

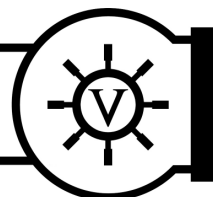
# Anthropology

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## Table of Contents

Music and Magic	2	The Best Night Ever	185
Equestrian History	9	Past Lives	200
Experimentation	17	To The Skies	215
The Princess of the Night	25	Home Again	232
Dressing in Style	35	Living a Lie	246
Christmas	49	Long Distance	260
Research and Rivalry	62	Another Year Older	271
Property Damage	74	Beginning of the End	282
The Canterlot Conspiracy	83	Truth Will Out	289
Lyra	95	Familiar Faces	301
On The Road	109	Chaos	318
Culture Shock	118	Friendship	329
A Chance of Rain	135	Between Two Worlds	342
Walk This Way	149	Harmony	358
So Much to Learn	160	One Month Later	371
A New Challenge	174		

PONY FICTION VAULT



"Are you gonna eat that?" Lyra looked expectantly at the cake that was still on Bon-Bon's plate.

Her roommate lifted a hoof to pull the plate a bit closer to her side of the table. "Honestly, Lyra..."

"Sorry. But it's just been *sitting* there, and –"

"We just got to Sugarcube Corner *five minutes* ago," Bon-Bon said. "And excuse me if I was a little shocked by how you inhaled yours."

Coming here had become a tradition, something the two of them did every weekend. Mr. and Mrs. Cake were some of the best bakers in Ponyville, if not all of Equestria. For ponies who both loved sweets, it was a natural hangout.

"You think cake and candy are some kind of art form, don't you?"

"It's what I make for a living! Of course there's an art to it!" Bon-Bon said. "And anyway, I've finally gotten a job interview scheduled with the owners, so before we know it, I might even be working here."

"That's nice. Will we get free cake, then?" Lyra asked.

Bon-Bon glared at her. "Anyway, I heard you were invited to play at the Grand Galloping Gala this year. That's quite an honor," Bon-Bon said. She took a single bite of her cake, enjoying it, savoring the flavor, unlike a certain unicorn.

Lyra nodded vigorously. "Yeah! Can you believe it? I'm not too good with formal events, though."

"I... can't imagine why." Bon-Bon's attention was fixed on some chocolate frosting still hanging off Lyra's chin. "Let's hope it doesn't turn out to be a disaster like it was last year. You heard about that, right?"

Lyra nodded. "I never would have thought Fluttershy had it in her. It's always the quiet ones."

Taking another small bite of her cake, Bon-Bon continued. "So, have they told you what pieces you'll be performing? Do you know what you'll be wearing?"

Lyra shrugged. "I dunno, maybe Rarity –"

"INCOMING!"

They barely heard the buzz of the scooter approaching before it slammed into the table. Bon-Bon's cake was propelled directly into her face. Lyra attempted unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh.

"Scootaloo, are you *sure* that's gonna be your special talent?" Apple Bloom said, walking towards the overturned table with Sweetie Belle at her side.

Bon-Bon gaped at the three fillies, her face covered in frosting.

"What can I say? Sometimes it's better to finish quickly." Lyra shrugged. "By the way, you've got a little something..." She lifted a hoof to her own face. "Right there."

Bon-Bon had already snatched up a napkin and started wiping herself off.

"Sorry about that," Scootaloo said, shaking her head. She adjusted her helmet. "I was going so fast that time! Now I just need to work on my turns..." She gave a weak smile.

"No problem," Lyra said.

Bon-Bon hesitated and took a deep breath. "Y-yes... No... problem... at... all."

"Lighten up, they're just kids. Remember what it was like trying to get a cutie mark when you were that age? I don't blame them for trying all this crazy stuff."

Sweetie Belle's face brightened up. "Hey, we never asked you how you got your cutie mark! Your talent is music, isn't it?" She was staring at the golden harp on Lyra's flank.

"Yeah! Actually, it took me a long time to get my cutie mark. It was back in filly school when I lived in Canterlot. I was one of the last in my class to get mine, you know..."

• • •

*Lying awake in bed one night, Heartstrings – she'd still been calling herself Heartstrings back then – had heard her parents talking about her.*

*"You know that Heartstrings has been struggling in school..." That was her mother.*

*"Some unicorns just take longer to learn magic, that's all. Things will come to her in time," she heard her father reply.*

*"But what if it doesn't? It's been too long now. No magic, no cutie mark. What if it's all because she's –"*

*"Heartstrings is a unicorn. It's that simple. It'll all come in time."*

*Of course, even though she was a filly, Heartstrings knew what they had been talking about. Her mother was a pegasus, but her dad was a unicorn. She had a horn, but she had never been able to use it. The other unicorns in her class had already mastered things like levitation, but she couldn't even lift a feather. She had to agree with her mother. What if she just couldn't learn magic?*

*Her teacher, Indigo Spark, said that it didn't matter. If a pony had a horn, they were a unicorn. There wasn't such a thing as a "half-unicorn," but... This wasn't the only time she had overheard her parents have this same conversation, and she still couldn't focus any power through her horn.*

*Cutie marks and magic were still on Heartstrings' mind the next day in class. They'd been brought to the music room instead of their usual classroom.*

*"Today we'll be working with musical instruments. I'd like all of you to pick something out. We're just practicing today, so don't worry about sounding good!" Indigo Spark watched his class as they inspected each instrument.*

*Heartstrings tagged along after the rest of her classmates. Would she be any good at this? It looked like there was a tuba... too big... a xylophone... that had a lot of keys, how would she handle that one? There were some drums. Those would be easy.*

*"Yes, Bluebelle, that one's called a lyre." Heartstrings turned to see the teacher talking to a young navy blue unicorn. "It's one of the more difficult instruments. It takes a lot of concentration to focus on moving each string to play even a simple song."*

*"How does it work?" the filly asked.*

*"Focus your magic onto each string, and adjust the tension in order to make them vibrate and create sound."*

*Blue Belle had already started, and what came out wasn't exactly music, in the strictest definition. Heartstrings winced at the noise, and turned to look at a cello. Maybe that one would work. No, it was way too big.*

*"I think I'll take a different one..." Blue Belle said, turning away from the lyre. "Something easier."*

*Most of the instruments had already been taken. So much for drums, Heartstrings thought. Wandering around the music room, between other young unicorns who were already trying out their new instruments, Heartstrings finally took a closer look at the lyre. No way, that one would definitely be too hard...*

*Besides, that explanation had made no sense. How were you supposed to create music if you moved each string by itself? If you plucked them in a sequence, moving down the row... It was less a matter of moving each string and more of something moving through them, plucking each one.*

*A few notes played, soft but clear. A few more. It was beginning to sound like a simple melody, nothing too complicated, but musical all the same. Heartstrings closed her eyes, focusing on the notes. Yes, this was how a lyre was meant to be played.*

*"My, Heartstrings! You really seem to have a knack for that."*

*Her eyes snapped open. The whole room had gone quiet. She tried to look at the horn on her forehead, and saw the edges of a lime-green glow. It matched the glow surrounding the lyre. She slowly backed away from the lyre, feeling the eyes of everypony in the room watching her.*

*"It's nothing to be embarrassed about. That was truly impressive."*

*"I, um... I just thought there was probably a different way to play it... Simpler..." Heartstrings stammered.*

*"There's nothing wrong," Indigo Spark said. "Now, does everypony have an instrument chosen? Let's begin."*

*Heartstrings stared at the golden instrument, and with some effort, managed to get it to float next to her. She was ecstatic. She felt like getting up and running straight home to tell her parents, but class had already started.*

*While the other colts and fillies struggled to create anything musical, Heartstrings was already grasping how to play this instrument. It was like she was born to play. When class was finally over, she noticed something different about herself. Namely, on her back leg.*

*To say the least, her parents were pleased when she returned home that afternoon. Heartstrings thought her mother was going to faint after she saw her daughter's new cutie mark. And she almost did, after hearing a bit of what Heartstrings could do. Her father signed her up for music lessons right away. They were saying she was a prodigy – maybe she was? Heartstrings didn't really care either way, the excitement of being able to do magic was enough for her.*

*It finally looked like Heartstrings was going to grow up into a perfectly normal unicorn.*

• • •

"Is it true what they say about ponies like that?" Sweetie Belle asked. "When their parents are two different kinds of ponies, I mean. I know it doesn't happen often, but you're great with magic, Lyra."

"Who knows? It took some practice, but I'm all right now," Lyra replied. "And it just goes to show that everybody gets their cutie mark eventually. I'm sure you'll all find yours soon enough."

Bon-Bon had finished wiping the cake off her face and was in a better mood. "You know, when I was about your age, that was the first time I ever learned how to use an oven, and -"

"Hey, music might work! Maybe we should try getting our band back together! Come on, Crusaders!" Scootaloo said. The three of them disappeared in a yellow, orange, and white blur.

"Wha-?" Bon-Bon said. "I didn't get a chance to tell my cutie mark story! Kids and their short attention spans!" She turned her head. "...Lyra?"

There was a fork hovering in the air in front of Lyra's face, and she was inspecting it with curiosity. She turned at the sound of her name, and the fork dropped to the ground. "Huh?"

"Oh... never mind. Let's go home."

• • •

*Music played softly in the distance. A familiar sound in the darkness. Did she know this song? She couldn't name it. Then, a figure. But it wasn't a pony, that much was clear. It was... Yes. Lyra started to move towards it for a better look. The darkness was fading away until she could start to make out the details. She had just a glimpse before –*

– she hit the bedroom floor with a thud, giving her a rude awakening from the dream. But she still had the image in her mind. Lyra stared up at the ceiling, her back on the floor and her legs sticking straight up in the air. The covers from her bed were still partially draped over her.

"It... it all makes sense now!" She grinned. "How did I not see this before?"

This had to be documented. Picking herself up off the floor, Lyra raced down the hall and found her journal in the office. Levitating it down from the shelf, she quickly started sketching with the nearest quill she could find.

"Lyra...? I heard a crash, are you alright?" Bon-Bon wandered into the room, rubbing her eyes. She stared at Lyra and the glowing quill scratching madly at the page. "What are you doing?"

"*They* designed it. It's meant for *them* to play, not us," Lyra muttered, not taking her eyes off the journal. "It all makes so much sense..."

Bon-Bon shook her head and watched over her roommate's shoulder. Some kind of figure was taking shape. It was holding a lyre in what seemed to be... arms? The shape of the body wasn't one that Bon-Bon had ever seen before. Maybe similar to a baby dragon, like the one that lived with Twilight Sparkle, but the limbs were elongated.

"The strings are much easier to pluck if you have fingers. I think it's similar to how I play it, actually. What I imagine while I'm doing it, at least." Lyra continued sketching. Bon-Bon couldn't tell if Lyra was explaining it to her or if she was talking to herself. "They're too close together to play very well with hooves, and it wouldn't make sense for ponies to design an instrument that could only be played with magic."

"Lyra, is this another one of your theories about those..." Bon-Bon's voice trailed off into a yawn.

"Humans. Of course." Lyra nodded. She dropped the quill, and looked up. "Humans invented lyres. Can you believe it? I've had their work on my flank for years and I never even realized it!" She grinned widely, looking at the image of the harp on her back leg.

"You're... sure?" Bon-Bon let out another yawn. "You actually think that this was invented by some kind of a... what was it, again?"

"If you knew where to look, you'd realize that humans left their work all over Equestrian civilization. Ponies weren't the first to establish a society. It's all because of humans, and we're just borrowing it."

Bon-Bon stared at Lyra, not understanding how anypony could be awake and so energetic at three in the morning. And she was on one of her "human" rants again. Not that Bon-Bon had any idea what a "human" was, but apparently Lyra had a strange obsession with them. Some kind of obscure mythical being that was referenced in some old books. And that's all they were – a myth. No pony had ever seen a real human before.

"Just go to bed," Bon-Bon said. She turned around and headed back to her room.

Lyra's grin vanished, and she looked back at her drawing. She had put as much detail as she could into the way the hands held the instrument, and the way the fingers moved along each individual string. It all seemed to work so well. There had been less attention to the face and the rest of the body, just a rudimentary torso and legs. Already the details of the dream were fading from her mind.

It wasn't the first dream Lyra had about humans - they happened sporadically. Usually in groups. She could expect several more hazy, indistinct dreams over the next few nights. Her journal was filled with as much as she could remember from them.

"I know humans used to exist..." Lyra muttered. "Maybe not anymore. But they *were* real."

She took one last glance at the figure she had drawn, playing a lyre as she herself often did, but this was the *right* way to play one. The way it had been intended. Then she closed the cover and lifted the book back onto the shelf.

For the rest of the night, Lyra couldn't remember if she had any more dreams.



The following day, Lyra had gone to her usual spot in the park to perform for a few hours. Open-air concerts were a regular deal for her, bringing in enough extra income between her other appearances. She could relax when she played here. There was no need for the extra effort she'd put in at a fancy event.

As she came to the end of her opening song, she put her lyre down for just a minute. A small crowd of ponies had gathered to watch her play. She nodded to them. "Thanks for coming, everybody. Don't forget the tips!"

Lyra wondered if anybody would ask about the way she was sitting. The regulars wouldn't. Sometimes a pony from out of town, not used to the sight of her, would stare at her slouching, and perhaps ask what she was doing. Today nobody commented. It was how humans sat, in pictures and in her dreams. Lyra had tried it herself and found it was comfortable.

Her instrument case had been left open next to the bench, with a hastily written note pinned onto it. It was already filling up with coins. Today she hardly noticed it. She kept on going through the motions of playing, but her mind wandered to other topics.

Doorknobs, for one thing. The round kind, not the long straight ones. They were on just about every building in Equestria, but a pony couldn't grip it very well with hooves. Most of them were merely ornamental for that reason, and didn't really latch the door closed. But a human, with fingers... They'd be able to use them.

Same with the bowling alley Lyra had walked past this morning to get here. She'd gone bowling with Bon-Bon a few times. All the balls had three holes on them – why? They were about an inch in diameter or so, which, as Lyra was pretty sure, meant that fingers could fit inside. An easy way for humans to hold them. As for ponies, there was no standard way to bowl. Unicorns used magic, other ponies had to get creative. Bowling was a pretty old sport, wasn't it? Maybe she should look up the history.

And she'd also noticed the tools they'd been using last Winter Wrap Up. Shovels had handles on the ends, which were easy enough for a pony to hold with their teeth, but then there was the long pole that made it unwieldy to use. Unless that long pole was the part that was *supposed* to be the handle.

Lyra watched a pony walk by with her filly. The mother dropped a few bits into the case. Lyra nodded a quick thanks, and kept playing.

And wasn't that the most interesting of all? Lyra could practically see an invisible hand moving through the strings of her lyre. In fact, she hadn't even been aware of it, but that really was how she'd been playing ever since the first time she picked up the instrument all those years ago. She had been told she was good at it. Maybe it was her technique, imitating the hands that had designed this instrument in the first place.

Her mind kept working even as she went through the rest of her set. The sun was beginning to go down as she packed up her lyre and counted up how much money she'd made today. It was a good haul. With this month's performances she'd be able to cover her share of the rent and then some.

As she headed back home, Lyra just couldn't stop thinking about last night's dream. It could be her imagination, but everything that she saw seemed to fit together. The more she thought about humans, the more everything made sense.

Why didn't anybody else see it?

• • •

*Lyra was...*

*In a big city somewhere. The tall buildings would have made her think it was Manhattan, except that she was surrounded by humans. All different kinds, although they were less diverse than ponies – fewer colors, and only one race. There weren't any horns or wings to be seen. Still, the subtle variations in their facial features were enough to give them all a sense of individuality.*

*She had dreams like this occasionally. Except this time was different. Lyra looked down at herself. She stood on two legs. She was dressed just like one of the humans, with a green shirt and a light jacket over it. Pants made out of some rough blue material. And hands. They were sticking out of her long sleeves. She lifted them up, moved her fingers, studying how the joints worked.*

*So this was what it was like to be human.*

*Lyra took a step forward, realized she could easily keep her balance even on two legs, and started down the street. She wanted to see everything: the humans, their buildings, their entire city –*

"Are you awake?"

She was now. She opened her eyes, noticing she was back in bed, with hooves like she'd always had, and Bon-Bon was peeking in the doorway.

"Lyra, did you oversleep again? It's noon."

Lyra groaned. It didn't matter what time it was, she wanted to go back to sleep. Her bed was feeling unusually comfortable today.

"I would have let you sleep in, but I've got an interview at Sugarcube Corner soon. I'll probably be gone for a few hours. You've got the house to yourself."

Lyra nodded slowly, but her thoughts were still on that sensation of being human and how *real* it had felt. Sure, she saw them often enough when she slept, but that was the first time she'd ever actually *been* one. She sighed, wishing she'd had more time to see what exactly was going on in that city, how humans lived.

She heard the front door swing closed – Bon-Bon had just left. What now? Lyra's thoughts moved to her journal – maybe she should record what little she had from this dream. Or maybe go back to sleep and see if it would come back... No. That wasn't it. There was something else she could do...

With a newfound sense of motivation, Lyra jumped out of bed and headed for the study. It had to be in one of her old books.

• • •

*The assignment had been very vague – a report on the history of Equestria, with the topic to be chosen by the student. Heartstrings had decided she didn't want to be just another pony writing about the earth ponies' traditions of Winter Wrap Up or the contributions of Star Swirl the Bearded to magical theory. Not even anything about famous musicians, like some of her friends had suggested. Sure, she'd found she had a talent for the lyre, but she would rather play it than read about some old pony who had been famous for it. There were more interesting subjects out there. If she could find them.*

*She'd gone to the Canterlot Library to look up topics. Her dad was the head archivist here, so she knew her way around pretty well.*

*Heartstrings found herself searching deeper into the depths of the Canterlot library. The building was already huge, and in the rooms back here the dust drifting in the air was enough to make her sneeze. No pony had been back here in years, it seemed, except maybe*

*herself and her father. That only meant that nopony in her class was going to end up with the same research she did.*

*Her eyes scanned the shelves, but she didn't really know what any of the titles in this section meant. She had chosen one of the old volumes at random and pulled it down with her magic – no longer a difficult task – and opened it to a random page in the middle.*

*The illustrations weren't of anything she recognized, but they were still somehow... appealing? Heartstrings couldn't explain why, but she was drawn to the way they walked upright, to the crude depictions of faces with small eyes and pointed noses, to their hands.*

*It said they were called humans.*

*This book, written in an old but still readable style, seemed to suggest that such creatures had actually lived. They had their own nations and rulers, civilizations like the ones that ponies lived in, but no mentions of ponies anywhere. Not even of magic.*

*She kept reading.*

*Heartstrings had checked the shelves near where this book had come from, and there were a few more books that were also about humans. She'd read a few pages from one, go back to another, come up with a question that might have an answer in one of the other books...*

*Heartstrings had spent all of that day in the library until she noticed the light streaming in from the dusty old window fading. Her mind was filled with questions – why had she never heard of such wonderful creatures before? Were there any left? Could she someday travel outside of Canterlot, and find kingdoms ruled and inhabited by humans?*

*"Heartstrings?" She heard her dad's voice calling for her. He showed up around the corner, a dark blue unicorn with an unkempt mane and thick-framed glasses. "Ah, there you are. It's getting late. Time to head home."*

*"Yeah, sure. Can I take this with me?" She held up the book.*

*"I don't think so, that's one of our older..." Her dad's voice trailed off as he read the cover. "Heartstrings, what were you reading that for?"*

*"I'm going to write my history assignment about this! It's all about these creatures called humans," she said. She was practically bouncing with excitement. "Have you ever heard of them before?"*

*Her father stared at the book for a while, and finally said, "Erm, yes. Heartstrings, you do know that humans don't really exist, right?"*

*She felt like she'd been hit with a brick. "What?"*

*"Those old books... They're just myths. Stories that hardly anypony even remembers anymore. Humans were made up a long time ago."*

*"But..."*

*"Maybe you should just find another topic to write about. We've got a few books about Star Swirl the Bearded. He was one of the finest unicorns to have ever lived, you know. He discovered hundreds of spells."*

*"Humans don't need spells... They do all sorts of things without magic," Heartstrings muttered.*

*He frowned. "I thought you liked using magic. Remember how excited you were?"*

*"I know..." She turned back to the stack of books she'd piled onto the table. "It's not that I don't like magic, it's just that... have you seen what humans did? All of these inventions, and cities, and... everything? They were amazing!"*

*Her father shook his head. "It's all legends. Folklore. Nothing else. I'm surprised we even still have these old books around. I thought we were going to clean this wing out a long time ago."*

*"Why were you going to get rid of them?" Heartstrings's eyes widened. "You can't just throw them out!"*

*"Er... Those books can hardly be considered relevant anymore, most ponies don't even talk about humans anymore."*

*"Can I keep them?"*

*"That's not what I was saying..."*

*"Please? Why not? You were just going to throw them out anyway."*

*"Well, er... they're..." Shaking his head, her father realized he couldn't argue with her. "I... suppose you can. Just promise me you won't take any of it too seriously."*

*Heartstrings broke out into a wide grin. "Thank you so much!" She ran up to hug him.*

*"Now we'd better head home before it gets too late," her dad said. "We don't want your mother to worry."*

*Heartstrings nodded and started loading the books into her saddlebags. She planned to read every one front-to-back. No matter what her father seemed to think, these books weren't made up. The way they talked about humans was too consistent. They described something real, not just a collection of legends, and she was going to find out the truth.*

• • •

In the Ponyville Library, later that afternoon, Twilight had just been reviewing a new spell when she heard a knock on her door. She opened it to find a familiar face.

"Hey, Twilight. Mind if I borrow a book?" Lyra asked.

"Hello, Lyra. Nice to see you." Twilight's attention went to Lyra's left front hoof. She was limping, and it was covered in a thick mass of bandages. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"Oh, this?" Lyra lifted her hoof off the ground a few inches. "I just had a little accident, that's all. It's no problem."

"If you don't mind, I could take a look at –"

"No!" Lyra drew her hoof back like it had been burned. "I mean... That's not necessary. It's really not that big a deal." She gave a nervous laugh.

She limped into the main room of the library, looking up at all the hundreds of old books. It was fairly tidy – she'd known the place to be like the aftermath of a hurricane, especially if Twilight was doing some intense research. Most of the time, really.

"So what are you looking for?" Twilight said.

"Just wondering if you have any books about humans," Lyra said. Locating the "H" section, she started scanning the titles. "The information in my personal collection wasn't exactly... detailed enough."

"Uh... what are you looking for? I don't know if I..."

Lyra turned to stare at her. "You've never heard of them, have you?" She sighed. "I'm not surprised. Sometimes I feel like *nobody's* ever heard of humans before."

"Nobody...?" Twilight echoed.

Ignoring her, Lyra continued searching. "It might be under mythical creatures... That's where anything on them usually ends up. Not that *I* think they're mythical, of course. Based on the evidence, it's likely that human civilization invented printing and they're the whole reason you have all these books, to be honest. According to what I've found."

Twilight nodded, a bit uneasily. She headed over to the section on myths – not a corner of the library that she went to very often. There was never anything useful to her own studies there.

"I've got... let's see..." She pulled out a few books, scanning the titles and covers as they floated past her face. "*An Introduction to Mythical Creatures... Legendary Beasts... The Illustrated Guide to Equestrian Cryptozoology...*"

"Did you say 'illustrated'?" Lyra was next to her and fixated on the book before Twilight even knew what was happening. "This would work perfectly!"

"That's... That's great," Twilight said.

Lyra was already flipping through the pages, frantically determined to find something. She lifted her bandaged hoof and rubbed it against her other leg uncomfortably. As she went by one page, she stopped, flipped back to it, and her eyes widened.

"Perfect!" she said. She stared at the drawing, almost pressing her face against it.

"May I ask what exactly you're studying?" Twilight hesitantly looked over Lyra's shoulder, wondering if the other unicorn even remembered she was there.

"Oh, right. It's this." Lyra pointed to the drawing, which was some kind of claw or talon without the sharp points. Instead, the five appendages ended in soft, rounded tips. "These are what a human's hands look like. This particular drawing is quite detailed – I've never seen anything like it. Exactly what I needed."

"And, um..." Twilight paused. "Why were you looking for this?"

"Just curiosity," Lyra said, lifting up her bandaged left hoof. "Hands are just so much more useful than hooves. Think of how much life would change if we had fingers!" She suddenly stopped, looked at her raised hoof in shock, and then quickly put it down.

"I suppose it does sound rather..." Twilight tried to think of a word. "Interesting?"

"You bet! Anyway, I should really be getting back home before too late. Bon-Bon's interview should be over soon. I'll see you later, Twilight." Lyra hobbled over to the front door as fast as she could on three legs. She stopped in front of the door, and turned around. "Right. You don't mind if I borrow this?"

"No, that's absolutely fine." Twilight smiled nervously. Sometimes Lyra could be a little strange... That was especially true today. "Go right ahead."

"Thanks! I'll bring it back later. Any book that mentions humans is pretty rare, you know."

And just like that, Lyra was out the door and headed back home. Twilight was left to wonder just what exactly she was up to, and what these 'humans' had to do with it all.



*"Lemon Hearts... Sea Swirl... Spring Fresh..."*

*As Indigo Spark called out each young unicorn's name, their papers floated over to their desks. There were various reactions once they saw the grades – smiles, indifference, utter horror...*

*"And... er..." Indigo Spark squinted at the name. "Lee-ra?" The teacher frowned, looking at the paper. He glanced around the room. "Or is it... Lyra?"*

*"Yes, that's mine," said a certain green unicorn sitting in the back, raising her hoof. "How did I do?"*

*"Oh, Heartstrings...? Er, yes..."*

*"Do you mind? I like the name Lyra better. That's all," she said. She watched as her paper floated over to her, a blue aura shining around it. It seemed to take forever to reach her.*

*"I suppose that's fine..." Indigo Spark looked confused. "Your paper was... interesting, I'll say that much..."*

*"What?!" Lyra had just seen her grade. A large red D- was written in the upper right corner, along with a note in the teacher's hastily-written script: Equestrian History (the second word had been underlined twice), not legends. Throughout the paper were underlined phrases with question marks.*

*She gaped at the paper in disbelief. Was that true? She'd read those books for hours on end and not a single one had said anything about humans being 'legends.' There was just too much on the subject, so many diverse topics about their culture and biology and customs and... and everything!*

*True, there were parts of it that were obviously legends. Just like ponies, humans had their own folklore. She'd actually come across her new name in the old stories – Lyra. As soon as she'd read that, something about it just sounded so right. She liked the name much more than 'Heartstrings.' She'd said the name out loud to herself a few times – "Lyra" – and the way it sounded was so perfect.*

*Human names were like that. Most ponies had names that were made up of other words, but humans had names that were just that – names. Ponies might say that something 'tugged at the heartstrings' (a phrase that had always bothered her) but they never*

*mentioned anything about 'Lyra.' Human names were all unique words, with no other meaning. And they were beautiful.*

*"Now, on to our next assignment." Indigo Spark's announcement was met with a few scattered groans. "I'd like each of you to learn a new spell..."*

*Lyra was hardly listening. She was reading over her paper again. There had to be some reason nobody believed in humans... Why had they been forgotten? More importantly, where had they gone? She couldn't focus on things like magic when there were such mysteries in the world. There had to be answers.*

• • •

This was it. All those years of ponies saying humans had never existed, that creatures like those were impossible... If this experiment worked, Lyra would be able to see just how humans might have lived. It could prove everything.

Lyra took a deep breath. She was in her bedroom, and Twilight's book was on the floor in front of her, opened to that wonderfully detailed illustration of a hand. She'd gone over it a few times – the way each finger on the hand was formed, how long they were, the placement of the joints. She'd once come across a human expression about knowing the back of your hand – she was probably about as familiar with it as any human ever was by now.

She bit her lip, knowing what to expect as she unwrapped the bandages from her hoof. Lyra had applied them several layers thick to hide any suspicious protruding shapes. As the wrapping came off, she frowned, looking at all her mistakes from her previous attempt.

A few half-formed fingers stuck out from an appendage that was still – kind of – a hoof. They jutted out at all the wrong angles, one of them actually pointing backwards. A few had too many joints in them, and others didn't have enough. There were two that resembled thumbs, one on either side of her hoof since she'd been indecisive as to which side it was supposed to go on. The whole thing was a tangled mess.

"This time it'll work. Let's see..." She referred to the book (*the illustration seemed to be a... left hand, that's because the thumb was on the right*) and then back to the results of her last experiment. She flexed one of the fingers. Even if it was all messed up, she still had motor control over the fingers. It just felt all wrong. This attempt would be better. "Now, just gotta focus..."

She started to channel the magic through her horn and onto her hoof, wincing both from the mental strain and from the sensation of the entire anatomical structure of her hoof being rearranged at the same time.

The fingers were changing shape, retracting back into her hoof and then protruding back out as the entire hoof transformed...

• • •

Bon-Bon's job interview had been little more than a pleasant chat over cupcakes. The owners of Sugarcube Corner, Mr. and Mrs. Cake, were a very friendly and welcoming couple. Still, that hadn't helped make Bon-Bon any less tense.

They had gone over the policies of how they ran their business, from the recipes used to the packaging methods to the proper behavior when running counter service. They seemed glad to have a level-headed, mature confectioner apply – as opposed to Pinkie Pie, who had been bouncing in and out of the bakery for snacks several times throughout the meeting.

Finally, it seemed like they'd gone over everything. Mrs. Cake shook hooves with Bon-Bon. "It was so nice to have this chance to talk to you, dearie. We'll need all the help we can get, what with Nightmare Night coming up soon."

"You mean I'm... hired?" Bon-Bon tried not to seem too eager. She had to stay professional, after all. "I'd be so honored to work here!"

"You said you've been working from home? You wouldn't mind if we stopped by for a quick visit, would you, Ms. Bon-Bon?" Mr. Cake said.

"Oh, not at all!" Bon-Bon said. "I always keep everything in order."

They followed her back through Ponyville to her house. Bon-Bon was glad she had taken the time to clean up a few days ago. The house would still be presentable. Lyra had been in one of her odd compulsions lately. Maybe that had blown over by now. Anyway, it wouldn't be a problem.

Bon-Bon entered her house and led them into the kitchen. They could hear the sound of a lyre being played down the hall. It was the only sound in the otherwise silent house. The melody was complex. Compared to what Lyra usually played, it had many more notes and was at a quicker tempo.

"Sounds like my roommate must be practicing something new for the Gala," Bon-Bon said. "You'll have to excuse her." *Actually*, Bon-Bon thought, *this is perfect*. Lyra was finally focusing on what was real and important.

"No problem at all, Ms. Bon-Bon," Mr. Cake said.

"She sounds absolutely wonderful. I've never heard anything like it," Mrs. Cake said. "Now, I'm curious. You said you used original recipes? We'd love to see them."

"My recipes? Why, of course. I keep them all in my own personal cookbook. Let me just go get that real quick," Bon-Bon said.

She trotted in the hallway towards the study. The music grew louder as she came closer and walked through the doorway. "It sounds great, Lyra. By the way, have you seen my –"

Bon-Bon's scream could be heard from the kitchen, where Mr. and Mrs. Cake exchanged confused looks.

Lyra, reclining there on the sofa, glanced up at her. She stopped playing – but she hadn't been playing the lyre with magic, like any normal unicorn would. Instead, she had some kind of... *thing*... on the end of each hoof, and was holding the instrument in those.

"Hey, Bon-Bon. Check it out. Hands!" She held one up like she was waving, and flexed the appendages sticking out from it. They were the same mint green as the rest of her coat, but it didn't help the fact that they looked like they had been taken from some other creature and crudely stuck onto Lyra's forelegs. "It took me a few tries, but they came out perfectly in the end!"

"What did you – How did you –" Bon-Bon couldn't even form a complete sentence. She was frozen in place.

"It wasn't easy," Lyra rolled off the sofa and wobbled forward, balling up her hands and keeping her eyes down on them as she tried to walk across the room. "I just referred to a few of the diagrams – I had to come up with the spell on my own – I should probably figure out how to walk on two legs next, these aren't meant to be used like hooves."

"Are you okay, Ms. Bon-Bon?" Mr. Cake's voice was coming from down the hall.

The situation was going from bad to worse, but Bon-Bon couldn't panic now. Not when she was doing so well. "I'll be right out! Everything's..." She hesitated. "Everything's just fine, thank you!"

"We have company?" Lyra said. She started towards the door to look.

Bon-Bon blocked the doorway. "You... You... No, listen!" Her voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "The Cakes are right out there in the kitchen. They are just about to give me a position as Assistant Confectioner at Sugarcube Corner. This is the chance I have been hoping for ever since moving to Ponyville, and if they see *you*" – thrusting a hoof towards Lyra, who shrank back in shock – "with *those*" – pointing down at Lyra's hands – "if they see those, I mean if *anypony* sees those, they're going to think you're some kind of a... I don't even know what! They're going to think we're *both* crazy!"

Lyra waved a hand dismissively. "It's not that bad, you even said my music sounded better."

"Your *music*? No, no, no, you can't show up at the Gala with –!" Bon-Bon caught her breath, composed herself, and tried to keep her eyes off of Lyra's hands. She gritted her teeth. "Just... I need my cookbook."

Lyra went over to the bookshelf and reached up, gripping it in her hand and holding it out to her. "Here you go."

"Could you just not –" Bon-Bon stared at the book. "Oh, nevermind." She took it in her teeth. "Bmmf mff ff..."

"Huh?" Lyra cocked her head.

Spitting out the book, Bon-Bon said, "I just said you better not show yourself out there with those until everypony's gone."

Lyra raised up one of her hands to show her. "See, that's why these are so great, because you can carry things around without –"

"I don't want to hear it!" Bon-Bon picked up her recipe book again and headed back out down the hallway into the kitchen, trying to keep it together.

Mr. and Mrs. Cake were still waiting there. Bon-Bon walked in and set her book down on the table, while forcing a smile. She had to give the impression of being a capable baker, absolutely nothing was wrong, this was a normal household, nothing out of the ordinary to see here.

"You alright, Ms. Bon-Bon? What was that all about?" Mr. Cake asked.

"Oh... it was just..." Bon-Bon wasn't about to admit the truth. "A spider! Two of them. Huge. To tell the truth I can't stand the sight of the things, all those weird spindly legs moving around..."

"You've got spiders here?" Mr. Cake said.

She paused. "Not usually. Certainly not in the kitchen."

Lyra poked her head through the doorway. "By the way, you dropped some notecards. Do you need these?"

Forcing back another scream, Bon-Bon managed to choke out, "Oh... d-did I? Well, I'll come get those, no need to –" Lyra started coming closer. "NO! I mean, no need, I'll just..." She glanced over nervously at her guests. "You should really be practicing for the Gala, shouldn't you?"

"We could hear you earlier. It sounded quite wonderful!" Mrs. Cake said.

"Thanks! I'm working on a new technique," Lyra replied.

Bon-Bon rushed over to the doorway before Lyra could come fully into view. She struggled to look cheerful. "Thank you, Lyra, for bringing these over, but you really should be... *practicing!*" Her voice took on an edge. "No need to let us *disturb* your *creative focus*, now you should really get back to work where we won't be around to distract you while you *perfect your art!*"

"Um... Okay, I guess..." Lyra said. She gave a thumbs up, which Bon-Bon stared at in confusion. "Good luck with the interview!"

Bon-Bon glanced back at the Cakes, who were looking through her cookbook. They hadn't seen anything. Lyra had turned around and was heading down the hall. She attempted to pick herself up and walk on two legs, but wobbled and fell forward. Bon-Bon put a hoof to her face in exasperation.

"Anyway, my recipe book..." Bon-Bon flashed a huge smile that she hoped wouldn't look too fake. "There shouldn't be any more distractions."

When the music started playing again, Bon-Bon's eye started to twitch.

• • •

The sun outside was just starting to set when Bon-Bon said goodbye to the Cakes, with the assurance of a new job enough to offset the stress of the past day. A few minutes earlier the music had stopped. Who knew what Lyra was up to in there now?

Bon-Bon reluctantly headed back to the study after her interview was over. She braced herself for what she was about to see. Lyra had never taken her obsession with humans *this* far before. Something must have gotten into her.

She slowly pushed the door open. "Lyra....?"

Lyra was on the couch, lying on her back and staring at the ceiling. She didn't move. One foreleg hung over the edge onto the floor... but it ended in a regular hoof. There weren't any fingers there at all. Bon-Bon couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"Hey, Bon-Bon. How'd it go?" Lyra asked. Her voice was flat and unemotional.

"Um..." Bon-Bon couldn't take her eyes away from the hooves. She'd honestly never been that glad to see plain, unremarkable hooves before. "Everything went very well. I got the job. They want me to come in for work starting tomorrow."

"That's good."

They were both silent for a while, and Bon-Bon stared at the ground. She didn't want to be the one to bring it up. "What about your..."

"My hands?" Lyra asked. She turned her head down to look directly at Bon-Bon. "You were right. Nobody would understand. They'd probably react just like you did. Nobody else believes in humans, anyway." She sighed.

"Oh..." There was another long pause. Bon-Bon fidgeted for a bit. Right now Lyra looked like any normal pony, but after today, Bon-Bon would never be able to forget what she'd done, no matter how hard she tried.

"I'm tired. I think I'll turn in early," Lyra said. She got off the sofa and headed for the door.

"Lyra..." Bon-Bon said. Lyra stopped and turned her head. "Um, it's good that... that you're finally seeing some sense. This whole 'human' thing has just gone too far this time."

"This isn't over."

"What?"

"I may not be able to make myself human, but that doesn't change the fact that understanding them is very important to the history of Equestria. Now that I've seen how hands work, it's even more obvious that our society was made by something that didn't have hooves. It wasn't just the lyre. Those hands would have made *any* task much simpler."

Bon-Bon gaped at her. "Surely you don't still think..."

"The information I have right now isn't sufficient. That much is obvious. If I can find some more... like the book Twilight gave me..." Lyra scratched her head, trying to rack her brains. "Where would I be able to find out more, though?"

She walked past Bon-Bon, headed to her bedroom. Bon-Bon turned to watch her, but couldn't think of anything else to say. At the very least, she hoped there wouldn't be any more self-mutilation like today's.

"I don't have time to worry about this..." she muttered. She had a new job, at one of the finest bakeries in all of Equestria. She had to focus on that. Things would be fine.

They both ended up going to bed early.



"So tell me again why I'm doing this," Bon-Bon asked as she started winding another roll of gauze around Lyra's body.

It was Nightmare Night, and the sun was just beginning to set. Soon Ponyville would be covered in darkness, and hardly anypony would be recognizable – all dressed in costumes of everything imaginable. To disguise themselves from Nightmare Moon, if you went by the traditional story. Not many ponies had believed that old legend until the last Summer Sun celebration, when it turned out there really was a Nightmare Moon after all.

"I'm going as a mummy. I thought it would make a cool Nightmare Night costume. It's how the Egyptians buried their dead," Lyra explained. Her legs were already covered with the bandages, and now Bon-Bon had moved up to her shoulder. "They were an ancient nation of –"

"Humans?" Bon-Bon said.

"You've heard of them?"

"Lucky guess."

"It's fascinating, really. According to what I've read, they had special chemicals and stuff they applied to the dead body, but first they'd take these special hooks to go into the body's nose and mmmfff –" Lyra's mouth was suddenly covered with a strip of bandages.

"I don't understand where anypony would come up with something like that," Bon-Bon said. She finished up the last of it, covering up Lyra's horn up to the very tip. Nothing but her eyes were exposed. Bon-Bon stepped away to examine her. "Though, at least this costume isn't... too human-looking, I suppose."

Lyra pulled down the wrapping to uncover her mouth. "I did have a few other costume ideas lined up, but with the time we had left this was the only thing that worked. I never did get those gloves made..."

"I'm not even going to ask what *that* means," Bon-Bon replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to take a rest. These past few weeks have been exhausting, and you certainly haven't been much help."

With Bon-Bon's new job at Sugarcube Corner came a heavy workload at this time of year. Not only was she making candy at the store, but their own kitchen had been commandeered to cover all of the orders. The house had been filled with the overpowering, tantalizing smell of chocolate for weeks.

"Have I ever mentioned that you're the absolute best roommate to have at this time of year?" Lyra said. "You better have made some extra for me!"

As Lyra headed out the door, Bon-Bon felt like she could collapse at any minute. As glad as she was to have her new job, it really took a lot out of her. At least there hadn't been any more incidents with hands. Never mind the ghosts and goblins, *that* had been a scarier experience than anything Nightmare Night could offer.

• • •

The Town Square had been completely transformed by the time the sun was down. A stage had set up, where a band was performing. Strings of lights stretched between clusters of tents, with paper cutouts of ghosts and stars hanging down.

Applejack, wearing some old burlap sacks that she'd fashioned into a scarecrow outfit, was in charge of games again this year – bobbing for apples, launching pumpkins, the works. A bit of a shame to see all those perfectly fine pumpkins getting splattered all over the targets, but what the hay? It was fun.

"Hey, Applejack. How's it going?" She turned around to see a pony completely covered in bandages.

"Uh... just dandy," Applejack said. She squinted at the strangely-dressed pony. "Who's in there, anyhow?"

"It's Lyra," the pony said. Now Applejack was able to recognize the voice, and she smiled.

"Nice costume... No, wait, don't tell me. You're..." She thought for a moment. "A hospital patient who fell down a flight of stairs?"

"Actually, I'm a mummy," Lyra replied.

"Ain't nopony's mother ever looked like that," Applejack muttered under her breath. *Just another of Lyra's quirks*, she figured. "Well, feel free to stick around a while and enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I will be." Lyra glanced around. "That's weird. I don't see any kids around here."

"Pinkie Pie and Zecora took 'em all into the forest to the Nightmare Moon statue. They'll be back in a jiffy."

"Then it's all unguarded..." With her eyes searching for the nearest provider of candy, Lyra set off for the hunt.

She made the rounds in the town square, hitting up any place that looked to have the best candy and a lot of it. With no swarms of kids to get in the way, it was smooth sailing. She continued for a few minutes, happily oblivious to anything except the pursuit of treats, until she was interrupted by a sudden lightning flash and the sounds of ponies screaming. She dropped to the ground instinctively.

"Citizens of Ponyville! We have graced your tiny village with our presence, so that you might behold the real princess of the night!" Lyra glanced up. The booming voice was coming from a tall, navy blue alicorn with flowing hair... Princess Luna? She'd changed in the past year, that was for sure. She continued her speech. "A creature of nightmare is no longer, but instead a pony who desires your love and admiration! Together we shall change this dreadful celebration into a bright and glorious feast!"

Lyra stared up at her. This was the first autumn since Nightmare Moon had been defeated. It made sense that Princess Luna would want to attend their celebration, in honor of her, even if the entire tradition was based on fear.

Pinkie Pie, dressed as a chicken and leading a group of young colts and fillies, suddenly spoke up. "Did you hear that, everypony? Nightmare Moon says she's gonna feast on us all!"

A few of the ponies had jumped up, screamed, and run off with her. The rest were cowering on the ground. Lyra stayed down with the others. No, they wouldn't actually be afraid of the Princess. Maybe they were bowing? It was normal to show this kind of respect to Celestia, but this was a little ridiculous.

Luna was speaking to the mayor now, who was just as speechless as everypony else. "What is the matter with you?" Her grandiose tone had changed to one of annoyance. "Very well then, be that way! We won't even bother with the traditional royal farewell!" She walked away arrogantly. Lyra noticed Twilight head off to follow her.

Lyra glanced around once they were gone, and was one of the first to stand up. "Well, that was awkward..." she muttered.

No time for distractions, though. This was the biggest night for candy of the entire year, and she had hardly even begun.

She headed back over to the tubs of apples after everything had settled down again. Applejack was still there, standing at the ready in case anypony was willing to step up and play a game.

"Everythin's fine now, we can just go on with our regular ol' Nightmare Night..." she called out. She glanced around the now-silent square, and sighed. "First Nightmare Night we've ever actually had Nightmare Moon herself show up. Guess I coulda expected this."

"She's just Princess Luna, though... isn't she?" Lyra said.

Applejack jumped. "Huh? Lyra? Gosh, I didn't even see you. Don't scare me like that."

"You and the others defeated Nightmare Moon. That's just Princess Luna," Lyra repeated.

"Back then all of us just thought Nightmare Moon was an old legend. I just don't know what I'm s'posed to think now," Applejack said. "Heh. Makes you wonder what other old stories might start comin' true, don't it?"

Lyra's eyes widened. "You know... you've got a point."

"Now, when's somepony gonna get the party started up again?" Applejack said. "Just look at all these apples that we got left."

She pointed to one of the tubs of water, with apples floating on the surface. Lyra had always wondered about that game. pegasi and earth ponies always picked things up in their mouth, and even unicorns would do that occasionally. What was the point of making a game out of it?

"You wouldn't happen to know which way Luna went, would you?" Lyra asked.

"Huh? I think she was headed to the forest, but... Why would you want to know that?"

"She is one of the oldest ponies alive... It's been a thousand years since she was even in Equestria. Who knows what kind of things she'd know about?"

"I... guess you got a point there..." Applejack said. "What do you want to talk to her about, though?"

"Nightmare Night might be older than we think, you know. I read about this old harvest festival, really similar to what we have here. It wasn't exactly a pony holiday, though." It was difficult to tell with most of her face covered, but she seemed to have a strange grin forming. Applejack found it unnerving.

"So you're asking her about –" Applejack's question was cut short when Lyra suddenly took off. Applejack watched the white shape running through past all the tents and vanish into the Everfree forest. "I just don't get that pony..."

• • •

The forest glade, where the statue of Nightmare Moon watched over the silent trees, was deserted. A pile of candy had been left in front of it, but whoever had put it there was long gone by now. Lyra picked up a piece of chocolate, unwrapped it, and ate it. Nobody would notice a missing piece... or twelve.

Still, there was the issue of where Princess Luna – the real Nightmare Moon – had gone. Lyra thought she had heard someone in this part of the forest, but whoever it was, they'd been gone by the time she had arrived.

This part of the Everfree Forest was quiet. Nothing but the rustle of the wind through the trees. And it was already starting to get chilly, too.

Somewhere in the distance, there was the sound of shouting. Lyra couldn't make out the words. That kind of volume, though... There was only one pony it could be. After that display in the town square there wasn't a doubt.

She took off into the woods, heading towards the voice. This was the path out of the forest. If Lyra was right, then it led to Fluttershy's cottage. That was odd. Fluttershy never celebrated Nightmare Night; she was too scared of the dark. Everybody usually let her wait it out alone.

The trees thinned out as she reached the edge of the woods, and she was almost to the cottage when she was nearly run over by a stampede of tiny colts and fillies led by a giant chicken.

"Lyra?" Pinkie Pie said. "You have to run! Nightmare Moon's going to eat Fluttershy!"

"Pinkie, you're being ridiculous," Lyra said, shaking her head. "That's Princess Luna, she's not going to eat anyone, and I really need to find her and ask her something. It's important."

Pinkie's terrified expression changed into a smile. She spoke in a low voice, so that the younger ponies wouldn't hear. "Silly Lyra, I know she's not going to eat us. Just play along, okay? It's fun!"

Lyra couldn't help but smile as well. "Well, you go ahead... But this could finally be my chance to learn something about humans, so I'm still going to go find her."

"Humans?!" Pinkie Pie said, her eyes bugging out. "Oh my gosh, my grandma told me about those! They're even worse!" The fear seemed almost genuine this time.

"Huh?"

Pinkie spoke in a louder, more dramatic voice so that everypony could hear her. "Humans are these awful creatures who eat *meat!* Cows, and pigs, and chickens" – she punctuated the last one with a high-pitched squawk, then dropped her voice lower – "and maybe even *ponies!*"

The entire crowd of young ponies screamed, and they dashed off towards the lights in Ponyville. Lyra stood there alone, frowning. "This is exactly the problem!" she yelled, but they were too far away to hear her.

There was so little information on humans that ponies – those few who had heard of humans, anyway – would make up anything about them. Even ridiculous things like humans eating other animals. Lyra had looked at enough drawings to know that humans just weren't built to be carnivores. They had no claws or fangs or anything like that.

With stories like that going around, it was no wonder her mother had been so panicked back when Lyra had brought those books home from the library. Her dad had tried to reassure her that there was no real harm in their daughter reading about humans, but her mother had always vehemently discouraged it. She'd probably heard the same lies Pinkie believed in.

Lyra sighed, and plodded over to Fluttershy's cottage. The windows were dark, but she'd lived in Ponyville long enough to know that Fluttershy was still home. Not even free candy could lure that pony out of her house on Nightmare Night. Lyra stepped up to the door, and knocked a few times.

"Please, no more visitors!" a small voice said from inside. "Just go away..."

"Fluttershy?" Lyra called. "Was Princess Luna here? Where'd she go?"

"They're, um..." Fluttershy's voice was barely audible, and Lyra pressed her ear up to the door to hear. "She went back into town with Twilight... Please leave me alone..." Her voice faded into a squeak.

"They're back in Ponyville? Thanks!" Lyra said.

There was another squeak in response, but Lyra was already running off to Ponyville. She wasn't going to be late this time.

• • •

Her sugar rush must have worn off. Lyra's pace was slowing down, and she had to stop to catch her breath. She looked down at a strip of gauze that was coming unwound from all the running, and her horn glowed as she tied it back around her leg.

It was going to be impossible to keep up this pace. She had to slow down, but it was getting late, and if Princess Luna decided to head back to Canterlot... Who knew when Lyra would get another chance to talk to somebody who was over a thousand years old?

She passed by Big Macintosh, pulling a wagon back towards Sweet Apple Acres. He was wearing a particularly impressive costume complete with top hat. Lyra stared at the image on his cape – she hadn't noticed it before. It was a skull, stylized to look like an apple, but she couldn't help but think it looked somewhat like a human. She shook her head. No time to focus on the small things. Where was Luna?

It was a little odd, since even with as late as it was, there didn't seem to be as much noise coming from Ponyville. The lights still seemed to be on. But a lot of things were weird tonight.

Lyra happened to glance up and noticed a figure standing out by the bridge on the outskirts of town. She did a double-take, almost certain that she was mistaken, but it was actually her. Princess Luna was standing all alone, staring out at the sky.

Taking a deep breath, Lyra prepared herself. She just needed a moment. She had to get right to the point. She might not even get an answer, but... if Luna didn't know about humans, who would?

"Princess?" Lyra approached her slowly, her heart pounding.

Luna turned around to face her, and Lyra could have fainted. "We have no interest in thy foalish celebrations." She turned her face up.

"Um, y-yes... It's not about that," Lyra stammered. She tried to compose herself. "I... actually wanted to ask you something, since you've been around for so long, I figured you would know..."

"Thou... wishest to speak with us? Thou art not afraid?" Luna's voice was much quieter now, and she gave a small smile. "Certainly. We would be most happy to grant thee an audience."

No reason to waste time. Lyra asked her straight out. "Well... What do you know about... humans?"

At the mention of the word, Luna's expression changed, becoming significantly less good-natured and much more fearsome. "Speak not of the foul beings!"

Lyra jumped back. "Huh? What's wrong with –"

"Tell me, how doth thou knowest of such things?"

"Just a few books, nothing much," Lyra said. "But please, if they're real, you have to tell me about –"

"Away with you! No more talk of the beasts!" Lightning flashed behind the Princess, emphasizing her words. "Our kingdom shall remain peaceful without their influence!"

In spite of everything, Lyra was grinning – actually smiling, just to know that humans were more than just legends, and she had heard this directly from one of Equestria's princesses, no less. "Um... thank you so much!"

"Now begone!" Her voice actually seemed to create a strong blast of wind.

Lyra did just that. She was running straight home, and hardly even noticed when she passed by Twilight Sparkle on the way there. This was the development she'd been waiting for.

• • •

"Bon-Bon? Bon-Bon! Wake up!"

As Bon-Bon opened her eyes she gave a start at the huge gold eyes staring right into hers. She didn't remember falling asleep on the couch, but the past few hectic days of finishing all these candy orders were a haze in her memory.



"Lyra...? Let me go back to sleep..." Bon-Bon moaned.

"No, this is too important," Lyra said. She backed away from the couch, but she couldn't stop bouncing. "You kept on telling me that humans didn't exist. Just like everyone else has *always* said."

"I'm really not in the mood for this." Bon-Bon stretched out, wondering if she could make the effort to go back to her bedroom where it was more comfortable.

"Princess Luna said they're real."

Bon-Bon sat up. "The Princess? When did you meet her?"

"She came to Ponyville for Nightmare Night. Long story. Anyway, she knows about humans."

"Princess Luna was here?" Bon-Bon rubbed her eyes. "Why would you ask her about humans?"

"Luna's thousands of years old! If anyone knew about humans, I knew it would be her, and I was right!" Lyra clapped her hooves together. Then she stopped, and frowned. "Except she wouldn't tell me much... To be honest, she seemed kind of mad."

"You dragged Princess Luna into your insane theories, and you got her mad at you," Bon-Bon said in a flat voice.

"You know, I definitely think she was mad..." Lyra repeated, stroking her chin. "But they're not 'insane theories!' Luna said that humans existed a long time ago in Equestria."

"Princess Luna..." Bon-Bon repeated. "She actually comes to Ponyville for a visit – royalty, in Ponyville! – and all you care about are these humans and..." She shook her head. "Exactly how angry did you make her? In that costume, at least she wouldn't be able to identify you, but do I need to worry about the royal guards coming to our door?"

Lyra turned her back. "You're ignoring the most important part of this. Humans *are* real, or... were... and there's something that the government doesn't want us to know about them."

"No. Don't pull the government into this. I'd rather not have either of us get arrested."

Already heading off to her study, Lyra just said, "I need to write down exactly what Luna said before I forget. There could be clues. This is a huge development!"

Bon-Bon sighed, and collapsed on the sofa again. No... There would have to be limits on how far Lyra would actually go with this. For tonight, there was no way Bon-Bon was going to argue with her, so she'd leave that for later. Within minutes she was asleep again and snoring.

There were quiet hoofsteps going down the hall. A door creaked closed, and latched shut.

Lyra was still awake, listening for the telltale sounds of Bon-Bon going to bed, waiting until she could be sure she wouldn't be disturbed. It was more for Bon-Bon's sake than her own; Lyra had promised that she'd never try this again after the first disaster.

She was sitting on her bed, with her journal on the nightstand. She raised up her two front hooves in front of her face, closed her eyes, and concentrated. Slowly she felt the magic changing her. All this practice had made the spell much easier to cast, with fewer accidents. She hardly noticed the discomfort in the process anymore. It had only taken two nights after Bon-Bon's panic attack before Lyra just hadn't been able to resist trying out her handwriting again. Now she was doing this at least three nights a week.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a perfect pair of hands. It was a sight that always managed to make her smile. She flexed her fingers, adjusting to the feel of them again. What would be the reaction if she tried to keep them like this, all the time? True, most ponies would probably react like Bon-Bon had... At least Lyra could still have hands at times like this, when she was on her own. She picked up her journal and a quill, and flipped to a blank page.

There hadn't been any dreams over the past few nights. Still, one of the recurring details had been on her mind a lot lately. As she stared at the page, Lyra scratched her chin thoughtfully, and then started sketching out a few lines.

First of all, she had to get the posture right. And the curves of the figure. Female humans had some differences in their shape from the males. Lyra ran her fingers through her mane. It came to down to her shoulders, so she tried drawing it like that in the sketch. It didn't look quite right, so she made it a bit shorter. A human's neck wasn't as long as a pony's.

Also, there was the issue of clothing. Ponies only wore clothing for special occasions, but humans were always fully clothed. In casual situations they'd wear pants – Lyra drew those over the legs of the figure, and a long-sleeved shirt on top. Yeah, that looked pretty good.

Finally, the face. Lyra stopped for a moment. Her fingers idly stroked the feather of the quill. What exactly would her face look like as a human? She tried just a general female face. The eyes – they looked a little small, but that was normal. Her ears wouldn't be pointy at all and they'd be on the sides of her head, about centered. No horn.

The horn was something she thought about often. Humans didn't have them, so they couldn't use magic. That might not be so bad. After all, being able to have hands seemed like a fair exchange. She held up her left hand to examine it as she drew with her right. It seemed easier to control the quill with her right hand, so she always used that one.

That was it – this was what she'd look like as a human. Lyra held the book up and examined her work. She looked pretty good. All of those weird details – the bipedal posture, the lack of a tail, the fingers – when they were all part of a human figure, they didn't look weird at all. Lyra found herself wishing that she actually did look like this, but... Hands had been difficult enough. She sighed. This would probably be out of the question.

Lyra closed her journal and set it back on the nightstand. Then she blew out the candles and laid her head on the pillow. It might have been a little ridiculous imagining herself as a human. Knowing that they were real didn't change anything. She'd never actually be human no matter what she did.

There was an itchy spot behind her ear, so she reached up to scratch it... and realized she still had hands. That was a close one. As much as she wanted to, Bon-Bon might kick her out if she kept them, so they had to go. The green light from her horn lit them up as the fingers retracted back into the hooves.

• • •

The next morning, Bon-Bon was preparing breakfast, as she normally would on the weekends. In the month she had in between the two biggest holidays of the year, work would be at a relaxed pace and she could take it easy for a while. Not to mention all the crazy things Lyra had been doing had also seemed to slow down lately. Bon-Bon would be content if she never saw another pair of hands again.

"Good morning, Bon-Bon," Lyra said.

"Good mor—" Bon-Bon turned around, saw Lyra, and stopped. "Um... what's with the...?"

Lyra was dressed in a white dress shirt and – something that was especially unusual for a pony – a pair of black pants. A tie was hanging loose around her neck. Bon-Bon had a sick feeling that she knew what this was all about, but hoped she was wrong.

"I was going to head over to Rarity's later," Lyra said. "I thought you knew I was picking up my dress for the Gala today."

Bon-Bon let out a sigh of relief. "Ah, yes. I almost forgot you had ordered one from her."

Lyra's horn started to glow as she looked down at her tie and adjusted it. "Anyway, humans dress like this all the time, and I was thinking I might make a habit out of it. Personally I think it looks good on me."

Bon-Bon stared at her. She started to speak – or tried to, she couldn't think of what to say. She looked down at Lyra's hooves to make sure they were, in fact, still hooves. "Um, it's..."

"You don't like it?" Lyra said.

Bon-Bon wrinkled her nose. "It's not that, I just think... Well, it must be a hassle getting dressed every day. Are you sure you want to put up with that kind of trouble?"

"Nah, it's not really that big a deal. This didn't take long at all." Lyra sat down at the table. "Anyway, let's eat!"

Taking a deep breath, Bon-Bon joined her. Clothes were not that much of an issue. Some ponies liked them. And maybe Lyra would finally get tired after some time and give up on this foolishness.

But she was sitting that way again. Leaning back in her chair. It was as if she thought she *was* one of them.

• • •

Lyra left home shortly after breakfast. It was chilly out. The leaves had started to fall already, but the trees wouldn't go completely bare for another couple weeks until they had the Running of the Leaves. The oranges and reds of the trees stood in stark contrast to the grey skies.

Wearing clothes was a good way to stay warm. It definitely helped to block some of the wind. This might be a good habit to start after all. Lyra was beginning to wonder why this particular aspect of human culture hadn't been retained by ponies.

Lyra noticed that a few heads were turning to watch her as she trotted through town, towards Rarity's boutique. In her dreams, the humans were always wearing clothes, but that wasn't how pony culture worked at all. Clothing really made a pony stand out.

Lyra knocked on Rarity's door and waited patiently, humming to herself contentedly and rocking back and forth on her hooves.

The door opened, and when Rarity saw who it was, she smiled. "Ah, I was expecting to see you today. Come on in. Love the outfit, by the way."

"Really?" Lyra said, following her into the shop.

"Oh, but of course! Classic black and white, and that tie really pulls everything together... You truly are a Canterlot pony, aren't you?" Rarity examined her approvingly. "Some special occasion?"

"Nope, just felt like it," Lyra said. "I actually find the pants very comfortable."

"You know, my mother seems to like them as well, though I've always found them a bit... tacky, I suppose," Rarity said, frowning. She looked back at Lyra. "Oh, but they look great on you!"

"Thanks!" She thought Rarity sounded sincere enough.

"But let's not get sidetracked. I just know you'll love what I put together for you," Rarity said, leading her through the chaotic jumble of supplies and sketches to stand in front of a newly-completed dress on a mannequin. "How do you like it?"

Lyra's dress was all pure white except for some turquoise trim and embroidery on the back. The back flowed out gracefully. The sleeves and neck had gold accents, and a brooch shaped like her lyre cutie mark was on the front.

"It looks... great!" Lyra said. She was reminded of a toga more than anything else – that was an old style of human garment, although she wasn't sure if Rarity would have ever heard of those.

"Why don't you try it on? I need to make sure it's absolutely perfect," Rarity said. "Oh, and don't forget the matching shoes and mane clip. I went ahead and made you an entire ensemble."

"Wow, this is really amazing," Lyra said, admiring the detail on the brooch.

"Now quickly. I'd like to see how it looks on you," Rarity said. Her horn glowed as she lifted the garment off of the dress form and passed it over to Lyra.

"Sure," Lyra replied. "Um... excuse me." She stepped behind a screen as she changed out of her shirt and pants and into the dress.

Rarity came over to where Lyra was examining her reflection in the mirror. "So, how do you like it?"

"This is excellent," Lyra said. She turned from side to side, craning her neck to look at herself from all angles. Then she carefully lifted herself up onto her back legs.

"Um... What are you doing?" Rarity said.

"Just wanted to see how it would look..." Lyra said. She tried to stay balanced, but it was hard to stand on two legs for very long.

Rarity bit her lip. "Lyra, I've noticed that you sometimes sit a tad strangely, particularly when you're performing. Perhaps at the Gala you should attempt to be more..." She searched for the word. "Ladylike."

Lyra dropped back down to all fours. "Huh? Oh. Right..."

"It *is* a formal event. You're quite fortunate to have been invited. You should know that they will expect all the formalities in Canterlot," Rarity said.

"You've been to the Gala before, haven't you, Rarity?" Lyra asked.

Rarity's face twitched. "Well... yes, but I'm afraid I will not be attending again. Still... don't hesitate to tell everypony where you got your tailor-made dress. And if you see any important Canterlot personalities –"

"I probably wouldn't recognize them if I did. I've never really paid attention to that kind of thing," Lyra said. "Thanks again, by the way."

"It's not a problem at all." Rarity regained her composure. "Would you like me to wrap that up for you?"

• • •

Lyra headed out of the boutique and headed back home through Ponyville, thinking about what Rarity had said. The package was floating along next to her.

*Canterlot.*

Lyra was having mixed feelings about going back there. Like Rarity said, it was very formal. Stuffy and boring would be more accurate. Still, the Grand Galloping Gala was an honor. Being invited was a testament to her talent as a musician.

She came up to her house and opened the door. Her head was down in thought as she habitually headed into the living room.

Rarity had actually called her a "Canterlot pony." That was a laugh. These clothes were more for the human look than high-society. Lyra had always felt out of place in Canterlot, which was why she'd been happy to move away from her parents' house.

"Ah, there she is! We've missed you, Heartstrings!"

Lyra's head shot up at her father's voice. Bon-Bon was seated in the living room with a dark blue unicorn and a violet pegasus. Lyra was speechless. *Her... parents? Here? Now?* The package dropped to the ground. "Dad? Mom? Wh-when did you get here?"

"They just arrived a few minutes ago. I told them you wouldn't be long," Bon-Bon said.

"We told you we'd be visiting today," her mother said. "You must have gotten our letter. You're even dressed up. Very nice."

"Oh... Right," Lyra said, smiling nervously. She'd never gotten any letter. She loosened her tie; it seemed to be getting kind of warm in here. Funny, she'd been shivering outside just a few seconds ago. "Just let me put this away and I'll be right back."

Leaving the room perhaps a bit too quickly, Lyra headed for her bedroom. First she threw the package into the closet, then she lifted up her journal and hid it under the bed. Rushing into the study, she took down all of her old books and dropped them behind the sofa.

Lyra looked over the room, satisfied with her efforts. Should she change out of her human clothes? No, that would take too long. Besides, her mother had already commented on that. Lyra spun around, only to come face-to-face with Bon-Bon.

"You never told me your parents were visiting, *Heartstrings*," Bon-Bon said, placing an odd emphasis on the name. "What was that about a letter?"

"I never got anything. It must have gotten lost in the mail," Lyra said. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for any traces she might have missed. "You know that one pegasus who always brings our mail. She's a total ditz. She loses stuff all the time."



"That may be so, *Heartstrings*. Anyway, I was just about to start preparing lunch. I'll be in the kitchen. Why don't you spend some time with your family? They've been waiting for you."

Lyra's eyes darted all over the room again. "Great! You do tha—" She stopped. "Wait, why do you keep saying my name like that?"

"Like what, *Heartstrings*?" Bon-Bon asked, with a mischievous grin.

"I..." Lyra began. She blinked. "I've never told you what my real name is, have I?"

"No, you didn't. I thought for sure they must have the wrong house when they were asking for 'Heartstrings.' If you had just seen the look that they gave me when I said my roommate 'Lyra' was out! Why didn't you tell me that 'Lyra' was just a nickname?" Bon-Bon said.

Lyra sighed. "Fine... I've been going by a human name ever since I came to Ponyville." Bon-Bon's mouth dropped open, but she didn't say anything. "It never really caught on like I wanted to back in Canterlot, but... I've never liked my real name."

"We've been living together for a few years now. You could have at least told me what your *name* was."

"Sorry... But you have to do me a favor! Please don't tell my parents about the research I've been doing."

"Your... research?" Bon-Bon frowned.

"About humans. My parents... They've never really approved of it. They thought I was just going through a phase. All they've ever wanted was for me to act like a 'normal unicorn.' Everything about humans... They think it's all a bunch of nonsense."

"Lyra, I think it's a bunch of nonsense."

"How many times do I have to say this? What Luna said proves there's more to this! I'm going to find something out." Lyra took a deep breath. "But... Please. Just for today, can you act like I'm... normal?"

"You realize how difficult that's going to be." Bon-Bon's eyes narrowed.

"I'm sorry. I know I've put you through a lot lately," Lyra said. She stared at the floor, trying to look as apologetic as possible. She hoped it was convincing.

"Normal," Bon-Bon said. "You realize how much you're asking, right? You never even told me your real name! And after that incident with those hands –"

"Not so loud, please!" Lyra's voice had dropped to a harsh whisper. She glanced towards the living room nervously.

"You're absolutely insane." Bon-Bon shook her head. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I'm real sorry about that. Honestly, I am. But... they were so proud when they heard I was hired for the Gala, and they've always just wanted me to focus on my musical career..." Lyra said. "They don't understand how important humans are to me."

"I don't, either."

"Just for today. Neither of us is going to mention humans."

"That sounds wonderful, *Heartstrings*. Perhaps you can make a habit of it," Bon-Bon said.

"I'm serious. Don't say *anything*." She jabbed a hoof in Bon-Bon's direction. She didn't want to discuss it any further. She headed for the living room, and Bon-Bon went to the kitchen.

"Sorry for the wait," Lyra told her parents. She was about to take a seat on the couch, but stopped herself. She couldn't sit like she usually did. Not in front of them. Slowly, awkwardly, she laid down like most ponies would. It wasn't a normal position for her.

"It's been a while since you wrote home. We haven't heard from you in months," her mother said. "How have you been?"

"Oh, I've been... busy..." Lyra's voice trailed off. She quickly interjected, "Practicing, of course."

"Your roommate mentioned that," her dad said, pushing his glasses up. "I still can't believe you were accepted for the Grand Galloping Gala. That's a huge honor."

"We always knew you were a prodigy," her mother added. "By the way, when we got here, your roommate said you were still going by that old nickname. I thought you'd grown out of that."

"Oh, that?" Lyra said. Her voice trembled. "Yeah, the name kind of caught on. It's what everyb—" She corrected herself. "It's what everyone calls me now."

"Just so long as you're done with those ridiculous old stories," her father said.

Lyra barely contained an outburst, knowing it wasn't worth it. Her parents were immovable in their skepticism. Her father had pointed to that grade on her report about humans all those years ago and claimed that was proof they weren't real. What about the proof all around them, all of those relics of human society in Equestria that were so obvious if you just knew what to look for?

Bon-Bon came out of the kitchen carefully holding a tray of food in her teeth. She set it down on the table. "When we heard you'd be coming I made sure to prepare something special." It was the leftovers of the breakfast casserole she'd made that morning. She'd done a spectacular job of fixing it up to look fresh. "Anyway, I don't believe I caught your names earlier."

"Dewey Decimal," Lyra's father said.

"And my name is Cirrus," said her mother. She started a plate. "This is quite delicious. You mentioned you were a professional chef?"

"Confectioner," Bon-Bon clarified. "I just got the job recently, to be honest."

Lyra breathed a sigh of relief. The conversation had drifted away from her – for now, at least. And as long as her parents weren't going to get on her case about the nickname, everything would go fine and she could enjoy the visit.

"You're quite lucky, Heartstrings. You must get homemade sweets all the time," Dewey said.

"Yeah... Everything's pretty great around here," Lyra said.

"Of course," Bon-Bon said.

"Everything's *perfectly normal*," Lyra added.

Her father gave a nod of approval. "Glad to hear it. Anyway, there's been a lot going on in Canterlot ever since you left, Heartstrings."

Lyra winced at the name. She knew she'd be hearing it a lot today. But honestly, she was sixteen years old. She was an adult now, and she'd been living on her own for several years now. Her parents still treated her like a filly.

The next few hours dragged by. Her mother started talking about the weather factory's plans for the coming winter. Her father just wanted to talk about Canterlot society, which Bon-Bon seemed to absolutely love. Lyra suppressed a yawn.

At one point they asked Lyra to play some of her material for the Gala. She got out her lyre and played a piece for them. She went through about half of it – the melody just repeated in the second part, anyway – and then put her lyre back in its case.

"It would be great if you tried to take your talent further," Bon-Bon said, nodding. "Perhaps you should focus on it more?"

"Well, there's been... other things... occupying my time," Lyra noticed the look that Bon-Bon gave her, and knew exactly what she meant.

"Such as?" Dewey leaned in. Lyra had no idea what to say.

Then there was a knock at the door.

"Someone's here?" Lyra's head shot up. "I'll go get it."

She was glad to be away for a little bit. Whoever it was, this distraction was welcome.

After Lyra left the room, Cirrus turned to Bon-Bon. "We have been worried, though. Heartstrings hasn't mentioned anything about 'humans' to you, has she? When she was a filly, she was simply obsessed with them, and it's really not good for her. She's even still using that name."

Part of her wanted to scream at them, telling these surprisingly normal Canterlot ponies about the horrors she'd experienced because of their psychopath of a daughter. But instead, against her better judgment, she simply replied, "Humans? No. Of course not. What are those? I've certainly never heard of them."

"That's a relief. She must have forgotten all about them," Cirrus said.

Bon-Bon glanced back towards the entry.

"Hello, Lyra. I was hoping you'd be home. Can I come in?" It was Twilight's voice.

"Sure. Um, my parents are over for a visit, though."

"That's fine." Twilight followed Lyra as they headed in to the living room. She stopped once she saw Lyra's father. A smile spread across her face. "Mr. Dewey? From Canterlot?"

"Twilight Sparkle! It's been a while since I've seen you," he said with a nod. "I had almost forgotten you were living here in Ponyville now."

"Lyra? You didn't tell me your father was Mr. Dewey!" Twilight said, grinning.

"You never asked," Lyra replied.

Twilight seemed to be getting misty-eyed. "I've really missed the Canterlot library. It's the largest in Equestria. I used to spend hours there."

"How have you been, Twilight? Still studying for the Princess, I assume," Dewey said.

"Of course. Actually, she just gave me a new assignment. I came over because I needed to pick up a book that Lyra was borrowing," Twilight said. "I thought you'd forgotten. It's *The Illustrated* -"

"Oh, *that* book?" Lyra cut her off. "I didn't forget. In fact, it's in the study. We'll go right on back and get it." The book in question was hidden along with the others, behind the sofa. She quickly formulated a story – *she was terribly unorganized, it must have ended up there on accident... along with all her other books, when the bookshelves were bare?* No, that wouldn't make any sense.

"That's great," Twilight said. "I probably wouldn't have remembered either, except that the princess wanted me to write up some information in a report for her."

She noticed that her hooves that had begun sliding across the floor. Lyra had gotten behind her and was pushing her towards the study. "That's very interesting, Twilight. Let's go find that book. I'm sure you're very busy."

"It's fine, Lyra, I can walk there on my own," Twilight said.

Lyra hurried off down the hall. With a puzzled look, Twilight followed her. Heading over to the couch without a word, Lyra lifted up a book wedged behind it and the wall.

"That's funny, how did it get back there?" Lyra said in a flat voice. "Anyway, there's your book. We were in the middle of something, actually, so if you could just leave and –"

"Just checking, you're done with this, right? You got all the research you needed?" Twilight asked.

"Yeah, of course. You can have it back. It's fine." She waved a hoof.

"Well... thanks!" Twilight headed back out, passing through the living room towards the door.

Lyra's father spoke up. "I didn't realize you two were friends. We'd really like to hear about what you've been up to, Heartstrings."

"Um, yeah... Sorry," Lyra said. She really hoped Twilight would leave soon, before she could say anything about what that book was about.

"It's strange, I've never really had much of a use for a book on cryptozoology, but I looked through my library and this was the only book I had that I could use for my research report."

Lyra was starting to feel a spell of lightheadedness coming on.

"Really? What does the Princess want you to study this time?" Dewey asked, pushing up his glasses.

She paused for a moment. "Actually, Lyra, maybe you could help me with this. I actually never heard about humans until you showed up."

Dewey seemed to be overcome by a coughing fit. "Did you say... humans?"

Lyra's eyes darted from side to side. "Um, of course not, Twilight, I don't really know anything about..."

"I thought you said you were finished with this 'humans' obsession, Heartstrings," Cirrus said.

"I am! Of course I am," Lyra insisted.

"You were just in my library a few weeks ago asking about them." Twilight cocked her head, frowning. "That's the book I came over for. I couldn't find anything else about humans in my other books. By the way, I noticed your hoof is better now."

Bon-Bon choked on a bite of casserole.

"Yeah, I told you it was nothing," Lyra said. Her mind was filling up with questions. Princess Celestia wanted a report on humans, but if Luna was any indication, they should both know more than anyone. And, on top of that, hadn't Luna said that they'd never speak of humans again? Why would Celestia be sending out her own apprentice to dig up whatever information was left? Unless...

"Heartstrings, we really thought you'd come to your senses," her father said, shaking his head.

Her mother cut in. "I'm sure you're going to be very busy preparing for your performance at the Gala. You only have a few months. It's probably best if Twilight just gets her paper written." She looked over at her. "But I can't believe the Princess would have you writing such a ridiculous assignment."

Twilight glanced back at the door. "Maybe I came at a bad time..."

"It's fine," Lyra said. "I'm done with humans. I really should focus on my music, shouldn't I?" She couldn't believe what she was saying, but she had to speak carefully now. Twilight showing up like this was suddenly very suspicious.

"That's good to hear," Cirrus said. She turned to Dewey. "I've always said you never should have given her those books in the first place."

"I never thought it would become such a problem," he said.

Lyra grinned nervously. "I don't even *have* those books anymore, so..."

"Well, thanks for giving me this back," Twilight said, moving slowly towards the door. "The Princess actually didn't tell me very much. She's always giving me extra research projects in addition to my usual studies, it's really nothing special."

"It is rather strange," Dewey said. "But we shouldn't keep you from your work."

"You're right. I shouldn't stay longer than I have to," Twilight said. She quickly turned and bolted out the door.

Lyra's parents turned to look at her. There was a long and painful silence.

"So, um... anypony want dessert?" Bon-Bon offered.

• • •

Dewey and Cirrus said their farewells as night fell, and Lyra waved goodbye as their carriage started down the road back to Canterlot. Once it was out of sight, she went back inside.

"I must say, your family surprised me," Bon-Bon told her as she stepped inside. "They're so *ordinary*. Knowing you, I expected them to be –"

"She's onto us," Lyra said.

Bon-Bon stared at her. "Who?"

"Princess Celestia!"

Bon-Bon put a hoof to her face. "What in Equestria are you talking about now, Lyra?"

"Do you honestly think it's a coincidence that Twilight's out, asking around about humans? She's the Princess's personal apprentice! She's spying on me because *they* know I know something *nobody's* supposed to know!" Lyra was restlessly pacing back and forth across the room.

It was starting again. They'd had a day that was almost normal, and Lyra had truly been able to pass as a reasonably sane pony, but the moment her parents were gone, she had snapped again.

"Lyra, Twilight's been our neighbor for over a year now. She's not a spy," Bon-Bon said.

"Then why does the Princess need a report about humans? If Luna's any indication, I'd say she probably already knows enough about them," Lyra said. "It's *me* they're studying."



There was something about this time of year that always made Lyra feel nostalgic. And, since she was back in Canterlot for Hearth's Warming Eve for the first time since she'd moved away, that was especially true this year.

Still, home or not, this *was* the center of the conspiracy, so she couldn't afford to be careless.

The streets were covered in snow, the ribbons and garland hung from every building, the lights shone in all the trees. She'd always heard that Canterlot was the best place for the winter season, and she had to admit that Ponyville's celebrations had always felt a bit lacking compared to home.

"Scootaloo! Get back here! You already got your tongue stuck to *one* candy cane, we don't need to go through this again!" Bon-Bon called down the street. She shook her head. "How did we get talked into filly-sitting?"

Lyra simply pulled down the hood of her parka, stepped forward, and called out, "Hey, girls! Want to know where to get the best gingerbread in Canterlot?"

Suddenly all three fillies were right in front of her.

"Did you just say the *best* gingerbread?" Apple Bloom asked.

Lyra nodded. "I used to go to this bakery every Hearth's Warming Eve when I was your age. It is, hands down, the best you will *ever* have."

Bon-Bon shot her a look.

"Well, it is," Lyra said. "No offense, Bon-Bon, you're a great cook, but I've always found your gingerbread is seriously lacking."

"Hurry up! We want to see!" Scootaloo said, bouncing up and down.

"Well, we don't have much time until the play starts, but it's right on the way to the castle. We can stop in for a few minutes," Lyra said.

With a look of satisfaction, she started down the street with the Crusaders following behind, wide grins on their faces. Bon-Bon gaped at her, and ran to catch up.

"How do you do that?" she asked.

"What can I say? I'm good with kids," Lyra replied.

"You practically act like you still *are* one," Bon-Bon muttered.

Lyra turned to enter a building on the corner of the street. "It's right here." She inhaled the smells of baked goods emanating from the building. Peppermint, chocolate, and, of course, that gingerbread. "Pony Joe's usually just sells donuts, but they step it up around this time of year. I've missed this."

They entered the bakery, with the fillies chattering excitedly. Bon-Bon was scanning the shelves of baked goods behind the counter, and attempting to peek through the window into the kitchen.

Lyra stepped up to the counter. "How's it going, Joe?" It hadn't escaped her notice that he had a human name, though he didn't know it was anything special. Some ponies were lucky enough to have real names like that. "Five gingerbread cookies, please. Oh, and a hot chocolate."

"Heartstrings? Haven't seen you in ages. That'll be ten bits," Pony Joe replied.

Lyra produced the coins from the pocket of her coat. There were just so many benefits to human clothing. She'd started wearing clothes every day now.

"Thank you," Joe said. "Happy Hearth's Warming."

"Merry Christmas!" Lyra said cheerfully. He stared at her, one eyebrow raised in confusion.

They took the cookies and Lyra's hot chocolate and sat down. The Cutie Mark Crusaders all sat around a table, while Bon-Bon and Lyra took some nearby seats at the window.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but... why do you keep saying that to everypony?" Bon-Bon said in a hushed tone. She glanced over at the Crusaders, but they were satisfied with their cookies and weren't paying any attention.

"It's the dreams again," Lyra said, and Bon-Bon let out a groan. "I was human again in this one. I really like those ones... But anyway, I was in one of their towns. It was decorated just like this, for Hearth's Warming Eve, but I kept hearing humans saying 'Merry Christmas.'"

"Where did you even get that word from, though?" Bon-Bon said.

"When I woke up, I wasn't sure exactly what it meant. I looked it up in my books, and sure enough, something called Christmas was mentioned a few times. I think it's a human holiday. I didn't remember reading about it before, though."

"You must have. You just forgot about it, or... something." Bon-Bon shook her head. "I've never heard of anypony taking their dreams so seriously."

"There wasn't much information. As far as I could tell, Christmas is some celebration that takes place in winter, but as much as I looked I never could find the true meaning of Christmas. It's too bad. I'd really like to know what it is."

"This isn't like what you were saying about... whatever that harvest festival last October was called... is it?"

"Who knows? Maybe we've been celebrating a human holiday all month and didn't even realize it."

Bon-Bon finished her cookie. "I suppose you may have a point about the gingerbread..." She was eager to change the subject at any cost.

"It's the molasses," Lyra said. "You always use too much of it."

Bon-Bon's eyes narrowed. "We're going to be late for the play," she said. "We should get going."

Lyra walked over to the table that the Crusaders were gathered around. "Come on, girls. We're headed to the castle now."

"Yes!" Scootaloo said. "I can't wait! Rainbow Dash is going to be *awesome* in this play!"

"Aren't you forgetting somepony?" Sweetie Belle said. "My big sister's playing Princess Platinum. She's the best!"

They headed outside into the street, joining a number of other ponies all heading to the castle. Lyra stared up at the gold-capped towers looming over their heads. Maybe it was a mistake coming to the play this year. Staying hidden in the crowd would be a good idea.

"I've never been to the Hearth's Warming Eve pageant in Canterlot before," Bon-Bon said. "And we even know the stars. I'm excited."

"I can definitely understand why the Princess would want Twilight in the pageant," Lyra muttered. "She's a *great* actress. She's especially good at playing clueless."

"Are you still convinced she's a spy?" Bon-Bon whispered. "You need to let it go."

"How do you know she's not? It's not like she'd tell us if she was," Lyra said.

This had been going on for a month now. Bon-Bon had hoped that Lyra wasn't harassing Twilight too much, but it wasn't like she could keep an eye on her roommate when there were literally thousands of cookies to be made this season.

The castle seemed to grow even taller now as they crossed the bridge into the entrance, and Lyra stared up at it apprehensively. They were coming into the entrance hall now. *This was where the Gala would be held, too...*

Bon-Bon gave Lyra a look. "Perhaps you'd like to take your coat off and stay a while?"

Lyra groaned, but Bon-Bon had a point. "Fine..." She knew it shouldn't be so much of a problem, but she would actually feel awkward being out in public and not wearing clothes.

There was a coat room nearby, so she left it there among all the scarves and hats. Not many ponies realized the value of a full coat to keep yourself warm. Or the usefulness of a hood to hide yourself from unwanted eyes, for that matter.

• • •

The play would be on a huge stage that had been set up in the throne room. Ponies filled the audience from wall to wall. Dim moonlight faintly illuminated the stained glass – on one side, Twilight and her friends bearing the Elements of Harmony. On the other side, Discord, the spirit of Chaos. It had been just a few months since he'd broken free, but now he'd been sealed away again and things were calm... relatively speaking.

Lyra kept her head down as they entered the hall. Their ticket stubs floated in front of her.

"Can I see those?" Bon-Bon asked. Lyra moved them in front of her. "Now, where are we... These are..." Her eyes widened. "We're in the front row?"

"Great, just great... Bon-Bon, can you look around for me? Is the Princess here?" Lyra asked.

"If you want to see her –"

"I can't make myself too suspicious!" Lyra whispered. "You need to look for me. Where is she? What's she doing?"

Bon-Bon sighed and glanced around. The entire hall was packed with ponies of every race and color, but there didn't seem to be any special audience box. Princess Celestia, if she had been there, would have been easy to spot.

"She's not even here," Bon-Bon said, surprised.

"Really?" Lyra raised her head up to look for herself. "That's strange."

"Lyra, you're paranoid. It's a wonder I was even able to convince you to come to Canterlot," Bon-Bon said.

"They would have noticed if I turned down the offer to watch the fillies. The secret is to act natural."

They reached their places. The Crusaders had the very front row – reserved for family of the stars, obviously. Bon-Bon was behind them, and Lyra was stuck across the aisle.

"Oh, Lyra... Are you okay being over there by yourself?" Bon-Bon frowned.

She waved a hoof. "It's fine. It's pretty packed, anyway," Lyra said.

The lights dimmed and the curtains opened. A hush fell over the audience. Spike was on stage, apparently playing the part of the Narrator this year. Lyra was mostly interested in his costume. Baby dragons were bipedal, and his outfit, although small, was extremely similar to something a human had worn. The style actually seemed to match an illustration Lyra had seen in one of her books.

"Once upon a time, long before the peaceful rule of Celestia, and before ponies discovered our beautiful land of Equestria, ponies did not know harmony," Spike began. The lines were familiar to the point where Lyra hardly even heard them anymore. "It was a strange and dark time. A time when ponies were torn apart – by hatred."

Not everybody was so used to the play, though. Over in front of Bon-Bon, the Cutie Mark Crusaders had just recoiled in shock at that revelation.

Although the events of the pageant got to be routine over the years, Lyra still remembered the interest she'd once had in the play. Unicorns and pegasi as enemies? That had been hard for her to understand as a filly. Her own parents got along just fine. And now she was sharing her rent with an earth pony.

When she'd been really young, though, her own identity had always confused her. pegasi, like her mother, had their weather control and flight. Unicorns had magic. For a long time Lyra had neither. She didn't even have any talent with food, so she couldn't just call herself an earth pony with a useless horn either. But then she'd picked up the lyre, magic had become second nature to her, and she had moved past that entire awkward phase.

They were on to the part where the leaders showed up for the first time. Lyra had zoned out and practically missed the first scene of the play. Now Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity had taken the stage. Lyra heard Scootaloo give a quiet squeal of excitement.

Rainbow Dash's natural hotheadedness made her a perfect Commander Hurricane. And Rarity was just as extravagant as always, but now she had a tiara to match. All three of them were adding something to the normally predictable pageant. It was hard to see them as the characters rather than their own selves, but at least it was something new.

The costume design definitely was top-notch this year. The characters were all so well-established that everybody knew what they looked like, but these outfits came the closest to the popular depictions. But then again... Lyra was absolutely certain she'd seen illustrations of humans dressed just like Applejack's character, Smart Cookie. That hat, and the shirt...

Sure enough, the influences of human culture were even in the Hearth's Warming Eve play if you knew what to look for.

Lyra's attention was fixed on the stage for the remainder of the play. Of course... Even something as simple as this couldn't be overlooked. What was *really* going on in this story?

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"Hurry up! Let's go!" Apple Bloom led her friends towards the entrance to the backstage area.

"Girls, please, slow down!" Bon-Bon chased after them. Lyra was about to follow, but stopped. There was a guard posted in front of the door, his rigid face staring straight ahead. Bon-Bon stepped up to him. "Family and friends of the cast," she explained.

Rainbow Dash stepped out, still dressed in her costume as Commander Hurricane. She noticed them immediately, and nodded towards Scootaloo. "Oh, hey, squirt." She turned to the guard. "It's fine, they're with us."

"This is... so *cool!*" Scootaloo said. She was nearly about to faint and fall over backwards, but Lyra stepped up and gently nudged her back onto her hooves.

With a nervous glance at the guard, who hadn't reacted to her at all, Lyra followed the others to the backstage dressing room. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom immediately ran to their sisters, while Scootaloo just tagged along behind Rainbow Dash. Across the room was Twilight Sparkle.

Lyra tried not to acknowledge her. She looked through the props and costumes, and a few pieces of flat scenery that had also been stored back here. Just about everything seemed familiar from her books. Everybody thought that this play was all about three different races settling their differences and coming together, but what about the race that walked on two legs and had the hands necessary to use some of these props? They'd certainly gotten the short end of the deal...

"Hello, Lyra. How did you like the play?" Twilight asked.

Lyra jumped. "Oh, it was... excellent! You did great." She grinned nervously. "Actually, I was wondering if I could see a copy of the script."

Twilight glanced around the room. "Sure. We've got tons of them lying around." She found a copy folded open on one of the dressers and passed it over to Lyra. "But it's really not very different from the plays they put on all over Equestria. Just about everypony knows this story."

"Of course. It's just that... Well, Equestrian history's always interested me." Lyra shrugged, then added, "Especially things about ponies."

"I see..." Twilight said.

Lyra glanced over at the window, avoiding Twilight's gaze. "I'd better get going now. Don't want to miss the train," she finally said. She took the script and sprinted out of the room.

"Don't worry about that, you've still got –" Twilight called out, but Lyra was gone. "Another two hours."

Twilight looked over and saw Bon-Bon talking to Fluttershy. She joined them.

"Bon-Bon, I noticed Lyra's been acting a bit strangely lately. I mean, more than usual, I guess," Twilight said. "Is everything okay?"

"What did she do now?" Bon-Bon said in an exasperated tone.

"Nothing, really," Twilight assured her. "I can't explain it. Is this something to do with her parents? When I came over, she just seemed really nervous about them. That's when this all started."

Bon-Bon gave a sigh and shook her head. "It's ridiculous, really. She thinks you're a government agent sent to spy on her."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "I thought everypony had gotten over that after I first moved to Ponyville. I'm not a spy. Why would I even be spying on her?"

"It's this obsession with humans. She thinks that the Princess is hiding some kind of secret about them," Bon-Bon said. "Don't ask me to explain it. There's no logic to it."

Twilight frowned in confusion. "The Princess wouldn't hide something like that. All she wants is a report on them. And as far as I've been able to tell, humans aren't even real," she said. "But I do need to get a complete report, and there just hasn't been enough information to fill even a single page. I hate to ask, but... what if Lyra helped me?"

"Oh. Well, I do try to avoid bringing up anything about humans. Once she gets in one of her moods, it's hard to reason with her," Bon-Bon said. "Quite frankly, it can be... horrifying, sometimes." She cringed at the memories.

"Maybe I could show her what I've been able to come up with. I contacted a few libraries in Manehattan and Trottingham, and they sent me a couple books that they were able to dig up. But there's still been no concrete evidence that humans exist."

"Exactly. Now if you could just get Lyra to understand that..."

"I'll do what I can. If nothing else, I do find these stories a fascinating part of Equestria's culture and folklore," Twilight said.

Bon-Bon left the backstage area and found Lyra waiting outside. She was wearing the parka with the hood up again, glancing around nervously, and didn't seem to notice Bon-Bon approach.



"There you are, Lyra."

Lyra gasped and spun around. "Bon-Bon? Oh, it's just you. I really don't want to stay here any longer than we have to. It's dangerous." She was already heading for the door out of the castle.

Bon-Bon caught up to her. "For the last time, Lyra... I just spoke to Twilight. She says that Princess Celestia isn't hiding anything from you."

"Of course she'd say that! But that's oddly specific," Lyra said. She stopped. "Wait a sec. Don't tell me you actually *asked* her."

"Well..."

"Did you mention me?"

"Of course, but only because you've been so unreasonable lately."

"Bon-Bon, you just blew my cover! I need to get out of here – now." Lyra broke into a gallop and disappeared into the packed streets of Canterlot.

Bon-Bon let out a sigh. They'd probably meet back up at the train station. If not, then... Lyra would probably make it back to Ponyville eventually, right?

• • •

The sky had turned to orange as the sun set. Bon-Bon scanned the crowd of ponies at the station, looking for the familiar mint-green mane, but didn't see it. No, Lyra wouldn't have just run off like that. Then she remembered – of course, Lyra would still be wearing her coat. She saw a pony with a hood up, and headed over.

"I can't believe you'd tell Twilight what I know," Lyra muttered as Bon-Bon nudged her way through the crowd to join her.

"You're being completely impossible. All Twilight wants from you is help with her project," Bon-Bon said.

"Yeah, a research project. The perfect cover."

"For the last time, there's no conspiracy!" Bon-Bon yelled. Everypony at the station turned their heads to stare at her. She hung her head down, avoiding their eyes. "Anyway, Twilight said she wanted your help, but if you're just going to keep acting like this..."

Lyra blinked. "Wait... that's it."

"What now?"

"I'll have to be careful about how much I reveal, but the only way I'm going to find out what Princess Celestia wants is by talking to Twilight. I have to get on the inside!"

"That's not what I meant. Twilight's been doing some research on her own, and she doesn't even think that humans are –"

"I'll have to act carefully," Lyra said, ignoring her. She seemed to be talking to herself again. "She already suspects me, but this may be the only way forward." Then her head jerked up. "And the Gala! The Princess will be there. How could I have forgotten *that*?"

The train whistle blew as it pulled into the station, so nopony heard Bon-Bon let out a groan.

"You're a genius, Bon-Bon! I'm getting so close now, I can just tell!" Lyra said. "But first, there's something else I need to look at..."

• • •

Most of the ponies on the train were quiet. A few, Bon-Bon included, had fallen asleep after the long day. But Lyra was wide awake, her horn glowing to let her read the copy of the script she'd be given.

[Enter CHANCELLOR PUDDINGHEAD]

PUDDINGHEAD

Since the other tribes have refused to make peace,  
I have decided that the earth ponies will go it  
alone!

SMART COOKIE

The other tribes didn't come around? I thought we  
could get to them if we agreed to work together.

PUDDINGHEAD

With the food gone, they just wouldn't come to a reasonable solution!

So Pinkie Pie had forgotten her lines and starting making stuff up on her own. Lyra didn't need a script to see that. The chimney scene had been brilliant, though; she'd definitely admit that.

She skipped back a few pages to the scene before that one where the tribe leaders had been at the meeting.

NARRATOR

The earth ponies were freezing. The home of the pegasi fared no better. The pegasi were hungry. And the unicorns were freezing and hungry. Even the unicorns' magic was powerless against the storm.

She scribbled a note in the margin.

*Windigoes – do these appear in any other books?*

Weather was usually caused by pegasi. If Windigoes had caused this storm, due to the ponies' lack of cooperation according to the play, then what had happened to them since then? If all it took were arguments to start blizzards, then Lyra and Bon-Bon's house would have frozen over a long time ago.

Lyra stared at the lines of script. There had to be something here. A missed detail, some inconsistency, a word out of place...

She flipped over to the end.

NARRATOR

The three leaders agreed to share the beautiful land, and live in harmony ever afterwards. And together, they named their new land...

ALL [unison]  
Equestria!

[COMMANDER HURRICANE, CHANCELLOR  
PUDDINGHEAD, and PRINCESS PLATINUM raise  
the flag of Equestria together.]

According to this play, Equestria had been founded by those three leaders. A pegasus, an earth pony, and a unicorn. So where was Princess Celestia? Not only had she been absent from the audience, she'd never shown up in the play itself. Not even a mention of either princess.

No, that wasn't quite right. Lyra underlined the phrase "flag of Equestria" twice. It had been the modern flag of Equestria, with Celestia's image on it.

And there had been another thing. Lyra flipped back to the first few pages. Yes, here it is.

NARRATOR

Once upon a time, long before the peaceful rule of Celestia, and before ponies discovered our beautiful land of Equestria, ponies did not know harmony. It was a strange and dark time. A time when ponies were torn apart – by hatred.

Lyra stared at it. Everything was quiet except for the low rumble of the train along the tracks. This was it. "Long before the peaceful rule of Celestia." She circled it. That line was everything!

Exactly how long ago had Celestia come into power? And then when was this play supposed to be set? Not a single mention of humans in the entire thing, and yet it was supposed to be before Celestia's day?

Just about every prop in the entire performance looked like something out of one of her books about humans. Not even that, but then how did Luna know about humans? Lyra could only assume from her brief conversation that Luna had some *very* close knowledge of them.

"Are you still looking through that old play?" Bon-Bon had just woken up, and was watching her sleepily.

"It's all lies..." Lyra muttered. "Nothing about this makes sense. The entire story is made up!"

Bon-Bon sighed. "Not this again."

"This could be just the beginning. Who knows how much of Equestria's history has been fabricated? This could go even deeper than I realized!"

"It's just a silly holiday play. They put these pageants on every year. Don't tell me you've never seen one," Bon-Bon said.

Lyra's eyes scanned the heavily annotated script. "Nobody ever questions it because this story is so ingrained in our heads. It's just an ego trip for ponies. We're covering up the real origins of our world and claiming that we created everything ourselves. Why is Celestia insisting on this?"

"Not everything has to do with humans, Lyra. They never even mention them in the play."

"Exactly."

The conductor's voice called out throughout the train. "Next stop, Ponyville. Next stop, Ponyville."

Lyra closed the script. "I need to cross-reference this with other accounts of pony history. If I'm right, then there should be contradictions *everywhere*." She stood up as the train rolled into the station. "And the perfect place to start is Twilight's library."

The snow was really coming down now. This meeting could have been timed better. Lyra had known that the pegasi were planning another snowfall today, but she hadn't been counting on the wind as well. She was freezing even with the pants, sweater, scarf, and the heavy coat over top of it all.

She glanced up to see the library just ahead. With a final burst of speed, she hurried to the door and dashed inside.

Recovering from the wind and cold, she kicked the snow off her hooves and shook off her parka. A coat rack was right next to the door, so she pulled it off and hung it up.

Twilight had noticed the door open. "Oh, Lyra. You're here," she said. "Make yourself at home. Spike's got a fire going in the other room."

Lyra's eyes narrowed. Twilight was being way too friendly... Or was she just always like that? "Thanks..."

"So how's your roommate been? I haven't talked to Bon-Bon in a while."

"She's been okay for the most part, but when I said I was headed over here to help with your report she said she wanted to find something heavy to hit her head against." Lyra shrugged.

"Oh..." Twilight said, frowning. "Well, you can go ahead and get started. I'll be in there in a minute."

Lyra turned and headed for the other room.

Twilight really did own a lot of books. This room, like the other, was mostly shelves upon shelves of them. A ladder leaned up against one wall. On the opposite side of the room, Spike was sitting by the fireplace, holding his right claw and grimacing. He glanced up at Lyra as she walked in.

"Hey, Spike. You okay?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Yeah... Twilight's been having me write notes for her all day." Spike rubbed his wrist. "I've got a serious claw cramp."

"I know how it is. Those are a real pain," Lyra said, nodding. Spike stared at her strangely. "Uh... from what I've heard." She averted her eyes. "So anyway, what have you been writing? Anything for the Princess? Care to tell me anything?" She moved closer.

"Just more to-do lists and some rough drafts of Twilight's report. You wouldn't believe how much preparation she always does for these."

Lyra leaned in closer. "You're *sure* you haven't been writing to the Princess? What about Twilight? Has she told you anything?"

The door opened and Twilight entered the room. Owlowiscious flew in behind her and perched on the top rung of the ladder. A couple books floated in the air around her head. They drifted over to the table and settled down.

"Hey there, you two," Twilight said cheerfully. She turned to Spike. "You've been working pretty hard today, Spike. I think Lyra and I can handle it from here."

"Finally," Spike said. He yawned, stretching his short arms upwards. "G'night." He headed up the stairs.

"Let's get started, Lyra," Twilight said.

Lyra idly examined a shelf of books. "Yeah, I guess we should..."

Twilight's smile vanished. "Lyra, you're not still suspicious of me, are you? Because I'm telling you the truth – Princess Celestia has never told me anything about humans. Other than this assignment, of course."

"Of course not," Lyra said. She stared at Twilight in disbelief.

What was Twilight doing? How lousy of a spy could she be if she was just going to blatantly deny it like that? She had even been the one to bring it up in the first place. Lyra obviously hadn't been planning on saying anything about that to her.

Twilight crossed the room and searched through a drawer, taking out scrolls and loose sheets of paper. "It's in here somewhere. Aha! Right here." A single scroll floated up out of the stack, and the others fell back into the heap. "You can look at this yourself."

The letter floated over until it was right in front of Lyra's face. She unrolled it and read the fancy script.

*My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,*

*In the interest of understanding early Equestrian culture, I would like you to compile a complete report on the various legends concerning creatures known as "humans." As usual, keep me informed on your progress and any questions you may have.*

*Your mentor, Princess Celestia*

Lyra took note of the official seal at the bottom of the parchment. It didn't appear to be fresh. "So when did you get this?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Over a month ago. That's all the information she gave me," Twilight said. "It's taken me a long time to get started. There's just nothing about humans anywhere."

"She calls them legends," Lyra said, reading over the letter for what must be the third or fourth time.

"Of course. There's nothing else they could be," Twilight insisted. "I'll admit that the entire world humans were said to live in is extremely detailed. I'm especially fascinated in how there are so many different kingdoms and rulers in these stories. Not only that, but the same historical events keep getting mentioned. It's very consistent."

"Because they're *not* legends."

"Because, through generations of storytelling, imaginary places like France got to be universally accepted. I didn't even realize that when Rarity talks about 'French couture' it's actually an allusion to ancient pony mythology. She's probably not aware of that herself."

"You honestly think it's made up?" Lyra said. The letter drifted over to the table and settled down there. "Or did Princess Celestia *tell* you to say that?"

"Of course she did!" Twilight said. "Well, no, it's not what she told me to say, it's just what it *is*. That's all the background I got from her. Lyra, you've been reading these longer than I have. All we know about humans comes from books. There's no scientific or archaeological basis to prove there's any truth to these stories."

Lyra moved even closer. "What about their tools? We still use those! And clothing, you even admitted that Rarity's styles are based off of human designs!"



Twilight shook her head. "They're made-up creatures who are always shown using the same objects ponies do, because ponies created them *and* those objects. These stories might even be part of some kind of creation myth. Historically, lots of mythical creatures have some kind of relevance to the society that imagined them," she said. She thought for a moment, then added, "That's the only reason I can imagine that Princess Celestia would want to know about them. Cultural relevance."

Lyra gaped at her, but she couldn't think of any response. She was not about to admit to Princess Celestia's own student that she had heard it from Luna herself that humans were real.

Maybe Twilight wasn't lying... She really did seem to know nothing. But Lyra still had to speak carefully. Anything she said could potentially be reported back to the castle, and *that* would be a problem.

"Fine," Lyra said finally. "Just let me see what you've been able to find." She walked over to the desk and checked out the books that Twilight had set there.

*Pre-Equestrian Mysteries*, *The Human Hypothesis*, and *The Age of Man*. The titles were faded and nearly unreadable, and the books seemed to be falling apart. But these were all-new sources, books that weren't in Lyra's own collection from Canterlot. Lyra had never considered what other cities' libraries might have.

"It's probably best if we just dive right in," Twilight said. "I got these ones from the Manehattan library. It took them weeks just to respond to my letter. They said they had to check their oldest section before they found anything."

Remembering her own trip to the Canterlot archives all those years ago, Lyra nodded. "That usually seems to be the case."

"I've checked *Pre-Equestrian Mysteries* and all it had were a few paragraphs mentioning humans. I don't think it's anything other than what you already know. By the way, you said you'd check to see what books you had. Did you bring them?" Twilight asked.

Lyra slowly took the saddlebags off of her back. "It took me a while to find this. There was only one left, so I brought what I had."

*Designs for Dexterity* was the smallest of her books, just barely a hundred pages. The other books, the ones that went into more detail, were all at home. Hidden. She had to withhold as much information as she could from Twilight. Just like she'd always done with her parents, really...

All this particular book mentioned were human inventions. The introduction even stated that these were meant to be "theories," but the pony who had written the book most likely believed in them. With this evidence, how could anyone not?

"Well... alright then," Twilight said. "You're sure this is all you had? I thought you said you had more."

"Nope. My parents wanted me to get rid of them." Lyra shrugged. "When I was here a few months ago, that was nothing. Just curiosity. I haven't been studying humans for years."

That was the story Lyra would stick to. The same one she'd told her parents. Her interest in humans had been a childhood phase, and she'd grown out of it. Of course, Twilight knew that she'd been researching the structure of hands just a few months ago, but there was no way she'd hear about the results.

Twilight frowned. She opened her mouth, then shook her head and decided not to say anything. Glancing over the books spread out on the table, she chose *The Age of Man* and opened it up.

"This one was actually from Trottingham. It's the only one they could find. I guess 'man' is short for 'human,'" Twilight said. "Have you heard that before?"

"That's basic knowledge, Twilight. So what's that one about?" Lyra came over to see.

"It's what I was talking about earlier – the different nations of humans and how they interacted with one another. Political structures, languages... I can't believe they took the time to create entire *languages* for fictional cultures."

"What's it going to take to convince you that humans aren't fictional?"

"Lyra, you can't just believe everything you read. You have to use your judgment."

"Maybe you should be using yours," Lyra said. She was beginning to feel irate. All this skepticism really got on her nerves. "What about that play you were in? I found a lot of things wrong with that. Are you sure that's really how Equestria was founded?"

Twilight stared at her, and then, strangely, laughed. "Of course it happened. That story's been part of Equestrian culture for thousands of years. Sure, maybe some of the details aren't historically accurate, but it's a dramatization, and –"

"Windigoes," Lyra said.

"Huh? What about them?" Twilight asked.

"What happened to those? Supposedly they're spirits or something that create blizzards as a result of disharmony, but what happened to them? That's certainly never happened as long as I've been around," Lyra said.

"You believe in humans, but you don't believe in that?" Twilight said. "You can ask any foal in Equestria. Everypony knows about Windigos, but nopony's ever heard of humans."

"That's not the point!"

"They disappeared because our society has learned the value of harmony, and –"

"Do you *know* that?" Lyra's eyes narrowed.

"Well... it's just what the play implies..."

"Exactly!" Lyra paced across the library. "Just another plot hole."

Twilight was starting to raise her voice. "I said it was a dramatization!"

"Then where's the proof that any of it's true?" Lyra said. Her eyes locked with Twilight's.

Outside, the blizzard raged and the wind howled past the window.

It was only then that Lyra realized all of what she'd just said. She wanted to smack herself. How could she have been so stupid?

"Well... that's just a theory of mine..." She tried to laugh it off. "I haven't really given it any serious consideration at all."

Twilight didn't look convinced. "Let's just get started on this," she said. She picked up the book Lyra had brought in, and Lyra started with the first chapter of *The Age of Man*.

It was like being a filly again. All these new books about humans, new things that Lyra had never seen before. The political systems of humans were described in more detail here than she'd seen before. Most of them were monarchies, similar to what Equestria had, but human kings and queens didn't have any magic power. They were so much closer to the common people that way. And they wouldn't live forever. The power would pass through each generation of sons or daughters, so it was in constant shift.

Then – there it was.

The lyre was an ancient Greek instrument, played (of course) by humans. There was a picture of a human, seated and plucking the strings of a lyre just like the one she herself used. It looked so much like that drawing Lyra had done, based on what she'd seen in her dream. She read the caption about how the music would usually accompany a recitation of an epic story.

Where were those? Surely written copies must exist.

Obviously lyres had more significance to human culture than Lyra had previously realized. Now she needed to find out what those stories were that went with them. She loved the stories about humans. Legends, sure, but that only proved they themselves were real. There was no reason for a legendary creature to have its own mythology.

"I've got it!" Twilight suddenly exclaimed. Lyra looked up from the book.

"What do you mean?" Lyra said.

"I get what the significance of humans is. They're all the same!" Twilight said. "Of course, I should have seen this earlier!"

"What do you mean by 'all the same'?" Lyra asked.

"Ponies are all different. Humans can't fly, and the books never mention them doing magic. The whole point is that they all have the same abilities," Twilight said. "That's what I was saying when I said they had significance to ancient cultures! By having this imaginary civilization that's all the same, ponies would learn to appreciate and understand how different they were!"

"Who?" Owlowiscious hooted.

Lyra sighed. "Twilight, you haven't found anything about Greek myths, have you? Or any songs?"

Putting a hoof to her chin, Twilight said, "I think everything about the... Greeks, was it? It was all in that book." She nodded towards the one Lyra was reading.

"No, this one's all factual. I'm looking for..." Lyra noticed the look that Twilight was giving her. She didn't want to have that discussion again. "Never mind."

They continued for another half hour or so. There was a real gold mine of information here. Lyra tried to think if there were any other cities in Equestria that were known for having good libraries. It was always possible that she could find out more about the lyre there...

The idea that she'd been using a human instrument gave her such a connection to them, and she loved that. Not to mention she'd even learned how to play the lyre in the human style – with hands. Magic could never compare to the physical feeling of the strings against her fingers.

She skimmed over the paragraphs about Greece a few more times. It was frustrating, none of this was information that she could really use.

Twilight was completely absorbed in the book Lyra had brought. This was her chance. She stepped over to the wall of bookshelves, scanning the titles. If the answers about humans weren't in these books, maybe the clues were somewhere else. Hidden in plain sight, right in the ponies' own history.

Here was one. *Pegasi: From Past to Present.*

Lyra pulled it from the shelf and flipped it open. She started at the front, where the earliest pegasus leaders were described. Her eyes rapidly scanned the pages for anything about a "Commander Hurricane" or "Private Pansy." Nothing in the first chapter. Turning to the index, she searched for the names.

Nothing.

Pretty odd, wasn't it? You'd think that the pegasus who originally founded Equestria would at least get a mention.

"Lyra? Did you find something else? I didn't think I had any other books about humans," Twilight said.

Lyra dropped the book in shock, and found Twilight standing right next to her. "Oh, no, it's..."

Twilight had picked the book up off the floor to look at the cover. "You were reading about pegasi?"

"It's for... another project."

"I had no idea you had such diverse interests, Lyra. You could be an excellent historian if you wanted," Twilight said. "If you ever need to borrow one of these, you're welcome to it." She passed the book over to Lyra.

The magic aura around it changed from purple to green, and Lyra stashed it away in her saddlebag. She didn't have any actual intention of reading further; she'd found what she needed. Or, more accurately, *hadn't* found it. "I'll do that. Thanks."

Twilight picked up the book she'd been reading earlier, but stopped. "Lyra, I know that you think humans must have been real, but..." Twilight hesitated. "There's really nothing to suggest they ever existed. The theory would be more plausible if you had solid evidence, but..."

"What about Nightmare Moon?" Lyra said. The idea had suddenly popped into her head.

Twilight drew back. "Huh? No, you're changing the subject, I'm –"

"I'm not changing the subject. You talked about Nightmare Moon when you came to Ponyville, and none of us believed you then. How is that any different?"

"It's completely different! There were references to her in all sorts of stories. We had a celebration dedicated to her, and an exact date that she was said to return, and then she did. All you've got that mentions humans are –"

"Stories," Lyra said. "Princess Celestia probably told you that Nightmare Moon was a story too, didn't she?"

The snow was piling up in the window panes. The candlelight flickered in the dim room.

"Face it, Twilight. We're not all that different. Someday I'll find the truth."

Returning to her reading, Twilight didn't say any more on the subject. Lyra just couldn't understand how anybody who'd read the books could still be so skeptical. It was even worse than her parents. They didn't believe in humans, but they wouldn't even *touch* the books...

• • •

*Dewey Decimal had found his daughter in her bedroom. It was dark out, almost midnight, but she was still poring over one of those books by candlelight. The past few days, this was*

*all she had wanted to do. Even the history report that she'd nearly failed hadn't done much to discourage her – if anything, it had just made things worse.*

*"Heartstrings... I've been talking to your mother, and we agreed that you really shouldn't be reading all of those books," he said.*

*Her head perked up, and she turned around. "What my teacher said was wrong. I just know it."*

*He had just known this wouldn't be easy.*

*"Please... You've been spending every waking moment on this, and it's just not good for you. Your mother's been very upset."*

*"Why? What does Mom have against humans?"*

*"Nothing... Absolutely nothing. We're just worried... that you're neglecting your other schoolwork," he said. He paused, then asked, "Have you been working on your magic?"*

*Lyra's horn glowed as she closed the book and set it over on the corner of the table with the others. "I can do magic just fine now. It's easy." Her father smiled.*

*There had been an illustration in one of the books of a human using a quill with their hands. She wished she could do that. How would it feel to actually grip the quill as you moved it across the page? Of course, it was probably best to keep that little wish to herself.*

*"I know you'll be an excellent unicorn someday. All we want is for you to reach that potential," he said, looking over at the corner of the room where her lyre was resting on its stand. He turned back to her, his expression more serious. "But by tomorrow, we want these books out of the house."*

*Lyra's mouth dropped open. "That's not fair!"*

*Dewey sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "Now, it's getting late. You should probably go to bed. There's still school tomorrow."*

*He left, and Lyra glumly turned back to her books. There was no way she'd get rid of these...*

*Of course she wouldn't. She lifted them up off the table, set them down next to the bed, and then lifted up the mattress. One at a time, she slid them in between the mattress and the bed frame.*

*Hopefully her parents wouldn't find them here. If necessary, she'd come up with another hiding place and move them. Whatever it took, she wasn't giving up on humans.*

*Sure, all she had were books, but... Lately she'd started having dreams, too.*

*It was best to stay rational. If she was constantly reading about humans and thinking about humans during the day, it only made sense that she'd dream about them during the night. But it all seemed so real. The parts she remembered, at least.*

*She climbed into bed and pulled the covers over herself. Her eyelids felt heavy. She was asleep in a matter of seconds.*

*Most of her dreams were very hazy, and often Lyra would wake up with just a fleeting image in her mind that she'd completely lose within a few hours. But tonight it was mostly sound.*

*Just a single word, in a voice she was half-sure she hadn't heard before, but obviously speaking to her.*

*"Lyra..."*

• • •

*"Lyra."*

She stared at the drawing of a human in the book she was reading. It was a female in a long, elegant dress and a tiara. Human royalty, from some long-forgotten nation. This outfit reminded her of Rarity's from the play.

*"Lyra?"*

Twilight was staring up at her. Lyra had barely noticed the first time her name had been called.

*"Yeah?"*



"Just suppose for a minute..." Twilight began. "Just suppose that humans were actually real. And you had proof of it. What would you do?"

"I..." Lyra paused. "I'm not sure."

"You seem so fixated on finding proof that they existed, but either way, it's obvious that there aren't any of them around now," Twilight said. "If there ever were. I'm also trying to understand why Princess Celestia wouldn't want ponies to know about them. According to your theory. There's nothing here that seems objectionable."

*There was certainly something that Luna doesn't like about them, Lyra thought. I'd consider that proof.*

But, all that aside... what exactly had drawn Lyra to humans in the first place? It was something that was hard to put into words.

"I guess that's what I'd like to know, too. There's so little information on humans, but I just know there's more to them that we don't understand," Lyra said. And even though she knew it was unlikely, she added, softly, "And if there was any chance that they *weren't* gone, somehow..."

At night when Lyra would suddenly find herself in a human world, one that felt so real but didn't always line up with what the books said, it really felt like humans might not be so far away.

Maybe it was time to put aside the books and test out some more of her theories.

Applejack had set up her stand in the center of town. Now that winter had been wrapped up for the year, she was happy to be back to growing and selling apples. Her first customer for the day was already here.

"Howdy, Bon-Bon. What can I do ya for?" Applejack asked.

"Oh, just the usual. I'll just take..." Bon-Bon looked over the bushels sitting around the apple cart. "A dozen should be fine."

"Alrighty then." Applejack started inspecting some apples and started picking out the best ones to fill up a bag. "How've you been lately? Haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been quite alright," Bon-Bon said. "It's just that... well, it took Lyra and I quite a while to finish all those apples, and then she was saying that if she ever saw another slice of apple pie she'd probably be sick, and I have to admit that I was running out of recipes that could be made with apples..."

Applejack nodded. "Apple Bloom won't be handling sales anymore."

"It's for the best," Bon-Bon said solemnly.

"Anyways, how's business at Sugarcube Corner? Pinkie Pie ain't gettin' to you, I hope," Applejack said, smiling.

"Pinkie's quite manageable. I'm sure you know my roommate. I'm used to occasional strangeness."

Applejack helped load the apples into Bon-Bon's saddlebag. "That reminds me. I just talked to Lyra this morning. Any idea what she's up to?"

"She left early today. I thought she'd be playing another concert in the park." Bon-Bon tilted her head in confusion. "What did she talk to you about?"

"She was just asking if she could borrow one of our carts for the day. I can't imagine what for, but we've got a few of 'em," Applejack said. "I figured we could spare one."

"One of your carts?" Bon-Bon said, frowning. "Why would she need one of those?"

"No idea," Applejack said with a shrug.

"The Gala's in a week. What is she up to?" Bon-Bon sighed. "But you know what they say about these artistic ponies. They can be a tad... eccentric."

"I'm sure it was nothing to be worried about," Applejack said. "But anyhow, enjoy your apples, Bon-Bon!"

"Thank you," Bon-Bon said.

There was a low rumble in the distance, followed by the sounds of ponies screaming and gasping in shock. Applejack was squinting at something down the street, and only had time to mutter, "What in tarnation?" Then something wooshed past, just a blur going through the streets of Ponyville with speed to rival the Wonderbolts.

"Hey, Bon-Bon!" It was Lyra's voice, but it quickly cut off as she zoomed past.

Bon-Bon didn't want to look at what had just hurtled through town, but she slowly turned around and stared down the street. There was an apple cart quickly fading into the distance.

Applejack's hat had blown off her head. She picked it up, shaking the dust off before putting it back on. Her eyes were wide in disbelief. "Uh, was that..."

"What did she do now?" Bon-Bon said, in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"More importantly, what the hay was pulling that cart?" Applejack said.

Twilight nearly ran straight into them at a full gallop, and quickly skidded to a halt. She glanced at the two of them. "Hey, girls. Do you have any idea what that was?" Her head turned to watch it, now just a brown dot in the distance.

Suddenly Rainbow Dash had shown up as well, flying a few feet over their heads. "Did you guys see that? Where'd it go? What was it?" she said, gaining some altitude trying to see where it had gone.

"I think it's my roommate..." Bon-Bon said. Her voice still quavered in shock.

"What? How?" Rainbow Dash said, taking another glance down the street.

"That was *Lyra*?" Twilight said. "I don't understand! What's she doing?"

"I think it's best if we stop talking and do something before somepony gets hurt," Applejack said.

Dash gave a quick nod. "I'm on it!"

She was gone in a blur, chasing after the cart. She was accelerating as fast as she could as she flew down the street, but was still just barely catching up. There was a lot of distance to clear. Pumping her wings harder, she managed to match the speed of the vehicle and fly right alongside the driver.

"Oh, hey, Rainbow Dash," Lyra said, glancing over to her and then fixing her eyes back up front. She was sitting at the front of the cart, her shirt flapping in the wind as they sped through town.

"Lyra? What're you doing?" Dash watched her, frowning.

The last few houses in Ponyville whisked past and now they were headed out of town. Lyra's horn glowed for a moment and they just barely swerved around a tree and then continued hurtling down the road. Rainbow Dash veered to the other side, then flew back alongside the cart.

"It's an experiment. I'm... Well, it would take too long to explain," Lyra said. "And I don't think we have that much time."

Rainbow Dash looked ahead and noticed the ravine they were headed for.

"Can't you stop it?" she asked.

"It took me a while to get this thing up to speed. Braking is much harder, it turns out," Lyra said matter-of-factly. "Steering's nearly impossible."

"You're headed for a cliff."

"I noticed."

With seconds to spare, Rainbow Dash grabbed Lyra with just her front hooves, lifting her off of the cart with a jerk. She was only able to support her weight for a few seconds. The cart sped past under them and they both collapsed to the ground, trying to catch their breath.

The cart zoomed over the edge and vanished from sight. There was the sound of smashing wood on the rocks below.

"There they are!" It was Twilight's voice.

Twilight and Applejack galloped over to them. Bon-Bon followed close behind at a quick trot. Lyra, putting a hoof to the side of her head, was struggling to stand up straight. Her legs wobbled, and she leaned to one side and fell over completely.

"Lyra, what in Equestria are you doing?" Bon-Bon demanded.

With some effort, Lyra managed to pull herself up off the ground. She shook her head. "I know it seems weird. But hear me out on this," Lyra said, raising a hoof. "Oh, and Applejack, sorry about the cart."

"H-How...?" Applejack managed to force out. She was staring down into the canyon in disbelief.

They could see the splintered remains of the cart. One wheel still spun around on its axle, sticking straight up into the air. Another rolled along the ground and fell over. Lyra grinned sheepishly.

"Come-to-life spells are extremely advanced. You really shouldn't attempt them on something so large without proper practice. Even I can't quite manage to control them," Twilight said.

"I had a good reason for this!" Lyra said.

"What, exactly?" Applejack said, raising an eyebrow.

"Um... You see..." Lyra took a deep breath. "Humans have carriages that move on their own. They actually don't look like these ones, they're made of something different, but I had to use the closest thing I could find."

"*That's* what this is about?" Bon-Bon said. She put a hoof to her forehead in exasperation. "Humans again?"

"Lyra, I've read all the books. Humans aren't supposed to be able to do magic, and they could certainly never manage anything that advanced," Twilight said. "Where would you even get that kind of idea?"

Lyra hesitated. "It's... well... I dreamed it." Her voice was very quiet.

"All of this. It was all just a dream?" Twilight's voice was flat.

"Well, yeah. I see humans in my dreams all the time. It doesn't always match what's in the books, but... these things all make sense to me," Lyra insisted.

"We can hardly consider *dreams* to be a valid source for research," Twilight said. "Especially when the very existence of humans is questionable at best."

"Just look at this logically. Humans don't pull carts, we can tell that by looking at them, but what if they need to travel long distances? How would they get around? What if they had to transport some kind of large cargo, like furniture or something?" Lyra said, her voice rising in intensity with each question.

"I guess that *almost* makes sense, but –"

"Twilight, don't tell me you *believe* her," Bon-Bon said.

"I really can't make any conclusions about humans with what little information we have. But I don't think that this can be included in our final report," Twilight said. She looked at the remains of the cart. "Lyra even admits that there's no record of anything like this. While this would have been beneficial to humans, it is far beyond what their abilities were said to be."

Lyra stared at the ground. "I've never been able to understand how things like that work, either. That's why I needed to test it."

"If humans had really had something like that, wouldn't we still be using them?" Twilight said.

"Probably. I don't know," Lyra said.

Bon-Bon stared at Twilight. "You said you didn't think humans were real."

"Well, no," Twilight replied. "But even considering the accepted mythology, this doesn't make any sense." Her eyes widened. "That reminds me, I need to fill out a report to the Princess on my progress. Not that I've made much..."

"Maybe we should go too," Bon-Bon said, shooting Lyra a look.

Lyra turned to Applejack. "It's fine. I'll pay you back."

She hurried along after Bon-Bon without another word, glad to be away from that mess.

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Once they returned home, Bon-Bon turned to her roommate.

"Lyra, I know that I've been saying this before, but I really mean it this time. All of this business about humans needs to stop," Bon-Bon said. "I've put up with those... hands, I didn't even say anything when you started wearing clothes, but *this*? You could have killed yourself out there!"

"It was my first experiment with this technology. Mistakes happen," Lyra said.

"Your *first* -? No, please tell me you're not doing anything like that again. You completely destroyed Applejack's cart, all because of some theory that doesn't even make any sense -"

"I know what I've seen," Lyra said. "If you knew what my dreams were like, you'd understand. If I figure out how humans worked these carriages, imagine how much Equestria would change!"

"Humans aren't real!" Bon-Bon yelled. Lyra shrank back. Lowering her tone of voice, Bon-Bon continued, "You're too old to believe in these stories. Just listen to Twilight. Listen to your own *parents*, for Celestia's sake."

"None of them understand what's going on here. I know humans are real," Lyra said.

"But all of these things you've been doing... You're a unicorn! Nothing's going to change that. You're not a human."

"I never said I was."

Bon-Bon took a deep breath. "Lyra, I didn't want to have to say this, but... If you keep doing these experiments, or whatever it is you call them, I..." She hesitated. "I really don't want to have to force you to move out, but..."

Lyra stared at her, completely taken aback. "You'd... seriously do that?"

Bon-Bon nodded slowly.

"But..."

"I'm worried about you, Lyra. I was willing to let it go and say it was harmless before, but this... This is just too much. You could have hurt somepony with that thing."

There was nothing else to say. "Fine." With a sigh, Lyra turned and headed to her room.

Closing the door behind her, she collapsed on the bed and rolled over to stare at the ceiling.

It was so frustrating. All she needed was a solid piece of proof. Maybe all she had were only theories, separate pieces of evidence pointing to the fact that something had existed and created this society before ponies had come along.

But they seemed so close in her dreams.

She looked over and saw her journal by the nightstand. The night before she'd woken up again and had those images in her head. She flipped back to the last page and stared at what she'd drawn.

She'd managed to get most of the details before she'd forgotten them. It really had very little in common with a wooden apple cart, but that was the closest thing she had. These human vehicles were made out of something else... possibly metal, based on the appearance? There were glass windows all around the sides. Passengers and drivers would sit inside. And the wheels were fatter and not made of wood. They'd been moving in the dream so she hadn't gotten a very good look at them.

The real problem was propulsion. She'd been using magic, same as what powered anything in Equestria. The books all said that humans couldn't use magic... but how else would these carriages work? She'd seen them moving around at impossible speeds without anything pulling them.

Twilight didn't believe in Lyra's dreams, but she'd never experienced them. They weren't normal dreams. Everything was extraordinarily detailed. Lyra often saw things that were never described in the books, but there was no way she'd be able to imagine all these things on her own.

And yet, Twilight did have a good point... If humans had built those things, what had happened to them, and why didn't ponies use them now?



She set her journal down on the dresser, on top of a cluttered mess of sheet music for the Grand Galloping Gala. That reminded her, she only had a week left. She picked up a copy of one of the waltzes and scanned the lines of music, hearing it in her head as her eyes moved along the page.

Fine. Maybe she'd give it a rest for a while. Do some last-minute practicing for the Gala, even though that was hardly necessary. Bon-Bon was upset and any further research right now would just make that worse.

Lyra was tired. She just wanted straight answers, but would she ever get them? Just *anything* that would make Bon-Bon see things her way.

She turned out the lights, and tried to tune out her thoughts and get some sleep.

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A cab had just pulled up in front of the house. Bon-Bon was the first one to see it through the window.

"Lyra, are you ready? Your carriage is here," she called.

"On my way!" The response came from down the hall.

Lyra did a quick sweep of her bedroom, gathering up everything she needed. There was sheet music, both loose and bound into books, scattered all throughout the room on her desk, nightstand, and bed. She used her magic to scoop it all up hastily. Everything on her dresser was piled into a jumbled heap, which she compacted as much as she could, and she dashed out the door without another thought.

Lyra was running as fast as she could in her dress, trying not to trip over the fabric. She was much more used to pants. This was too wide and hard to move in. She paused in the front room.

"Good luck out there," Bon-Bon said. "Do you think you'll be back tonight?"

"Dunno." Lyra shrugged. "My parents sent a letter. They said they wanted me to visit after I'm done, which'll be late, but I'll try to make it back as soon as I can."

She checked over all of her things – her lyre case, the books of sheet music... That should be it. They all floated along above her head as she trotted out the door.

Lyra stepped up to the door of the carriage. She opened it, and started setting down her things inside. Bon-Bon followed her outside and walked around to the front of the vehicle.

"Everything alright?" The driver had noticed the expression of worry on Bon-Bon's face.

"Oh, it's fine. Just wanted to make sure you were driving," Bon-Bon said. She got a quizzical look in response. "Um... it's a long story." She hung her head.

"Don't worry about that, ma'am," the stallion replied. "I make the trip between Ponyville and Canterlot all the time. Everything will be fine."

"Yes, of course..." Bon-Bon gave a short laugh. "I'm sure it will be."

Maybe she worried about Lyra too much. Her... quirks... had gotten more severe in the past few months, without a doubt. But what was the worst thing that could happen at the Grand Galloping Gala? This would be nothing but a step in the right direction for Lyra. Perhaps she'd eventually find a permanent career with an orchestra and get some steady income.

"Alright, I'm ready," Lyra said, coming around from the side. She looked at Bon-Bon, then to the driver. "Let's get going."

"Goodbye, Lyra," Bon-Bon said. "Do your best."

"I'll see you tomorrow, at the latest." She pointed a hoof for emphasis. "Bye!"

Lyra stepped up into the carriage. She sat on the cushioned bench inside, but her dress made it odd and uncomfortable to sit the usual way. She'd have to sit like a normal pony while she was performing, anyway. Just like Bon-Bon and Rarity had both told her.

She watched as Bon-Bon and their house grew smaller as the carriage pulled away. Canterlot was probably an hour or so away. She settled back for the ride.

The carriage slowed down and pulled up in front of the castle gates. Staring out the window, Lyra took a deep breath.

She was expected here. The invitation had come months before Twilight had showed up at her house, before she'd asked Princess Luna about humans, before any suspicion could be placed on her at all.

But it was still dangerous.

Lyra opened the door and stepped down from the carriage. Her gold shoes clicked against the paved stones of the path. She glanced up at her lyre case and books floating down out of the carriage, and pulled them down closer to her.

"Good luck, ma'am," the stallion pulling her carriage said.

"Thank you," she said absently.

She heard the wheels rolling along the path as the carriage pulled away. Lyra hesitated in front of the castle gates. Things were a bit eerie right now when she was the only one here.

It was still light out. The musicians were expected to arrive early. It wasn't much different from any other performance, really. Lyra tried to convince herself of that, but somehow she knew that something was about to happen tonight. Princess Celestia probably knew what Lyra had been up to... But would she do anything about it at this public event?

The path leading up to the castle was long, but right now it was empty. No guards. That was good.

She walked into the entrance hall. A long red carpet led down the center. Lyra glanced around and found the ballroom – her post for the night. The other band members were already setting up inside. The stage was right in front of some abstract-patterned stained glass windows. Quite a venue.

Walking up to the stage, Lyra took her place next to a elegant-looking grey earth pony in the process of tuning her cello. There was also another mare with a huge brass instrument – a sousaphone, Lyra thought – and a stallion at a piano.

*Just give me ten fingers and I bet I could play that even better than he can,* Lyra thought.

A music stand was there by itself, waiting for her, so she stacked her sheet music on it. Then she set down the case for her instrument, clicked it open, and took it out.

"Hey. You ready?" Lyra asked the pony next to her. "I'm Lyra, by the way."

"Octavia." She'd barely turned to look at the newcomer and was back to adjusting her strings. Apparently satisfied, she stood up on her back legs and played a long, drawn-out note to listen to the tone.

Lyra stared at her, mouth hanging open. "So... you always stand up like that when you play? How?"

"Years of practice," Octavia replied.

"It must be hard to keep your balance," Lyra said. She thought maybe she could put more effort into learning that pose herself.

"One learns to maintain posture, even for extended periods."

Lyra turned back to her own instrument. She'd always taken care of her lyre, ever since her parents had bought it for her when she was a filly. The gold frame still shined in the last of the daylight filtering in through the window, and the strings... She plucked one with her magic, frowned, tightened the string, and tried again. There it was.

The ballroom was all decorated for the party. Tables had been spread out, and waiters dressed in suits were arranging the food on the main buffet. The Gala ran until midnight. Lyra would be in here for hours... It might be good to grab some food while she still had a chance.

It was typical prissy formal-event fare. Tiny sandwiches that weren't meant to fill you up, little cubes of expensive cheeses. Some floral arrangements were in the center. Lyra took a glass of punch. Maybe she'd need it if she wanted to make it through the night.

Heading back up to the stage, she finished tuning her lyre and waited for the guests to arrive.

The sun was setting, and the colorful light streaming down on the stage was fading away. Lyra tried to settle on a more pony-like method of sitting that she could hold for the entire night. It wasn't easy.

The earth pony playing the sousaphone turned to Lyra. "That's a very nice dress."

"Thanks!" She remembered what she'd been told to say. "It's an original Rarity design."

"Rarity?" the pony said, tilting her head.

"Certainly not Prince Blueblood's... disastrous... date from last year, I'm certain," Octavia said, raising an eyebrow.

"Nope. Different Rarity," Lyra said, shifting her eyes. She stared off in the other direction towards the door.

"Oh, yes. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to return after *that*," the stallion at the piano turned to join the conversation. "Nadermane certainly didn't. Though I'm sure our friend Lyra here will fill in for him just fine." He nodded towards her.

A chime sounded from up in the tower, tolling out the hour.

"It appears the party is starting," Octavia said. "On my count."

As the first few guests arrived, the band started into the first piece, a slow-moving sonata that lasted a full fifteen minutes. Lyra was already bored.

Canterlot had always made Lyra feel alienated from other ponies. Nobody here cared about anything interesting or important, just fashion and high society and the most boring of all the boring classical music that had ever been written. Why had she taken this gig?

Right. So that she could advance her career. Towards even *more* boring parties and concerts.

And now the song was coming to an end, and they started into yet another song, and another one, for the next two endless hours.

Lyra was nodding off. She fought to stay alert, her mind going through each song she was playing without really thinking about it. After practicing a song so much, it got to be an unconscious action. It usually didn't even take her much practice to master a piece anyway. She'd always been a fast learner. A prodigy. Whatever.

The night was a blur of ponies dancing, talking, entering and leaving the ballroom from the gardens outside. It was hard to imagine she'd actually been nervous when she arrived. Absolutely nothing was going to happen tonight, if it ever ended.

She played the coda of one song, and the other musicians seemed to be preparing to finish up for the intermission. The only intermission of the entire evening. But then they started into another waltz, and Lyra lifted up her instrument again to play.

Finally the waltz came to an end. There would be a brief break – about ten minutes, but it was something – before they continued with the rest of the music. She set down her lyre and gratefully stepped off the stage to stretch her legs for a bit.

"Excuse me. Which one of you would be Heartstrings?" One of the servers, a white unicorn dressed in a tuxedo jacket, had walked up to the stage and was speaking to the band.

Lyra turned back around. "That'd be me." She was surprised to hear *that* name being used.

"Ah, yes. The Princess has requested an audience with you after the conclusion of tonight's festivities," he said.

Lyra's eyes widened. "What? Princess... Celestia?"

The server nodded. "She will be expecting you just after midnight." Without another word, he walked away.

That had certainly been a wakeup call. Lyra's mind was reeling with questions now. There was no way this had anything to do with the Gala. She was just a musician here, nothing special. Other plots were at work here. She'd been right. Princess Celestia was undoubtedly at the top of the entire conspiracy.

"The *Princess* wants to speak with you?" Octavia said. Her mouth hung open.

Lyra gave a nervous grin. "What can I say? I must be a very important pony."

She quickly trotted off into the crowd, her head bent down. The voices in the ballroom all blended together. A stallion somewhere raised his voice for the punchline of a joke, followed by a burst of polite laughter from one corner. Lyra glanced over to the side and recognized Spitfire, one of the Wonderbolts, talking to a fan. Everything seemed so ordinary. None of these ponies knew what was really going on.

The complimentary buffet was just up ahead. She got another glass of punch and downed it.

"You're with the band up there?" asked a pegasus with her mane done up in an elaborate curly style.

Lyra was caught off guard. "Y-yep, that's me..." She had to calm down, pull herself together. No reason to suspect everybody.

"Simply smashing work. I quite enjoy a good concerto."

"Thanks." Lyra nodded, finishing a second glass of punch without realizing she'd picked it up, and hurried off, almost tripping over the tail of her gown as she turned.

It was easy to get lost in the crowd. Maybe she could slip out unnoticed. Not until the end of the Gala, though. They'd definitely notice if their musical quartet was suddenly a trio. But after tonight, then what? How could she hide from the Princess of Equestria herself?

Through the archway she could see her. Princess Celestia – right there, personally welcoming each pony in a line of guests, smiling and offering polite greetings. So close. What was going to happen tonight?

Lyra had to prepare for the worst. Luna had reacted strongly to a mention of humans. Celestia had commissioned that report from Twilight, but what did that mean? One thing was sure – if Celestia was asking for her specifically, then she *knew*.

Watching her from a distance, Lyra examined her fancy mannerisms. She would say something to each pony she greeted, just a few words, though Lyra couldn't catch them, then – as a pair of guests stepped away after greeting her – Celestia's head turned towards her, and she briefly met Lyra's eyes.

She froze. It had only lasted a second, but she'd definitely been watching her. She quickly dashed off, weaving through the crowd, heading towards the stage to rejoin the other musicians.

Just a few more hours remaining. Octavia was giving her a strange look, no doubt jealous that Lyra had been invited to such an honor.

Lyra sifted through her music, trying to find the next piece. Something fell out of the stack of books. It wasn't one of the Gala pieces, though, it was...

No. How had she managed to pick up her journal? She was stuck at the Gala, the Princess knew she was here, she knew what she was doing, and on top of everything else she'd brought all of her incriminating research.

What else could she do? Lyra slid her journal in the middle of the books of sheet music she'd already played. It was easy enough to miss. She'd definitely not been able to notice it. Hopefully she'd be able to get it out without anyone noticing.

The stallion at the piano started an intro, and they began playing another piece.

Here, at one of the biggest social events in Canterlot. In all of Equestria, even! Princess Celestia would actually choose to confront Lyra here? Then again, she was the supreme ruler. Couldn't she get away with anything if she wanted? And if Lyra happened to already be here as a musician, that was the perfect excuse.

The lyre began to play out of rhythm with the rest of the band. She'd gotten at least three measures ahead of everyone else, and Octavia shot her a look. Lyra quickly caught herself. She had to focus. The situation had become that more intense. She couldn't let her thoughts influence her magic.

Lyra did her best to concentrate on the music in front of her. She'd practiced these songs hundreds of times. It was no challenge to play them. One note at a time, staying in time with her other band members. She was a professional.

How was she supposed to focus on this boring classical music when she'd essentially just been told that the government really had been spying on her?

Her perception of time grew hazy. Had she been playing for five minutes, or for five hours? Lyra honestly couldn't tell. Her horn glowed, the next song was there, and the lyre continued to play.

Another hour passed... or it seemed like it had been an hour, Lyra couldn't tell. She glanced up from the music for a moment to check on the crowd. What time was it now? Was it just her, or was the ballroom starting to empty out?

No, the party was definitely coming to a close. By the end of the next song, practically everybody had left. Her chances of getting away had dropped to zero.

She turned another page of sheet music over. There was nothing but the shiny brass music stand behind it. This was the final song of the evening.

After it came to a close, there were still just a few scattered circles of ponies talking to one another. The silence was sudden and unnerving. Octavia had started putting away her cello, the stallion had stood up from the piano.



A female voice spoke to her from the side of the stage. "Heartstrings?"

"I prefer Lyra," she said automatically, and then glanced over to see Princess Celestia speaking to her. Her eyes went wide.

"Oh, of course. My mistake." The Princess smiled at her.

Lyra was feeling dizzy. What was she supposed to do now? Did she even have a choice other than to go along with it?

"Perhaps you would like to join me in private," Celestia said. "I have some important business to go over with you."

"Y-yes..." Lyra said. She nodded. "Of course."

Her head turned towards her instrument case, the sheet music – with her journal hidden in the middle, she realized.

"You can leave your things for now," the Princess said. "Shall we go, then?"

Lyra nodded silently. Her stomach was doing backflips. It was a good thing she hadn't eaten anything.

She followed Celestia out of the ballroom. Her legs were shaking as she walked, and probably not because of all the punch. They climbed the stairs, and continued through the hallways of the castle. The silence here after the bustle of the Gala was extremely unnerving.

Lyra and Celestia continued through the castle up to the throne room. Stained glass windows flanked the long hall. The last time Lyra had been here was when it was publicly open for the Hearth's Warming Eve pageant. The huge room was completely empty now.

Celestia spoke to a guard posted at the door. "You may leave us. Wait outside."

"Yes, Your Majesty." He promptly left, and the doors closed.

They were alone now. Lyra's heart was pounding. In the quiet room, she could almost hear it.

Celestia finally spoke. "This was your first Gala, wasn't it? Even after a thousand years, these always seem to drag on forever." She smiled.

"Y-yes..." Lyra stammered.

"It's a shame that Twilight and her friends couldn't make it, but we couldn't exactly have a repeat performance of *that*." The Princess laughed softly. "So how was your night?"

"Pretty boring, actually." Lyra stared at her in confusion. This wasn't at all what she'd expected.

"Ah, yes. I'd have to agree." Celestia nodded. "It never gets any better, no matter how many we have."

"So, uh... what's this about?" Lyra frowned. "Why did you call me up here?"

"I suppose I should get to the point, shouldn't I?" Celestia said. "Twilight told me you've been helping her with her research project. I must say, I was surprised to see your name in her report."

"Oh... right," Lyra said. This was about humans, then. Her fears were confirmed. It was probably useless to deny anything at this point, but what else could she do? "Oh, but, uh... We went over everything we found, and it looks like humans don't really exist at all." She forced a grin, even though the words were hard for her to say.

"Is that so?" Celestia raised an eyebrow.

Lyra hesitated. "Of course."

"Just a complex series of myths and legends, invented by ponies long ago, with absolutely no basis in fact," the Princess said. Lyra could almost hear her parents saying the same thing.

"Absolutely." Lyra gritted her teeth.

Celestia's expression became more serious. "Yes, from what I've heard, you found quite a lot of information," she said. "In recent years, it's become obvious that humans won't be able to stay forgotten."

She couldn't take it anymore. "Don't lie to me! I know that humans exist!" Lyra's outburst echoed in the large, empty hall. It was only then that she realized... "W-wait... are you saying... Oh."

Celestia paused. She stood there, facing away from Lyra, and was silent for what seemed like an eternity. Lyra took a step back nervously, though somehow she wasn't feeling threatened anymore.

"I've... been hesitant to even talk about humans," Celestia said finally. "In recent years they've started to press on my mind once again. And just a few months ago, my sister came back from her visit to Ponyville claiming that somepony still remembered them."

Lyra was really regretting opening her mouth now.

"Unfortunately, my sister wasn't able to describe who had asked her about them. Apparently they were entirely hidden by their costume," Celestia said. She turned around, and had a slight smile. "That's Nightmare Night, though."

"Y-yeah..." Lyra said, nodding.

Celestia continued. "I realized then that I had neglected to tell her of the recent developments, since it happened only shortly before she returned to Equestria... Our relationship with humans has become more complicated than my sister realized. But the truth is, Lyra, humans did exist once in the world we now call Equestria."

Lyra's mouth was hanging open. "You're... just going to tell me?" She'd honestly been expecting more difficulty than this. The Princess was being amazingly open about it all, and far more calm than Luna had been. "I've been studying them all my life. Everybody just says they're made up, though. Why doesn't anybody remember them?" Then she fully comprehended what Celestia had said. "*Recent* developments?"

They began to walk slowly down the length of the room. "Well, relatively speaking, recent... But it's best to start at the beginning. For well over a thousand years, there were no humans left in Equestria. I myself was very young when humans were still alive. But after what happened to them... my sister and I devoted ourselves to wiping away every trace that they ever existed. Gradually ponies have forgotten what humans even were. Those who did thought they were made up."

"Why would you do that? I've done research. We owe nearly *everything* to humans," Lyra said. "Our entire civilization is based on what they created."

"That is true..." Celestia said. "What humans lacked in magic power, they made up for with their intelligence. Ponies all have innate magic power. Not just unicorns, but the earth ponies have their connection to the land, and pegasi can regulate our weather. Humans, on the other hand, have only their minds. They invented their own solutions to

make up for what they lack. We still use some of what they made; those tools are that useful. Ponyville looks almost exactly like a human village would have, all those years ago. But then..."

Lyra quickened her pace to get even closer. "What happened to them?"

Celestia walked over to one of the stained glass windows. The image of a draconequeus, nearly the entire height of the window and the room itself, was etched there. "As ambitious as they were, humans were also naturally prone to conflict and disorder."

Discord... Just last year he had reawakened. Everyone in Ponyville remembered it. He was the spirit of chaos. Most of what had actually happened while he was out was just a confused blur, but Lyra remembered the chocolate milk rain, buildings turning themselves over upside down, and ponies suddenly turning against their best friends.

"Even the smallest differences between humans could lead them to fight amongst each other," Celestia said. She stared up at the unmoving face, the yellow eyes, the twisted body composed of so many unmatching parts. "When Discord came to power, he escalated what tension already existed. The disharmony between humans gave him even greater power."

"I-I've never read anything about humans fighting each other," Lyra said. She tore her eyes away from the window to look up at Celestia. "This never even came up in any of the books."

"This is exactly what Luna and I wanted to hide. The wars between humans became increasingly brutal. They began inventing new weapons, rather than tools of creation. Eventually..." Celestia closed her eyes. "No civilization can survive for long when it devotes itself to destruction."

The words hit Lyra hard. She couldn't even imagine it. Humans... They'd destroyed themselves? How could any kind of creature even do that?

"It's all Discord's fault, though, right?" Lyra said, finally breaking the long silence. Celestia looked down at her. "Humans couldn't have done that on their own. They *wouldn't*."

"They were already vulnerable," Celestia replied. "I know this must come as a shock to you, but you must understand."

A shock? That was a bit of an understatement. Lyra could barely convince herself to accept it, even when she was being told these things by the Princess of Equestria herself. It didn't seem right.

"After humans had been wiped out, Discord's power was growing weaker. He'd driven them to such chaos that it had overwhelmed them, and with the humans gone he didn't have that source of power anymore." Celestia left the window and crossed the hall. "That was when my sister and I first used the Elements of Harmony. He was finally defeated and sealed away... although it was too late to save any humans."

Now they stood before one of the new windows. Twilight Sparkle and her friends were immortalized here, wielding the Elements of Harmony to defeat Nightmare Moon.

"Kindness, laughter, generosity, honesty, and loyalty. Those are what Equestria was founded on." They both gazed up at the window. "Luna and I created a new society based on harmony and friendship, so that what happened to humans would never happen again."

Lyra was staring at the floor. This seemed to go against everything she had ever thought about humans.

*It was all a mistake, Lyra told herself. That's not what they really were.*

"You said you tried to destroy all the records. I found books about humans in the Canterlot library when I was a filly," she said. "They never mentioned anything about the war, but..."

"There could be nothing remaining of war in Equestria. That much was certain. We tried to find every remaining trace of humans, but... They were very widespread. Not everything could be caught," Celestia said. "I'm surprised you were able to find anything remaining when you were so young... and right here in Canterlot, of all places. I suppose humans always were a persistent race."

Lyra didn't even know what to say anymore. "So our entire way of life... The entire reason we even have the Elements of Harmony, it's all to cover up... the war?"

"Of course, it's hard to understand just how important friendship is unless you've seen its absence," Celestia said. "We couldn't let any of the truth be told, but ponies had to know. That's why we came up with the Hearth's Warming Eve play. It's nothing compared to what really happened to humans, but it serves as a warning."

"So that play really is made up."

"Chancellor Puddinghead was my own creation. I'm particularly proud of him," Celestia said. "I hear Pinkie Pie did an excellent portrayal this year."

Maybe it was just the fact that she'd spent the entire night playing music at a boring party, but Lyra was feeling drained. "You've worked so hard to keep this a secret. Why are you telling me?" She stared out one of the clear glass panes over the dark castle grounds with their stone statues, and the hedge maze extending to the horizon.

"Your... parents... spoke with me not too long ago. They were concerned," Celestia said. "They said that you'd found out about humans, that you'd continued to study them all your life."

"My *parents* talked to you? Why would they... No, they wouldn't..." Lyra laughed nervously, and shook her head. "My parents *hate* humans. They've always tried to keep me away from all of this."

"I wouldn't say they 'hate' humans," Celestia said. "Like most ponies, they'd never heard of humans before. That was... until what happened. About fifteen years ago if I remember correctly." She paused. "It was just a few months ago that they spoke with me, and we agreed that you needed to be told. Please, you must understand why we ponies have taken such measures to distance ourselves from humans..."

"Huh?" Lyra said.

Celestia hesitated.

"When Cirrus and Dewey Decimal found you as a baby, and brought you to me, they had no idea what you were. I myself wasn't sure how it was possible. All we knew for sure is... you weren't born here in Equestria, Lyra."

It was probably about two in the morning. The streets of Canterlot were empty. Lyra knew she wouldn't be catching a train back to Ponyville tonight like she'd planned, but even if she could, she still had to go back to her parents' house. She had some things to talk to them about.

It was still hard *not* to think of them as her parents.

They'd sent that letter asking her to visit. It hadn't seemed strange at the time. But they'd known. All this time...

*"It's been too long now. No magic, no cutie mark. What if it's all because she's -"*

Honestly, Lyra hadn't been surprised to hear that humans were extinct. It was just how it had happened that she hadn't expected. But the whole idea that there was another world out there, and that she was actually...

"A normal unicorn," Lyra muttered to herself. "All this time, they kept telling me to act like 'a normal unicorn.'"

She'd arrived at her house. She stepped up to the door, raised a hoof hesitantly, and knocked. Waiting there nervously, Lyra glanced around at the other houses with their darkened windows. She heard hoofsteps coming up and finally the door opened.

"Heartstrings?" Cirrus said. "I wondered if you'd come by after that Gala. How was your night?"

The Gala? Lyra had practically forgotten any of that had happened. "Uh... Mom, if you don't mind... I'd just like to go by Lyra now. I mean... Heartstrings is a pony name..."

The look of realization in Cirrus' eyes said that she knew exactly what Lyra meant. "You spoke to the Princess."

"Yeah."

Cirrus sighed. "Come inside, then."

Lyra followed her into the living room and set down her instrument case and books. It had been some time since she last visited, but not much had changed. Cirrus headed upstairs to find Dewey. Lyra glanced around her childhood home as she waited. A few

photos of her parents, taken shortly after they'd met, were hung on the walls. And there were some pictures of Lyra as well, when she'd been a filly. She now realized that she'd never seen a picture of herself as a baby.

Her parents came back and sat down. They stared at her across the coffee table, not sure where to start. The only sound was the ticking of the clock in the hallway.

Cirrus finally broke the uncomfortable silence with a sigh. "The Princess told us she'd be speaking to you. She could explain what she did better than anypony."

"It was starting to seem like it was inevitable. We knew we couldn't hide it from you forever," Dewey added.

"No matter *what* you are, we still consider you our daughter."

"The only reason we tried to keep you away from all those stories about humans was to protect you. If you ever found out the truth –"

Lyra interrupted them. "Listen... I'm not mad at you," she said. "I completely understand why ponies would be afraid of us. Humans, I mean. And I really appreciate that you took care of me. I know how much of a risk it that must have been."

"We're not afraid of you, Heartstrings," Cirrus said, frowning.

"I'm just Lyra now," she said. "Princess Celestia told me just about everything, but... where did I really come from?"

Her father – she still couldn't help calling him that – exchanged a glance with his wife. "We were just taking a stroll through the castle gardens together. The first thing we noticed was... well, furniture, scattered all over the garden. Naturally we didn't know what was going on. We found you in a crib, but... you weren't a pony. We weren't sure *what* you were."

"The only thing we knew was that you were alone. Taking you to the Princess seemed like the best idea. The whole situation was strange, to say the least," Cirrus said. "The royal guards looked over everything in the gardens and couldn't figure it out either. So they let us in to see the Princess, and, well... She told us the same things she explained to you."

"About... what humans are," Lyra said. "And what we did."



"But the Princess says you aren't from Equestria. She wasn't sure exactly where, though," Dewey said. "Based on how scattered everything they found was, it seemed like an accident, whatever happened. And besides, you were only a baby. It would have been wrong to abandon you just because of what your kind did thousands of years before you were born. Still, other ponies might not understand, so..."

"Turning you into a pony was the best option for any of us. Especially you," Cirrus said. "Princess Celestia said that humans were supposed to be extinct. She didn't know where you'd come from, so she couldn't send you back. Besides... we'd never been able to have a daughter of our own, and as long as you needed somepony to take care of you..."

Lyra stared at the floor. "Who else knows about this?"

"Just us. And the Princesses. No pony else," Dewey said.

Lyra nodded. "So Twilight never was part of this." Her own parents had been the last ones she would have expected to be part of any conspiracy.

"Princess Celestia told us she had no intention of telling Twilight about humans. We'd been worried ever since she showed up at your house, but there was nothing to it," Cirrus said.

"So you've been talking to the Princess all this time?" Lyra said.

"We had to. No human has ever been turned into a pony before. We had to let her know how you were doing – that you had finally learned to use magic, that you seemed to be growing up like any other pony, when you... found those books about your species..." Dewey's voice trailed off.

"I still think it would be better if we hadn't told her," Cirrus said. "It's only going to make things difficult."

"This doesn't have to change anything," Dewey replied. He turned to Lyra. "But now that you know, you'll just have to keep this quiet when you go back to Ponyville. If any pony found out you were human, we're not sure what would happen," Dewey said. "Surely you must understand."

Princess Celestia had told her the same thing as she'd left. If she went back home, she wouldn't be allowed to tell anyone about this. Humans were better off forgotten. And now... it was hard enough before, but to hear Bon-Bon or Twilight say that humans were

nonsense and know that she *was* one... Lyra wouldn't be able to bear that. But there had been a second option.

"That's the thing..." Lyra said. "I'm not going back to Ponyville."

Dewey blinked. "What do you mean? What about your roommate?"

She hesitated, knowing that they wouldn't be happy about this next part. "The Princess has been trying to find out where I came from, and she said that, if I wanted... She could send me back to my own world." She forced a smile, though she was already anticipating the reaction.

Once again there was a long and painful silence.

"Princess Celestia told us she had perfected the spell," Dewey said. "She's been studying the artifacts from your world. Those things from the gardens when you appeared."

Lyra had been told about those. The explanation of the magic Celestia had been using to trace the human world was far too complicated to understand, and combined with Lyra's current mental state, she couldn't remember any of it. All that mattered to her was that there was a chance that she could go back and live as a human.

"Heartstr– or, Lyra, I suppose..." Cirrus said. The pronunciation was strange to her. "You don't have to do this. Humans are dangerous. Didn't the Princess tell you about the war?"

"Not all humans are like that!" Lyra insisted. "I mean, *I'm* not like that... And there's so much more to us than that. All of the things we've invented to make life better. Ponies still use them. We're not just destructive, no matter what Celestia says. I know we're not." Her voice faltered.

"You've never even met another human," Cirrus said. "We raised you as if you were a pony. I don't even know what would have happened to you if you had stayed there."

"That's part of why I want to go. I'm supposed to be there." Lyra stared down at the floor – at her hooves. She hadn't been born with those. "Besides, the war was caused by Discord, and it was in Equestria. The humans where I come from might be... different." She lifted her eyes just slightly.

Cirrus was about to raise another protest, but Dewey lifted a hoof and cut her off. "This is Lyra's decision." It was as if he was trying to convince himself as well.

"Princess Celestia told me all about the risks, but I need to know the truth about humans," Lyra said. "I know we can't be as bad as ponies think."

"You're not thinking straight," Cirrus said. "You're tired. You'll feel differently in the morning."

Dewey nodded. "Perhaps you should sleep on it."

Lyra shook her head. "Ever since I found out about humans, I've wanted to know more about them... Or, really, I guess I've wanted to *be* one. This is what I want."

"You never should have let her keep those books," Cirrus muttered.

"By the time I found her with them, it was too late," Dewey replied. "I didn't think she'd take any of it so seriously."

Lyra looked at her father, then back at her mother. "I need to at least try." She paused. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe we all need to talk about this in the morning," Dewey said. "Whatever you decide, Lyra... Just make sure it's what you really want."

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Lyra was on her bed in her childhood room. She'd taken off her dress and was trying to relax, but there was no chance she would get to sleep tonight. It was practically morning now anyway.

She should have felt happier about this. She'd always loved humans.

So her parents still thought humans were dangerous. Not only them, but Princess Celestia, too. Normally Lyra would have no trouble saying they were wrong, but she was still thinking about the war. What if it *hadn't* been Discord's fault?

No... That was ridiculous. Celestia had admitted she and Luna weren't able to defeat him right away. He just had more time to gain power, and he'd started with humans. He could have twisted ponies that much, if he'd wanted to. That's what he'd started to do last year.

The human world would be perfectly safe.

She picked up her journal off the nightstand and looked through it again. Her dreams had most likely been things from her own world, not from Equestria. It would explain why everything looked so different from the books.

Just how much would be the same? The dreams had been similar enough that she'd honestly thought they were the same place... That was the only thing that made sense. She was still having trouble with the concept of a separate "human world."

There was a knock at her door, and she glanced up. Dewey was peeking in from the hallway.

"Is it... alright if I come in?" he asked.

"Yeah. Of course," Lyra said. She set her journal down.

There was something floating in the air next to him, glowing blue. Lyra couldn't tell what it was. Some flat rectangular object.

"You still want to go back and live with other humans," he said.

Lyra nodded.

"Perhaps that's what you should do. I really don't know anymore..." He glanced over to what he was carrying. It floated over to Lyra, and she took it with her magic. "Celestia told you about what they found. Things that fell through the rift along with you. She wanted to study them. But I kept this one."

Lyra couldn't believe her eyes. It was just an old photo frame, but...

"These are... real humans?" she said. Two of them – a man and a woman – standing in front of a large house, and one of those self-moving carriages from her dreams. The man had dark hair and a beard, and had his arm around the shoulder of the woman. She stared up at him. "How do you have this?"

"I've never known for sure, but they just might be your parents."

She was speechless. She set down the photo on her nightstand, but could barely manage to tear her eyes away from it. Any photographic evidence of humans would have been exciting, but *that*... Well, of *course* her birth parents would be humans, but actually seeing them suddenly made it all so much more real.

"You've had this all these years?" Lyra asked.

Dewey nodded. "Your mother doesn't know that I kept this, but it's our only clue to who you used to be. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about your species. I've wondered about those humans ever since we found you."

Lyra glanced back at the photo, then looked up at him. "I can't believe you have this..."

"I'm not trying to tell you what choices to make. But before you make any decisions about what you're going to do... just make sure you're absolutely certain. If you leave Equestria, you might never come back."

"I know that..." Lyra said.

"I understand why you'd want to go," he said. "It's still your choice, in the end." Turning and heading to the door, Dewey was about to leave the room.

"Wait."

He turned his head to look at her. He looked very tired.

"Dad, you don't think that... all humans are evil, right?" Lyra said.

He smiled. "I've only ever known one."

She looked back at the photo on her nightstand, the picture that still seemed so impossible, and then back to him. "Good night."

"Good night, Lyra." He left, and the door swung shut behind him.

Lyra laid in bed all night, but never got to sleep. She was staring at the faces of those humans. Every picture she'd seen of humans before had been a drawing. Or in her dreams. But these humans... her parents, maybe... They were real. They were still out there somewhere.

• • •

The next morning, Lyra went out for a walk.

Canterlot was familiar to her. She'd lived most of her life here, and even after moving in with Bon-Bon in Ponyville she'd come to visit a few times. So why was she suddenly feeling like she didn't belong here?

Princess Celestia had explained to her, while she'd been stunned into total silence, that she was still a citizen of Equestria regardless of her heritage. She could stay here. That's what Celestia recommended, even. And of course her parents didn't want her to leave.

Passing by the train station, she watched as an engine pulled in. Lyra could easily go back to Ponyville later tonight if she wanted. Go back and pack up all of her books, tell Bon-Bon that she was finished with humans forever. Forget that she'd *seen* who her real parents were and that she had never been a pony to begin with...

No, that wasn't possible at all.

She passed by the stadium where the Wonderbolts derbies took place. There were posters up with a date, saying that there would be a race there in a few days. Lyra liked seeing those...

Her pegasus heritage was all a lie. She'd thought that explained why magic had been so difficult. And now she realized that, the first time she'd ever used magic to play the lyre, she'd been imagining fingers moving through the strings. And when she actually did use hands to play, it seemed so much easier.

Ponies, dressed in their fancy hats and high-class Canterlot fashions, passed by her, without a second thought. They had no idea she was something that was only supposed to exist in myths.

Nothing was different. She hadn't actually changed. She'd always been human. The only difference was that she knew about it now. All those times that Bon-Bon had looked her in the eye and told her to stop obsessing over those "crazy dreams..."

When she was a filly, she'd always believed that humans might still be around somewhere in Equestria. It wasn't until she was older that she'd resigned herself to the fact that they were probably extinct. The Princess's offer was almost too good to be true.

And it *was* a good thing. Because all of those fears about humans were completely unfounded. Weren't they?

Humans weren't truly extinct. What had happened to them in Equestria was unfortunate, but that didn't mean that Lyra had to be nervous about going back home.

Lyra stopped and stood there for a moment. She let out a sigh. This wasn't going to get any easier. She just had to make her final decision.

Turning around, she headed back home to make some final arrangements.

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Canterlot Castle felt different in the daytime than it had at the Gala two days earlier. It was brighter, but so quiet. They'd passed a few guards on the way to the Princess's chamber, posted at the gate. Dewey was recognized as the head librarian, so he had no trouble getting in.

There hadn't been much discussion when they'd arrived. Princess Celestia had instantly known what they had come for. Cirrus seemed restless, Dewey kept on starting to say something, then his voice would trail off.

*An entire world outside of Equestria, Lyra thought. With living humans.*

Lyra hadn't brought much with her. She had her lyre, of course, in a large saddlebag at her side. Also, her journal – she'd recorded the dreams in there, and those were her only record of her own world rather than Equestria's past. And the photograph of her human parents. She was going to find them... somehow.

Now Lyra and Celestia stood alone together in one of the guest chambers.

"You're absolutely sure about this," the Princess said. It wasn't so much of a question as it was repeating a statement.

"I'm sure," Lyra said. "I need to know who I really am."

"My offer still stands. You would be more than welcome to stay in Equestria," Celestia said. "I've only been able to see limited glances of the world you came from. It's very different from the human society we knew of. Your species survived much longer... Their technology is far more advanced."

"I've seen it in my dreams. That's what it was, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps..." Celestia said. "I thought you would be too young to remember anything."

Lyra could feel her heart pounding. Soon enough she would no longer be a pony. She'd never have hooves again. Princess Celestia was the only one powerful enough to do this

kind of transformation spell... No, it was the opposite. She was removing the spell, that was all.

"Let's not delay any longer, then." Celestia lowered her head, pointing the tip of her horn towards Lyra. "Relax. This will only take a moment."

Her horn glowed softly, pure white. Lyra had gritted her teeth, expecting the process to be painful, like the times she gave herself hands, only multiplied by a thousand, but... now she was transforming and she barely felt anything.

• • •

Lyra hadn't come home from the Gala yet. She had said she would be back two days ago.

Bon-Bon had started to feel concerned. Yet, honestly, what could have happened to her? Despite all of Lyra's ravings about government conspiracies and humans, and how Princess Celestia was "out to get her" or whatever, there was nothing to be afraid of in Canterlot. Bon-Bon was a little ashamed of herself to be so worried.

There was a knock at the door. Bon-Bon's head jerked up, and she went to answer it. She pushed the door open. A grey pegasus stood there, eyes skewed in two different directions.

"I've got a letter for you, Ms. Bon-Bon!" she said cheerfully.

Bon-Bon took the envelope, and saw the name "Rainbow Dash" on the front. She frowned.

"Uh, thank you..." she said. There would probably be time to take this over before clocking in at work.

That ended up not being necessary, since Rainbow Dash showed up right behind the mail mare carrying another letter in her teeth.

"Hey there, Bon-Bon," she said in a flat voice. "I got your mail."

"Thanks, Rainbow Dash. I have yours." They swapped envelopes. Her letter had "Bon-Bon" scrawled in Lyra's familiar writing. It felt heavy for some reason. There was something extra in there.



Rainbow Dash turned to the other pegasus, standing there looking downcast. "Uh... you're getting closer, at least. I only had to go to one house this time." The mailmare gave a goofy smile and flapped her wings.

Bon-Bon took the letter back into the house, wondering what it could be. Some kind of an explanation for why she was running late, maybe. At least Lyra had the consideration to write back if she was held up for some reason.

As she opened the envelope, a few gold coins fell out and clinked on the table. Actually, after shaking it out, there was a substantial amount of money enclosed. Frowning, Bon-Bon took out the letter and began to read.

*Dear Bon-Bon,*

*Sorry for the short notice. Something came up in Canterlot and I'm moving out. This should cover my rent for the next few months. Maybe you can find somebody else to room with. It was great knowing you. Thanks for being so patient with me.*

*- Lyra*

She stared at the hastily-written note in disbelief. Lyra was really moving out, just like that? Bon-Bon couldn't help but feel like maybe she was responsible for this. Had she been too hard on her about that cart incident?

Bon-Bon scowled. It was just like that pony to do something so impulsive. She really shouldn't have been surprised. Still, this was drastic. What exactly did she mean by something "coming up?" And all that money... Bon-Bon's eyes widened.

The Gala... of course!

Lyra must have been spotted at the Gala and hired for a symphony. Celebrities from all over Equestria would have been in attendance, so there was really no telling where she could have ended up. She would have moved to a big city, probably, wherever the symphony was located. The extra money was probably just a fraction of whatever they'd offered her.

But she had just gotten up and *left*. Not even so much as a goodbye, other than this letter. She'd left behind everything she owned – her clothes, furniture, books...

All of her crazy theories about humans...

Despite everything else, a smile crept onto Bon-Bon's face.

Was it possible? Lyra had finally figured out who she was. She was destined to be a successful, daresay even famous, musician. Her days of hunting for humans were finally over.

• • •

Lyra stood in the private bedchamber, examining herself in the mirror. She'd just finished getting dressed in the clothes the Princess had provided her with. Reaching up to her forehead with one hand, she felt the smooth skin behind her bangs. No horn. If she tried reaching out with magic to move something, nothing happened.

But that was fine with her.

Lifting up her hands, she inspected the fingers. They still fascinated her, even though she'd been able to make them herself as a pony. Compared to these, though, her past attempts had been crude – the fingers had been too thick, not as flexible. These were real human hands. Slender, graceful, and completely amazing. It seemed like a fair trade for her magic.

Her eyes were still gold, and her mane – no, her hair – was mint green with a white stripe, just like when she'd been a pony. Those weren't normal human colors as far as she knew. But she did have the same light-colored skin like most of the humans in her dreams had. It was strange being almost entirely hairless, but Lyra wasn't completely opposed to it. In fact, she kind of liked it.

She was dressed in a simple green shirt and tan pants, and shoes – those had been somewhat new to her. The only shoes she'd worn had been the fancy ones that Rarity had made with her Gala dress, but these new ones were plain and meant to be practical. Now that the skin of her feet was so soft, instead of hooves, shoes were going to be necessary.

Along with the clothes she'd found a gold necklace with a small golden charm shaped like her cutie mark. Which was gone, just like her horn. She'd checked over her entire body. The necklace served as a reminder of Equestria, she supposed.

Being a human was a surreal experience, yet still somehow familiar. Maybe it was her instinct, or maybe just all those dreams where she'd looked exactly as she did now. Lyra ran her hands along the smooth, hairless skin of her arms. This was all real, not a dream this time. She *was* a human.

She turned and walked over to the door. Everything in the room was made for ponies, and it all seemed miniaturized now. She'd been about four feet tall as a pony, and now she was between five or six. There was a new bag sitting there that she had transferred her few things into. The long strap went over her shoulder. Kind of like a saddlebag, but for walking on two legs. She took the doorknob in her hand – it didn't turn, most in Equestria didn't – and pushed the door open.

Lyra walked through the empty halls of Canterlot Castle. The floor seemed to be so far away when she looked down at her feet. Her arms were crossed in front of her. It was kind of strange, having those two extra limbs that she didn't need to use while walking around. Not that she couldn't get used to this.

She eventually reached the throne room where her adoptive parents were waiting with Princess Celestia. They turned to stare at her.

Hesitating for a moment, Lyra finally spoke. "I'm ready."

Cirrus stepped back, shocked by Lyra's appearance. "I-it's really not too late to change your mind," Cirrus said. "You're... absolutely certain?"

Lyra's fingers tapped restlessly against her arms. "I'm sure. I've been studying humans long enough. I think I'll be able to get by."

"Once you arrive in your world, you'll most likely be unable to return here," Celestia said. Lyra was now almost at eye level with the Princess, though her size was still impressive. "You'll be on your own."

Lyra's mind went to the photo in the bag hanging by her waist. *Not exactly alone...* She just had to find them.

"I suppose this is your decision..." Dewey said. He looked up at her, and gave a weak smile. "I didn't realize how tall you'd be."

"This is about normal for humans, I think," Lyra said. She couldn't help but grin. "I mean, wow. I can't believe I'm really..." She put a hand to her forehead.

"The spell is similar to teleportation, though a far more complex variation," Celestia said. Lyra turned to look at her. "As soon as you're ready. I'll give you time."

Lyra turned back around, and knelt down in front of her parents. "I really am going to miss you guys. I just think... this is what's best for me."

"We can't talk you out of this, can we?" Cirrus said.

Shaking her head, Lyra replied, "I'll be fine."

"Just be careful," Dewey said. "All we want is for you to be safe."

"I will. I... I know exactly what I'm doing..."

She put her arms around him in a tight hug, then turned to Cirrus. She was slightly uneasy about Lyra's true form, but returned the embrace. Lyra felt a tear going down her cheek.

Finally, Lyra stood up. She turned to look at Princess Celestia. "I think I'm ready now."

Celestia looked at the human standing in front of her, wishing she could see something other than the corrupt beings from all those hundreds of years ago. Lyra still had some of her pony qualities about her – the hair color, her eyes. But even so, Lyra was as human as the day she'd been born.

"For your own sake... I hope you're right about humans being different in your world," Celestia said.

She lowered her horn again, and it started to glow.

Lyra stood there as Canterlot Castle, Princess Celestia, her parents, all of Equestria faded away.

Lyra felt warm sun and a gentle breeze on her face. She found herself standing in the middle of a flat stone road, but it stretched off farther than she could see in either direction into a clear blue sky. Flat green fields were on either side. There were also tall poles with ropes stretched tight between them, for some indiscernible reason, running along the side of the road. A faint smell hung in the air, a bit like something burning, that Lyra couldn't identify the source of.

But what really concerned her was that gigantic sign towering over everything.

*A 15-minute call could save you 15%.*

It was written in legible Equestrian, even if the actual meaning didn't make sense. The part that bothered her the most was the picture of a lizard next to it. Not a human. And it looked much more like a photograph than a drawing. Maybe it was a gecko, but the word was spelled wrong. Had Celestia really sent her to the human world? She didn't see any other humans around. What if there had been some mistake?

She turned away from the sign. If there was a road, it would go somewhere. She just had to follow it. She chose the direction going away from the sign and started walking.

Lyra stared down at her feet, which treaded along the yellow line painted down the center of the road. Who had painted it? Hopefully not a giant lizard... It seemed to stretch on as long as the road itself.

Just moments ago she'd been standing in Canterlot Castle. Now she was... Somewhere else. These fields all seemed close enough to what she was used to in Equestria, but the road itself, those weird poles – and that sign with the lizard – proved this was definitely some other world. Whether or not it was the *right* one remained to be seen.

A few minutes passed without any event. Then there was a low rumble coming from behind her. She turned around to see some kind of object coming towards her. It was getting closer, and fast. She stood there stunned. It came right past her, swerving to the side and making an incredibly loud noise like a trumpet blast forcing her to clap her hands to her ears. That burning smell got stronger as it passed.

*That was one of them!*

The carriages from her dreams. Like the one she'd tried to make herself out of Applejack's cart. And there was also one in that photograph of her parents. Humans

drove them. They were real, and Lyra had just seen one in real life. As horrifyingly fast as it had been, she was excited. There could have been a human inside that thing. Lyra was grinning.

It had been going in the same direction she was headed, and by now it was a tiny speck in the distance. Lyra headed over to the side of the road. If more were coming, she didn't want to be in the way. She knew from experience that it was hard to steer those.

Continuing on, she saw a green sign – about eye level, not massive like the lizard one – with just a few words on it. She stopped in front of it.

## DES MOINES

7

How was she supposed to pronounce that? And what was it? At least the other sign had been in readable Equestrian, by some stroke of luck, but Lyra had no idea what this meant.

Lyra talked to herself as she continued walking, trying different ways to pronounce "Des Moines." None of them sounded right. Oh, well. She'd figure it out.

Something was starting to come into view down the road. A white speck, starting to take the form of a house. It didn't seem too different from one she'd see back home. Any building would have been a good sign, but somebody might live here. She could figure out where she'd ended up.

As she got closer, she noticed one of those carriages was outside it – red, slightly rusted, and sitting completely still. Lyra headed towards it to investigate. At the moment it did nothing, but she walked around it carefully just in case.

Leaving the main road, she continued down a dirt path past the house and followed a wooden post fence running along the path. Then she saw them.

Not humans, but ponies. They looked different from the ones back home. Their coats were dull shades of grey and brown, and as she got closer, Lyra realized they didn't have cutie marks. Their faces were a bit longer too. But still, it was good to see anyone else that she could talk to.

Lyra stepped up to the fence and leaned her arms on the top beam. "Um, excuse me. I'm new around here. I'm looking for humans."

The ponies didn't say anything. One of them flicked his tail.

"You know about humans, right? They'd look... well, like I do..." Lyra's voice trailed off. There was something wrong here. "Do you speak Equestrian?"

Still no response.

"Scuse me. This is private property."

At first Lyra thought the voice was coming from the pony, which was strange because he'd never opened his mouth. Then she turned around and saw a human standing there looking directly at her. She stumbled backwards, hit the fence, and put out her hands to steady herself against it.

The human was a male – she was pretty sure. His hair was very short, barely coming past his ears, like most human males were shown to wear it. He wore a white shirt and dark blue pants, with heavy mud-caked shoes.

It took Lyra a while to find her voice. "Oh – i-it is? I'm just..." Her mouth had gone dry. "I'm, uh, looking for somewhere with humans. Like us." She flashed a somewhat uneasy smile.

The human looked at her like she'd said something strange. He lifted one arm and pointed a finger in the direction she'd been walking. "Nearest city's Des Moines. It's a few miles down the road." He pronounced it like "day moyne."

Lyra's eyes were locked on his hand, the way that he used his fingers. "Oh... Thank you!"

"I don't know where you're headed, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You're scaring the horses," the human said.

"Y-yeah... Sorry..." Lyra was in shock. She stared down at her two feet, which at the moment she could barely remember how to use – *just move one, then the other...* "Thanks again!"

She turned and ran for the road again. She headed off, head down, arms crossed in front of her. She waited until she had a good distance away to slow down.

In spite of how terribly that conversation had gone, Lyra couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing.

She'd just talked to a real human. Of course, she was one herself, but still, it was amazing. As impossible as it seemed, humans were alive and well, and she was about to see even more of them.

Lyra had to make sure, though, so she reached up a hand and prodded herself in the face. And then again, a bit harder, but still nothing. She wasn't sleeping, then. She half expected to wake up, find out she'd passed out from boredom at the Gala, and dreamed the entire thing. But she was here, and she was a human.

It was going to take Lyra a long time to get used to the fact that humans were common in this world. They'd always seemed so far away and unapproachable. But in this world, there must be thousands of humans. There would be more like that one in Des Moines.

"Des Moines..." Lyra said aloud to herself, trying out the way that the human had pronounced it. She'd probably be expected to know how to say it.

Next time she saw a human, she'd have to try to stay calm. This was just another stage in her research – close-up observation. It was going to take some time to learn how this world worked, and she'd have to use everything she knew about humans if she was going to live here for the rest of her life.

The rest of her life... This was her home now. She looked around, even though the scenery hadn't changed much. It seemed peaceful. There was nothing to worry about. The human world would be great.

Still... something else bothered her. The ponies had never talked to her. Then again, they didn't exactly look like ponies; their facial features were different. They had still been close enough to at least *resemble* ponies like the ones she'd lived with...

Lyra shook herself. No need to worry about that. She was a human now. There was no reason to worry about ponies anymore.

Her feet were starting to feel sore. It was impressive enough that she was having such an easy time of walking on two legs, but it was still unfamiliar. The only other time she'd ever done this had been in dreams.

Trying to keep her mind off of her sore feet, she took some time to examine her hands. She moved the fingers of one hand over the other, feeling her skin, and the bone structure underneath. She studied the interesting patterns of lines on her palms. These were completely unlike anything ponies had, even different than her magically-created hands had been.



But the best part was – these hands were here to stay. Bon-Bon couldn't tell her to get rid of them anymore, and besides, these were an integral part of what made humans what they were.

"You thought we didn't even exist," she said under her breath, smiling. "If you could just see me now, Bon-Bon..."

That made her stop. Because now, she'd suddenly realized that she *wouldn't* see Bon-Bon ever again. Lyra would probably never talk to another pony – the ones she'd just seen weren't capable of speech, as far as she knew. Only now was it starting to sink in just how much she'd given up to be human.

It wasn't too bad, right? She'd wanted this ever since she was a filly. This was a kingdom inhabited by the creatures she'd read about for so many years – her own species, as it turned out. That made her smile again.

A few more of the carriages passed by over the next hour or so, and Lyra watched them pass with interest. How exactly did they move if humans couldn't use magic? They were much faster than a pony-drawn carriage. One of them that drove past was huge, with several sets of wheels and a big box-shaped section on the back. There was writing on it, but it had been too fast to read.

At least, she was pretty sure humans couldn't use magic. Lyra saw a glass bottle on the side of the road, and focused on it. She tried to raise it up into the air... Still nothing. It sat there lifeless.

Lyra lifted up her head and saw some buildings off in the distance. A group of houses, much closer together. Probably the village she'd been looking for. That was her goal, and seeing it gave her an extra boost of energy. The other humans would be there. Maybe even her parents.

Walking on two legs was barely a conscious effort anymore. She focused on those buildings. Another carriage zoomed past, blowing her hair into her face. She brushed it away with her fingers – they were so useful. As she got closer to the city, the structures were beginning to come into focus.

It wasn't much farther now.

• • •

For the past few hours, she'd been headed into the city. The few scattered farmhouses along the road had given way to a neighborhood of hundreds of houses, all just one or two stories. Then the buildings just got progressively larger until she reached these massive towers at the center. This could easily be the capital of the human world. Or at least whatever country she was in.

Lyra stared up at the tallest of the buildings. She was right underneath them now. This one must have been at least thirty floors, capped with a dark pyramid shape. It was dizzying being so close to it.

She'd seen some tall buildings in Equestria. These particular buildings, though... They seemed absolutely massive. Once they'd come into view, she'd been able to tell they were big, but they were definitely larger than anything in Manehattan, and they even would have dwarfed Canterlot Castle, which could be seen from miles away in Ponyville.

Just like Princess Celestia had said, these humans were far more advanced than the ones in Equestria had been.

Her neck was craned up as she walked, trying to see the top of the tower, and she bumped into a human.

She jumped in surprise. "E-excuse me..." Lyra stammered.

"Watch where you're going." The man, dressed in a suit and tie, hurried off in the other direction.

There were hundreds of them. Humans, everywhere. All different colors – but, as Lyra had expected, the spectrum of human colors ran from dark brown to a light tan (like herself). There was a bit more variation in hair color. Lots of brown and black, but also a few reds, yellows, and greys.

Lyra was conscious of her own green hair. Nobody seemed to be making a big deal about it, but she was getting a few looks. Maybe... It could just be an especially rare hair color for humans. Like how Rainbow Dash was the only pony Lyra knew with a multicolored mane like that.

It was just one of many questions she had right now. This city was almost exactly like the ones she'd dreamed of. She didn't recognize anything specific, but it was extremely similar. This was undoubtedly where she came from. It was so exciting.

It hardly felt real. Lyra was here in the middle of a human city, surrounded by them on all sides, and she fit right in. She was one of them. She may have been raised by ponies, but she was a human at heart.

There was just so much energy here. Ponyville was such a quiet little town... Most days, at least. But a normal day here was filled with so much motion. Humans walking in all directions, flashing lights everywhere like it was a festival...

And those carriages were running right in between all the buildings! Apparently they could slow down enough to be controlled with precision in these tight passages. Whatever magic humans used, they had excellent control over it. That was the only explanation that made sense.

Lyra was watching the humans around her, but none of them were actually using magic. At least, not anything that she recognized. They carried everything with their hands. But of course they would – if you could choose between carrying something with your mind, and having a real, solid, physical grip on it, the choice was obvious. Still, she wasn't sure how these carriages and lights would be working if humans didn't have any kind of magic.

She was at another street corner, waiting to cross. Lyra had decided she would only try to cross in a group. At these intersections, there were panels that lit up with pictures of human figures and bright red hands. That on its own had instantly gotten her attention. After watching the behavior of the humans, she'd determined that the hand meant stop, and the walking human meant to cross. Either way, it was best to follow another human across just to make sure.

One of the carriages pulled up and came to a stop. There was loud music playing from inside it. Well, more like just a low bass beat that seemed to shake the ground. Lyra turned to stare at it as she crossed, and saw a human in the front seat tapping his hands with the rhythm. Where was the music coming from, though?

Lyra kept going deeper into the city, but she was feeling lost. This network of buildings and streets was like an endless maze, and she wasn't even sure where she was headed. She just wanted to see everything.

There were signs and words all over the place, even if not all of them were very clear. How was she supposed to know what "Drive-Up and ATM" meant? And she was pretty sure "Quizno's" wasn't a word. Or maybe it was. Maybe she didn't know as much about this world as she thought.

One building with large red letters was apparently called "Marriott." It seemed to be a hotel. That reminded her – she'd need a place to stay. But there was no way she'd be able to do that without some money. Whatever humans used as currency, she didn't have any of it. Besides, this hotel looked incredibly fancy. From what she could see of the lobby, the rooms would be even nicer than a private suite in Canterlot Castle.

Down the street she saw a store with some books on display in the windows. Lyra paused, and looked at the titles. These were different from Equestrian books. The covers were interesting, usually with full color photographs on them, but they were hardly thicker than the pages. There were a couple traditional hardbound books in the mix, but those were a minority.

Lyra walked inside to look around, a bell ringing as she opened the door. A few tables were set up in the front, with some books set up, and towards the back there were rows of shelves.

"Hey, how's it going?" There was a human behind the counter – probably the owner. A male with thick-rimmed square glasses.

"Just fine..." Lyra said.

"Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks." She headed into the shelves at the back without looking at him.

It was such a casual greeting. A pony would do the same thing if you walked into their store, but this was a *human*. A creature that had just recently stopped being a picture in a book and was suddenly speaking to her. It was going to be hard to get used to that.

It was quiet here, and the smell of paper reminded her of home. It was good to see that humans valued books just as much as ponies did.

Lyra ran her fingers through her hair, enjoying the sensation as she tried to decide on a course of action. Her attention drifted to the books in front of her. Some of them had been placed with the covers facing outwards instead of the spines. The names of the authors were featured even larger than some of the titles – Robert Jordan, Steven Erikson, Thomas Michelakos... Humans had such interesting names.

She picked one up off the shelf. It felt heavy in her hands, but it was a nice weight. The humans pictured here looked more like the ones she knew about from her books, based on the clothing styles. On closer inspection, this cover was a painting, not a photograph.

The thatched-roof houses in the background could have been just like the one she'd lived in with Bon-Bon, but instead of ponies, there were humans – dressed in armor and carrying long blades and axes with them.

Putting the thick book back on the shelf, she noticed the label on the top of the shelf. So this was the "fantasy" section? But... These were the only things that looked very familiar from her studies. Everything outside seemed more like a fantasy, to be honest.

Lyra wandered around the store a while longer. Most of the books here were fiction. Still, just about every single one was about humans, so they were all fascinating to her. She'd just like to know how things here in her world worked. She felt so lost here.

She couldn't let herself feel overwhelmed. The first thing she had to do was earn some money. Then she could worry about finding a place to stay and getting something to eat. Lyra noticed for the first time that she was hungry – probably something to do with the long walk into the city.

Leaving the store, she headed further down the street. The number of humans she saw was truly staggering. In Ponyville, she'd known just about everyone else. Canterlot had even seemed like a big city. But here there must be *hundreds* of humans.

The buildings gave way to an open green park. It was amazing how similar it was to the one in Ponyville. There was grass, trees, well-maintained gardens... There were a few humans walking through, so she'd have an audience. That was the important part.

Lyra sat down on a bench, just like she did back home. She took her lyre out of her bag, set the case down in front of her, and started to play.

She'd stopped playing once she hadn't been able to take the gnawing hunger anymore. Lyra hadn't eaten since, well... This morning, at home in Canterlot. Had that really been today? Des Moines was about as far from home as she could get, it seemed.

She knelt down in front of her lyre's case, and examined what the humans had dropped in there. She was happy to see a few coins – silver and bronze, no gold – but mostly it was just green pieces of paper. She picked one up. It had a human's face on it and the number "1" in all the corners. Was this worth something? Lots of humans had given her these, so maybe it was.

"I've never seen an instrument like that before."

Lyra jumped at the voice. She stood up and whirled around, still holding her lyre in both hands.

It was a girl – probably about the same age as her. Lyra recognized her, this human had been watching for a while. She had dark hair, tied back and hanging down just past the collar of her red plaid shirt. Lyra caught her breath. So a human was talking to her, again. No big deal. Just had to stay calm.

"Yeah..." Lyra said. "Wait, you've... never seen one..." That couldn't be right. This was a human instrument – it had to be. Didn't humans play these too?

"It's a lyre, isn't it?" the girl asked.

"Yeah." Lyra gave a quiet sigh of relief. "I thought you said you hadn't seen one before."

"Well, not in real life." Smiling, the girl asked, "Does it have any magic powers?"

Lyra was taken aback. "Magic? No, of course not..."

The girl laughed, and shook her head. "Calm down, I was only kidding. I mean, it just made me think of..." She noticed Lyra's look of confusion. "Never mind. You must not play *Legend of Zelda*."

"I'm actually not taking requests," Lyra said. She didn't know how to play that one, but it might be one of the legends that humans were said to recite with a lyre. Maybe she could learn it. She scooped the money and the green papers up and shoved them in her pockets,

then put away her instrument. "I was just about to get going, actually." She paused, and turned her head. "Wait, you live here, don't you? Where can I go to eat something?"

The human shrugged. "It's not like there's anything too special around here."

"I'll eat just about anything at this point." Lyra clicked the latches on the case shut and stood up. Her stomach growled.

"You'll probably just want something cheap anyway. I don't imagine you made very much playing. But you were pretty good," the girl said. "Oh, by the way, I'm Audrey." She extended a hand.

She was offering a handshake, probably. Lyra knew about those. Ponies had a variation, but without the fingers.

"My name's Lyra," she said, and took Audrey's hand. Their fingers closed together. Lyra stared at their hands, hardly believing this was happening.

"Lyra? Like your instrument," Audrey said.

"Huh?" Lyra said. "Yeah... I guess so." She picked the case up off the ground, and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Where do you even learn to play one of those?" Audrey nodded towards the case as Lyra tucked it back into her bag.

"I've been playing ever since I was a fil- I mean, ever since I was a little kid," Lyra said. "My parents got it for me... Well, not really my parents. I was adopted." This conversation wasn't going well. She smiled awkwardly.

"Oh..." Audrey seemed unsure of what to say next.

"I'm just really hungry right now. I need to eat something."

"Right. I was just on my way to dinner too. Why don't you come with me?"

"Seriously?" A human was offering to eat with her? This was almost too good to be true. And it still wasn't a dream, this was really happening.

"It was just an offer. You don't have to. I mean, it's summer vacation and I'm a bit starved for human interaction -"

"Same here!" Lyra blurted out.

"Well, that settles it, I guess."

Lyra nodded vigorously and followed her out of the park.

"So do you play here often? I cut through here a lot and I've never seen you," Audrey said.

"No, I'm from... out of town," Lyra said. "Where do you live?"

"Walnut Street. It's a short walk from here." Audrey gestured over to their right, and Lyra's eyes followed her hand. She was a bit more interested in the hand itself than where it was pointing.

After a few blocks they reached a green-roofed building – a restaurant. Through the windows, Lyra could see humans seated at tables, eating something. It reminded her again how hungry she was.

"It's not much, but you said you didn't care," Audrey said as she pulled the handle of the door. She let Lyra enter first.

The smell of something good – food, though Lyra couldn't identify what – was strong. The inside of the building was set up like any other restaurant, except that there were humans at the tables and in the kitchen at the back. There was a family with some children in the corner. Music was playing – from where? It was probably a recording, but there was no phonograph set up that she could see.

Normally Lyra would have been more interested in observing what was going on here, but right now she was starving. Besides, she was about to figure out what human food was like. It might be similar to what ponies ate. She hoped humans liked cake as much as she did.

Audrey went up to the counter and spoke to the human operating the register. "I'll have a... number one. And no mustard on that."

"You want that as a combo?"

"Yeah."

"That'll be five sixty-seven."



Lyra was watching closely at how Audrey paid, but all she handed to the cashier was a small rectangular card. And then he gave it back to her. Wasn't she supposed to actually pay?

"Can I help you?" Now the cashier was talking to Lyra. What did she order? All Audrey had said was a number.

"Uh..." Lyra said. "I-I'll just have the same thing." That was the safe way to go, she figured.

"Alright. Five sixty-seven."

Five sixty-seven... what? Lyra reached into her pocket and pulled out the wad of paper. She was pretty sure it was human currency. She stared at it for a few seconds, then handed it over.

The human looked confused, but took out some of them and handed the rest back to her. He scooped a few coins out of the register.

"Thirty-three cents is your change. Have a nice day."

"You too..." Lyra said.

Everybody here was so friendly. Princess Celestia had been wrong about humans. Or at least, Lyra had been right that the humans in her world would be different. It was hard to believe that just this morning she'd been in boring old Canterlot, and now she was somewhere as amazing as Des Moines.

"So, um..." Lyra started. "What exactly does 'Des Moines' mean? That's where we are, right?"

"Uh... I can't remember," Audrey said. Her arms were folded in front of her. "It's something French."

"Oh... Really?" So she'd ended up in France... Lyra smiled, imagining what Rarity's reaction would be if she knew where she was right now. France was a real place. In this world it was still thriving.

"How long have you been in town?" Audrey raised an eyebrow.

"I just got here today," Lyra said.

"You'll get used to it. It's pretty boring around here, really."

"I doubt *that*." Lyra smiled.

As they waited for their food, Lyra listened to the music, wherever it might be coming from. It was pretty catchy, whatever it was.

*"It don't take money, it don't take fame, don't need no credit card to ride this train..."* It was an upbeat tune. This was human music, Lyra realized. She liked it more than the classical stuff that was popular back home. *"It's strong and it's sudden and it's cruel sometimes, but it might just save your life – That's the power of love!"*

The food came out on brown trays. Lyra recognized some of the food as fries, but they didn't look like they were made from hay like the ones back home. The other food came in small square boxes made of cardboard.

They'd been given empty cups, made out of paper. She watched Audrey go over to a box next to the counter and fill up hers with something. Lyra just imitated what she'd done, and took a sip – it was just regular soda. A bit sweeter and more bubbly than back home, but other than that it was like being at Sugarcube Corner again.

By the time they sat down, Lyra couldn't hold herself back. She opened up the box – it was some kind of a sandwich – and started eating immediately.

"So you really *were* hungry," Audrey said, staring at her in mild amusement.

Lyra nodded, and swallowed a bite. "It's delicious."

"It's really nothing special," Audrey said. She leaned forward. "Anyways, where did you say you were from?"

"It's, um..." Lyra took another bite, wondering how much she should say. What did humans think about ponies? She wasn't going to take chances until she knew. "It's a small town. Really far from here. You've probably never heard of it. It's that far away."

"Right..." Audrey gave a slow nod, and started her own food.

The lettuce was falling out of Lyra's sandwich onto the tray. It was difficult to hold the sandwich all together. Maybe she just wasn't experienced enough with her new hands.

Lyra watched as Audrey picked up and ate some fries. She used her fingers thoughtlessly. She'd always had them, so she didn't realize they were anything special. Humans like her couldn't even imagine how lucky they were.

"I'd really like to hear more about you," Lyra said. "What do you do? Do you have a job?"

"I tried applying a few places last summer, but didn't get anything back. Same thing this year." Audrey's hands moved idly as she spoke. "Usually I'm too busy with school to work the rest of the year."

Lyra stopped and stared at her. "You're still in school? But... how old are you?"

"Sixteen, as of last February. What do you mean, 'still?'"

"I graduated years ago," Lyra said.

"From *what?*" Audrey said. "I've still got two years of high school left. Then I want to go to Grand View to study psychology, and that'll be another four years, at *least.*"

Lyra didn't know what to say. Humans really went to school for that long? She was even a few months older than this human, and yet she'd been out of magic school for a long time.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden burst of music. It had a tinny quality and sounded close by, closer than the other music that was playing here.

"Whoops. That's mine," Audrey said, pulling some small black object from her pocket. She stared down at it for a moment, and got an irritated look on her face. Lyra sat there, not sure what the proper response was. "Why would he expect *me* to know anything about eBay?" Audrey wasn't speaking to her, she just stared at the thing in her hands and then started tapping at it with her thumbs, which was interesting. Then she put it away again, and her friendly expression returned instantly. "Sorry. That was my friend Nathan."

Lyra nodded, though she was even more confused than ever. That thing had a name, and Audrey considered it a "friend." Audrey's explanation had been so casual that it was as if Lyra was simply expected to understand.

"But anyways, I still don't know anything about you. What are you doing here in Des Moines?" Audrey asked.

"Oh, well..." Lyra hesitated. It was probably best to tell the truth. "I'm looking for my parents, actually."

Audrey nodded, and took a sip of her drink. "Right... You mentioned you were adopted earlier," she said, and then quickly added, "You don't mind me asking about it, do you?"

"Not at all," Lyra said. "I actually didn't even know that I was adopted until just recently."

"Really? Most adopted children these days know about it. It relieves a lot of the stigma, lets kids know that they're still wanted..." Audrey said. "I can't imagine what you must have gone through when you found out."

"My situation was... complicated. Let's leave it at that," Lyra said.

Shaking her head, Audrey muttered, "Still. Leaving your parents behind and all that."

"I moved out a while ago... I guess I could've stayed in town, closer to home. Twilight did that," Lyra said, shrugging.

"Twilight?"

"Yeah, she was a... friend," Lyra said. She remembered when they'd been doing research together a few months ago. Look who had turned out to be right.

"That's... kind of an odd name," Audrey said, wrinkling her nose. "What, were her parents hippies or something?"

Lyra suddenly realized what she'd done. Pony names were different from human ones. It had completely slipped her mind. "Yeah... Total hippies." *Whatever that means*, Lyra thought. It seemed to be a satisfactory response, though.

"People must always be teasing her. You know, about the books."

"Well, sometimes, but..." Lyra blinked. "Wait, how did you know Twilight likes books?"

"No, I was talking about..." Audrey gave a sigh. "You know what? Never mind. Keep going. You were talking about when you moved out. How long ago was that?"

"About..." Lyra thought for a moment. "Four years ago?"

Audrey stared at her. "And you're... how old?"

"Sixteen. Same as you." Lyra grinned.

"You've been living on your own since you were twelve."

"Yeah. Well, I mean, I had a roommate," Lyra said. "This city's bigger than what I'm used to, but I think I'll be able to manage."

"Your parents kicked you out when you were *twelve*?" Audrey seemed shocked for some reason.

"No, I chose to move out," Lyra said. "They didn't *force* me to leave or anything. And I wanted to be on my own. My parents didn't really like all of the research I was doing about... Uh..." Lyra's voice trailed off. Her eyes wandered around the restaurant, at the humans behind the counter at the other tables, at Audrey, sitting right in front of her. "Well, it's not really important. But I was able to do whatever I wanted."

"You were *twelve*," Audrey repeated. "That's just, I don't know... a *serious* case of neglect, or something... Didn't social services find out about it?"

"It's really no big deal," Lyra said.

Audrey shook her head, then continued. "And... you mentioned trying to find your real parents. That's why you came here."

"Yeah. My parents... well, my adopted parents... They gave me this." She reached down to pick up her bag by the side of the table, and took the picture out of it. "This is all I have from my real family."

Audrey took the picture and looked over it for a few moments. "This is all they gave you? Do you even know their names, anything about where they're from?"

All Lyra knew was that they were from this world. Still, she didn't think humans were aware that Equestria existed. She hadn't known that this place had. "No... I don't really know anything about them."

"Jeez. I hate to say it, but I don't think this'll do much good." She turned it over, but nothing was on the other side. She handed it back. "I can't believe they'd just send you out on your own with nothing but that. This kind of thing just doesn't happen. It makes no sense."

"Oh, it's fine. Like I said, I've lived on my own for a long time," Lyra said, slipping it back into her bag next to her journal. "I think I can manage."

"Where *are* you from?"

"Like I said... You wouldn't have heard of it. It's not important." Lyra waved one hand, holding the remaining quarter of her sandwich in the other.

"I don't even know what to say to this."

"Uh, yeah," Lyra took another bite as she tried to figure out what to say next. She finished the last of her sandwich. It was exactly what she'd needed, and she was feeling completely full. "That was delicious. What is it?"

"You've seriously never had a Big Mac before?" Audrey said.

The first thing that came to mind was Applejack's big brother, but obviously that wasn't what she was talking about. The sandwich must just have the same name, by coincidence.

"So what's in it?" Lyra asked.

Audrey shrugged. "Greasy meat and cheese on a cheap bun? I don't know exactly what the sauce is, but that's –"

Lyra had stopped listening after the second word. She slowly raised a hand to her mouth. "You said... there's meat in that."

"Of course. Well, kind of. I mean, it's fast food. Who knows what it really –"

"Like... animals."

"Huh?"

"That... That came from something that was alive! Who did I just eat?" Lyra demanded.

Audrey's eyes went wide with concern. She put her head in one hand and stared at the table. "Oh my god. You're a vegetarian," she said. "You should have told me! I figured everyone knew what these are. Don't tell me you've never been to a McDonald's before."

"Who *was* that...?" Lyra said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It was... from a cow, probably. Mostly. I mean, I don't know how much of it was filler." Audrey was stumbling over her words.

There were cows on Applejack's farm. They raised them for their milk, and treated them kindly. Humans *ate* them. And Lyra had just...

She was going to be sick.

Audrey seemed panicked too, but not even half so much as what Lyra was feeling. "Oh my god... If you're a vegetarian, you could've warned me earlier. I would have suggested someplace else. I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

Lyra shook her head slowly. "Pinkie was right..." she muttered. And the worst part? Meat was delicious.

"Who?" Audrey said. "Right about what?"

"Oh, did I say Pinkie? I meant... Diane." Lyra hoped that would save her from more questions. Her stomach was doing backflips. "We always call her Pinkie because it's her favorite color. But... she told me about..." Lyra's voice trailed off, and she groaned.

"Lyra, are you really going to be okay? I mean... I feel really terrible about this whole thing."

"I'll be fine..." she mumbled. "Do... Do all humans eat like this?"

"Well, no... I mean, you just said you were vegetarian..." Audrey shook her head. "*God*. I really am sorry." She put her head in her hands and stared down at the table.

She finished the rest of her food in uncomfortable silence, avoiding Lyra's eyes. The rest of the food seemed okay. It was safe, at any rate. Lyra picked at the fries, though she wasn't feeling hungry anymore.

Lyra finally spoke up again. "Audrey... you don't eat... ponies, do you?"

"What? No."

"Uh... okay..." That was good, at least, though it didn't really make things any better.

Lyra really wanted to trust this human. Things had been going so well, but this... Could she really overlook this? Then again, all humans, or most of them, anyway, did eat like this. It was their natural biology. Maybe they had no choice.

But... it had tasted good.

Audrey had called her a "vegetarian," so maybe it was normal for some humans not to eat it, but it had sounded like the exception instead of the rule. Lyra just wasn't sure what to think anymore.

Finally Audrey spoke up again.

"Uh... Lyra. You said you were just passing through town," she said, pointing a finger outwards idly.

"Yeah, that's right," Lyra said.

"Where are you staying?"

"I... haven't really thought about that, to be honest," Lyra admitted. Today had been too overwhelming.

"Well, uh..." Audrey was looking for the words to say. She took another drink of her soda. "You're an interesting person, Lyra. I'll say that much."

Lyra smiled a little bit. "Thank you..." Having a human call her "interesting" was an incredible honor. She thought Audrey was much more fascinating.

"You're also *incredibly* naïve, and something terrible's going to happen to you if you're left on your own."

"What do you mean?" Lyra asked. The human world had seemed safe to her. Well... other than the food. It seemed impossible that anything worse than *that* could happen.

"What I'm saying is..." Audrey gave a small laugh, and looked down at the table. "I'm crazy for saying this, because I just met you and all. But we've got a guest room back home, and if you need a place to stay until you get things figured out –"

"I'd love to!" Lyra said, her face lighting up. Then she shrank back down. That outburst had been louder than she'd wanted.



"I guess that's settled, then," Audrey said, smiling. "Come on. I'll show you where I live."

• • •

Audrey's house was just a half hour walk away. It was two stories, painted white, with a grey roof. It looked a lot like the other houses that were all around it, actually. They seemed to be arranged a bit more orderly than Ponyville, kind of in a grid pattern. It was thanks to the roads that the human's carriages required. One of them was sitting in front of the house.

This part of the town was quieter than the center had been. All of the houses had lawns with grass and trees, some better tended than others.

"Looks like Mom's home," Audrey said, nodding towards the stationary carriage. "I'll tell her you're staying over. Don't worry. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Alright..." Lyra was still amazed that she was about to stay in a human's home. It was almost enough to make her forget what she'd just eaten. Almost.

Lyra noticed the word "LOREN" on the side of the mailbox in front of the house. She followed Audrey up to the door, and stepped inside. The entry hall really didn't feel too foreign. There was a still life painting hung on one wall of some fruit, and across from that stairs headed up to the right. Lyra noticed that the stairs were narrower than back home, making them far more compact. Besides, the extra width wouldn't be necessary for a two-legged human.

Not long after they'd entered the house and Audrey had pulled the door shut, another human walked in. She looked kind of like Audrey, but her hair was curly instead of long. "Oh, I thought you'd be home soon."

"Dad's still at work?"

Audrey's mother nodded, then noticed Lyra. "And who's this?"

"This is Lyra. I told her she could stay with us for a while..." Audrey's voice trailed off, and her mother gave her a look. She turned to Lyra. "Um, make yourself at home. I'll handle this."

"Oh. Thanks," Lyra said. She headed down the hallway and left the two humans in the entry.

Their voices had dropped low. Lyra couldn't make out what they were saying, but she trusted Audrey. Maybe more than she should... No, the meat had been a misunderstanding. She couldn't dwell on that. Even if she couldn't force it out of her mind no matter *how* hard she tried. Besides, was she really in any position to turn down the kindness of strangers? Especially humans?

She had to get her mind off of what she'd done. This was a human house, after all – the thought of that was still exciting to her, regardless of everything else. Lyra headed into the other room.

Now the house was starting to look different from Ponyville. The living room – if that's what this was – had a strange setup. A couch and a few chairs were set up, all facing a black box. At the moment Lyra had no idea what it was for. It looked boring, so she turned her attention to the framed photos on the end table.

This one... It looked just like Hearth's Warming Eve. They had a tree decorated and everything. No, wait. That would be Christmas, wouldn't it? Lyra was grinning. Maybe she could ask them about what that was... But she couldn't be too obvious that she didn't know about it. All humans celebrated Christmas, after all.

Another one seemed to be Nightmare Night. A small human, the age of the young ones she'd seen at the restaurant, was dressed like a black cat. It was probably Audrey at a younger age. But if humans didn't have Nightmare Moon, then who did they celebrate?

She noticed the coffee table in front of the sofa had a vase with some flowers in it. Lyra was feeling a bit peckish. Hopefully she wouldn't be overstepping her bounds as a guest if she just took one.

She bit into the petals, and instantly had to resist spitting it out. It was way too bitter. She coughed, and tried to swallow it.

Lyra headed back into the entry hall. As she got closer, their voices became clearer.

"She's had a hard life. She won't even tell me what she's been through."

"I realize that, but this isn't like when you used to bring home stray animals. This is a *human being*, Audrey. A stranger. Do you even know anything about her? Where she's from?"

"She's going through a rough time. She's confused." That voice was Audrey's.

Lyra walked in. "Um, sorry, but... I think your flowers went bad. They don't taste right at all." She was holding the stem with the head partially bitten off.

Silence.

"Uh..." Audrey wasn't quite sure what to say.

"Sorry..." Lyra said quietly.

"No, it's... It's fine," Audrey said.

"Lyra, was it?" Audrey's mother said. "Audrey says you're in town working to make your own money."

Lyra nodded. "I really won't be any trouble. I can stay, right?" She took another bite of the flower stem without realizing it, and grimaced again. How could *this* taste bad, when earlier today she'd eaten...

Audrey exchanged a glance with her mother, then turned back to Lyra. "Come on. I'll show you where you'll be staying." Audrey led her over to the stairs.

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It was starting to get dark outside. Lyra was helping Audrey to put covers on the guest bed she'd be sleeping in.

"Could you get that corner?" Audrey held one end of the floral-patterned sheets and pointed with her free hand.

"Sure." Lyra helped tuck it under. "I can really stay here, right? How long?"

"However long you need to. I think you need to come up with a better plan, though. At this point, trying to find those people from your photo is just unrealistic."

They finished with the mattress cover and started on the blanket. It was just a simple task, but they were using their hands for it. One hand had to hold up the corner of the mattress while the other pulled the cover over it. Audrey had picked up the blanket when a man walked in from the hallway.

"You must be Lyra," he said. "I heard you'd be staying with us?"

She turned to look at him. He was probably Audrey's father. "Yeah."

"Mom talked to you?" Audrey said. "About... well..."

"I really won't be any trouble," Lyra cut in.

"I'm sure you won't be," he said, smiling. "And we can't exactly throw you back out on the street, now can we?"

Lyra could hardly believe how lucky she'd been to end up here. "I... can't tell you how much this means to me."

"It's nice to meet you, Lyra. Just let us know if you need anything. We really do want to help you."

"Thank you," Lyra said, smiling. "I think I'm doing okay right now, though." She went back to making the bed, and finished putting the sheets on.

"I'll leave you be for now, then." He turned and left as they finished making the bed.

"Looks good," Audrey said. "And like Dad said, just tell us if you need anything."

Lyra was staring at the bookshelf at the end of the room. "Do you mind if I read some of those?" She pointed at them.

Audrey shrugged. "Sure. If you want to, I guess."

"Thanks." Lyra yawned. "But... actually, I think I'll just go to bed for tonight." She realized again that she'd woken up this morning in Canterlot. It felt like years ago. She needed some rest.

"Okay. Good night, then."

"Night."

• • •

There were strange, unidentifiable sounds outside in the human world. Lyra thought they might be those carriages, but there was also a loud, high-pitched whine that grew louder and faded away. Lyra was stretched out on the bed, with her journal open in front of her, and a pencil in her hand.

It wasn't too different from home, except now she was writing from experience. And there were so many new things she'd learned about humans today. Where to start? She tapped the eraser against her lip.

She took another glance over the room she was staying in. It was dark other than the lamp on the table next to her. In front of that she'd set down her bag. Curtains hung in front of the window, but she hadn't felt like closing them. Earlier she had looked at the titles of everything on the bookshelf, and just couldn't decide where to start. Human culture was even wider and more varied than Equestria's.

Back to her journal. First off – *Be careful of what you eat.*

That note was worth circling. Lyra cringed just thinking of what had happened earlier today. Audrey hadn't meant any harm, though. Eating meat was just a normal human behavior.

It didn't change the fact that Lyra never wanted to do it again.

Moving on, there were all of those inventions that were in this world. She flipped back to a few sketches of carriages that she'd done based on her dreams. Those had been surprisingly accurate. She went back to a blank page.

The idea that this was *her* world – this huge, amazing place – was just wonderful. Equestria just couldn't compare to what might be in store for her here in France. And she'd already made a friend who could help her find her way around.

Though... She did miss Bon-Bon. A smile came to her face as she imagined what Bon-Bon's reaction would be to seeing her now. But... that would never happen. How could she get back without any magic? Besides, the spell was too difficult even for a *normal* unicorn.

How had she even gotten to Equestria to begin with?

Too many questions, and she'd been though too much today to even consider them all. She yawned. She really should just get to sleep.

She turned and saw her necklace hanging on the bedpost. A gold lyre, just like her cutie mark. She reached past it to the lamp, trying to find the switch. She wondered if all humans had things like this in their homes. Magical appliances existed in Equestria, but they weren't too common. But, judging from what Audrey had said this morning, she'd made it sound like magic was some kind of a joke. How did *anything* here work, then?

Her fingers closed around the knob, and it clicked as she twisted it to the "off" position. She was too tired to think about all these questions right now.

All things considered, day one as a human had been a success.

Lyra woke up to the smell of something baking... Was that cinnamon? Bon-Bon must be making breakfast.

She pulled herself up and rubbed her eyes. Then she stared at her hands. That's right... She was a human now. The sun was streaming in through the window, and she could see a carriage moving past on its own through the streets of France.

After taking a moment to readjust, Lyra stuck her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, steadying herself against the bed with one arm. She stretched to get rid of the stiffness.

There were voices coming from downstairs, and not ones she recognized. The words were hard to make out, but it didn't sound like any of the humans she was staying with. She scratched her head, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Audrey was sitting at the table, staring at a silver box on the kitchen counter. Her hair wasn't tied back like it had been yesterday, and hung down to her shoulders. She was also wearing glasses, even though she apparently hadn't needed them before. She turned her head when she heard Lyra enter. "Good morning."

"Good morning..." Lyra said, yawning. She looked at the thing Audrey had been staring at. It seemed like that was the source of the other voices.

"We're back with our continued coverage of the presidential campaign..." It was like it was talking to nobody in particular. Audrey was hardly paying attention to it now. She picked up a long black object and the box suddenly went silent.

"Mom and Dad left for work already," Audrey said, pulling Lyra's attention away. "You slept in pretty late, I was almost about to go wake you up."

"Yeah. I tend to sleep late," Lyra said.

"Great hair, by the way. Even crazier than usual," Audrey said. "I could lend you a brush if you need one. After you eat, if you want."

The smells were irresistibly stronger now, and these were familiar ones. "You made breakfast?" Lyra asked. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to get it to stay down, but without much success.

"Cinnamon rolls. That's fine with you, right?" Audrey said. "I still feel awful about yesterday."

"No, it's fine," Lyra replied. "Great, actually. My roommate used to make these all the time. She's a professional baker."

"I'm definitely not," Audrey said, with a smile. "They're just Pillsbury." She noticed Lyra was confused again. "Pre-packaged. All I did was turn on the oven and put them in."

Lyra was just glad to see some recognizable food. She headed over to the stove, where there was a pan waiting on top. A plate and some silverware was sitting to the side.

"I made coffee, too, if you'd like some."

"No thanks," Lyra said. "I don't really like it. Too bitter."

Even when everything else seemed so unfamiliar, there could still be something recognizable in the human world. Plenty of ponies liked coffee – Pony Joe made most of his money off of that, back in Canterlot. Lyra had given it a chance a few years back. Even when she tried to dump in as much sugar as possible, she had never really gotten used to the flavor.

She took a seat across the table from her human friend. That still seemed too good to be true. Not too long ago, Lyra would never have imagined sitting down to eat breakfast with a real human.

Lyra took a bite, and even though the cinnamon rolls weren't quite as good as what Bon-Bon made, she still liked them.

The silver box was behind her. She turned to get a better look, and – as impossible as it was – there were human figures inside, though a window. There were words all around the figures, too many to focus on, all moving around. The humans' lips moved, but no sound was coming out anymore.

"It's been nothing but election coverage. I'm already getting tired of it. I guess I should probably pay more attention to it. I mean, we'll both be voting in another year," Audrey said. "I assume you will be, at least. Are you a Democrat or Republican?"

Lyra stared at her. "I... don't know."

"Undecided? I guess it's no big deal." Audrey shrugged. "So, anyways, your roommate?"



"Huh? What about her?"

"She was a professional baker, you said?"

"Yeah. More of a confectioner. Candy and sweets and stuff," Lyra said. She took another bite. "I love that kind of food, so it worked out well."

Audrey nodded. "And how old was she?"

"A few months older than me."

"That's still pretty young to be a professional..." Audrey said.

"Not really. She worked for years before she even got hired where she is now," Lyra said. "But, uh, what do your parents do?" She wanted to change the subject back to humans. Thinking about home was a little difficult right now.

"Dad works for Principal, in 801 Grand. That's the tall building in the middle of town," Audrey said. "And Mom's a teacher. Middle school English. She's still got some summer classes going on."

So, a teacher, and... Lyra wasn't really sure what to make of the other one. "So, uh... what's English? You mean, like England?" It was one of the human nations she recognized from her books. She was still unfamiliar with how human society worked, with all these different countries. They couldn't possibly have teachers for all of the other ones, too.

"You know, English. Literature, writing. Language arts," Audrey said. "Lyra... What you told me yesterday really worries me. I think you were probably taken out of school too early. What exactly happened?"

She shrugged. "That's when everybody graduated."

Audrey frowned, and raised an eyebrow. "Okay... So what school did you go to?"

Lyra hesitated. "It's... uh..." What did she say? Audrey had laughed at the idea of magic when she had brought it up yesterday. The Canterlot Magic Academy had been a good school, but clearly human education worked differently. "Oh, uh... you know. School."

Audrey leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "Fine..." she said.

"I really just want to see more of this place. I walked around a little yesterday, but there's even more out there. I don't really want to think about home right now."

"Lyra..." Audrey hesitated. "When I talked to my parents yesterday, they said the same thing I'd been thinking. You need professional help."

"You're doing just fine," Lyra said. "You're doing plenty just by letting me stay here. I really appreciate it."

"Well, yes, but... I mean therapy."

Bon-Bon had said that a few times, too. But why would Audrey be saying that? Her very existence proved that Lyra wasn't crazy.

"What do you mean?" Lyra asked.

"Obviously you can't afford it in your current situation, and we can't really spend that much either... But at the very least, it would help both of us if you just told me more about where you came here from."

"I told you it doesn't –"

"It *does* matter, Lyra. Why would you leave your parents' house when you were so young, for one thing? What did they do?"

"Nothing... They just decided it was time that I knew the truth about myself. My parents always did the best they could for me."

Audrey had said she was the same age as Lyra, and yet she still lived with her parents. They were going to work, but she still had a few years of school left. Lyra wasn't sure if she could even consider herself an adult anymore... But that still seemed ridiculous. She'd been able to take care of herself for years.

Audrey sighed. "I know you don't want to talk about it, but is any of this even true? What you've been saying hasn't made any sense."

"Of course it's true," Lyra said. "I get that your wor– I mean, this place works differently than where I'm from. But this was all normal for where I used to live."

"I just find it hard to believe that you'd get up and leave everything and everyone behind like that."

"My life back home was completely fine," Lyra said. "I guess... I just always felt like I didn't belong there. When I found out about my real family, that explained why. I just need to know who I'm supposed to be."

Audrey picked up her mug and finished the now-cold coffee, which had stopped steaming a long time ago. "I'd *like* to help you find your parents. I just don't see how we'll get anywhere with just a photo, much less one that's at least as old as I am," she said. "Have you considered going back home? It sounds like you had plenty of friends there."

"That just... isn't possible anymore," Lyra said.

"Why not?"

"It's too hard to explain." Lyra stared at her empty plate. "Trust me. I really am telling you the truth."

"I'm sorry if I'm coming across as intrusive. But as long as you're staying with us, we just want to know a little bit more about where you're coming from," Audrey said. "Anyways... what's your plan for today? Let's just take it one day at a time."

"I thought I'd go out and play some more. I still need to make some more money," Lyra said.

"Oh. That's right. Did you get a permit?" Audrey said. "I did some research online earlier. The city's pretty good about street musicians, but you do need a permit."

"No, I never thought about that," Lyra said. She wondered how Audrey could have had the time to look up that information just today – how long had she been awake? "I used to play in public all the time. I've never had problems with that before."

"Well, you're just lucky nobody called you out on it. You should probably get one today, before you try any more. It's just five dollars. Oh, and take your I.D."

"Huh?"

"Which reminds me..." Audrey's fingers drummed against the table. "You never told me your last name. You could at least do that, right?" She smiled.

Lyra sat there for a moment. "My... last name?"

"Yeah."

She glanced sideways. "That's a problem... I don't know what it is," she said. "I still don't know anything about my parents."

"But you must've gone by *something* back where you're from," Audrey said. "What about your adopted family?"

Lyra shook her head. "No, I've always just been Lyra." Well, actually, Heartstrings. But if Twilight sounded like a weird name to a human, what would they think of *that* one?

"So... No last name. And no I.D."

"Nope."

"Getting fined for playing would definitely be counterproductive..." Audrey rubbed her forehead. "I really don't know what I got myself into," she muttered.

"Sorry," Lyra said. "I told you. Things were really different where I grew up."

"I can tell *that*."

She glanced over at the box on the counter again. A human figure was inside. Behind him was a confusing mess of color. He seemed to be gesturing to one region. Audrey picked up the long object from the table. "Oh, the weather's on." She pointed it at the box and the human's voice could be heard again.

"Should be seeing some cloud cover and a slight chance of rain in the afternoon..." The colors behind him vanished and were replaced by a series of numbers and small icons of suns and rainclouds.

"They said earlier it might rain around three or four," Audrey said, pointing at the box. "If you're still going back out for anything, you should try to be in by then."

Lyra's head was turned and her eyes were glued to the box, but she nodded. "Yeah." Then, after a moment of consideration, she added, "My mom used to work in weather."

"Oh, really? Like an anchor, or...?"

"Production," Lyra said, frowning. She hadn't said anything about boats.

Audrey nodded. "But I don't suppose you'll tell me the name of the station."

"It really doesn't matter."

"I guess it's a start... If you want to tell me anything else, you can trust me. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, of course..." Lyra said. She idly picked up the fork, even though she was done eating. She held it in between her fingers and examined it with curiosity. After a moment, she looked up again. "Actually, one question."

"Shoot."

"Is there somewhere I could buy some more clothes? I didn't pack much with me when I left."

"Yeah, there's a few thrift stores downtown. It's not that far of a walk if you wanted to head out later today."

"I think I will."

They cleaned up the breakfast dishes together, and Lyra headed upstairs to get ready.

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Lyra stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror, with a green-haired human staring back at her. She was almost surprised when she saw her reflection move at the same time as her as she picked up the hairbrush. She still couldn't believe that was her.

The handle fit into her palm perfectly. It was almost exactly like the kind she would use on her mane when she was still a pony, but now she was using it the *right* way.

Moments like these seemed to bring everything into perspective. Even something as simple as a hairbrush had been designed by humans. This world's past was probably a lot like the other, if you go back a few centuries. But how far, exactly?

She ran the brush through her hair, trying to brush out her bedhead as much as possible. It still stuck up a little on top, but that didn't matter.

With one look back at her reflection, she decided it was good enough. She took another moment to admire her new self. She really did look startlingly similar to that picture she'd done a few months back... Part of her had always known she was meant to be human.

Lyra headed back to her room, and stood in front of the window. The weather report had said it was scheduled to rain between three and four, so she'd wait until that was over before heading out to the store. The clouds had already been moved out, and the sky was grey.

For now, she checked out the bookshelves in her room like she'd been planning to do the night before. There were so many books here that she hardly knew where to start. This was, quite literally, a whole entire world of information that she was just beginning to tap into.

There was a series of books, big hardcovers that increased in thickness, called "Harry Potter." It looked like fiction, though – the titles reminded her too much of the Daring Do adventures that she'd read as a filly. Actually, a lot of these books seemed like fiction. There was an entire shelf of books by some human named William Shakespeare that seemed to be plays when Lyra looked inside.

Lyra would have really preferred a history of the human world, but... here was something. *Understanding Human Nature*. That was perfect.

She took it with her and sat on her bed, starting with the introduction. It seemed to be focused more on psychology than anything else... But that was good, too. The preface said it was intended to improve relationships with "our fellow human beings." Practical application was exactly what she wanted to understand.

She read the first few chapters, but this wasn't what she'd been expecting. All this stuff about consciousness and the psyche... It was too bad that Twilight wasn't here to explain what all these words meant. And it certainly didn't explain the human world very well.

Lyra glanced up at the window. It wasn't raining yet. She wondered if she had the time wrong, but she was almost certain it should have started by now. It was still cloudy, but it was dry.

She closed the book and set it down on the nightstand. It was getting late, so she should probably head out before long. Besides, she'd been reading about humans her whole life. What she really wanted was to go out and be a part of this place. Practical application, like the book said.

The wad of human money was sitting there, so she picked it up and put it in her pocket. Eventually she'd run out... It was hard to tell if she'd even made a lot from her performance yesterday. And she needed a permit? This was getting too difficult...

Heading downstairs, she found Audrey putting dishes back into the cupboards. She watched her for a while, the way she'd pick up a few plates in her hands, stack them, and move them up to the cupboard four or five at a time.

Audrey stopped, noticing she was being watched. "Can I help you?"

"No, I was just... Uh, I think I'm going to head out to the store now," Lyra said. "Are you coming?"

"I've still got a few chores to do. There are a few thrift stores downtown – just head past that park I met you in, and it's a few blocks past the capitol building. You'll know that one when you see it."

Lyra had been right – this *was* the capitol city. Maybe a more typical human city would be smaller, more like Ponyville or at least Manehattan. But of all the places she could have started out her life as a human, it was so exciting to be here.

"I think I'll be able to find it. Thanks!"

"Yeah. Be careful out there," Audrey said.

"I'll try to be back before too long."

Lyra headed for the front door and went back out into the human neighborhood. She took a moment to orient herself, trying to recall how they'd gotten here the day before. They'd come back from that... restaurant. She shuddered as she remembered it. But the park would be down the street from that. She started down the sidewalk in that direction instead, enjoying the cool breeze.

She passed a couple of humans walking a dog on a leash. It was a small black one, not quite up to her knee. It wagged its tail as it looked up at her. The human holding the leash gave her a nod, and she smiled back at him. Even with this being a big neighborhood, there were rarely as many humans walking outside as there would be ponies in Ponyville. It was a little odd.

The park was easy enough to find a few minutes later. And then, down the street, that building with the domed towers must be the capitol. That made sense. It wasn't as tall as Canterlot Castle, but it was still a very impressive structure with a similar sense of majesty. Lyra wondered if they ever held parties there, like the Gala.

Downtown would be where the buildings started to get closer together. There were more carriages driving past now, and more humans on the sidewalks. Lyra was almost getting used to seeing them – almost.

As Lyra headed into one of the shops, she took another glance upwards. They hadn't cleared the clouds away yet, even though the rain had been called off. Why bother sending out a weather report if they weren't going to adhere to it? She shook her head and walked inside.

She checked the money she had brought with her. Human currency was still hard to understand, but she was beginning to work her way through it. The paper ones were called dollars, and those seemed like they were actually worth *more* than the coins. There was literally no difference between the five- and one-dollar bills other than what was printed on them. Still, humans considered that normal.

It was easy to get sidetracked when there were so many human clothes for sale. There were so many more casual outfits than there would be in Equestria. Maybe that was partly because she'd grown up in Canterlot, but it was also because humans wore clothes all the time. She'd noticed yesterday that the different colors and designs made up for the lack of variation in their own physical appearances.

Lyra knew she had to stay focused on what she was actually going to purchase. She counted through the money she'd brought, and tried to make sense of the price tags on the clothes. She could buy a few outfits, but that was going to blow through her remaining funds in a hurry... At least she didn't have to worry about paying for food or a place to stay. For as long as she was in town, at least.

It wasn't until she checked out that she realized most of the shirts she'd picked out were green. She'd just chosen what she thought would look good on her. Maybe green was just her color.

As she handed each item to the cashier, she took a look outside. There were droplets forming on the windows. Rain?

"Um, excuse me. What time is it?" Lyra said. Maybe her sense of time was off.

The human working the register checked her watch. "It's almost five."

"Seriously?" Lyra said. The weather report had said it was supposed to rain between three and four today. They were completely off schedule. Lyra shook her head. Her mother



never would have allowed this. Not even Rainbow Dash would have slacked off that much.

"Are you in a hurry or something? Be careful out there."

Lyra handed over the money for her clothes. As she had expected, she was nearly out. Before long she'd have to earn some more. Somehow.

The human handed her the bags with her clothes inside, and she took them. These strings on the top... Most ponies would have thought that those were to hold in your mouth. Maybe that's what they'd become to Equestrians, but it made so much more sense to hold those in your hands. If you were lucky enough to have them, that was.

Lyra was about to head outside, but she stopped. She decided she didn't really feel like heading into the humans' poorly timed rainstorm right now. They'd probably cut it off after an hour or so, like it had been scheduled. Lyra wasn't sure how they did it, if humans couldn't fly, but they did plenty of other impossible things. They could probably reach the clouds if they really wanted to.

She stood near the exit, watching the spray of water as carriages zoomed through the rain. Turning back to the store, she considered looking around some more. She obviously couldn't buy anything else, but human fashions and goods were interesting enough to look through a second time.

There was a bulletin board with some flyers posted near the exit. Lyra read some of them over. Her eyes stopped on one in particular – a word had grabbed her attention. She read it over again. Tore it off of the pins that it was hung up with. Maybe this was just the answer she needed.

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Once it had cleared up, Lyra hurried back to the house with a grin on her face. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this excited. Well, maybe when she first got to Des Moines, but this was even better.

She swung the front door open and called out. "Audrey?"

"In here." The voice came from the living room.

Lyra headed in to find the black box turned on. Just like the smaller one in the kitchen, the glass panel was now showing images of humans and different places. Audrey was sitting in the recliner in front of it.

"Mom's home. We've been waiting for you to get back. Did you get caught in that rain?"

Lyra handed her the flyer. "Hey. Take a look at this."

"Huh?" Audrey stared at it for a while, and read it. "Lyra, you know you're supposed to just take one of these tabs at the bottom, right? Not steal the whole thing." She pointed to the flaps of paper hanging off the bottom.

"Those were just numbers. I wasn't really sure what they meant," Lyra said. "Actually, I don't know what a lot of it means, but they need musicians, so that means me!"

"It's a phone number," Audrey said. She looked up at her. "What do you mean you didn't know what it meant?"

Lyra ignored the question. "We both know I need a way to make money, and I make a ton more if I do actual performances. Playing in public is really just a side thing."

Audrey started reading the flyer.

#### SEEKING MUSICIANS FOR HARD ROCK BAND

#### LEAD GUITAR, DRUMS

INFLUENCES INCLUDE : GNR, AEROSMITH, AC/DC, DEEP PURPLE

"Lyra... This is a rock band." She looked back up.

"Huh?" Lyra frowned. "Well, I mean, I've heard of that. It's not all that popular back home, but I pretty much know what it's like."

"Playing the lyre would be, what? Classical? Folk? I don't know. Point is, there's not really a need for that in a band like this," Audrey said. "Looks like they need a guitarist."

"Guitars?" Lyra nodded. Another human-designed instrument. "I've heard of those before."

"You've *heard* of them?" Audrey said. "Sounds like you're all set."

"Yeah! I mean, I've heard they can be difficult to play, but I think I'm up for it." Lyra was examining her fingers.

Placing a hand to her forehead, Audrey said, "No, I mean..." She sighed. "I guess that it *might* be useful to learn. There's definitely more of a demand for that than a lyre."

"If this is the kind of music that's popular with humans, then I want to learn it," Lyra said.

"Um... what?"

"I think I can do it. Music's my special talent."

Audrey rubbed her forehead. "Just when I thought I was starting to understand you..."

"Anyways, I'm gonna go drop these off upstairs." Lyra grabbed the flyer back from Audrey and took it with her.

"We were just about to have dinner!" Audrey called after her. Lyra nearly tripped over the unexpectedly narrow stairs, but caught herself just in time and hurried back up.

Lyra headed up to the guest room and left her shopping bags there. The flyer she left tucked in the pages of her journal. She paused for a moment when she saw her lyre's case. Then she headed back downstairs to eat.

Dinner that night was lasagna, which Lyra was assured was mostly cheese and tomato sauce and contained absolutely no meat. Audrey's mother had made it. They said it was Italian – yet another reference to a human nation. Lyra hadn't realized how interconnected they all were.

After they had finished and it had gone dark outside again, Lyra was back in her bedroom, taking another look through the books. She was in the middle of one when Audrey interrupted her.

"Hey, Lyra, about that flyer earlier..." She was leaning against the doorframe, holding out that little thing in one hand. She'd called it "Nathan" yesterday, if Lyra's memory was correct. Her wrist moved around in an idle motion.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I don't know how joining the band will go... But if you really want to start playing guitar, turns out I know someone who could help with that."

The next day Audrey brought Lyra to a house a few streets away. Lyra watched her as she pressed the doorbell with a single finger and then stepped back to wait on the porch, arms crossed in front of her.

Lyra was dressed in some of her new clothes. Blue jeans, and a green sweatshirt. These clothes fit her better than the ones she'd arrived in, but those had been made in Equestria. They might not have even been intended for a human originally. These felt perfect.

"I haven't seen Nathan in weeks," Audrey said. "This is the perfect excuse to come by and bother him."

From what Lyra was able to gather, this Nathan was another human. Lyra wasn't sure why Audrey would have given the same name to that little object she was always tapping her fingers on or occasionally holding up to her face and speaking to.

"He's a musician?" Lyra asked.

"Tried to be," Audrey replied. "That was a few years back. He never really got anywhere. He said he was trying to sell his old guitar on eBay, along with a bunch of other things, but I told him you'd be interested."

Lyra was about to point out that Audrey had just said that she hadn't seen Nathan in weeks when the door opened and another human greeted them. A male, with dark hair just past his ears, and a black shirt that read "Aperture" across the front. As was typical for most human males, he was a few inches taller than either of them. He scratched his head.

"Hello..." he said, as if he hadn't expected them.

"You remembered we were coming over, right?" Audrey said.

"Yeah, of course." He gave a glance towards Lyra. "So you're...?"

"Lyra." She put out her hand for a handshake, and he took it. She was getting good at this.

"I'm Nathan. You're the one who was interested in the guitar, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Come on in. I'll go get it for you." He turned and headed inside. Audrey followed him, and Lyra tagged behind her.

There was music playing, growing in volume as they came into the living room. Humans seemed to love music even more than ponies did. They would play recordings of it practically everywhere – stores, restaurants, sometimes even out on the streets from their carriages. Lyra tried to locate a phonograph in the room, but she still couldn't see one.

It was hard to understand many of the words past the chorus – "walk this way, talk this way" – but the repeating instrumental motif could really get stuck in your head. Lyra could recognize it as rock music. It was different than what she's heard in Equestria – heavier, with different instruments – but wasn't everything here different? This was what she was going to learn.

"It's been a while since I've seen you. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing much," he said. "Enjoying the summer. Making a little money. So how'd you meet her?" He nodded towards Lyra, who was busy examining a half-empty bottle of Mountain Dew on the coffee table.

"It's complicated. I'll tell you later," Audrey said.

"That's cool," he said. "It's just great to finally find a buyer."

"Well, not exactly. More like borrowing."

"Alright..." He nodded slowly. "What's the deal there?"

"Oh, um..." Lyra had been watching how the humans interacted with interest. It caught her off guard to be addressed directly.

"She's pretty dead-set on joining a rock band," Audrey explained. "Even though she's never played guitar before."

"If nothing else, she definitely looks the part..." Nathan said.

Lyra grinned. "Thanks!"

"And you don't have it listed online, do you?" Audrey said.

"Relax. I never even got that far," Nathan said. "eBay's pretty confusing when it gets to selling big stuff like that. I was trying to figure it out, but I didn't get very far. And from the looks of things, I'd be lucky to even get two hundred for the guitar."

Lyra wished she knew more about what the humans were talking about. It was still fascinating just to observe them.

She noticed that he had one of those big black boxes in his living room, too. Lyra thought she'd heard Audrey's father refer to theirs as a "TV," whatever that stood for. The one in this house had a list of words – "Resume, Options, Quit."

Audrey had noticed it too. "Looks like you've been hard at work."

"Well, I was. Earlier," Nathan said. "I've been selling a ton of stuff. I managed to list a few old games, some books. I've got a lot I'm getting rid of besides the guitar." He turned to Lyra. "So, you said you were just a beginner?"

"Oh, um... I've never really tried guitar before. I wanted to learn something new. I play the lyre. I heard that's not very popular around here, though."

"A lyre?" Nathan said. "I guess if you found someone who played ocarina, you could start a band."

"Really?" Lyra said, cocking her head. If she found out what that was, that could make things easier.

"She doesn't really get sarcasm," Audrey said.

Nathan laughed and said, "Anyways, I've got some beginner's guides, too. You can borrow those to help you get started. I'll get all of that for you. It's just upstairs."

"Thank you so much," Lyra said.

"No problem."

Lyra waited with Audrey in the living room, listening to the footsteps from upstairs.

"I wonder if he's even chosen a college yet," Audrey said, settling down on the couch. She glanced over at the television again – those words were still there, not moving. "He's never really had much motivation, though. I'm not even sure what he plans to study."

"He's still in school, too?" Lyra said.

"Of course," Audrey replied. "He'd better start looking into colleges soon. We've only got a couple years of high school left."

It had been over four years since Lyra was last in a classroom. Eventually she'd have to go back, probably. Human schools were probably completely different than in Canterlot. She'd never really learned the full history and culture of her own race, and that was making it hard to fit in. What she'd studied all her life only went up to a certain point.

At least her musical talents were still just as useful here as it was in Equestria. And for now, all she had to worry about was finding some steady income. Then she could worry about other things, like school, or going back to find wherever she'd been born...

A few moments later, Nathan returned carrying a large black case. He unzipped it – it seemed to be made of nothing more than stiff fabric, nothing at all like the hard instrument case she used for her lyre.

"Man, I don't think I've even taken this thing out in years," he said.

"Um... can I..." Lyra was watching him intently.

He nodded. "Go ahead."

Lyra took the guitar, and Nathan showed her how to put the strap over her head and shoulders. She moved her hands into a position that was comfortable – right hand on the strings, left holding the neck.

"It's a Les Paul, but don't get too excited. It's just an Epiphone. This is one of the cheapest ones they make," Nathan said.

"Um... okay," Lyra said. Another inanimate object that the humans had given a name like their own. Interesting.

This wasn't quite like the guitars Lyra had seen in drawings, not even like the ones she'd seen ponies play a few times. Those were usually made of wood. She ran a hand over the smooth black face, and plucked a few of the strings with her fingertips. They felt too loose. She found the knobs at the top of the neck and tightened them, but it still sounded too quiet.

"Uh, I don't think it sounds right..." she said.



"You need to plug it in," Nathan said. He picked up a long cord and handed her one end. He pointed to a metal tip. "This goes in the end. I'll go get the amp for you."

He headed back up the stairs. Lyra searched over the body of the guitar and found where the end of the cord clicked into place, and moved across the strings. It still didn't sound right. Way too soft. She wasn't quite sure why she'd assumed that attaching a cord would change anything, but Nathan had sounded like he knew what he was talking about. The guitar was missing the hollow chamber inside, she realized. Without it, the sound just wouldn't project. It was even quieter than her lyre.

He returned with a small black box. Taking the other end of the cord, he fit it inside. "You'll probably want to adjust these."

She watched him twist some knobs on the box. They were small, just large enough to take them in between the forefinger and thumb. The varieties of uses for fingers was really amazing.

"What do those do?"

"That's the amp. It's how you adjust your sound." He pointed at each one in sequence as he turned them. "You'll want this one about 5, usually keep the treble up a bit higher, add some reverb..."

She was completely lost.

"Now try," he said.

Her fingers strummed the strings, and this time she jumped at how loud it was.

"It's... *supposed* to do that?" she said.

"I could turn it down a bit for you," Nathan said. He adjusted something again on the amp.

She tried a bit more, and found that she actually liked the sound. It was unusual – nothing like what she'd expected from a stringed instrument. Or any other kind of instrument, for that matter. But somehow Lyra still found it musical. After listening to some more, she realized this was a sound she had heard in a lot of human music over the past couple days.

The physical act of playing it, though... That felt great. One hand was using the strings, which wasn't entirely unlike her lyre. But her other hand had to move along the neck, adding a whole new dimension to how this instrument was played. Both hands, each of her fingers, they all had to work independently in order to play this. But the challenge made it exciting. It felt like she was a filly again, learning to play her first songs in music class.

"I've also got a tuner, it's somewhere in here..." He dug around in the case. "I'll show you how to use it."

Lyra was busy with the knobs at the top of the neck. "I think I've got it." She played one string at a time, testing the sound.

"Just by ear?"

"That's how I've always done it." She tried a few more notes, one at a time, and nodded.

Nathan scratched his head. "Try it out for a bit," he said. "I mean, I never quite got the hang of it, but yeah."

Lyra smiled. She slid her left hand along the neck, trying a few different positions and hearing what they sounded like. "I think I like this," she said. "Just give me a little time. I think I can figure it out."

She tried a little bit more, her fingers quickly learning their way around the strings.

"Do you mind if we step out for a while?" Audrey said, gesturing towards the door. "I wanted to talk to Nathan about something."

"That's fine," Lyra said, staring at her left hand as it moved along the neck of the instrument.

"Just keep working at it," Nathan told her. "Try to get used to it."

She nodded, but she was lost in concentration. Audrey led Nathan out into the hallway, still listening to the sounds of Lyra's playing. One flat note at a time, repeated over and over until it sounded right.

"So what do you think of her?" she said.

He stared at her. "What do you mean? I guess she's kind of cute, but –"

Audrey shot him a look. "That's not what I meant. She seems a little... off, right? I wanted your opinion on that."

"Well, yeah, I guess she's not really what you'd call 'normal.' You said you met her a few days ago. What's her story?"

"What she's told me is that she just found out that she's adopted and she's trying to find her real parents. And she was sent away from home with nothing but an old photograph of them that she was found with as a child."

"That's... a little dramatic," Nathan said. "How did you get into this?"

"She was in the park down by the statehouse a few days ago, playing her lyre. The hair kind of got my attention."

He nodded. "Yeah, I can see that."

"But... once I actually started talking to her, it turned out she can be a little strange."

"I could've told you that."

"You have *no* idea."

From the other room they could hear a few off-key notes and screeching feedback from the amp. They both winced simultaneously.

"Sounds like she's getting the hang of it," Nathan said. "Anyways, you were saying?"

"That's part of it," Audrey said. "You saw how she didn't understand anything about how an electric guitar worked. She gets that way with a lot of electronics. It's like she's never seen them before."

"Maybe she's Amish," Nathan suggested.

"With hair like that? I don't think so."

"Space Amish?"

"Get serious, here." Audrey's eyes narrowed.

Nathan waved a hand. "Okay. Start at the beginning."

"Well, we weren't exactly off to a great start. I started talking to her. She asked me where she could go to eat, so I took her to McDonald's. I thought that wouldn't be a problem, but I'm pretty sure she'd never been to one before. She didn't even know what the food was. And it turned out she was a vegetarian."

"Oh," Nathan said. Then the realization hit him. "*Oh*. Yeah, that's... That's not good."

"The look on her face... It was like she'd committed a murder. She probably felt like she *had*..." Audrey said, shaking her head. "But while we were there, I was just kind of making friendly conversation, and she said some other things that bothered me."

"Such as?"

"Well, apparently she's been living on her own since she was twelve. Her and some other girl who she called her roommate," Audrey said. "They might have been runaways. But Lyra doesn't even realize that it was anything out of the ordinary to live on her own at that age."

"You're serious? Where exactly do two preteen girls go to live and not get found by child services – or worse?" Nathan said.

"She won't tell me. Every time I try to find out where she came from, she just tells me the same thing – that it 'doesn't matter.' I don't even know her last name." Audrey paused. "Well, she doesn't know her last name. Or she just won't tell me."

"And you're letting her stay at your house, even though you know nothing about her."

"After everything she was saying, I started to get worried about her. She really has no idea what she's doing," Audrey said. "I was able to convince my parents that she's harmless. And she's pretty much determined to make her own money... hence this whole thing with joining a band."

The sounds were gradually becoming closer to something musical. Nathan paused for a moment to listen. "So before this, she said she just played a harp."

"When she came up with the idea to try guitar, I figured she'd be able to do more with that. I don't think she'll be able to actually try out for a band for a while, though."

"A harp's pretty interesting, though. Where did she learn to play that?"

"Believe me, I'd like to know. I'm hoping that she'll open up if I give her some more time," Audrey said.

Nathan leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "So what has she told you?"

"Nothing I can really use. She claims her mother – adopted mother, I guess – was a meteorologist. And she mentioned a few of her friends." Audrey paused, and they could hear a few notes being played. Lyra was trying to play a scale, and coming fairly close. "Let's see... Someone named Twilight, and then there was Diane. But at first she called her Pinkie. But she said that Twilight wasn't a nickname."

"If she was making those up, she'd have gone with something more sensible."

"I do think she's telling the truth, when she says anything at all. But she's still avoiding telling me anything specific about where she's coming from or why she left. At first I wondered if there was something going on, like... abuse." Audrey hesitated. "But she seems too cheerful. Actually, she seems a little sad to have left home."

"Then what do you think is wrong with her?"

"Maybe nothing. Well, not in the 'disorder' sense. She's naïve, but her lack of understanding seems mostly culturally-based. I get the feeling that she can actually be pretty smart. The only problem is *what* culture she's coming from, and how she ended up in the middle of Iowa when she hardly understands how American society works. And you saw how she reacted just now with the guitar, how she didn't even expect it to sound like that."

"So what are you going to do with her?" Nathan asked. "I mean, how long can she stay at your house? It sounds like it'll already be impossible for her to find out who her parents are supposed to be."

"I realize that..." Audrey said. "I'm starting to think that all she really needs is a hand up. She's definitely willing to work for what she needs; she just needs a place to stay for a while. So I'm doing that much for her."

"All I can say is that you're in way over your head, Audrey."

"Not as much as Lyra is."

Then they heard something – a simple, familiar riff. One that they'd both heard not that long ago. Nathan and Audrey looked at each other, then headed back to the room where Lyra was practicing.

"I think I've got it now," she said.

"That's Aerosmith..." Nathan stared at her in disbelief as she played the riff a few more times.

Lyra let the guitar hang from its strap. "I heard this as we were coming in. I thought I'd try it out."

"You're *sure* you've never played before?" Audrey said.

"I've always been a fast learner. Music's my special talent." Lyra gave a shrug.

"That's one way of putting it..."

Lyra stared down at the guitar again, still trying to familiarize herself with the new instrument. She'd never even dreamed that something like this could be possible. The sounds were unlike anything she'd ever heard.

"I'm not the best musician myself," Nathan said, scratching his chin. "And even if you're not exactly Joe Perry –"

"Of course not. I'm a girl," Lyra said.

"– I still think you could probably audition for a local band if you really wanted to," Nathan finished. "You're already about as good as I was ever able to manage. Somehow."

"How did you pick that up so fast?" Audrey said.

"I told you. Music's my special talent. I've always been a fast learner." Lyra turned to Nathan. "I can really have this?"

"Not exactly."

Lyra frowned. "But –"

"I'd still like to make something off of it," Nathan said. "I'm letting you borrow it for a while."

"I could pay for it. Just give me some time to make money." She'd liked this instrument. It felt right. She might start playing it full time.

He nodded. "Sure. It's not worth that much, but that's fine."

"I'll buy it from you as soon as I can afford it. I promise," Lyra said. She carefully set the guitar back in its case and zipped it back up. There was a strap to carry it on her back.

"I'll take this, Lyra," Audrey said, taking the amp by the handle on top.

"I'll get those beginner's guides, but I'm starting to wonder if you'll even need them," Nathan said. "You sound great. You've really got a knack for it."

"You really mean that?" Lyra could hardly believe her own ears. To hear that from a human – and about their own kind of music, too! It was such an honor. "As soon as we get back to your house, I want to start practicing right away!"

"You're serious about going through with this," Audrey said.

"Of course!" Lyra said. "My parents always told me I should focus on my music career. Ever since I first picked up a lyre they said I could go far with it."

"They *probably* didn't mean joining some guy's garage band, though."

Lyra smiled. "Probably not."

She wasn't about to tell either of them, but her parents hadn't even wanted her to become human in the first place, much less start playing human music. She wished that they could see her now and know that she was doing alright. Things were starting to look better already.

After a little over a week in the human world, Lyra was beginning to understand what Audrey had meant by it being "boring."

Well, no. That wouldn't be the right word. Humans were still managing to surprise her every day. A better term might be "peaceful."

Truth be told, the past year or so in Ponyville had been unusually eventful. Nightmare Moon had only been the beginning, but then there had been the parasprites, the Ursa Major, the dragon. Countless other things in the Everfree Forest that she only heard about but hadn't actually seen. And that time when Twilight had cast that spell on her old doll, and Bon-Bon and Lyra had ended up giving each other some ugly bruises.

Things like that never happened in Des Moines. Humans were completely in control of their world, it seemed. Lyra couldn't forget what Princess Celestia had said about the war... But she hadn't seen any humans carrying around weapons. It was hard to imagine Audrey, Nathan, or anybody else she'd met doing something like that.

Lyra had settled into a routine, spending most of her time working on her guitar playing. She was picking it up fast. Music had always come naturally to her, so it wasn't a surprise. The guitar itself was easy enough, but that amp confused her. It was necessary to get any sound, but she hardly understood how or why.

Nathan's books had helped, too. It turned out that guitar was based more on chords than individual notes, so it wasn't quite like her lyre. She tried playing some old songs she had memorized from her Gala performance, but on the guitar they didn't sound right.

This was an instrument made for human music. She had asked Audrey for some music recordings that she could try to listen to and learn by ear.

"You mean, like rock music?" Audrey had said.

Lyra nodded. "Like what it said on the flyer. I don't know who those musicians are, though."

"I think my dad might have some stuff like that. Ask him."

It was a Saturday – Audrey's parents both had work off today, so Lyra found Audrey's dad in front of the television in their living room. They spent a lot of time there, but staring at the moving images for too long would make Lyra's eyes sore.



He noticed her before she could say anything. "Hello, Lyra. Do you need something?"

She nodded. "You have records of guitar music, right? Rock, specifically. I'm trying to learn it."

"You're looking for guitar music? I thought Audrey had said you played a lyre."

"Well, I used to, but I want to learn something new." She'd been doing a lot of that lately, and music was probably the least confusing of it all. "If I have something to listen to, I can usually play it by ear."

"Let's see. I've got a lot of music from the seventies, if that's okay," he said. Humans tended to describe a lot of things with numbers. He led her over to a shelf filled with thin cases. "CCR, Deep Purple..."

"I think that one was on the poster I saw. These songs have guitar players, right?" Lyra asked.

"It wouldn't be rock without it." He pulled a few of the square cases from the shelf.

"Those are what you keep music on?" Lyra asked, taking one and turning it over in her hands. It was so small. "I'm used to these other things back home. We call them records."

That made him laugh for some reason. "Usually it's the kids your age who don't know how records work. Do you need me to show you how to play it?"

She nodded.

He opened up a case, moving his fingers quickly. He pressed down on the center. "Hold it like this. Try not to get fingerprints on this side." He held the disc with one finger through the hole in the center, the others on the edge.

Lyra took it from him, carefully holding it the way that he had. The light caught the silver disc and created rainbow patterns on the blank side. "It looks amazing."

"I think there's a stereo in your room, Lyra," he said. "I'll show you how to play it."

She hadn't noticed the "stereo" before because it looked like just another piece of furniture. The disc was hidden inside a tray that came out, and it would play music despite not having horn for the sound to come out of. But the sound was less scratchy,

and Audrey's dad showed her how to skip exactly to the beginning of each song or play them on repeat.

She'd listened to a song called "Lodi" a few times. It was nice and slow, and she could definitely relate to the lyrics. Once she'd picked out the lead guitar part, she'd practiced it all that afternoon until her fingers moved on their own and she could practically play it in her sleep.

Back when she'd been a unicorn, playing her lyre for too long could give her a headache. Magic required such concentrated mental focus, but playing either instrument with her hands was so much more relaxing. Once she got the song down, she could lose herself for hours. And, in fact, she had – she had to remember to cut off her practice time once Audrey and her family were going to bed.

Some ponies did play guitar, but Lyra had no idea how. Her fingers gave her precision control over each string. She'd seen ponies play guitars with their hooves, but it didn't even come close to what she could do with fingers. Humans probably made better piano players, too. Any instrument, for that matter.

It had been a little over a week since she'd started. It was hard to imagine she'd been human for that long already. Lyra was in her room as usual, working on another new song.

"Sounds good." Lyra looked up from her guitar to see Audrey standing in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Thanks. I've been working on a new one," Lyra said.

"How many songs have you learned?"

"I think maybe... three?" She tapped her chin. "No, four."

"It's only been a week."

"I know." Lyra went back to playing, doing the main riff from a song called "Smoke on the Water."

Audrey sat down next to her and watched. "It's weird. You're good at this – really good. You're like a prodigy."

"My parents used to tell me that." Lyra smiled.

Audrey just nodded and stared at the ground. She'd stopped asking Lyra so many questions lately, probably because Lyra had no intention of answering. Lyra set down her guitar on the bed at her side. Audrey had a point, she had learned how to play really fast.

Lyra stood up suddenly, and went to her bag. Her journal was right on top, right beside her lyre which had sat in there unused for a while now. But all she needed was the flyer tucked in the front cover.

*MUSICIANS NEEDED.* Lyra couldn't help but wonder if they were still looking for somebody to play guitar. And now she knew a little bit about Aerosmith and Deep Purple – those were famous human bands, and she could play a few of the songs off their albums.

She sat back down next to Audrey, reading over the flyer a few more times. "You know, I think I could probably audition for this now."

"You're still set on that one, aren't you?" Audrey said.

Lyra nodded. "How do we contact them? You said you knew how."

Audrey leaned back on the bed, supporting herself with her arms. "It's been a while since you picked that one up. They could've gotten another interested guitarist."

"I still want to try."

"You sound like you're ready, at least. Somehow." Audrey shrugged. "We could try to call them."

"Yeah, let's do that." Lyra wasn't sure what she meant by "call," but she was still getting used to human slang.

Her parents had always wanted her to pursue her music career. In a way, that's what she was doing now. Maybe she wasn't a pony anymore, and maybe this human music wasn't what most ponies listened to, but Lyra knew they'd still be proud of her if they could see her now.

"Here you go," Audrey said, holding something out to her.

It was the thing that she'd seen Audrey use so often before, which by now she was pretty sure wasn't actually called Nathan. Lyra took it hesitantly, and examined it. "What is it?"

Audrey scratched her head. "Right. I probably should have asked if you knew how to use a phone..."

"Well, no," Lyra said. "But I'd like to learn! Teach me."

"Uh... How exactly do I start..." Audrey thought for a moment. "It's weird. You catch on to music so fast, but I still have to explain things like *this*..."

"Please? Just do your best."

"You'll put in that number off of the flyer. Then just talk to whoever picks up. Tell them you saw their ad and you want to join the band." She paused, then added, "If they ask you how long you've been playing, lie to them."

"Alright..." Lyra stared at the phone in her hand. She tried to think of how Audrey had used it. "So... these numbers?" She ran a finger over them lightly.

"I'll read it off for you." She started reading off the number, but Lyra cut her off.

"Slower."

Audrey sighed and went back to the numbers, listing them off one at a time. Lyra touched each one in sequence with her finger. They gave in just a little, and it let out a note each time.

"Now what?" Lyra said after the last one.

"Just talk."

Lyra held the phone up to her face. She could hear something buzzing. "Is... is somebody there?" She felt ridiculous.

The buzzing continued, then stopped suddenly. "Hello?" The voice was actually coming from inside the phone. Lyra almost dropped it in her surprise, but caught it just in time.

"Oh, uh... who are you?" she asked.

"Do you have a wrong number?" the voice said.

"Um..." Lyra looked to Audrey for answers.

"Tell him you're interested in the band," Audrey said.

"Oh! Right." Lyra wasn't sure exactly where to look. It was strange talking to somebody when she couldn't even see them. "I saw this poster, and I'm a guitar player, so I was thinking..."

"This is about the band? Yeah. Great," the voice said. "My name's Randall. I'm the lead singer and temporary manager, until we get that spot filled. When can you come over? It'd be good to get an audition in with you."

"Oh, uh..." Lyra paused. "I think I can come over whenever." She turned to Audrey, who gave a confused look.

"Get his address," she said.

"Huh? Oh, right. Where do you live?" Lyra said.

Audrey handed her a pen. Lyra juggled it and the phone, shifting it to her other hand so that she could write.

"What do I do with this?" she asked.

"Write it down." Audrey put a finger on the flyer, and Lyra nodded. She copied down what the voice on the phone told her. It sounded like an address. A lot of numbers were mixed in there, too. Humans seemed to really like numbers.

"Did you get all that?" the voice said.

Lyra finished writing and nodded. Then, remembering the human on the other side probably couldn't see her, either, she added, "I've got it."

"My schedule's pretty open this weekend. Think you could make it tomorrow afternoon sometime? Just wanna hear how you sound, that's all."

"Tomorrow..." Lyra glanced over at Audrey. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"I'll see you then. Bring your own music. Looking forward to hearing you."

The sound suddenly cut off from the other end. Lyra held the phone away and stared at it, trying to figure out what had gone wrong.

"Press the red button," Audrey told her. Lyra tried one. "The other one, on the side." That seemed to work. A flashing time was displayed on the phone now.

"So what happens now?" Lyra asked. She handed the phone back to Audrey.

"You said you'd audition for him tomorrow, right?" Audrey said. "My parents will both be at work again, and I don't have a car..." She thought for a moment, then started pressing numbers on the phone again. Her fingers moved quickly. Lyra watched how she used it – it was much more natural and easy for Audrey.

"Hey, Nathan? Are you busy tomorrow?"

• • •

The doorbell rang the next afternoon.

"That's probably him. Go answer it, I'll print this out." Audrey had barely looked up. She was using something she'd called "Google Maps" – though it looked more like another television instead of a map. And she was sitting *way* too close to it.

Lyra headed downstairs and opened the front door.

"Oh hey, Lyra," Nathan stood there, a ring of keys hanging from one hand. "Is Audrey here?"

"Hi! Audrey's upstairs. I'm not sure what she was doing," Lyra said.

They heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and a moment later Audrey was there carrying a piece of paper. She handed it to Nathan.

"I just got the directions printed. Thanks for offering to drive her."

"Not like I was *busy* or anything today." He stared down at what she'd given him. From the glimpse Lyra was able to get, it looked like a map – a very complicated one. "I think I know where this is..."

"We don't really know much about this guy, but he seemed okay on the phone," Audrey said. "Just be careful."

"Will do." Nathan nodded and looked up from the map. "Ready to head out, Lyra?"

"Yeah, I'll just get my guitar."

"Technically, it's still mine."

"Right..." Lyra said. She headed back up to her room. She packed up the guitar into its case, slung it over her shoulder, and lifted up the heavy amplifier, her fingers straining with the weight.

Once she was downstairs, she almost dropped it in front of the two humans. "Now I'm ready," she said, panting.

"I can get it the rest of the way. My car's in the driveway." Nathan pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, towards the front door.

"Your...?"

Lyra followed him out to the front yard, where one of those carriages was waiting. It wasn't the same one that was usually there – this one was grey, and it was one of the smaller ones.

"We're taking that?"

Nathan slammed down a hatch on the backside. "Yeah. Don't worry – I haven't had my license that long, but I'm a very safe driver. You've got nothing to worry about."

He circled around to one of the front doors and got inside. Lyra stood completely still for a moment, but he gave her a look as if telling her to get in.

"Go ahead and put the guitar on the back seat," he told her.

She nodded, and found the door handle. Her fingers slipped up inside it and it pulled outwards. The back seat was covered in all sorts of things – papers, a metal can, some shopping bags. She put the guitar on top of the mess, closed the door, and went around to the other side to get in the front seat next to him, on the right side.

There were all kinds of buttons like the ones on the phone or the stereo, a lever in between the seats, and some kind of wheel in front of Nathan. *Like a ship*, Lyra realized – he'd probably use that to steer. The seats were soft, but there was almost no leg room.

"Where'd I put that..." he said. He looked over and found the map. "Ah. There it is."

Lyra was still taking inventory of the vehicle. A cup sat near Nathan's seat – there were two indentations perfectly sized to it, one next to it that had a few coins in it.

He turned a key and the entire vehicle shook. There was some kind of a loud rumble from behind them. Lyra could feel her heart pounding in her chest. It had been loud, and when they started rolling backwards out into the street she could barely keep her eyes open.

"What's wrong? Carsick?"

She managed to open her eyes just a little, then squeezed them shut again. "No, I'm... fine. I'll be fine." She might have been talking to herself.

"Lyra, have you ever been in a car before?"

"One of these?" Her legs tensed up. She stared at them. Better those than the windows.

A memory suddenly played out in Lyra's mind – Rainbow Dash pulling her out of the runaway apple cart just seconds before it careened over the side of a cliff. In this vehicle they were completely enclosed and had even strapped themselves in. Not to mention she hadn't seen a pegasus in over a week.

That didn't make her feel any better. "Well... once."

"Just once?" He glanced over at her for just a moment, then looked ahead again.

"It wasn't exactly like this. But... similar. We didn't have these where I was from."

He nodded slowly, even though he was obviously confused. "Don't worry. We're not going that far." He kept his eyes focused ahead, without turning when he spoke to her. "Where'd you come from that you've never been in a car before?"

Lyra sighed. "Is it normal to ask this many questions when you've just met somebody?"

"Right... You've probably been hearing a lot from Audrey. It's not just you. She likes to analyze people," Nathan said. "The whole reason she took you in is probably because you're such a mystery. Though it does make sense that she'd want to figure out more about you."

"I'm just a normal human." Lyra noticed her own reflection in a mirror attached to the side of the car.

"You really don't want to talk about it, huh? I won't pressure you."



"There's nothing wrong with me."

"Maybe not, but I'd still say you're a long way from normal."

Nathan seemed completely calm. Lyra watched his hands, and that distracted her from what was going on. They gripped the wheel as they drove through the city, and he'd move it to either side when the carriage changed direction. As she'd assumed, it was the steering mechanism. After some time Lyra was getting used to the motion, but she still felt curious about how this thing moved at all.

They were going much faster than a carriage would. The speed wasn't as noticeable from the inside as it was when you watched one from the sidewalk. They slowed down again as they entered another neighborhood.

The drive had only been a few minutes, even if it had seemed much longer than that. And they must have been *miles* away from Audrey's house. They'd pulled up in front of a brick building, and Nathan was peering out the windows at the number on the mailbox.

"This is it... You're sure you want to go in there?"

"That's where we're supposed to go, isn't it? You had the map."

"Well, yeah, but..." He kept glancing around.

"I'm not nervous at all. I've been practicing a ton," Lyra said. "I'm sure he'll let me join."

Nathan just stared at her. "That's not what I'm concerned about."

Lyra searched around for the release to the strap across her chest, and clicked it down. She opened the door and stepped out, her legs still shaking. She braced herself with one arm against the car until it stopped. "What are you waiting for? Come on!"

"Lyra, don't you think –" Nathan started to call out to her, but she had already grabbed her guitar and was headed for the front door. He let out a sigh and left the car, double-checking to be sure he had locked it.

She searched around the edge of the door. "They don't have one of those..." There was no doorbell, so she made a fist and knocked. It hurt her knuckles, they weren't as sturdy as a hoof.

"I'm just saying, if this doesn't turn out well, just let me know. We can head right back," Nathan said. He made a gesture behind him, towards the car.

The door opened and another human stood there, taller and bulkier than Nathan. He lifted a hand to push his stringy dark hair out of his eyes. It was about as long as Lyra's own.

"Um... I'm here about the band?" Lyra said.

He nodded. "Right, right... You're the girl who wanted to try out for guitar. I was expecting you. Come on in. Let's talk."

Lyra quickly followed him inside, but Nathan touched her on the arm. "You're sure about this?"

"Come on. He's a human just like we are."

"I didn't doubt that."

"You guys coming?" The man looked back at them.

"Yeah!" Lyra put a hand to the guitar case on her back and hurried in to the living room.

They were invited to sit down on a couch, and the other man took a lumpy armchair across from them. He nodded towards Lyra. "You were the one on the phone?" He looked her over. "You seem a little young."

"Oh, it's fine. I'm sixteen."

"Right... You must be the one I talked to yesterday," he said. "You can just call me Randall."

His voice sounded kind of like the one she'd heard on the phone, but it was weird to think that they'd already talked if she was just meeting him for the first time now. She noticed the odd artwork on his T-shirt – unusually detailed, even for human clothing. It had what must be a human zombie on it, and the words "Iron Maiden" in red.

"Are you the one in charge?" Lyra said. This wasn't like the auditions she was used to coming to, but then again, those had all been with ponies.

"Gotta say I'm glad that we've got somebody willing to be our guitarist. A band can't really hold itself together without one, you know?"

"Uh... yeah."

"So you're...?"

"Lyra."

"Lyra...?" His voice trailed off expectantly.

She stared at him. "That's what I said."

"You got a last name, Lyra?"

"Nope. Just Lyra."

His expression was blank for a moment, then he laughed. "Well, okay then. So, just-Lyra, got any performance experience?"

"Yeah. A ton." She beamed with pride. "I was chosen to play at the royal Gala back home, as a matter of fact."

"A... royal Gala." He leaned back on the sofa. "What, are you British?"

Lyra frowned. "I don't *think* so..."

"Well, anyways, let's hear what you've got. All that really matters is if you can play. Am I right?"

"Yeah..."

Nathan stood up. "I'll go get the amp out of the trunk. You go ahead, Lyra." He hurried out.

Randall lifted a finger. "So that was...?"

"My friend Nathan. He's lending me the guitar."

She noticed on his left arm he had a twisting black pattern. It looked like a dragon – like the ones she'd seen in the dragon migration, or that time when Spike had grown to his

full size. That was the only time she'd ever seen a full-size dragon up close. "How'd you get that?"

"Oh, this?" He lifted up his arm and glanced down at it. "Heh. I woke up one morning with a splitting headache and this happened. Who knows what else went on that night."

"Fascinating..." Not only did this human have a cutie mark, he didn't even remember how he earned it.

He opened a door and led her into another room. "We usually play in here. I'll let you get set up." He touched something on the wall and an entire wall rumbled and started pulling itself up.

Outside, Nathan was carrying the amp up to the house, and walked inside the room where they were. He glanced around. "Wow. A literal garage band."

"We use what we've got," Randall said.

It was like a tool shed attached to the house, with a solid stone floor stained with something black. Lyra got to work setting up the amplifier. It was still difficult to remember how to set this thing up – she'd kept it ready to be used in her room ever since the first time she'd used it so that she wouldn't have to worry about this part.

"Need some help?" Randall said, raising an eyebrow. He took one of the cords and plugged it into the wall.

"No, I... I think I've got it." Lyra was crouched down, trying to figure out all the cords. She found the end that plugged into the guitar and clicked it into place, then stood up. "I'm ready."

"Let's hear it." He stood back with his arms folded.

Lyra started into "Smoke on the Water." It was her newest song, but one of her favorites. She put all her concentration into her fingers and the sound of the guitar. She practically forgot about the two humans standing there watching her, or the cold and dirty room they were standing in. When you really got down to it, this wasn't too different than trying out for a concert in Canterlot. If she was good enough at the music, she had nothing to worry about.

After a few minutes, Randall raised one hand. "That's fine. That's enough."

Lyra stopped and lifted her head up. She brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Was it good?"

"Yeah. Great, in fact," Randall said. "I mean, I was just about to let you in no matter what you sounded like. We've been a bit desperate. But *that...* how long've you been playing?"

"Just about my whole life." It wasn't technically a lie. He just hadn't asked *what* she'd been playing. Or how. Lyra flexed her fingers. "Who did you mean by 'we?'"

"I'll introduce you to the other band members later. Practice'll be next Monday afternoon."

"So... I'm in?" Lyra started to grin.

"Welcome to Crimson Thunder."

She couldn't believe it. A human band. She was going to be playing music with other humans!

She ran up to shake Randall's hand vigorously. "Thank you so much!"

He stared at her in mild surprise, his eyes wide. "I guess I'll see you then."

"Right... Monday afternoon." She nodded, still grinning.

If she hadn't already been here for so long already, Lyra would have sworn she was just having an incredibly vivid dream. What would Bon-Bon think of her *now*?

It felt so long since the Grand Galloping Gala, but it hadn't even been a month yet. So much had happened since then. Still, going to Randall's house for her first band practice felt like returning to a familiar routine.

As Nathan pulled his car up in front of the house, Lyra saw the garage door open and Randall standing there with another musician, who was tuning his own guitar. There was an unoccupied drum set behind them. He noticed her and waved. She grinned, and ran up to meet him. Nathan stayed behind to get the amp out of the storage compartment in the back.

"Hey, I was hoping you'd show up." Randall turned to the other human standing next to him. "Mike, this is Lyra. She's our new lead guitarist."

"It's nice to meet you." She held out her hand, expecting a handshake.

The human he'd referred to as Mike looked her up and down, not saying anything for a while. "She seems a little young."

"Yeah, she's..." Randall thought for a moment. "My mind just went blank. How old are you again?"

Lyra slowly lowered her hand when Mike didn't accept it. "Sixteen."

"Right, right..." He nodded. "I figure we just won't mention her age at any gigs and it shouldn't be a problem. And as long as she doesn't take drinks from anyone, we'll probably get away with it."

Mike just shrugged. "Alright."

"Me and Mike started this band. Then we met Casey from one of the posters we put up – same way you found us, right? Mike's our bassist, Casey's on drums. We couldn't really hope to get an actual gig until we got our lead guitarist, though."

"Where is he, anyways? We were supposed to start by now. You'd think a drummer would have better timing." Mike laughed at his own joke.

"That's just it, though. He *is* the drummer." Randall turned back to Lyra. "Don't mind him," he said. "Anyways, we've been working on a few songs. Covers, mostly. Stuff from the eighties, *maybe* early nineties. Old favorites, maybe you've heard them before." Lyra

could almost guarantee she hadn't. "You'll have to put in some extra work to catch up, but you sounded good last time."

"I'm a very fast learner," Lyra said.

"Good to hear it."

She got another glance at Randall's cutie mark, still wondering why the other humans she'd met didn't have theirs. And shouldn't *she* have one herself, if she'd earned it as a filly? The placement made some sense – the forearm instead of the back hip, which you couldn't usually see on humans because of clothing. She wondered what Randall's talent was that got him a dragon mark like that.

Nathan came up behind her, the amp hanging from one hand. He set it down for her. "Hey, uh, Randall..." He gave a small nod, his eyes darting towards Mike, then towards the door. "Mind if I wait inside? How long is practice going to take?"

"Should be a couple hours. You can watch some TV if you want to. *Don't* touch the fridge." He pointed at Nathan as he said that for emphasis.

Nathan shrugged. "Fine with me. I'll see you later." He headed inside, glancing back at her one last time before he closed the door.

He'd told Lyra earlier that he didn't want to drop her off there and abandon her. Why he was so nervous, she couldn't understand. But it would be convenient, and she appreciated it.

Lyra slid the guitar case off her back and set up. There was a tangle of wires on the ground, and she stepped over them as she plugged her own guitar in. She played a few notes to try it out.

"So we've got our guitarist... I *guess*," Mike said. "When do we get a manager? We don't have a band until we've got a gig."

"I'm working on that. For now I've got a few contacts waiting and we might be able to perform soon," Randall said.

Satisfied with her guitar's sound, Lyra stood there wondering when they'd start. And what songs they'd do. That was a problem.

"Hey, Randall?" she said. "Do you have any, you know, sheet music? I'm not sure what you guys play..."

"You mean tabs? Oh, sure. Pretty sure I've got some in there somewhere. Let me go look for 'em." He headed into the house.

While she waited in the garage, Mike didn't say anything to her. He pretended to take an interest in his bass, even though it was obviously ready and in tune. It was quiet except for the low notes coming from his own amplifier. She wasn't sure whether to offer friendly conversation or not.

Randall returned a few minutes later. "Here it is. We're working on a few things right now. You might have to practice on your own time to catch up."

She looked over it. Guitar tabs – that's what they called these – weren't quite like regular sheet music, but a lot of the notation was exactly the same as it was in Equestria. That couldn't possibly be a coincidence, any more than the countries and language being the same as what she'd read about in Equestrian history. But for now, it was just convenient.

Outside, a dirty car that was probably blue once pulled up, making all kinds of weird rumbling noises. It made Nathan's car look fancy by comparison, even though he tended to joke about what a mess it was. Another human got out from the front seat, a blond male with some scraggly facial hair. He jogged up to the garage to join them.

"Casey! Finally made it, did you?" Randall said.

The newcomer stared at Lyra. "Who's she? Your kid sister? Crazy hair, by the way." He grinned when he said it, though Lyra wasn't sure how to take it.

"Our new guitarist," Randall said.

"You serious? No, who is she really?"

"I'm Lyra. I can't wait to perform with you guys!" She stuck out her hand, and Casey reluctantly took it.

"Look, I know we were getting desperate, but she's a *kid*," he said.

"I do have professional experience," Lyra offered.



"So you've told me," Randall said. "You'll understand once you hear her, Casey. Now let's get started already. I've been dying to get back to practice ever since I got off work."

"Sure. Whatever. Let's just get going." Casey took the seat behind the drum set.

Other than Randall, this band almost seemed as standoffish as the other musicians at the Gala had been. Lyra was getting a bad case of *déjà vu*. That is, until they started into the first song. She'd just seen the guitar tabs, but she could understand how it sounded. The riffs were simple enough, with the same few chords repeated through the whole song.

Once they finished, all the humans were silent. The final note seemed to reverberate in the garage for a long time. Maybe that was just the echo.

"That was your first time with that one?" Mike said slowly.

Lyra nodded. "Yeah, I think I got lost somewhere around the second verse. Can we try it again?"

"Where did you *find* this one?" Casey said.

Randall gave a glance to the other two musicians, as if to say "I told you so." Then he counted them off to start again.

• • •

Practice lasted for a few hours. It hardly felt like any time at all. Rock music was pretty short, catchy, and high-energy. It was nothing like the droning classical pieces that Lyra had always performed in Canterlot – complex, but often forgettable.

She was back in Nathan's car, heading back. It was still hard to get used to this fast motion in a vehicle that was propelling itself somehow. Lyra was doing better than her first time, though. Like all human things, it just took some getting used to. She reminded herself that she'd never seen one of these go spiraling out of control like the apple cart had, but it was all too easy to imagine.

"I texted Audrey back there, asked if we could do something out for dinner," Nathan said. "To celebrate, I guess, but to be honest I'm just bored. And my parents don't really care what time I'm home."

"That sounds fun," Lyra said. But she realized it would probably mean more driving.

They stopped in front of Audrey's house just long enough for Nathan to go to the door and pick her up, and then they headed to what the humans had called "the mall." Lyra had told them she'd never been to one before, but they were used to hearing that from her by now.

They pulled into an open space filled with other humans' cars. Lyra was the first one out of the cramped vehicle, as relieved to be out of the cramped seat as she was interested in where they were now.

The building was huge – it rivaled Canterlot Castle; it even made the humans' own capitol building seem tiny. And once they'd entered, the sights took Lyra's breath away. This one structure had tons of small shops, more than all of Ponyville. It was enough to impress a Canterlot pony – well, a Canterlot girl – with all of the selection.

Nathan was just amused at Lyra's wide-eyed stare. He and Audrey both acted like they were used to this place, as unaffected by the sights and sounds as they were by all the other amazing things in their world.

"Chinese good with you?" Nathan asked.

"I'm feeling more like sushi. The Chinese place here isn't that good," Audrey said. She grimaced. "I actually might've gotten food poisoning the one time I tried it."

"Yeesh. Well, looks like we're being fancy today," Nathan said.

"I'm fine with anything... pretty much," Lyra said. She'd lost track of how many new foods she had tried, especially all the desserts. "But there's no... um..."

Audrey caught on to what she meant. "They've got a few vegetarian options," she said. "Unless you eat fish. I know some vegetarians make an exception for that."

Lyra shuddered. "No, I'll... I'll just stick to the vegetables."

They passed a florist and a salon on the way there. This place really did have everything. It kind of reminded her of the flower stand that Roseluck worked at on market days, or Aloe and Lotus' beauty shop that she'd been to a few times with Bon-Bon...

The restaurant was on the second floor, in front of a balcony. There were more levels of stores above and below them, all packed with humans. Lyra leaned over the rail to look down at the tiled mosaic floor, with the sun from the skylight above their heads shining down on it.

"You coming?" Audrey called out to her. Lyra turned around and headed up to where they were waiting in front of the restaurant. The menu was posted on the wall. Audrey gestured towards it. "Good news for you. Their vegetarian options are actually cheaper than the regular ones. I might even go for that."

"Regular..." Lyra muttered. It *was* normal for humans. Would she ever get used to that?

It was still hard to accept that most humans did choose to eat meat. They even knew exactly where it came from. But... there were plenty of animals that ate meat. They had to sustain themselves. Just like other animals might eat plants, or gemstones.

They placed their orders at the counter. Lyra was getting really good at talking to humans – not too long ago, even being *near* one would make her mouth go dry. Now it was just an everyday thing. She was feeling like she fit in here.

They sat down at one of the tables. Even though the mall was crowded, this restaurant's seating was all available.

"So how're things going with that band?" Audrey asked. "You seem to be in a good mood."

"It's great! Randall said we'd be doing covers. That means we're doing songs that other bands wrote," Lyra said. "I didn't realize bands wrote their own music. Do most of them do that?"

"The good ones do," Nathan said. "The ones that get famous."

"He said that his original stuff wasn't any good, though," Lyra said. "I just think it sounds hard. Writing music and playing it? You'd really... have your hands full with that, don't you think?"

"I guess so. I thought I heard Guns 'n Roses back there," Nathan said.

"You know that one? Everything we're working on is completely different from the songs I practiced before. A lot louder. But I don't really mind," Lyra said. "I think the other band members have been practicing them longer than I have, but I'll just work extra hard back home."

"Yeah, about those band members..." Nathan said. He hadn't gotten a chance to really meet them. He had waited inside until they stopped playing.

"Everyone in the band is really nice. But I am the youngest one there," Lyra said. "I was kind of surprised, actually."

"Most kids our age would be focused on school," Audrey said.

"Right..." Lyra nodded. She'd forgotten that.

"They were all in their twenties, it looked like," Nathan said. "I'm amazed Randall even let you join in the first place."

"I guess I'm usually younger than the other po– than the other musicians I play with. It's always been that way." The musicians at the Gala had all been older than her by a few years, plus they had seemed like regulars to the event. Still, these humans were, what? Six or seven years older than her? It hadn't seemed like that much of a difference.

"Right. The young musical prodigy with a mysterious past," Nathan said.

Audrey gave a sigh, though she didn't say any more on the topic. She opened up a thin paper wrapper and took two long wooden sticks out of it. Lyra nearly forgot how hungry she'd been as she watched Audrey move her fingers expertly and pick up pieces of food with them.

"What are those?" Lyra pointed at them.

Audrey paused for a moment and looked at her. "I think this one's an avocado roll..."

"No, I mean the things you're using to pick them up."

"Chopsticks?"

"I've never been able to get the hang of them, myself," Nathan said. "Too much of a hassle. And they give us forks anyway." He stabbed at his own food with one.

Lyra didn't hear him. She was concentrating on the complicated movement of Audrey's hands. This was a challenge. And it looked like so much fun.

She glanced down at her plate, searching around the edges. *There!* She had one of those paper wrappers too, so she tore it open and took them out. She snapped them apart at the top, and held them up to her face, examining them intently.

"Have you ever used them before?" Audrey said. "Actually, that's a stupid question, isn't it? I'm guessing not."

"I've never even seen anything like this," Lyra said without looking up. She tried to figure out how to hold them – Audrey made it seem so easy. There was no secret in their design, it seemed. They were just smooth wooden sticks. Humans had designed them as a test of skill or something, a way to show off their dexterity. It was the only explanation Lyra could think of.

"Getting a little intense, there, Lyra." Nathan had stopped eating and was watching her.

She said nothing. Her entire concentration was on these little wooden sticks, trying to figure out how to fit them into her fingers without dropping them, and then trying to pick things up with them. It was almost impossible.

"You... *do* have a fork," Nathan said. "You know that, right?"

"I've been using forks all my life. This is something *new*." She fumbled with the sticks some more, and they fell out again. She picked them up off of her food and tried again.

Audrey reached across the table. "Here. Put the first one like this..." She put one stick in between Lyra's thumb and forefinger. "Then only move the second one."

Singling out one of the pieces of sushi, Lyra attempted to pick it up. It fell out. A few more times, without any better results. Then, leaning her face in, she was able to lift it up into her mouth.

Nathan clapped his hands together. "Nice work."

Lyra was beaming. "Got it." Then she made a face. "What exactly *is* this?" The taste was odd. Not unpleasant, but unexpected.

"I think it's just avocado and cucumber. Oh, and seaweed," Audrey said. "Those... aren't a problem, right?"

"No. I've never eaten seaweed before, though. Where do they get it? Is there an ocean near here?"

"I wish. Iowa's about as landlocked as you can get," Nathan said.

"And that's... where we are," Lyra said slowly, watching him. "Obviously."

"Of course," Audrey replied. She frowned. "Lyra, you *do* know where we –"

"I was just kidding." Lyra smiled awkwardly, and waved a hand. "Of course I know where we are. I'm not *that* clueless." She gave a nervous laugh, but they didn't look convinced.

Iowa, though? She thought the word sounded familiar, maybe humans had mentioned it a few times. It must be a smaller region in France. She hadn't looked at a map in a while, but she thought she remembered France having some ocean coasts. Des Moines must be somewhere inland, then. It wasn't easy to just go up and ask for a map without a good reason, though. They already noticed she wasn't like them.

She went back to trying to use her chopsticks, picking up a piece, lifting it almost all the way up to her mouth before it slipped and dropped back on the plate. "Horseapples..." she swore under her breath.

Audrey stifled a laugh. "*What* was that?"

"Oh, uh... Nothing!" Lyra said. "It was nothing." She made another attempt at picking up the sushi, and was successful this time.

"What do your parents think of Lyra staying for so long?" Nathan asked. "I mean, she's been there for, what? Over a week now?"

"They seem okay with it..." Lyra said. She glanced over at Audrey. "They like me, don't they?"

"Well, yeah. They've definitely gotten used to you," Audrey said. "I'm sure it helps that you're always offering to help around the house. Helping out in the garden now and then seems to make up for all the loud guitar music."

"I *do* like to work with my hands." Lyra gave a slight smile. Chores hardly felt like work – they were just another opportunity to see how humans got by without magic. And it turned out that they did pretty well. It was all of their tools – some of which were recognizable from Equestria, though it was obviously a lot easier to use a garden trowel when you could grip the handle properly.

"Sweet. Are they paying you?" Nathan asked.

"Well, yes..." Lyra said. But the money wasn't why she did it. Honestly, she'd been surprised when they'd offered to pay her for her help, but she had accepted it.

"It's practically like she's always lived here at this point." Audrey smiled.

Lyra had to admit, she did have a point. She'd been here so long it was starting to feel less like some strange other world and more like, well... home. And yet she still felt like she needed to find out who she was and where she'd come from. If that was even possible. Audrey had found Nathan's house on that computer somehow, why couldn't they find her parents?

Returning to her food, and these fascinating wooden sticks, she worked on picking up another piece. Glancing at the others' plates, she realized they were already done.

"Looks like we'll be here for a while," Nathan said, glancing up at the skylight. "By all means, take all the time you need, Lyra."

She'd get the hang of these sticks eventually.

• • •

Practice went on as usual, every Monday, Thursday, and Friday. Those were the days when the other band members' work schedules didn't conflict, according to Randall. On each of those days, Nathan would show up, Lyra would gather everything into her bag, and head out with her guitar on her back.

Her journal was still inside – if Audrey or her parents happened to find it lying around, there would be too much explaining to do. Better to just keep it close. And she was still taking notes in there. She'd just filled up an entire page on how to use chopsticks.

On this particular day, she was the last one at practice. Mike and Casey were already in the garage setting up, but Randall was nowhere to be seen.

Lyra checked the tuning on her guitar, plugged it in, and played a few chords to test it out. Setting up in Randall's garage for practice had already started to feel natural. Sure, it didn't compare to a fancy stage, especially not the one at Canterlot Castle, or even a normal practice room, but she was surrounded by humans here. That more than made up for it.

She took one of the songs Randall had given her out of her bag to read it over. They were working on several different pieces at once.

"Well, everyone, I just got off the phone." Randall swung the door to the house open and stepped out. He was in a good mood. "We're set to play at a music festival in two weeks. Told 'em we'd just play what we've been working on, and that was that."

"Seriously?" Casey said. "That's cutting it close."

"Lyra, I'll really need you to double-time it." Randall pointed a finger towards her. "This thing's coming up fast, but you've got talent. Mike and Casey, good work so far, but we could be better. We can *always* get better."

Mike nodded. "Sure. Guess so."

"Now, same songs we worked on last time. Let's get them perfect. We might actually get paid for this, so no slacking off."

A paid performance? Lyra knew that Randall had been trying to get them in somewhere, but hadn't been expecting it so soon. The idea of being back on stage again – in front of an audience of humans, no less – was incredible, even if she'd been expecting it to happen at some point.

"Starting off with Highway to Hell, then." Randall counted them off, and Lyra started.



Lyra had wondered what she was supposed to wear on stage. Usually at concerts she was expected to dress in something fancy, like that white-and-gold dress Rarity had made her for the Gala. No... Nothing like that. It wasn't the style. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt like she would on any normal day.

The music festival was taking place in a darkened building with an audience of humans standing out there watching. Randall had joked about getting a "real crowd" someday. Lyra wondered what *this* was considered, then.

There was a voice booming out from the ceiling. She only caught the words "Crimson Thunder," but that meant it was time to start. Lyra hardly had time to look up to find the human who had spoken before the lights came on, nearly blinding her. Her heart was pounding, but she couldn't panic now. This was what she had been waiting for.

She looked over at Randall, standing near the microphone, and he gave a quick nod towards her. Just like they'd practiced, then...

All it took was Lyra playing the first few isolated notes of their first song, something called "Welcome to the Jungle." The crowd was already yelling and cheering, and they hadn't even finished yet. With her guitar hooked up to the stage's sound system, it was still enough to drown them out.

This was her first performance since the Grand Galloping Gala. All those stuffy Canterlot ponies had just wanted simple, quiet music to play in the background while they ate and talked amongst themselves. The soft sounds of a lyre could get lost in the murmurs of conversation. But not here. Now she was the center of attention.

The music picked up into the intro. She could feel the sound shaking the stage through her feet. Randall stepped up to the microphone and started into the vocals. His voice wasn't nearly as raspy as the original singer on the recording – she actually preferred Randall; the original one didn't even sound like singing.

*"Welcome to the jungle, we've got fun and games! We got everything you want honey, we know the names!"*

Fear was turning to a rush of pure excitement. This was a song that humans knew, she was here playing it with them, in front of an audience of at *least* a hundred. It felt like her ears were going to burst, but she didn't even care.

The solo was coming up. Lyra loved this part. She got to play whatever complicated melody she wanted, just making it up on the spot. Her fingers were gliding over the strings, knowing where to go simply by touch. After listening to enough rock music, she had an ear for this, and the applause after she finished was the best sound in the world. Humans clapping their hands together for her. It was like a dream.

Randall came back in with the vocals and finished off the last few verses. "*In the jungle, welcome to the jungle, watch it bring you, to you – It's gonna bring you down!*" Lyra finished off with a drawn-out chord, letting it reverberate for a while like they'd rehearsed, until finally Randall gave a hand signal to cut it off. And then the cheering got even louder.

There was hardly any time to stay silent, they started right into the next song. They wouldn't be playing for too long. It wasn't their own show, after all, there were plenty of bands just like theirs waiting to go on. But Lyra would have been willing to let this last all night.

She had friends here, and she had music. Humans understood those two things just as well as any pony. Well, maybe their taste in music was a lot more fun than Equestria's. And her band mates were definitely more welcoming than Octavia and the others, once they'd warmed up to her.

Maybe she'd known it ever since she'd arrived here and seen another human for the first time. It had just gotten clearer after staying longer. It had been so hard to leave everybody in Equestria behind at first, but now she was where she belonged. The human world was where Lyra had been born, and it was where she would live for the rest of her life.

She didn't care if she never saw another pony again.

• • •

She packed everything up backstage. The whole performance had ended way too quickly. She felt energized, despite the late hour.

Randall's arm clapped her on the back, making her jump. "Hey, awesome work out there."

"Thanks!" Lyra said. "What are you guys doing next?"

"We're going back to my place to celebrate. Hey, your friend Nathan's still here, isn't he? Maybe you should go find him."

"Can't you drive me there?" Randall had a black van that they used to move some of the larger equipment, like the drum set.

"What? To the party?"

She nodded.

"Oh, uh... Listen, Lyra, it's great and all that you joined up, but... This party's more of an adults-only thing, you know? Casey's already gone out on the beer run."

"But I..." Lyra stopped herself. It was useless to protest. She knew she could hold her alcohol pretty well, though she was more fond of wine or punch. That was probably unavoidable since that's what they tended to serve at Canterlot events, and she'd gotten used to it. But she wasn't an adult here. Not anymore.

"Listen, you can come over tomorrow. I'll get you your cut of the pay. The last thing we need to do is get tangled up in anything illegal, right?" He grinned.

"Fine..." Lyra said, letting out a sigh. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

She zipped her guitar case closed and lifted it up. There was a backstage exit to the alley behind the theater, but she headed the other direction into the audience to find her friends. It was dark, loud, and crowded, but she found them standing towards the back.

"Great work out there!" Nathan had to yell over the music, but even then it was impossible to hear him.

Audrey stood there with her arms crossed. "Yeah, great. Can we get out of here?"

Lyra couldn't stop grinning, but she nodded. "Lead the way."

• • •

After living here a couple weeks, everything was starting to look familiar. It used to seem so huge after living in a quaint little town like Ponyville, but Lyra supposed that with enough time you could get used to anything. The route Nathan drove to Randall's house always drove through the central part of town, with the tallest buildings. Lyra recognized

the book store she'd stopped in on her very first day as a human. That first day seemed like so long ago.

"So. You have fun last night?" Nathan asked.

"Of course." Lyra smiled. "I've never been to a concert like that. It was incredible."

"You always kind of struck me as a rocker type, though," Nathan said. "You must just like hair dye, I guess."

"Music like that's just not popular where I used to live," Lyra said.

"In medieval times, where people still listen to traveling minstrels and have never seen cars."

She could tell he was joking, but he wasn't too far from the truth. "Well, I guess I've been to one. I don't think it counts, though. These... kids... Some of my friends' younger sisters, actually, they tried to do one for their school talent show."

"Really? That must've been good."

"It was terrible, actually. Their lead singer was completely tone-deaf and they tried to work kung fu in as dance moves." She stopped. "You know what kung fu is, right?"

"Yeah. That sounds interesting." He laughed. "You're not making this up? Nobody put it on YouTube, did they?"

"No. They're nice kids, but that performance definitely wasn't their special talent. I don't think I could even do it justice. You had to be there..." Lyra's voice trailed off. "But nothing could top last night's concert. That was amazing."

"Glad *you* thought so. There were these guys near where me and Audrey were who were really drunk. They were yelling and cracking bad jokes the whole time. Kinda ruined it. But you were still awesome out there, Lyra," Nathan said. "You really got them going."

"Thanks." Lyra went back to staring out the windows. "Oh, and I should be able to pay you for the guitar soon."

"There's no rush," Nathan told her. "But... how long are you staying with Audrey and her family? I mean, you can't move in with them permanently. School's starting soon, too. I didn't even expect you to stay as long as you have."

"I didn't think I would, either," Lyra said. "But I like it here. I... didn't really fit in back where I used to live. They used to think I was weird."

"Really, now? I can't imagine why."

She could hear the sarcasm in his voice, but really, he probably couldn't imagine it. Even with as little as she knew about humans, she still felt like she fit in more than she ever had in Equestria. Lyra would never have to hear Bon-Bon tell her that humans weren't real ever again. She'd never be called crazy. And these car seats had been designed for this sitting position, the way she'd always done it.

They pulled up outside Randall's house. Lyra unbuckled her seat belt and got out, adjusting the bag hanging at her side as she stood up.

"I'll just wait out here. This'll be quick, right?" Nathan asked.

"Right." Lyra nodded. She ran across the overgrown lawn and up the front steps.

She knocked on the door, and stood there waiting. Nothing happened. She tried knocking again, harder, and there was a muffled voice from inside that she couldn't make out. Then she was greeted by a very exhausted looking Randall, rubbing his forehead.

"Oh, hey, Lyra," he said slowly. "There's no practice today. Everyone's worn out from that concert. And the afterparty," Randall said. He rubbed his forehead, wincing. "Mostly the afterparty."

"It's Saturday. You told me to come over and you'd give me my cut."

He blinked. "Oh. That's right." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money – paper bills, the kind that were worth more. He counted out a few of them. "That should be it. Great work out there. I think I should be over this by Monday, but I'll call you if I'm still feeling like crap."

"Thanks... I'd definitely like to keep playing..." She looked over the money. Adding in the allowance she was getting from Audrey's parents, this would definitely be enough to cover Nathan's guitar... If she played more concerts, she'd be able to actually make a profit. But... then what?

"You're thinking of leaving?"

"It's nothing... Nathan and I were just talking. I guess I'm staying in Des Moines longer than I planned."

"You don't live here? What're you doing, then?"

"Well... I mean, I know this probably won't get me anywhere." She reached into her bag, finding the photo wedged between the guitar books and her journal. "I was just passing through town. I've been trying to figure out who my parents are. This is all I have of them, though."

Randall took the picture, and looked it over. She couldn't read his expression. It seemed like he wasn't entirely there.

"I think it's obvious by now that they don't live around here. I need to get out there and find them, even if I don't know where to start. France seems like a huge country, and I've only seen part of it."

He stared at her blankly. "Why are you talking about France? You're not making any sense..." His words seemed to slur together. He stared back down at the picture. "Besides, they live in Pennsylvania."

Lyra stared at him. "Huh?"

"You're joking. You're not *his* kid." He tapped the glass with a finger. "You told me you didn't have a last name."

"I don't. I mean, I don't know what it is..." Lyra said. "And what do you mean they live in Pennsylvania?"

"I've seen this house before. And your dad." It was like some realization had finally struck him. "I mean, *holy*... Just hold on a second." His sluggishness seemed to have completely disappeared. He shoved the picture back into her hands and ran up the stairs.

Hesitating for a moment, she stepped into the house. Everything seemed messier than usual, which was really saying something. It must have been from his party. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought Pinkie Pie had been through here.

But other things were more important now. Lyra stared down at the photograph. Audrey had told her it was unlikely anyone would recognize them. Did Randall know her parents? How would that even be possible? And... where *was* Pennsylvania, anyway? She'd never heard of that one.

The creaking on the steps signaled that Randall was back. He was carrying a large hardcover book, and handed it to her. "On the back."

She turned it over, and saw the man's picture there. "Wait..." She looked back at the photo of her parents. Then back to the book. The same short, dark hair. His beard. He wasn't smiling in the photograph on the book, but there was still something similar about the eyes. Lyra thought she had seen enough humans to tell one from another.

"It's the same guy, isn't it? It's not just the hangover getting to me?" Randall said. "That book's from '95 or something like that, before he took a break. His pictures after that look different. He got older."

The title said "Thomas Michelakos" in large, ornate letters above the title, *Entering Eternity*. A few human figures stood in a dense forest, one with a tall staff, the others with swords slung on their backs like Lyra wore her guitar. They wore cloaks and tunics. Things like the humans from her Equestrian history books had worn, not like what humans here dressed like.

"How did you –" Lyra began.

"Don't act all surprised that I actually *read* every now and then," Randall said. His words weren't slurring as much. "I like some good fantasy every now and again. Tolkien's the best, Blind Guardian's what got me into that. But Thomas Michelakos is still one of the better authors right now, if you ask me."

"So... my dad's a writer?"

"Your dad's on the New York Times bestseller list. Seriously, I don't think I've ever heard of him having a kid, though."

She looked at the humans on the cover. If she didn't know any better, she'd think they were the extinct Equestrian humans. "What's it about?"

"Typical fantasy stuff. Epic battles, magic, the usual. But it's the characters that really –"

"You said... magic." The word had struck her. It couldn't be a coincidence... could it? Humans seemed to know what magic was, even if they couldn't use it.

"It wouldn't be fantasy without it, would it?"

"I... guess not..." Lyra said. Maybe that's what humans would consider fantasy, but to her, it was part of an old life she thought she'd left behind. Why would a human... No, why would her own *father* care about that? Didn't they realize how great their own world was?

"Seriously, though, if you're his kid..." Randall laughed. "All this time. You really should've pulled that out earlier. What are the chances?"

Lyra didn't know what to say. She never would have expected something like this. The human world seemed so big that she had believed Audrey when she said the picture wouldn't get her that far. But when she turned the book back over, and looked at that photo on the back, it was unmistakable.

"Ah, man. This is unreal," Randall said. "Get me his autograph, why don't you?"

"Um... y-yeah," Lyra said. Unreal was right. "Listen, I'm supposed to go back..." She thumbed over her shoulder in a shaky gesture.

"Yeah, sure thing. I won't keep you. You've got better things in store, don't you?" he said. "This is probably going to sink in once my head stops pounding."

She handed him back the heavy book, with one last look at her father's picture. "I'm sorry. I guess I really won't be coming back to practice."

"It's fine. Maybe I'll see you again, right? Say 'hi' to your dad for me." He laughed at that.

Lyra gave a final look back as she headed outside. The car was still waiting there, and she mindlessly drifted towards it. Her mind was still reeling. What did all of this *mean*?

Nathan looked up from his phone as Lyra opened the door and got inside. "There you are. I just got a call from my parents. They want me back home soon. What took so long?"

She sat there for a moment. "I... have a last name."

"Come on, Lyra. I'm pretty sure you weren't in there long enough to get married."

"I thought I'd show Randall that picture of my parents. He recognized them," Lyra said, staring ahead blankly.

"He's friends with them? Do they live around here?"



Lyra shook her head. "My dad's a popular writer, I guess. About... magic." She said the last word quietly.

Nathan leaned forward with interest. "That's out of nowhere... What's his name?"

"Thomas... Michelakos?" It was a hard name to pronounce, but she'd have to get used to it. It was her own. "I've never heard of him."

"You said you'd never heard of *Aerosmith* until a few weeks ago." Nathan shook his head. "The guy's a bestseller! Even I've heard of him. Randall must have been kidding."

"No, he showed me one of my dad's books. The man in the picture was the same. I'm sure it's him."

"Oh God. You *are* serious... If you're actually his daughter, why'd he give you up? It doesn't make much sense."

"I don't know anything about that. My other family didn't know how I got... to where I used to live," Lyra said. She wondered if she'd ever find out why she had ended up stuck in Equestria. At least she'd probably find out what the reaction had been on the human side.

"Can't wait to hear what Audrey thinks of this..." Nathan muttered.

"You're right... She's got a computer, she can look him up." Lyra still didn't understand exactly how computers worked, but Audrey could get just about any kind of information out of hers. Like an entire library, but not much bigger than a single book. "We can find out where he lives."

Nathan was grinning. "You know, if Randall does turn out to be right about that, then at least you won't have to worry about earning money with some shady band."

"It wasn't that bad..." Lyra muttered. She hoped there would be more opportunities like last night once she got back home. All those years and she was finally enjoying her musical career.

Nathan started the car and they pulled away. Lyra took one last glance at the house. There would be other bands... That kind of music was popular with humans. She could always find another gig.

"This is really crazy, Lyra. Not that everything about you wasn't already," Nathan said. "Really, though, nobody's ever recognized him in that picture? Who have you shown it to?"

"Well, you... Audrey and her parents..." Lyra said. "And now Randall."

"What about before you came into town?"

Lyra shook her head. "No, they wouldn't have heard of him."

Nathan laughed. "Sometimes I really do wonder if you came from outer space."

"No, it's nothing like that," Lyra said. "I'm a normal human."

Though, all things considered, she was still having trouble letting go of everything else. No pony could have imagined this place. She still remembered Bon-Bon telling her to work on her music instead of studying humans. How Twilight had told her that there was just no evidence that humans existed. Her pony family telling her to study magic instead of...

Her real father wrote books about magic. Her human father.

Fiction, not instructional – humans knew about magic, they just didn't believe in it. And Thomas Michelakos would still be a typical human. He still lived in this world, after all. He owned a car, probably even a computer of his own... It just seemed odd that a human would take an interest in something as mundane as magic. Why couldn't he realize what the world they lived in was like?

She stared out the window at the now-familiar sights of Des Moines. She had really thought that she was finished with magic. How could any human care about it when there was all of this? She'd been impressed by human achievements back when she was reading about them in the Canterlot library, but nothing the humans in Equestria had done even compared to this world.

The one thing Dewey had wanted was for her to find out where she actually came from. All that really mattered was that she had a last name. She had a human family. Apparently a very well-known one, at that, but it's not like she ever would have heard of them before. Why wasn't she feeling better about this?

"You're going to try to contact him, right?" Nathan's voice snapped her attention back. "Your dad. Find out if Randall was right about him. I don't really know much about the

guy. Never been much of a reader. Actually, I'm surprised Randall is, of all people..." He took one hand off the wheel to scratch his head.

Lyra remembered something Randall had said. "How far away is Pennsylvania? I guess that's where I'm from..."

"Pennsylvania? What part?"

"I'm not sure."

"Doesn't matter. You'll figure it out. It's... I don't know, exactly," Nathan said. "You'd probably have to fly there."

"I can't fly. I'm not a pegasus," Lyra blurted out, and then instantly regretted it.

Nathan just laughed. "That's the *first* flying animal you think of?"

"Right... You didn't mean like on my own, with wings... Sorry." She laughed nervously. She couldn't start slipping now. Not when she was so close.

"You've got a weird sense of humor..." They pulled up into Audrey's driveway, and sat there with the car still rumbling. "Here we are. I can't stay, but tell me how this goes. I gotta know if this is for real."

Lyra stepped out and was about to get her guitar out of the back seat. She hesitated. "I think I can afford to pay you for this now."

He twisted around in his seat to look back at her. "Oh, right. Forgot about that. Yeah, go ahead and take it for now. We'll figure that out later," he said. "You've got more important things to worry about right now, don't you?"

She nodded, and slid the case out. As he pulled away, she waved, then turned to head inside.

Lyra's legs were shaking. She wasn't sure how to feel at the moment – she knew who her dad was, and yet something was just off about the whole thing. She went up the stairs and into Audrey's room, pushing the door open. "I know my last name."

Audrey was seated at her computer. It took her a moment to process that. She spun herself around in the chair. "You... *what?* How?"

The words all came tumbling out at once. "Randall recognized my parents. I'd never shown him the picture before. My dad's a writer, he lives somewhere called Pennsylvania, I think –"

"The guy from your band? How does he know them?"

"He doesn't know them personally. He showed me one of my dad's books. His name is Thomas Michelakos," Lyra said. She pointed at the computer. "You can look him up on that, can't you?"

"Yeah, sure, but... a writer?"

"Nathan said he'd heard of him, too. I guess he's famous. He writes books about magic."

"I wouldn't know him, then. I don't read a lot of fantasy."

"I know. It's so boring, isn't it? Nobody needs magic," Lyra said. It was good to know there were other humans with some sense. "But this might be it. I think he really might be my dad."

"Lyra, I wouldn't listen to everything Randall says. Besides... you said they were having a party, he probably drank a lot last night. I'd like to say he means well, but –"

"I saw the picture myself. I know it's the same man." Lyra glanced back at the computer. She still wasn't sure how it worked, but humans could use that to find out just about anything. "Could you try?"

Audrey sat down, spinning the chair to face the keyboard. "I'll see. Just... don't get your hopes up." The screen lit up. "Now, how did you spell that name? It sounded like it was Greek or something."

Lyra tried to remember. "M-I-C-H..."

"Nevermind, Google autofilled it. Here's the Wikipedia page."

Lyra stared over Audrey's shoulder. The computer screen had words all over it, like a book, but it was glowing and they kept on moving away from her eyes. It finally stopped on a photograph of a man at the corner of the screen. He looked older – his hair was a little grey instead of black, and his beard had been trimmed down, but Lyra thought that maybe he looked like an older version of the man in her photograph. Her dad.

"That's him..." she said, pointing her finger out. "I know it is."

Audrey leaned forward, with her head on one hand as she squinted at the text. "Let's see... Biography... He lives near Philadelphia. His wife is a freelance artist, and they have a... daughter? No, wait, that's not..."

"Fillydelphia? That can't be right..." Lyra leaned in close to get a better look at the page. All these tiny letters. She wasn't sure how Audrey was able to stand it. If it had just been on paper, it wouldn't be nearly so hard to read.

"It's what it says. So they had a daughter in... 2005." Audrey leaned back in the chair, and put her hands behind her head. "Sorry, Lyra, but you don't look like you're seven years old. Besides, she still lives with them."

Lyra stood up, blinking. "No... It has to be him. I know it is."

"Randall probably made a mistake. I'm not surprised."

"No, I looked at the picture too. It was him."

"He could've just looked similar. And I know it sounds great that your dad would be some successful author, but someone else would have recognized that picture in the past fifteen years."

"Well... no, I don't think they would have." No matter who a human might be, there was no way her Canterlot family would have known him.

Audrey shrugged and kept reading. "It wouldn't make sense. I just don't see how your family could have had that picture, and it's somebody fairly well known, and they didn't..." Her voice trailed off. "Wait. They had another child, but..."

The entire screen flashed and another set of words appeared.

"Here it is..." Audrey scanned the lines of text. "It says she went missing back in... 1997. Her name was... Oh my god." She leaned back in the chair, holding a hand over her mouth. "Lyra Michelakos."

"This thing has information about me?" The words had stopped moving long enough for Lyra to see her own name. She leaned down closer, one hand on the back of Audrey's chair. "My name –" Her name actually was Lyra. It would explain why she'd always liked the sound of it, ever since reading it in a book years ago.

Audrey shook her head. "It's not necessarily you. It could be a coincidence." She went back to the article, and the words scrolled up the screen, slow enough to read. "I'll admit that everything fits. With the date, you would have been... a year old, about. It says... the Michelakos family was robbed. Just about everything from their daughter's room was taken. Including her." Audrey's mouth hung open. "They'd made some money from the book series at that point, but there wasn't even a ransom. Everything was just gone. They never recovered anything, no signs of a break-in..."

Lyra grinned. "No... I know about this. It all fits. This is me. I know it is."

Like Princess Celestia had told her, she'd been found as an infant human in the Canterlot gardens. Objects from her home in this world had been strewn around, including the picture that she was carrying now. Obviously from the other end it would have looked bad. Her real parents must have been devastated...

Audrey stared at her. "I thought you said you were adopted, Lyra. You mean you were *kidnapped*, and you *knew* about it? All this time?"

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"How could it *not* be?"

"Well, um..." Lyra didn't know what to say. Whatever magic had brought her into Equestria, she didn't think anyone had done it intentionally. That didn't change the fact that she had no idea what had actually happened. "It's... It's all just a misunderstanding. I ended up okay."

"Federal crimes aren't just 'misunderstandings,'" Audrey said. "For a while, I thought you might be hiding something important. Repressing it. If you're really *this* Lyra..." She spoke slowly and evenly. "I really need you to tell me. Where exactly did you come from? And what do you know about how you ended up there? You told me you didn't even know who your parents were."

"I don't – I mean, I didn't know who they were. I just knew how I..." What did she say? "There's really nothing wrong. My other parents loved me. They took good care of me."

"You've said that plenty of times. I'm not sure I believe it."

"They told me they found me abandoned. All they had was that photograph, but they didn't know who my parents were. There was nothing they could do to send me back,

anyway. And they had nothing to do with this." She gestured towards the news article that was still on the screen.

Audrey put a hand to her forehead. "But you won't tell me any names, where you lived before coming here... How did you even *get* to Iowa from Pennsylvania? How far did they take you?"

"A lot farther than that..." Lyra muttered.

"*What?*"

"I... didn't mean that. Not in the way you think."

Audrey turned back to the news article that was still on the screen. "You're not making any sense. Why can't you just tell me what happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Even back in Equestria, where magic was just a part of everyday life, nobody would have believed that you could somehow end up in another world entirely. Humans definitely wouldn't accept that. They didn't believe in magic.

"This whole thing sounds insane, to say the least. But somehow, I believe it. Somehow it makes sense. There's just one thing..." Audrey sighed. "If you come forward claiming you're Lyra Michelakos, there's going to be an investigation. You can tell me if you want, but you're definitely going to have to answer to the police. And your family."

"I told you it's nothing illegal..."

"What part of it wouldn't be?"

Whatever Audrey thought of her, of all of her misunderstandings about human culture since she'd arrived... They were friends. That much was clear. And it would be easier to talk to her than any of the human authorities.

"Well... I really *am* Lyra Michelakos. From... Philadelphia." It was hard not to habitually say the name of the city in Equestria. She took a deep breath, and continued. "And I am a human. But for the past fifteen years... I was a unicorn."

"A... unicorn," Audrey repeated. She slumped down in her chair.

Lyra nodded, and took a seat on the bed across from her. "I don't know how I originally ended up in Equestria – that's where I lived – but that's what happened when I disappeared from this world."

"So... what you've been hiding all this time... is that you're a unicorn."

"I *used* to be," Lyra corrected her. "I didn't even know I was actually a human up until... less than a month ago, actually. I'd been researching humans my entire life, but Princess Celestia told me that they were real, and that you still lived here –"

Audrey put up a hand to cut her off. "No. Just... stop talking."

Lyra shrugged. "You wanted me to tell the truth."

"Of course. I *do* want the truth. You've mentioned a few things about where you came from, and I don't think you were talking about unicorns." Audrey paused to recall something. "Like... you mentioned that your mother worked at a weather station."

"Well, she's not a *unicorn*. She's a pegasus, and she worked at the weather factory in Cloudsdale. Specializing in rain cloud production."

Audrey shook her head. "No, that's... ridiculous. Are you saying you've just been giving me straight lies this entire time?"

"I didn't lie. I didn't tell you the entire truth, but I haven't lied to you." Lyra glanced down at her necklace, and held it out so that Audrey could see the lyre-shaped charm. "See this? This was a gift from the Princess before I came here."

"What, are you going to say it's magic or something?"

"No, that's not how magic works. I can't even do anything without a horn," Lyra said. "I lost it when I became a human. Not that I really mind, since I have these." She held up her hands.

Audrey almost laughed at her. "You're sounding crazy right now. Do you realize that?"



"I know it's a lot to accept. That's why I never mentioned it before. Besides, I don't want to go back to Equestria. I want to meet my real parents. My *human* parents."

"So... The reason you haven't told me anything is because you're a unicorn trying to fit into human society."

"Exactly."

Audrey laughed weakly. "You actually believe this?"

Lyra stared at her. "Of course. I haven't been in the human world very long. I'm still adjusting to it. When I first got here, I was overwhelmed. Des Moines is just so much bigger than Ponyville."

"*Ponyville?*" Audrey said.

"Yeah, it's where I used to live."

"That's –" She couldn't even find the words. "Never mind."

"You're the first human friend I've ever had. Up until I met you, humans seemed so distant. I didn't even think of them as being much like myself, I guess. But you showed me what we're all like. You taught me so much. I don't know what I would have done without your help."

"You were a unicorn up until I met you?"

Lyra nodded. "That was the day I left home," she said. "You... believe me, then?"

"Of course not. All this stuff about unicorns... It doesn't make any sense! I shouldn't even have to say this, but unicorns aren't *real*, Lyra."

The words seemed like an echo, something she'd heard so many times before – but reversed. Lyra stared at her. "You're just like Bon-Bon."

"Who?"

"My old roommate. She never believed me either."

"Exactly! If she didn't believe you about unicorns, what makes you think I would?"

"No, she doesn't believe in humans. Ponies think that we're just made-up creatures from old stories. Most of them haven't even heard of us. Even when there was so much proof that humans were real, all around us. Even before I knew what I was."

That actually made Audrey laugh, though it sounded harsh. "Lyra, I'll admit that this is one heck of a story. It almost makes sense that your dad would be a writer. You're definitely good at making things up. Except..." Her expression became sober. "You still believe everything you're saying, don't you?"

"Of course," Lyra said.

The problem was just that she didn't have any proof. Even then, would it have made any difference? Bon-Bon's mind had never been changed no matter how much evidence Lyra had found – and she had been right. Princess Celestia had admitted to all of Lyra's suspicions, and now she was here with a living human.

"I never thought I'd have to convince a human that unicorns were real..." Lyra muttered.

"Trust me, I never expected to have this conversation either," Audrey said. "Please... Don't mention any of this to my parents."

"I didn't plan on it. I just want to be a human. I didn't even want to tell you any of this in the first place."

"Good. Because they like you, Lyra. They let you stay here a lot longer than I ever expected them to. If you start saying stuff about being a unicorn and Ponyland or whatever –"

"Ponyville."

"Whatever. The point is, they're going to think you're crazy. And they'd be right."

Lyra was wondering why she'd ever said anything. She should have known this would happen. The human world really wasn't so different from Equestria, was it? "Fine..." she mumbled.

"We'll get in touch with your parents. Find out if they really *are* your parents. I think it would be best for you if you just have a permanent place to stay so that you can get back in touch with reality."

"Just one thing," Lyra said, holding up a finger. "You know what unicorns are, right?"

"Of course, but I don't see –"

"How do you know what they are?"

"Well... There's stories about them. But they're all fantasy. They're just made up," Audrey said. "Lyra, if this is about what your dad writes about, he'd probably be the first to tell you it's all –"

"We had a few stories about humans in Equestria. Not very many, but they were there if you looked for them. And that's because humans exist, and all those stories were based on fact."

Audrey put a hand to her face. "That probably sounds like a logical argument to you, but it really doesn't hold any ground."

"I don't know much about what our worlds have in common, but there are so many things I've noticed that line up. We even know what France is in Equestria, even though most ponies don't realize it's a real place," Lyra said. "They'd hardly believe that I'd gone there."

"When did you go to France? You're from Pennsylvania. Or at least, we think you are," Audrey said.

Lyra tilted her head. "But you said... You told me Des Moines was French."

"We're in America. There are plenty of foreign words here."

"Wait, we're..." Lyra stared at her feet. "But I've never heard of America before. That wasn't in any of the Equestrian histories I read."

"You've never *heard* of America?" Audrey said. She shook her head, and stood up. "Lyra... You're really going to need to get help. Look, I'll figure out how to get in touch with your dad. You just... I don't know. Let me handle this."

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Lyra returned to the guest bedroom, collapsed on the bed, and stared up at the ceiling. Initially, she hadn't planned on telling any humans about Equestria. There were a number of reasons for that. She wanted to fit in, like she'd always been a part of this world instead of having been yanked out of it all those years ago. She also didn't want to

have to explain that, where she came from, the species that covered this world had caused its own extinction.

And there was also the fact that she had no proof that another world existed, and humans would likely call her crazy for suggesting it. Sure enough, that had been it. Audrey didn't even believe in unicorns.

This was too much like what had happened during her last week in Ponyville. Bon-Bon had thought she was crazy and wanted her to drop the whole "human" thing, so Lyra had shut up about it. It had calmed things down, but it had been hard.

The evidence had been everywhere in Equestria. And of course it had – humans had lived there once, they'd left their inventions. And then they'd gone extinct. She still hadn't mentioned that part to Audrey. That war was even harder to think about now that she considered herself more human than pony.

Then again... Her life in Equestria felt like another life, and at the same time it seemed like she'd only just been there yesterday. Lyra was used to sitting down to dinner every night with Audrey and her family, but when she thought about staying in this house with creatures that she'd worked so hard simply to prove the existence of, it still amazed her.

They'd all gone their whole lives without seeing unicorns, though. And whatever those ponies she'd seen weeks ago had been, they were nothing like the ones in Equestria. They hadn't even talked to her.

Lyra idly inspected her fingers. She could always do what she'd done with Bon-Bon in that final week. If she didn't mention unicorns, maybe she could convince Audrey she was over it. That she wasn't crazy.

She knew even less about this world than she thought. She'd been in some place called "America" all this time. Judging by Audrey's reaction, France was still real, but Lyra had no idea exactly how far away it was. It didn't sound like it was anywhere close.

She let out a sigh. What was she supposed to tell her real family?

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Audrey found her dad working in the living room at his laptop. She approached him slowly. This would have to be handled delicately...

"Hey, Dad?"

"Yes?" He didn't look up.

"I know it's kind of out of nowhere, but... we found Lyra's parents," she said.

He stopped typing immediately, and turned his head around. "You're sure?"

Audrey nodded. She went on to explain everything about how one of Lyra's friends from the band recognized her dad, the news articles they'd found. The entire story, excluding the conversation that she'd just had with Lyra. The story was insane enough already without her help. "I'm not sure how nobody figured it out before. Thomas Michelakos. Ever heard of him? I guess he's fairly popular."

"I don't recognize the name. But you're sure it's him? I don't see how nobody would have –"

"Why they didn't recognize him?" Audrey said. *Well, Lyra had a perfect explanation for that...* "I don't know, either. But the picture matched up, and there were news stories about her disappearance that matched her age... I don't think we can really say anything for sure, but it seems very likely."

"Let me see it before we make any decisions," he said. "And she hasn't said anything about where she's been?"

*Yeah. She wasn't kidnapped at all. She's been living in a magical land with the unicorns. No worries there, everything was all sunshine and rainbows.* But instead, all Audrey told him was, "No... Still nothing. I still think that something might have happened to her. Like..."

He nodded. Nothing needed to be said, they'd discussed that possibility plenty of times.

"And Lyra still won't say anything. You showed her what you found, right?"

"Of course. She said... She said she didn't remember anything about it."

They were both quiet for some time. "But, Audrey..."

"Yes?"

"If this doesn't turn out to be her family, we'll need to do something about Lyra. She's a good kid, but she can't stay here much longer."

"I know that..."

"I just need to finish this up and I'll be up there to look at what you found."

She headed back upstairs to wait.

• • •

The light from the computer screen shined in Audrey's face in the dark room. It was late at night. Her mom had checked out what they'd found, too. She'd heard of the book series Lyra's dad wrote, though she'd never read any of them herself. High fantasy wasn't her preference. But everything about that story of Lyra Michelakos's disappearance fifteen years ago seemed to line up. Now it was just a matter of getting in touch. Lyra had told her to handle it, since she had no idea what email even was.

Why did she have to go and make things so much more complicated, though?

She'd actually been getting better up until now. The first time Audrey had met her, Lyra had been completely hopeless. A total wreck. It had just been Audrey's attempt at a good deed, letting her stay for a few days... that had turned into weeks. But a girl like that – obviously a runaway – alone in a (moderately) big city. That was asking for trouble. Who knew where Lyra would be by now if Audrey hadn't stepped in? If she'd even be alive. That might be pushing it, actually... But not impossible.

It had been hard enough to convince her parents that this random green-haired stranger who occasionally tried to eat flowers wasn't a total lunatic. They would not hear anything about unicorns. Audrey would have to make sure of that. The more of this she could convince them to let her handle on her own, the better.

Asking her about Lyra's past straight-out hadn't gotten her far at first. Audrey had thought maybe building some trust could get her talking. And that it had.

So Lyra thought she had come from "Ponyville" – *creative name, must've spent a long time on that one* – and that she'd been a unicorn. And now she'd been turned into a human by a magic princess and was trying to fit into human society. There were worse delusions, for sure, more dangerous ones, but that was a doozy.

Audrey's first suspicions of child abuse couldn't be completely counted out. If anything, they seemed more likely. Assuming she was Lyra Michelakos – there was enough to indicate that – and she'd been kidnapped as an infant, who knew where she had been? She was blocking the memories. She must be. Something in her behavior when she

opened up about her little "secret" said that she believed every word that was coming out of her mouth.

When they had first met, she'd thought Lyra was interesting. And yes, she *was* interesting, all right. Audrey put her head in her hands and groaned. The sooner she was done with this, the better.

Audrey tapped the spacebar impatiently to wake her computer up. She opened up the browser and went back to Thomas Michelakos's official website. The page was just a flashy ad for his book series. The guy had built his fortune off of fantasy worlds, and Lyra thought she had *come* from one. Was this really the place to send her, even if it was her real family?

On one hand, she acted like she *didn't* want to be a unicorn. Considering whatever those years in "Ponyville" had actually been, it made sense that she would want to get away from it. Her goal was to find her parents and become a normal human. It didn't sound too harmful.

And, on the other hand... She thought she was a unicorn. Of all things, a *unicorn*. What was the proper response to that, anyway?

Lyra needed help. As long as her delusions weren't dangerous... Therapy, medication. Probably expensive stuff. Sending her halfway across the country might not be the best thing right now, but it wasn't like Audrey's family could provide any help. And now Lyra had her own family to take care of her, assuming she could reach them.

It took a lot of digging through the site, but Audrey finally found a link on the page to the author's email. Probably just for fan letters and that sort of thing, but there was no other way to get in touch. Her parents had discussed this with her – what she should do, what she should tell him.

She spent a good few minutes typing out a message, and read it over a few times. She didn't exactly want it to sound like a school paper. Was it too formal? Not enough? She tried to phrase the part about Lyra's issues mildly. If she sounded too crazy, that could threaten the one part of the story that actually might be true.

*Mr. Michelakos –*

*My name is Audrey Loren. I am sixteen years old and live in Des Moines, Iowa. Several weeks ago, I met a girl my age passing through town who called herself Lyra. She's currently*

*staying in my home and working as an amateur musician. She has no known last name and said she was searching for her birth parents, after discovering that she was adopted.*

*It was not until very recently that we identified you and your wife in the photograph Lyra carried with her. She has never heard of you, but her name and age match those of your missing daughter.*

*Lyra refuses to tell me anything truthful about her past or who her former caretakers were. She seems to be suffering from delusions, and may need medication or professional help.*

Audrey paused on that part. At the moment, it would be best not to mention just how severe those delusions were. This guy's daughter had been abducted and he hadn't seen her in years. There was no way to fit in "by the way, she told me she was a unicorn" and not have it sound like a cruel joke.

*I understand that when your daughter went missing fifteen years ago, several objects were stolen. If this photograph is one of them, I see no other way she could have obtained it.*

*Please respond.*

Attached to the message was a photo she'd taken of Lyra's picture frame. Audrey didn't have a scanner, and besides – the frame might help identify it. Prove that the picture hadn't been copied. She also included a picture of Lyra herself.

"I hope to God you actually check this thing," Audrey muttered, and hit send.

• • •

It had been a few days since they'd found her parents. Lyra was starting to get uncomfortable in this house. At the moment she was just sitting on the bed with her guitar – not playing it; she hadn't even plugged it in. She was starting to spend a lot of time alone, just thinking.

Audrey's parents had started asking her what she remembered about her adopted family, and Lyra had noticed Audrey's face whenever they brought it up. She hadn't said anything about Equestria since their conversation. Audrey had practically begged her not to.

They were still being hospitable enough, but the questions had started again. Lyra just wanted to get back to Fillydelphia – *Philadelphia*, she corrected herself – and live the normal human life she'd been dreaming of. She had been pretending that was what she'd



had here, but really, she had been an outsider for the past few weeks. Now she finally had solid ties to the human world.

Well... maybe. They still hadn't –

"I got a reply back."

She stared up at Audrey, who had just stepped into the doorway. Something about her facial expression said that things weren't going as planned.

"From my dad? What did he say?" Lyra asked, frowning. She set her instrument down to the side.

Audrey took a seat next to her. Her arms were folded, and she stared at her lap. "Well, first off... He's not entirely convinced you're his daughter."

Lyra leaned forward. "What? But everything on your computer said –"

"They'd been searching for you for years after your disappearance. Obviously they wanted their daughter back, but eventually they gave up any hope that you were still alive," Audrey said. "But... you're not the first person who's claimed to be Lyra Michelakos."

"You mean... somebody pretended to be me? Why?"

"He's got a missing daughter and a lot of money. You do the math," Audrey said. "He doesn't want to put his family under too much strain. But he was interested in the picture. Nothing from your disappearance was ever recovered, but he said that picture was one of the things missing."

Lyra gave a sigh of relief. "See? I told you. That should prove everything, right?"

"Nothing can really be taken for granted until they get a DNA test, but first he wants to talk to you. He gave me a phone number," Audrey said.

"A phone number..." Lyra remembered what those were. Like what she'd used to talk to Randall the first time. "So I can talk to him with that, right?"

"That's kind of what it's for, yes. Just don't say anything crazy to him, alright?"

"You mean about Eques–"

"Yes, that. Nothing about that."

Lyra laughed nervously. "No, of course not. I know I'm not a unicorn. I was... kidding, that's all."

"So are you going to tell your family where you've been for the past fifteen years? I'm sure they'd like to know."

"Well..."

Audrey shook her head. "Whatever you decide to tell them, just remember that you're still on thin ice. The last thing you need is for them to think you're just trying to take advantage of them."

"I'd never do that."

"Lyra... In spite of everything, I still trust you. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe you are crazy." Audrey handed her a small piece of paper. "This is the number he sent me. All you can do right now is talk to him."

• • •

The phone was in one hand, and the slip of paper was in the other. Lyra thought she remembered how to enter the code onto the device. The operation had been pretty straightforward. Still, it was only her second time ever talking on a phone, and the last time had been a while ago. Not to mention she'd be talking to her dad for the first time ever.

She took a deep breath. She'd been watching the family relations between Audrey and her parents. They got along well, for the most part. But Audrey had always been a human, and had known them her whole life. This human – and that was part of it, he was a human – was like a total stranger to her. She hadn't felt this way about talking to a human since the first time she'd met one.

Lyra gritted her teeth, and punched in each number.

"Um... hi..." There was no response, just periodic buzzing. "Hello? Is anybody –"

"Hello? Who is this?" A man's voice came from the small device, unexpectedly.

She froze, but finally found her voice again. "My name's Lyra." She said it softly, and waited for a response. He didn't say anything, either. After a moment, she continued, "Are you... Thomas Michelakos?"

"Yes..." His voice suddenly dropped low. Maybe he was just as nervous as she was right now. He said nothing for a while, and then: "I read the email about you."

"Oh, you... did?" She was finding it just as difficult to say anything.

"Your... friend told me –"

"Audrey? Yeah, she sent the letter. I don't know how to use a computer." She gave a short, nervous laugh.

Another long pause. "How long have you had that photograph?"

"Since... Ever since I was young. I never knew who you were. Another friend of mine read your books. He told me about your books. The ones about magic."

"Lyra..." There was something strange about the way he said her name, like he wasn't used to saying it anymore. "Where have you been all these years?"

That question had been inevitable. It was only right for him to want to know. And yet, he probably wouldn't believe her. And if her family – her only solid connection to this world, and her only permanent home – if they abandoned her, she'd have nothing.

She remembered the night that Dewey had shown her that picture. It was one of her final nights in Equestria. After seeing those humans, not even knowing who they were, staying in Equestria didn't seem like an option. And now she was talking to the man from her picture.

If she wanted to live there, in Pennsylvania, then it would be best to put Equestria in the past. Permanently.

"To tell the truth..." She scratched her head. "I don't remember what happened to me."

"The email said you were... confused about it."

"Yeah." Lyra's voice trembled. "It's all kind of a blur."

The phone went silent again, then, "Are you alright?"

"Of course. Nothing bad happened to me. But I don't remember very much from before I came to Des Moines. Audrey and her family took me in for a while. Before that... I don't remember how I got here."

It sounded weak, she realized that. She just didn't know enough about the human world to come up with a convincing lie, even though she'd been pondering it over the past few days. She didn't even know what "America" was like, even if she was right in the middle of it.

"You don't remember anything?" he asked.

"I wish I did."

Her legs moved restlessly. The strangest thing about talking on a phone was that you couldn't see the other human. What they were doing, what they looked like. That was only making it harder to talk to her father.

"So... Green hair, huh?"

"What?" Lyra glanced around, but she was alone in the room. How did he know?

"Your friend Audrey sent me a picture of you. You aren't what I expected, to say the least." The good humor in his voice sounded forced. That much was clear without even being able to see him.

"Uh... yeah, I guess not." Lyra smiled weakly. The other humans all thought she dyed her hair. She actually didn't know what color hair she was supposed to have – green obviously wasn't what she'd been born with. Her parents would know, but not her.

"And you're a musician? Am I remembering this right?"

"Yeah. Guitar, mostly." There was yet another long silence. "I saw you write books about magic."

"Yes... I suppose you could say that, but there's much more to fantasy these days than just magic."

"I'm not really interested in that..." Lyra said.

"You might be the odd one out, then. My wife does artwork, a lot of it is for my books, and... your sister... Well, she's..."

Ever since Audrey had mentioned her while reading the information off the computer, Lyra had been curious about her sister. "What's her name?" Lyra leaned forward.

"It's Chloe."

"I'd like to meet her." Lyra smiled. She'd always been used to being an only child, but she was good with younger fillies. Her sister was probably around the same age as the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

"I haven't told either of them about you yet. It's just..." She heard him sigh. "Lyra, I really *would* like to trust you, but we can't be too careful. You're not lying about where you got that picture?"

"Of course not! I really have had it since... Ever since I can remember."

"You said you didn't remember anything."

"Well, not everything... But that picture, I've definitely had it –" *For a few weeks.* "For years," she said instead.

Well, Dewey had kept it for years, and where else would he have gotten a photograph of humans? Besides, it wasn't like they were going to tell her the truth. Up until the end, they just wanted her to be a regular unicorn. Hadn't they realized that would have been impossible?

"If you could just tell me what happened, where you'd gone after... well..."

"I can't. I'm sorry."

Neither of them said anything. Then, he spoke up again. "Would you be able to come here? To Pennsylvania?"

"Huh? I mean... I think so..." Lyra had no clue where that was in relation to Des Moines, but it would probably be possible to get there somehow. "You mean you *do* trust me?"

"I may be getting my hopes up."

"I really don't have anywhere else to go. Thank you so much..." she whispered.

"One final thing. Would I be able to talk to the family you're staying with?"

"Um, sure... I'll go find somebody... Do I just give the phone to them? I'm sorry, I'm new at this."

"That's fine."

She lowered the phone from her ear. She supposed she could walk around with it until she found one of Audrey's parents. There seemed to be a certain etiquette humans followed when using these that she'd observed but never understood.

But, more importantly... She was finally going home.

Something huge, with stiff, gliding wings, flew right over their car. Lyra leaned towards the window, trying to see what it was. She was pretty sure that it wasn't alive, despite the roar it gave as it passed.

"What was that?" she said, still trying to see it through the windows on the other side. The sky was still dark.

"It's just a plane. You'll probably be on one like that," Audrey said. She seemed unfazed by it.

"Right. You said I'd be flying..." Lyra had never seen anything like that. She'd been expecting an airship, or a balloon, or something that at least made sense.

After they'd talked to her dad on the phone, Audrey's parents had helped her book a flight to Philadelphia to meet him. It would cost just about all of what she'd made from household chores and her concert combined. She had been concerned about paying Nathan for his guitar, but he had told her not to worry about it. It was in the back of the car now, along with a suitcase of her clothes.

About an hour ago, Lyra had been woken up. It was early enough that it still looked and felt like night. As they had driven out to the airport, Lyra had slowly become more alert and realized just how nervous she was feeling.

It wasn't the actual flying that was making her nervous. It was more of *how* humans flew. If that "plane" was what they used, she was beginning to have her doubts. It was so loud, and so fast, and so bulky. Humans could accomplish some unbelievable things without magic, but this seemed questionable.

She'd been up in the clouds plenty of times. Cirrus was originally from Cloudsdale, and still worked there in one of the production centers. When Lyra had been very young, her father – well, not her father, just Dewey – had taken her to visit the city.

He'd used a spell that would let unicorns walk on clouds, and they'd taken a balloon from Canterlot to get there. Lyra still remembered how exciting it had been to see a whole new place up in the sky. It was so different from anywhere on the ground. At the time, going to Cloudsdale had been like visiting another world.

Once Lyra was old enough and she'd learned to use magic, Dewey had taught her to use the cloud walking spell on her own. It was an intermediate-level spell, and not very common, but she'd picked it up after some practice. Her parents had been proud.

But of course they would be. A human, learning a difficult spell like that? They must have realized what that meant at the time. No human had ever used magic before. And yet they'd never said anything to her, all throughout her childhood.

Recently, Lyra had felt like she was in Cloudsdale again. That same feeling like being the only unicorn in the middle of a pegasus city, even though here in Des Moines she was just as human as everybody else.

"Just checking. Do you have your boarding pass?" Audrey's voice snapped Lyra back to the present.

She thought for a moment, trying to remember what that meant. "You mean the ticket? Yeah." Lyra found it in her bag. It was a sheet of paper that Audrey had printed off her computer. They hadn't even needed to go to the airport to buy it.

"You'll be transferring flights in Chicago. Make sure you get to the gate on time, otherwise... I'd rather not consider that. You'll be alright on your own, won't you?" Audrey said.

"Of course. I..." Lyra was about to say that she'd lived on her own for years and travelled alone by train plenty of times, but bringing up anything about her past, especially Equestria, wasn't a good idea. "Don't worry about me."

Audrey took a deep breath. "Yeah. You're probably right," she said. "Besides, your parents said they'd be waiting there to meet you at the Philadelphia airport."

*Her parents.* She'd been thinking so much about the flight that she'd practically forgotten why she was doing this. Maybe that was the real thing making her nervous.

"They will be waiting... They told us that, right?"

"Of course," Audrey said. "Look... If you're nervous about meeting them for the first time, I understand. It's only natural."

"They aren't completely sure that I'm theirs. They said I'd have to take a test, or something."



"Well, a DNA test is really the only way to confirm your identity. It would still be necessary even if you did remember anything."

Lyra could tell what Audrey meant. She still thought Lyra was crazy, or that she was holding something back. Neither one of them had said a word about Equestria since that one time, but it was still on both of their minds.

"Did you remember to give her our phone number, Audrey?" her mother said from the front seat. "Lyra, you should call us when you get home. Let us know you arrived safely."

"I guess so," Lyra said. She turned back to the window, trying to see if any more planes would go overhead. "How far did you say it'd be?"

"You won't be there until this afternoon. It's, I don't know... About six hundred, seven hundred miles or so?" Audrey said. "About halfway across the country."

"You're serious?" Lyra said. "This afternoon...?"

There was *nothing* in Equestria six hundred miles from something else. That distance sounded impossible. And to travel that far in less than a day? If humans could manage that, Lyra would be even more impressed than ever.

Still, an airplane would have to be insanely fast to manage that. Lyra was beginning to feel jittery again.

"Just relax," Audrey told her. "I've flown a few times. It's not that bad."

"Right..." Lyra tried to force a smile.

The car pulled into a large, dark building. Some other vehicles were parked here. All different colors and shapes. The car swerved through all these tight spaces, up several levels of ramps. Lyra was used to cars at this point, and Mrs. Loren was a more careful driver than Nathan, but it still felt like they were coming close to the others. At least they were on the ground.

Once they had pulled in between two other cars, Audrey swung open the door on her side and got out. Lyra did the same. The lid of the trunk popped open and she removed her guitar and suitcase. It was a small one, cheap – she'd just needed something to keep her few changes of clothes in. The handle extended so that you could drag it behind you with one hand, on wheels. It was easier than carrying luggage on your back, or even keeping it afloat with magic.

"Do you need me to take any of that for you?" Audrey watched her as she pulled the guitar case onto her back, with her smaller bag hanging near her hip and the suitcase at her side.

"You're staying here, though, aren't you?" Lyra said.

"We'll be with you until you get to security. They'll check your bags before then," Audrey explained. Lyra stared at her blankly. "It's not as complicated as it sounds. Really."

"I've just never had to take this many steps to travel before. I've taken a train a few times," Lyra said. They started walking past the lines of silent vehicles. Another car passed them, but only once.

"A train? Where was that?" Mrs. Loren asked.

"It's..." Lyra noticed Audrey's expression. "It was a while ago."

She would have to watch herself. She'd slipped again, right after she'd told herself not to. This was going to be a fresh start with her parents, and she'd simplified her story – she would say she remembered nothing. She would tell them as much as they wanted to hear about Des Moines: living with Audrey's family, learning guitar, all the times they'd hung out around town. But absolutely nothing about what happened before that. Like Equestria wasn't even real.

They crossed over a bridge that spanned across the road. Only a few cars drove underneath, shining light ahead of them in the dim morning light. The structure they parked in was several stories tall, and big, but the rest of the airport looked like it would be even bigger. Nothing at all like the simple train platform in Ponyville.

Even the train station in Canterlot seemed big, but it was really nothing compared to this. This airport was a whole lot more complicated – needlessly so, it seemed. All she needed to do was get on one of these planes and go, what was so hard about that?

She let Audrey's mom talk to most of the humans at the airport. They had to stand in line just to show her ticket to a human at the counter, sitting there at a computer. Then they actually took away her suitcase and guitar. Lyra had almost raised a protest when they took them behind the desk and carried them away.

"They're just checking your luggage. Just go to baggage claim when you get to Philadelphia and you can pick them back up," Audrey said.

"But..."

"They don't lose things in transit. Usually," Audrey said. Lyra was about to raise another protest, but she was cut off. "Forget I said that last bit. It'll be fine. Don't worry about it."

Lyra just didn't understand why she couldn't carry everything with her. The guitar technically still wasn't even hers. She'd had to spend pretty much everything she had on the plane ticket, with just a few dollars left over. She really wanted to pay Nathan for the instrument, since it had done so much for her. Without that concert she wouldn't have been able to afford fare. Nathan had told her not to worry about the guitar, and that she could pay him back later – but how? Through the mail? She hoped it worked like Equestria's mail system... and that the carriers were reliable.

After handing off most of her belongings, they continued into the airport. Lyra was astounded at the size of this place. She'd thought the *mall* was big.

They came to some flights of stairs, but they were moving on their own. Audrey and her mom stepped onto them and just stood there, letting themselves be carried up. Lyra cautiously followed their example. Why exactly this was necessary wasn't clear – it seemed like they'd reach the next floor quicker if they just walked – but Lyra had enough on her mind as it was.

She'd be home soon. Then she could relax. Focus on studying human behavior then. For now, she just had to get through all of this.

They paused right before Lyra got to security. There was a long line of humans waiting to go through. She watched what they were doing at the front – sending their bags through some sort of machine, walking through gates that occasionally beeped, causing the human to stop and get searched by the workers in blue uniforms. This entire process just got stranger and more complicated as they went on.

"This is as far as we can go," Mrs. Loren said. "Will you be alright?"

"When you get to Chicago, just go right to the next gate. Don't get lost. I'm not sure what you'll do if you miss your next flight," Audrey said.

Lyra nodded, still sidetracked by the line she was about to enter.

"Please have your photo I.D. ready when you reach the security checkpoint! Thank you," one of the uniformed humans announced.

"I don't have an I.D." Lyra glanced from Audrey and then at her mother. "What do I do?"

"It's the other line, over there. It shouldn't be a problem. They'll... probably search you, though."

"Um... okay..." Lyra said. She looked at where Audrey had told her to go. The line was much shorter, at least.

"You'd better hurry up. Don't want to miss your flight," Audrey said.

"Yeah." Lyra nodded.

"Remember to call when you get home," Mrs. Loren added.

"I'll do that. I think I remember how..."

"You'll be fine. Don't worry about it," Audrey said.

"You're right... I'll be there this afternoon, just like you said."

"And you're feeling alright about this? Travelling on your own? And... meeting them?"

"Yeah... This is exactly what I was trying to do the whole time. I just need to go back home to my real parents," Lyra said. "I couldn't have made it here without your help."

With one last glance back, she hurried to get into line, and waited there for a while. She watched the humans ahead of her pass through. She couldn't tell exactly what the purpose of this step was... Her other belongings had been taken, but apparently the luggage you were allowed to take had to be checked first. It was all so pointlessly complicated.

"Step on up, ma'am." Lyra realized they were talking to her. She was next.

One of the humans started feeling her arms and legs with their hands. Like they were looking for something hidden in her sleeves. Lyra wasn't hiding anything, so other than the uncomfortable invasion of space she didn't mind too much.

But she nearly panicked when she glanced over and saw the humans going through her bag. They opened up her lyre's case, and flipped through her journal filled with observations of human behavior. If they saw that she'd been studying them, they'd ask questions, and Audrey hadn't reacted very well to the answers...

The search ended, and everything was put back. Lyra had been watching carefully to make sure of that. Apparently whatever the humans had been concerned about finding wasn't in Lyra's belongings, and she was free to go. When her bag was given back to her, she quickly put it back over her shoulder and held it close to her hip with one hand. She hurried out of the checkpoint and off to the other side.

Back on her own again.

In a way, it felt like her very first day as a human. All by herself, no friends to help her find her way around.

This area right outside of security had a place called the "Capitol City Marketplace." Apparently you could buy food here. A few humans were seated and eating breakfast, but Lyra was too nervous to even think about food right now.

Lyra glanced back at the security checkpoint. Those humans in uniform seemed to be looking for something. Not all of the humans were searched quite as thoroughly as she had been, but it was all very meticulous. But, as Lyra watched a few humans pass through, it seemed like they never found whatever it was they were afraid of finding.

A screen overhead – like a flat television, but the words were stationary – seemed to list all of the planes and destinations. Her eyes scanned the list. Atlanta, Austin... Chicago! It was pretty early on the list. Gate C6. Wherever that was.

"Attention, passengers." It was a female voice, speaking in a calm tone, but the way it had come out of nowhere still made Lyra jump. "Delta Airlines Flight 3849 to Orlando, now boarding at Gate A2."

The hallway on her right seemed to have C-numbers. C6 would probably be on the end. She started to walk down, looking at all the different humans waiting for their own flights. Considering that it was still about six in the morning, the airport was still filled with humans. Maybe this type of flying was a new experience for her, but humans seemed used to it. Another part of human life that she was getting to participate in. Even if she was still feeling nervous.

There were seating areas spaced intermittently between sections of hallway. Large windows let you see outside, where a few of the airplanes were waiting in the early morning light. She found a room marked C6 at the very end of the line.

She took a seat on one of the cushioned chairs, and leaned back to try to relax. A few other humans were scattered throughout the area. Some of them were reading books, or

on what looked like portable computers, but a few of them seemed to be sleeping or resting. It made sense, considering how early it was. They were all different ages – there was one who had grey hair and wrinkles, and then a few that had families of young children. Those young humans seemed especially tired. One of them who was actually awake seemed cranky. Seeing them made Lyra wonder about her own younger sister. What she was like. What were humans like at seven years old? They had different standards of age than ponies... She couldn't even guess the ages of the children here.

Lyra opened up her bag. Everything seemed to be in order even after they'd searched through it. She found her old journal and took it out. Flipping through the first few pages, she could see her sketches of her dreams, then the writing changed when she started using hands to write. It changed again when she became human. Lyra found a blank page and started listing off the names of cities that she could remember.

Atlanta. Memphis. Those ones were easy to remember. And someplace called "Phoenix." Princess Celestia had one of those. Lyra wondered if those still lived in the human world – she hadn't seen many animals, so she wasn't sure exactly what did or did not exist. If unicorns weren't even real here, then nothing could be taken for granted.

She sat there for a few minutes, just watching the other humans. They weren't doing very much. A few more came to sit down in the same waiting area.

Outside, the huge winged vehicles like the one she was about to board were moving along the roads, and in the distance she could see them taking off. They had wings, but they didn't flap. How did they lift themselves? She didn't often question the specifics of how human technology worked, but if it was going to carry her hundreds of feet into the air...

"Attention, passengers. United Airlines Flight 6190 to Chicago, now boarding at Gate C6."

Lyra's head shot up at the mention of Chicago. All she knew about it is that it was where she was supposed to go. The other humans were moving towards a doorway that seemed to be connected to a plane outside. All she could do was follow their lead as they waited for their tickets to be taken individually and entered the hallway.

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The plane was little more than a tube, with rows of seats and a low ceiling. Most of these seats were already filled by other humans. It was kind of like a train, just... smaller, and they'd be flying up into the clouds...

Lyra held her bag close to her side as she moved down the aisle. She couldn't hold up the line behind her. Her eyes scanned the seats, and she went for the nearest empty one.

"Excuse me..." She stepped over another human, a male, and dropped down into her seat. Her bag was still held close to her chest. She took a deep breath.

"Oh man. You look terrible," the human next to her said. It was a male, maybe a little bit older than her, with light-colored hair. It was still so hard to judge their ages, but he seemed a little older than Nathan, but not quite as old as her band members. "You're going to be okay, right? The last thing I need is for you to be throwing up the whole flight."

"I-I'll be fine," she managed to force out.

"You don't look like it."

"I've just never done this before."

"First time flying?"

"No... I've been up to the clouds plenty of times. Just..." She indicated everything around them with her hands. "Not in one of these."

"You're either high or really crazy."

"I'm not crazy!" she said. Maybe it had been too much of an outburst, because he was looking at her strangely now. She was starting off fresh, no need to make things worse now like she had with Audrey. "It was... a hot air balloon."

He nodded slowly. "Well, this will be an interesting flight."

"Really? What's happening?"

"You, for one thing."

"Oh. Right." She tried to smile. "Don't worry. I'm just a little nervous." Her eyes went down to his hands, and she remembered her human etiquette. She pried her right hand away from her bag and offered it for a shake. "I'm Lyra Michelakos." It was the first time she'd ever introduced herself with her full name.

He took her hand slowly. "Paul Chandler, but... Wait, don't tell me you're going to Philadelphia too. You're not related to –"

"Thomas Michelakos? You've heard of him?" Her eyes widened.

"You're serious?"

"He's my dad."

He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "That's... Wow. I've actually got a friend who works at a used bookstore. She's met him a couple times."

"Really?" Lyra said. "To be honest, I haven't met him before. I didn't even know who my parents were until recently. It's... kind of a long story."

"I don't mind. We've got a long flight ahead of us, and I happen to be sitting next to someone famous. Or someone with famous parents, but it counts," he said. "For the next few months, I'm going to be telling people about this whenever there's a lull in conversation. That's the unspoken rule of meeting famous people on a flight."

Lyra stared at him, wide-eyed. "I didn't realize..."

"Yeah, I had a friend who saw Orlando Bloom at an airport once. I was hearing about it constantly for weeks afterwards. You're not quite that famous, but you'll do."

Orlando... where had she heard that before? "Oh yeah! I think I saw a few flights listed going to Orlando."

"That's a different Orlando."

Just like in the airport, a voice came on out of nowhere, but it was male this time. It sounded slightly distorted and crackly. "Attention all passengers, this is your captain speaking. We'd like to thank you for flying United Airways today. We'll be at an altitude of about 30,000 feet today –"

"Thirty... *thousand*... feet..." Lyra said.

"You're scared of heights? I'm serious, I really don't want to deal with you throwing up."

"Why do we need to go that high? That's insane! We were nowhere *near* that high up when I went to Clouds– I mean... Never mind." She had to keep herself together. *I'm*



*starting fresh. No mention of Cloudsdale or ponies. This human already thinks I'm acting weird.*

The flight attendants were giving a demonstration of how to use the safety equipment. Lyra knew that she should probably pay attention, but it wasn't making her feel much better. They weren't even moving yet and the first thing they talk about is what to do if they crash? That wasn't exactly reassuring.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to put that under the seat in front of you." Lyra realized the attendant was talking to her about the bag she was holding even tighter than before against her chest.

"Wh-what? Oh..." She did as she was told, but instantly searched for something to hold on to. Her fingers closed around the armrests on either side of the seat. For some reason it just felt better if her hands were full right now.

She sat there for a moment, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Paul didn't seem bothered at all. Then, the same male voice from above their heads: "We've been cleared for takeoff."

Lyra felt the plane move forward underneath her. Her entire body tensed up. She stared down at her lap, trying not to look at the window.

"You're seriously going to be okay?" Paul asked.

She couldn't get any words out.

He leaned back in his seat. "This should be fun."

When she finally managed to lift her head up and glance outside, they were on a long strip of road, slowly moving forward... Then the high-pitched humming sound got louder and they started speeding forward. She was being forced back into the chair. She squeezed the armrests as hard as she could. And then the shaking stopped. Most of it, at least. They were tilting back, moving upwards. It wasn't so bad...

Her hands shot up to her ears. Something had just happened to them, and it hurt.

"Here." Paul's voice sounded far away. He handed something over to her. She opened her eyes just enough to see it was a magazine.

"SkyMall?" Lyra said, reading the cover. "I-I've been to a mall before, but why –"

"Maybe it'll help you get through the flight. Personally, I always look forward to reading it."

She lowered her hands from her ears, even though that weird sensation was still there. She started looking through the catalog. Human inventions *did* interest her.

"You can actually buy all of these things? That's incredible..."

"Um, that's not exactly what I was talking about," he said.

"What do you mean? This stuff is fascinating."

"In a way, you could say that. Honestly, who's going to spend that much on the world's largest crossword puzzle? I'll admit that the Bigfoot garden statue is... 'interesting,' but it's out of my price range."

A smile came across Lyra's face as she flipped through the pages of human inventions. "What's this?" Lyra pointed at one of the photographs. A close-up of a human's hand with some kind of device strapped to it, connected to each finger. "A 'hand fitness trainer?' How does it work?"

"Nobody knows. Probably not even the people who designed it," he said. "And it's yours for just \$30. Wow. Though, considering who your dad is, you're probably able to blow some money on whatever you feel like. You must be loaded."

"Huh?"

"He is a bestselling author. Something of a local celebrity, I guess."

"I guess I didn't really think about that... His books are sold everywhere, aren't they?"

He nodded. "And I see you've already forgotten you're afraid of flying."

"I told you, I'm not –" Lyra stopped. The strange thing was, she *did* feel better after looking at that magazine. She was much less nervous. Though she still couldn't bring herself to look out the window. "Um... thanks."

"Glad I could help," he said. "Anyways, you mentioned you had a story to tell. I'm still interested in hearing that."

"Oh yeah. Right..."

She told him just about everything about her weeks with Audrey. Meeting Nathan, learning guitar, playing the concert with Randall, and finally finding out who her family was. It was almost like practicing what she'd be telling her parents once she got home. Paul mostly listened, but offered a few comments.

"I stand corrected. I'm probably going to be bringing this up in conversation for *years* to come, not just months."

"What do you mean?" Lyra cocked her head.

"Honestly, I think you're making most of this up."

Lyra was speechless. It was like a curse – no matter what she said, nobody *ever* believed her. "It's all true, though."

"What you've got is interesting, but I personally would have added in some aliens, maybe a zombie outbreak, or magical –"

"Wait, I never said anything about magic." She stared at him in shock.

"You should have." He shrugged. "It's still a good story, though."

Maybe it had just been a joke... She tried to tell herself that. "So why were you in Des Moines? You haven't told me much about yourself," Lyra said. Anything to get the conversation away from magic.

"I was visiting an old friend who moved away a few years ago."

"That must have been fun. He's so far away, but you can fly to visit him?"

"Well, he's kind of a jerk, but yeah. I guess you're right. It is nice."

Flying to Cloudsdale had usually been pretty smooth, but the plane kept on shaking around. And the engines were still pretty loud. She tried not to think of those safety demonstrations they'd given at the beginning of the trip.

Lyra finally worked up the nerve to look out the window. As she'd expected, they were in the clouds... but it was so barren out there. There weren't any buildings, no structures, just flat expanses of clouds.

"It's so empty up here..." she muttered.

"What'd you expect?" Paul said. "Besides, wouldn't it be worse if there *was* something up here?"

So humans could get up here, sure, but they hadn't done anything. It figured. They couldn't fly on their own, so they probably couldn't walk on the clouds. And over the past few weeks Lyra had gotten the impression that all of their weather happened randomly. She wasn't sure how they predicted it, but they were accurate some of the time.

"You're right... I don't know. It's my first time being up this high."

"So you've told me. So, what's it like taking a hot air balloon? I've never done *that* before."

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They were descending.

The flight had lasted a little over an hour. Or so she'd been told, it felt like forever. If she hadn't had someone to distract her, she wasn't sure what she would have done.

Lyra could see the ground slowly coming up closer to them, and a part of her was bracing for the impact... But mostly she was just transfixed by the sight.

The entire ground was covered in buildings. Just a whole sea of gray box-like shapes. Some of them were small, like Audrey's neighborhood, but there were also some tall towers. It was hard to tell, but this city – Chicago – might be even bigger than Des Moines. And, as far as she could see, hardly any open green spaces. That feeling of being in a completely unfamiliar world was stronger than ever.

She felt the plane shake violently. It must have hit the ground. They were speeding along the road, but she could feel resistance like they were slowing down. Still, it seemed impossible that they could stop in time...

But the other humans were unimpressed. Some of them stretched as they woke up from sleeping. Imagine, taking a nap. Through *this*.

The captain's voice came on again, with that weird crackly sound to it. "On behalf of United Airways, I'd like to welcome you all to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. Please remain seated until we come to a complete stop, and we hope you had a nice flight."

Lyra leaned back and let out a sigh. "Finally. I don't want to do *that* again."

"Suck it up. We've still got one more flight before we're home," Paul said.

"You're right... Do you think I'll see you again? In Filly- I mean, Philadelphia?"

He laughed. "You're already sounding like a native. Maybe we will."

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This airport was even bigger than the one in Des Moines, and much more busy. She was beginning to believe what Paul had told her about Des Moines being a "small city."

She'd lost track of him as the airplane had cleared out. Maybe she would find him again before they boarded the next plane. Having someone else there had really helped her keep her head clear. Right now there was too much to worry about.

She had some time to kill before the next flight. About two hours, plus however long the flight itself would be. She wandered into one of the stores. The words "Hudson News" were lit up above the entrance, in white cursive letters. It seemed to have a little of everything – snacks, t-shirts, souvenirs, magazines... There were some books on one wall, with the paper covers instead of hard ones.

Her dad's name instantly jumped out at her. *Voice in the Dark*, by Thomas Michelakos. His name was slightly larger than the title. The cover art was similar to the others – humans, dressed in armor or cloaks, one of them seated on the back of a pony.

Well, it was closer to those ponies that she'd seen in Iowa instead of anyone she'd known in Equestria. Taller, with the long face and small beady eyes. Still, a human riding on its back... Spike did that with Twilight every so often. A human, though? That was different. Maybe when she'd been a pony, she would have agreed to that if a human had asked.

That was strange to think about.

It didn't say much about what the story was. All it said was that it was the first book.

It was only a couple dollars, and she was curious to know what exactly he wrote about. Between waiting for the flight and sitting through it, she'd have plenty of time to find out. She took out the little bit of money she had left, counted it, and took it up to the counter to pay.

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The second flight went easier than the first, perhaps because she knew what to expect. She'd seen Paul in line as they boarded, but lost him as they'd taken their seats. Instead Lyra was sitting next to an adult human woman who slept, snoring noisily, the entire time. Lyra was getting a bit more comfortable with airplanes, but she wasn't at the point where she could go to sleep yet. She settled in and kept her mind occupied with her dad's novel instead.

The book started off with a wordy introduction, and then went into a history of... a war.

Like what had happened in Equestria.

But this one hadn't ended the human race, in this world her father had dreamed up. Obviously it hadn't, since this took place at the beginning of the story. But why would humans want to read about something like that? War was just about the worst thing humans could do, even if they stopped themselves before going too far and wiping themselves out completely.

She kept reading, though. The tone lightened soon enough, focusing on a few humans living in a small village. Details of it reminded her of Ponyville – the thatched roof houses, the farms on the outskirts of the town, the marketplace they set up every week or so to sell crops and other goods.

But then she came across a mention of magic.

The world of this story was inhabited by humans, but certain ones used magic. Not that they were born with it – apparently in this book magic was just something ordinary humans could learn if they studied enough. And knowing magic created a huge divide between them and the other humans. Magic users lived in a city far away from this little village, all by themselves. Kind of like the divide between the races in Hearth's Warming Eve. That story had been just as fictional as this novel, though.

Lyra lowered the book and stared out the window. The human world stretched out below her, too tiny to see any details. It was huge and fascinating. Maybe she'd get the chance to explore it someday.

But more importantly... Magic didn't create any kind of tension between those who had it and those who didn't. Lyra and Bon-Bon had had their differences, their arguments, but it had never been about magic. It had been about... other issues Lyra had. She inspected her fingers. Though maybe in this book, it caused such problems because every

human who could use magic was about as powerful as Twilight, maybe even more. Magic wasn't that easy or that useful. Everything in this book was so wrong...

Her dad knew *nothing* about real magic.

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The flight lasted long enough for her to get through a good chunk of the book, though it hadn't been easy. All she could focus on were the inaccuracies, and wondering why any of this would interest humans who lived in a world where you could cross over six hundred miles in a few hours.

Lyra was grateful when the plane touched down in Philadelphia, once again landing on that long road and speeding along until it finally slowed to a stop.

"Thank you for flying with us. The local time here in Philadelphia is 12:53. We hope you enjoyed your flight." As soon as the captain's voice came through the ceiling, she'd been grateful to stand up, stretch her legs, and hopefully never fly like this again.

She followed the sea of humans pouring out of the single exit. They'd probably know where to go. She tried looking for Paul again, but couldn't find him. Besides, now she was looking for someone else. Someone more important...

The signs hanging above her head directed her towards baggage claim, and that made her remember her suitcase and guitar. Audrey had said that she'd get those back after arriving here.

Lyra followed the arrows through the airport. It was different from Chicago or Des Moines – had she really been to three of these already? But it was equally as huge and crowded.

Her eyes were suddenly drawn to something – her own name. First *and* last, in thick block letters, on a sheet of white paper.

Being held by a woman she recognized.

Lyra stood there frozen for a moment. There was no mistake. That human was the same as the woman in her photo. She'd been looking at it every day since she left Equestria. That was her real mother. And she was holding a sign with Lyra's name on it.

She felt herself start walking towards her. It was an almost subconscious motion.

"A-are you..." she started to say.

The woman stared at her, like she was hardly able to believe what she was seeing. "Lyra?"

Lyra could only nod in response. She remembered how humans greeted each other, and offered a handshake, but instead her mother put her arms around her in a tight hug.

They drew apart slowly, and then something crossed her mother's face. "Your eyes..."

"What about them?"

"No, it's... nothing," she said. "It's nothing to worry about. Lyra..." She shook her head. "When your father said that he'd found you, and that he'd spoken to you, I just couldn't believe it."

Lyra noticed something. She looked around at all the humans surrounding them. "Where is he, though?"

"He had to pick up Chloe from her day camp, but they should both be home not long after we get back."

"My sister." Lyra was grinning. "I can't wait to meet her. I'm pretty good with kids, you know. I'm so excited to meet her."

Lyra's mother nodded. "But until we know for sure... We don't want to tell her who you are. Who we think you are. If there's still a chance you're not..."

"I understand," Lyra said, but really she didn't. She reached into the bag at her side, and dug out the picture frame. "Um, I've had this picture, and -"

"I saw that in the email... I remember this photo. It was one of the things missing from your room."

"So that proves it, right? What else do you need?"



"Lyra, of course we believe you, but it's been so difficult for all of us. We would have given anything to know what happened that night."

"Yeah, same here," Lyra said. She idly reached up and shifted the weight of her bag on her shoulder. "I wish I could tell you what had happened, but..."

"You don't remember."

"Nothing."

"Do you know how you ended up with that?" Her mother indicated the picture frame Lyra was holding in front of her.

The night after her performance at the Grand Galloping Gala. Lyra had been lying awake after being told by Princess Celestia herself that her entire life had been a lie. And then Dewey, the unicorn who had adopted some creature from another world, had given her this picture and it had seemed like things could turn out alright. And now it was the very moment that Lyra had been waiting and hoping for ever since leaving Equestria.

"I... don't remember where it came from," she heard herself say. "I've had it all my life. That's all I know."

A frown crossed her mother's face, and she sighed. "Well, we'd better get you home, anyway."

"Oh, um – I need to pick up my bags. They took them before I went on the plane," Lyra explained.

"I didn't forget." She noticed Lyra's face. "Don't look so worried. They'll be at baggage claim," her mother said. Her head tilted up to find the signs hanging from the ceiling. "This airport is a nightmare. We've had to get through it a few times. It never does get any easier."

"You've been here before?" Lyra said. "This is my first time ever flying... In a plane, I mean."

Her mother gave her a strange look, but it only lasted a moment. "Follow me. We'll try not to get lost."

The "baggage claim" was a large room with some kind of moving track snaking through it. Tons of suitcases were drifting along. So many of them looked the same. Lyra tried to

remember what hers looked like... She hoped it was here. This entire system didn't make sense – why even take her things away if they were going to get here at the same time she did?

She watched for a while as other humans lifted suitcases off the track and rolled them away. The crowd was slowly thinning out.

"So, uh... where have you flown to? You said you'd been here before," Lyra said. She didn't take her eyes away from the baggage claim for more than a few seconds.

"Mostly conventions, things like that, but we've gone on a number of family vacations now that Chloe's getting old enough."

"Is it always like this? With all the security and stuff?" Lyra asked. A man stepped right in front of her to take his suitcase off the track.

"It's gotten so much more strict than it used to be. It's hard to believe it's been over ten years now." From the tone, Lyra guessed she was supposed to know what that meant, but she would have been a pony back when whatever it was had happened.

She spotted the suitcase – now she remembered what it looked like. It was coming around the bend towards her. She prepared herself to snatch it up – she'd have to be fast. The handle was pointing away from her... As it passed by her, she quickly reached down, spun it around with both hands, then closed her fingers around the handle to hoist it up and onto the ground in front of her.

"There it is. Ready?" her mother asked.

"My guitar, too," Lyra said. She really didn't want to lose that. She was more familiar with that case than her suitcase, so as soon as it came through...

"I heard you were a musician."

Lyra nodded. "Yeah. Well, the guitar's kind of new for me. I just learned it."

Her eyes were still fixed on all the luggage that continued to drift past. The guitar case would be easy to spot with its long, irregular shape. Not to mention she'd been looking at it for weeks going to and from practice. She was going to miss that.

"Another artist in the family. You'll fit right in."

"I hope so," Lyra said.

She spotted Nathan's guitar – her guitar – and pulled it off the track. For a moment she'd been worried that it would be lost. She had everything, and she was here with her mother. She felt such a strong sense of relief.

"That's it, then. Ready to go home, Lyra?" her mother asked.

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"This is... our car?" Lyra said. She walked around it, examining it. It wasn't much different from other ones that she'd seen before. Big. Red. Not the same one from the old picture, but that had been taken years ago.

"Of course," her mother said. She pulled open one of the back doors. "You can put your things in the back."

Lyra slid everything across the back seat, and then got into the front seat. The right side, since humans always drove sitting on the left. She was learning. This vehicle belonged to her family... Her other parents hadn't even owned a *carriage* of their own. Not that there was any need to. Unless they had to leave town, everything in pony cities was within easy walking distance.

They were in a darkened building just like the one Audrey's mom had parked in at the other airport. The same cold grey walls, floor, and ceiling. It was weird how things were so similar here. It was almost like being in the same city. When Lyra had found out she was going hundreds of miles away, she'd expected it to feel so much different. Just thinking of how diverse all of the Equestrian towns she'd visited felt, and those were relatively close together distance-wise.

They drove around the grey building for a while, then exited into the bright sunlight. It was weird. It felt like it should be so late, but it was probably just because she'd woken up so early.

It was a bit of a drive to get from the airport back home. It went through a city that was – as impossible as it seemed – even bigger than Des Moines. The buildings were so much taller, and all different styles. One that was reflective, practically a giant mirror, was right across from another tower made of light grey stone. This was her own hometown...

That's right. It was. She had seen this place before, nearly a year ago. In her dreams... This time Bon-Bon wasn't going to wake her up, though, because this time she was actually here. She leaned closer to the window, bending around to see up higher.

"Did you live in Iowa? There aren't many big cities out there, are there?"

Lyra shrugged. "Well, I didn't live there... I mean, I don't remember where I lived, exactly. I... think it was a smaller town, though." True enough – Philadelphia would have made *Manhattan* look like a backwater village, let alone Ponyville.

She read the names of buildings, shops, and restaurants as they drove past. What she at first assumed was just *déjà vu* turned out to be more than just a weird feeling. Some of these hotels really did have the same names as ones around the Des Moines area. Like they'd just been lifted out of one city and replanted here.

They drove through the city for a while before the tall buildings started to thin out. They crossed a bridge over a wide, brownish river, drove alongside it for a while, and then turned into a neighborhood amidst some trees. The forest got thicker as they continued on, with houses becoming farther and farther apart. Eventually it *was* just a forest and hardly a village at all.

And then there it was.

Lyra had seen this house plenty of times, but only in that photograph. Suddenly it was right in front of her.

As soon as the car stopped, she clicked out of her seatbelt and opened the door. She stepped out onto the pavement and just stood there.

Not much had changed in those fifteen years. She'd still recognized it, after all. It was so big, though – two stories, fairly wide, and the driveway had been longer than she realized. The picture also hadn't shown her all the trees surrounding the house.

"We're home, Lyra," she heard her mother say.

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This house – her house, Lyra realized – was nice. *Really* nice.

She entered into a hall with stairs on one side. There was a balcony going across, and she could see a doorway into another room upstairs. Directly in front of her she could see

through to the living room. Light was pouring in through the large windows, filtered through the leaves of the woods outside. Already she could tell it was maybe twice the size of where Audrey lived.

As she headed further inside, she noticed a painting on the wall. A large red dragon, sitting on top of a mountain of treasure. She'd never seen one up close, or in its cave, but it looked about right from what she'd heard from other ponies. And the details were accurate enough – though dragons had a huge variety of body shapes and sizes. In the corner, there was a name – *Selena M.*

"That's one of my early ones." Lyra's mother had noticed she was examining it.

"You painted this?" Lyra said, pointing at it. She turned back to look closer. "How did you know what a dragon looked like?"

"I based it off of Tolkien. Have you read *The Hobbit*?"

"No... I don't know that one." Lyra shook her head. Probably a human book. "I heard you were an artist."

"Your father and I do share a love of fantasy. It's how we met, actually, all those years ago," her mother said. "I've been doing the covers for his books, ever since *Voice in the Dark*. That was the first."

"I was reading it..." Lyra said. She remembered what the cover had been. "So, um... I remember the picture on that one. I was wondering about that. Have you ever... ridden on the back of a pony?"

Her mother laughed, a light sound. "I've done some horseback riding. It was a long time ago."

Lyra nodded. She wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Why do you ask? Do you do any riding?"

"N-no. Of course not," Lyra said. "It's just... well... never mind."

She hurriedly moved past the painting and into the next room.

The living room was spacious like the hall had been, the feeling of openness enhanced by the large windows on the back wall. There was a cobblestone fireplace, and Lyra was a bit

shocked to see a sword mounted over it. She was about to ask about it, but she noticed something on the coffee table in front of the sofa that was even stranger.

"What are these?" Lyra said, reaching out tentatively to pick up one of the small figures, but stopping short of it.

"Those are your sis- They're Chloe's."

"Oh... They are?" Lyra's voice shook.

She'd thought they were just small figures of horses at first. White horses, with a certain gracefulness like Princess Celestia, while still not looking quite like Equestrian ponies. They weren't as stocky. The faces were different. But she'd noticed the horns.

"You know how little girls are. Just about everyone goes through a unicorn phase at least for a little while," her mother said. She laughed. "Maybe I never outgrew mine."

"Um... right." Lyra grinned nervously. "I... I guess you could say I'm done with unicorns, though... And magic."

Her mother simply nodded. "Lyra... We really did miss out on so much time together. We never knew you when you were that age..." The smile had vanished from her face.

When Lyra had been that age, she'd actually been a unicorn, learning magic, and discovering humans for the very first time. Just how different *were* these two places? She was standing here with a human talking about how dragons and unicorns were just stories made up to entertain children. It was almost like talking to Twilight, but reversed.

"After we lost you... Well, neither of us wanted to go through that again. But we knew we still wanted a child..."

"I don't think what happened to me was normal."

"You're probably right about that."

They both heard the front door swing open, and footsteps quickly running through the entry hall. Then a small human girl ran into the living room... and stopped as soon as she saw Lyra. They both stared at each other, not saying anything.

"Who are you?"

"Um... I'm –" Lyra couldn't find her words.

"Chloe, we told you we'd be having a visitor, didn't we?" Lyra's mother said.

A man followed the girl from the hall. He was tall, with a small beard the same silvery-grey as his hair neatly trimmed framing his mouth. He noticed Lyra immediately.

"You're here..."

Lyra nodded. She wasn't sure what to say. Although she'd never met any of these humans before – and they *were* humans, that was still the strangest part – something about them felt so familiar. Welcoming.

"Chloe..." The man found his voice again. "This is Lyra. She's going to be staying with us for a while."

"Why is her hair like that?"

Lyra had to admit that she was wondering the same thing. Both her mother and her sister had dark brown hair. "I-it's because... I like this color, so I dye it." She flashed a nervous smile. In the back of her mind, she considered maybe learning how to use hair dye and changing it back to its original color.

"Chloe, why don't you go upstairs for a while?" her father said, bending down slightly and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Chloe nodded, gave a final glance towards Lyra, then headed for the stairs.

Lyra turned her head at the sound of footsteps heading up the stairs. They faded away. She looked back at her father, back to her mother. The faces were the same as her photograph. The first real human faces she had ever seen. Finally, her father spoke up. "Did your flight go well?"

She scratched the back of her head. "It was okay."

He looked over at the sofa behind her, and motioned to it. "Please, sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

She did as he said. She was feeling tired even though she'd been sitting for hours on the airplanes. That had hardly been what you'd call relaxing, though, with all the noise and being shot up thousands of feet into the air.

"It's been so many years..." her father said. He crossed the room and took a seat next to her. "We thought we'd never know what happened to you."

With any luck, they never would. She gave another glance towards Chloe's unicorn toys sitting on the table. "I'd kind of like to know what happened, too... It's like I told you on the phone. Before I stayed with Audrey's family, I can't remember anything."

"How did you find us?"

"I had a... friend. Randall. I played in a band with him," Lyra said. "I showed him the picture of you, and he recognized you. From the books. And then Audrey used her computer and found some news article..."

Her father nodded. "We're not going to talk to any media this time. When you went missing, they just made everything more difficult."

"We're just glad you're home now," her mother said, putting an arm around her.

Lyra smiled. "I am, too." Then, "One thing..."

"Yes?"

"I haven't eaten all day. Do you have anything I could have for lunch?"

• • •

Her parents had acted surprised when she told them she was a vegetarian. Lyra was having trouble deciding what she could eat, so she just grabbed an apple from a basket of fruit in the kitchen. She hadn't had one in a while. Probably not since they'd finished off the giant bag that Bon-Bon had been forced into buying.

They'd talked over lunch. The awkwardness never seemed to completely go away, although it took mere minutes for everybody to open up. She'd told them all about Des Moines. It was all she wanted to tell them about. She turned the questions onto them. She definitely had enough.

"That sword above the fireplace..." she said.

"That's an interesting story..." It brought a small smile to his face. "It's a gift from a fan. I have dozens of stories I could tell... I have been writing for a long time, now. Since before you were even born."



"It's a weapon, though..."

"The blade is dulled. The guy who gave me that actually owns a metal forge, and wanted to recreate Errian's blade for me. I met him at a convention."

Lyra nodded. "I was reading your book. You really seem interested in... magic. I don't really get that."

"Those are the things that draw people to fantasy. Everyone wants to escape sometimes, to a world more interesting than their own. I think that's what helped us." He looked across the table at his wife, then back to Lyra.

She stared at the apple and noted the way it seemed to fit perfectly into one hand. "Maybe you're right about that."

• • •

After that, she'd been shown where her room was. The same one that she'd slept in as an infant, according to her parents. It was refurnished since then, and they didn't use it very often.

Her father set down her suitcase by the door. "Do you need any help unpacking?"

She shook her head. "I'll be alright. I don't have much."

"I'll let you get settled in, then, Lyra." He gave a final glance, then turned and walked out.

Lyra wasn't really sure what she had expected. It was just a room, after all.

It was simply furnished, with a bed and a dresser and a nightstand, all dark polished wood. Nothing too fancy, though it was nice. Her window overlooked the back yard, which was mostly just forest. Thinking of her guest room at Audrey's house, and how she'd gotten used to falling asleep with the occasional sounds of a passing car or a siren, this would be more like Equestria than ever.

Fifteen years ago – well, at this point, almost sixteen – she had been right here, when something had opened up and dropped her in the middle of Canterlot. A human child, the first to be seen in Equestria for over a thousand years. Kind of significant, even though she'd ended up just being a single face in the crowd in Ponyville.

But suppose that hadn't happened. Suppose she'd stayed here. Grown up with her human parents, attended school – she'd probably still be attending school now, actually – and lived out her whole life as a human in Philadelphia.

She probably would have ended up like the rest of her family. Fascinated by magic, and dragons, and... unicorns. Completely ignorant of how great this world was by comparison. Most of the unicorns Lyra knew weren't very interesting, anyway. She'd had a few friends in Equestria... Not like here, though. Even if she'd left behind her human friends in Des Moines, she could meet more here in Philadelphia easily enough.

Lyra knelt down in front of the dresser and started transferring her outfits out of the suitcase and into the drawers. Once she was done with that, she leaned the guitar up in the corner of the room. Her smaller bag was still on the bed. She took out the photograph and set it up on the dresser. After considering it for a moment, she took out her lyre and laid it next to it.

Once everything was unpacked, Lyra stretched out on her bed, hands behind her head, and stared up at the ceiling.

Here she was. This was her house. She was back.

Her dad wrote books about magic... and war. Her mother was an artist who painted pictures that looked almost like Equestria. And her little sister was apparently obsessed with unicorns.

Today really *had* been exhausting. She didn't even notice when she fell asleep.

• • •

The human doctor was shining a bright light into one of her eyes. Lyra squinted, and started to tear up. Then he finished and turned it off.

It was only her second day here in Philadelphia. Lyra was in for her first doctor's appointment as a human. She sat on a strangely uncomfortable yet cushioned bench. Everything was pretty much the same routine as an Equestrian doctor. The office even looked similar – other than some anatomy diagrams, which she examined with interest whenever she could. Detailed diagrams of the human body. What she would have given to see these years ago.

The doctor, a younger man with neatly combed dark hair and thin square-rimmed glasses, asked about a few vaccines for diseases she hadn't heard of. Apparently humans

could catch "chicken pox." She had nearly admitted that she had already gotten the pony pox when she was a filly, but caught herself before saying anything. Just how many species' diseases humans were susceptible to was still unclear. She had gotten a few needles stuck in the soft flesh of both arms. It was even more painful than getting shots as a pony.

But she knew the real reason they brought her here. Well, kind of. She didn't understand how they would accomplish it, but...

"You're trying to find out if I'm really Lyra Michelakos, aren't you?"

The doctor nodded. "We already took the samples. They're off to the lab and it should take a couple weeks to get your results."

He was probably talking about those swabs they'd taken from the inside of her mouth. She had no idea why they were doing that. Maybe humans used potions, like Zecora. Those could be a substitute for magic in some cases. And what else would they be doing with it?

He had gone quiet again, just scribbling some things down on his clipboard. Lyra sat on the bench, her fingers curled around the bottom edge.

"This is my real eye color," she told him.

"Your family has a history of brown eyes."

"Well, um..."

"Amber isn't a very common color. It's not entirely unheard of for eye color to change in the early years after birth, although that's also very rare."

"It's... always been this way. As far as I know." She looked around at everything in the room except him.

"Lyra, do you remember –"

"I've told you, and I've told Dad plenty of times. I don't remember *anything* before I went to Des Moines," Lyra said.

"Did you live there?"

"Yes. Well, kind of. I stayed with another family for a few weeks."

He nodded, taking a few more notes. It bothered Lyra that she couldn't see what he was writing. "How did you get to the city?"

"I, um..." Lyra hesitated. "I walked there."

"And where did you walk from?"

She sighed. "That's as much as I know. I really can't tell you any more."

The doctor wrote down a few things on his clipboard. He didn't say anything. Lyra fidgeted, and turned back to one of the diagrams on the wall. The inside of a human ear. She felt her own, how it was kind of stiff. Much less flexible than pony ears. She had never noticed a significant difference in sensitivity, just that it was harder to move it on its own.

"Have you spoken with your... ah, parents, about therapy?" He looked at her over the top of his glasses.

She turned her head to look directly at him. "I'm not crazy."

He smiled. "Nobody's calling you crazy. We're only concerned about your emotional state. How you're adjusting to your new life."

The last three words caught her attention. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't have very much experience with cases like yours, personally, but the adjustment when children are reunited with their lost families can be difficult. Not just for you, but for your parents as well. And your younger sister, especially."

"Oh. I guess you're right."

"Do you feel like you're at home when you're with them?"

She suddenly remembered those white unicorn figures she'd seen on the table. They hadn't looked like anyone she knew, but it was too similar to be ignored. "I guess you could say that."

"It's good to hear so," he said. "Though I'll still be giving your father the number of a psychiatrist I know."

She sighed. There was just something about the way he said "your father" like he wasn't entirely convinced. She'd noticed that from her parents, as well – like they wanted to believe who she was, but had to tell it to themselves over and over and still not fully believe it.

"I just want to know about this test. When do we find out if I'm really Lyra Michelakos?" And she'd also like to understand what exactly they were doing, although just the words "paternity test" seemed to be good enough for everybody else.

"Those results should be out in about a week."

She leaned back, her back pressing against the wall mirror. *Just one more week.* Then they'd all have the answers.

Once again, Lyra was finding herself disoriented in the mornings. Waking up in a new place did that. At least this would be the last time she had to move. Those results would come soon, and then she'd be able to settle down.

She dragged herself out of bed and walked down the hall, past her mom's studio and to the bathroom across from Chloe's room. In the past nine days, she'd managed to learn her way around.

The first thing she noticed when she looked in the mirror was that her hair was a total mess. She found her hairbrush sitting on the edge of the sink and started straightening it out.

She really took more pride in her appearance now than when she had been a pony. True, she still looked somewhat like her pony self, but it was just her hair and eye color. Those things didn't really matter.

The brush snagged on a tangle of green hair, and she pulled it through. She rubbed her eyes and blinked at her reflection sleepily. She thought about how she'd look with dark hair. More like a regular human. That'd be good.

She looked down at her fingers. A few rough patches were forming at the tips from guitar playing. It had been painful at first, but she'd been told they were good – it would make it easier to pick the strings. What had Randall called them? "Calluses," that was right.

It was mostly on her right hand, but there were a few forming on her left as well. She poked at them, curious about the odd stiff texture. She winced as her brush got caught in her hair again, then went back to looking at her hands.

She stopped.

Both her hands were empty, but she was still brushing her hair.

She looked up at the mirror again and had just a glimpse of a fading aura around the brush before it dropped and clattered on the floor.

In a panic, she knelt down to pick it up, but... her fingers were gone. Two mint-green hooves were sticking out of her sleeves in their place.

• • •

Lyra sat straight up in bed.

It was still dark outside, and completely quiet except for the crickets chirping. She turned to look at the clock on the nightstand. The numbers "2:43 AM" were glowing on it. Just the numbers – her parents had called it "digital."

She pulled her hands up to check that they were still there. Everything seemed to be in order. Then she reached up to check her forehead, just to make sure it was still smooth. She let out a sigh of relief.

Had she really expected to find her horn again? Of course not. Humans didn't have those.

But... she'd better make sure she was really still normal.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she scanned the room. There was the dresser, and that large shape leaning against the corner was her guitar. She could barely make out the indistinct shape of her lyre in the shadows. It was set up on top of the dresser, probably about ten feet away from her. She tried to remember how this worked – focusing her mental power, letting it flow into the object and picking it up.

Nothing happened.

It had just been a dream. She still didn't have magic. It was crazy to think that she would.

Even though it had turned out to be nothing, she was still feeling short of breath. That feeling when she'd realized she was using magic again. The first thing that had flashed through her mind had been how she would explain that to her family.

For the past couple days, she'd just kept on telling them she had somehow lost her memory. She was feeling like a broken record, but what else could she say? *Especially* after what had happened with Audrey. But... how long could she really go on lying to her own family?

She laid her head back on the pillow and pulled the covers up. Everything was going to work out. Somehow...

• • •

One thing that hadn't changed since being a pony – Lyra still slept in late. On most days, at least. This morning she was up unusually early, but after that dream, she hadn't exactly been able to rest easy.

Lyra slowly worked through her daily routine. Nothing out of the ordinary... No magic. No hooves. That much was good.

It had been over a week, and Lyra was starting to get used to how things worked with her family. They had their own routines. At times she felt that she was throwing them off by suddenly showing up, but her parents seemed happy that she was back. Most of the time, at least. There still seemed to be a trace of doubt, every once in a while, but that would soon be cleared up.

The door to Chloe's room was still shut. She was probably still asleep. Lyra was still getting used to the idea that she had a younger sister. For the past seven years, she'd had a sister. A human one. Chloe seemed to be adjusting to Lyra being around all the time, but she didn't really like to talk to her. And she didn't know who Lyra was yet – if those results came back and it turned out Lyra was who she thought she was (and Lyra just knew they would), then they'd tell her, but only then. For now, Lyra was just "staying at our house for a little while."

Chloe was almost the same age as the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Lyra had been great at getting along with them. But, for human kids... What did they do? They definitely weren't concerned with getting a cutie mark or anything like that. And Lyra really didn't know much about the kind of unicorns Chloe was interested in.

Her parents' room was down the hall. Her mother was most likely asleep as well. She would probably wake up soon, sit on the back porch to eat breakfast, and then work on painting. There was a half-finished work in the studio that Lyra could see as she walked past. It looked like it would be a human figure with wings, but that was about as ridiculous as a human who could use magic.

Lyra stopped in her bedroom again to pick up the paperback sitting on her nightstand. A bookmark stuck out about three-quarters of the way through. She picked it up and took it with her.

Nobody else was down here yet. Her dad was probably awake. He would get up earlier than anybody else and work on writing. Well, he called it writing, but it was actually all on the computer and not on paper. Humans did use those for just about everything. Maybe Lyra would learn how to use one herself someday. "Typing" looked like it was fun.



She set the book down at the kitchen table and walked over to the cupboard. She opened it up, but it was the wrong one. This one was filled with plates... She moved on to the next one, and the one after that. She still couldn't keep track of what was where. Here it was.

Now, where were those things... Those thin pastries with the fruit filling that came in the shiny foil wrappers. She searched the shelves and found the blue box they came in. It was up high. Maybe she was still half-asleep, because her first instinct was to levitate it down. She shook herself and reached up, closing her fingers around it. She stood there for a while, staring at it blankly.

"Good morning, Lyra." She was snapped back by the sound of her father's voice.

"Oh... Good morning." She managed a smile.

"You're up early. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, of course..." Her eyes went back to the box in her hand. "I just... had a weird dream last night. It's still kind of getting to me."

"Do you remember what it was?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm already forgetting why it bothered me in the first place. I used to have dreams all the time."

"How long ago?"

"It was... Um..." She moved her fingers unconsciously, drumming them against the box. Then she remembered what she was doing, and took out one of the packages. "I don't know. I... just used to have them."

He started making coffee. They had a machine that did it automatically. From what she'd seen, humans were practically addicted to the stuff, and her parents were no exception.

Lyra sat down at the table and crossed her legs, leaning back in the chair. She tore open the foil, took out one of the pastries, and took a small bite from the corner. You could heat these things up in something called a "toaster," but she didn't feel like it today. It still tasted good, if a bit stale. Bon-Bon would probably be horrified, but prepackaged food was a major part of a human diet.

A few minutes later her father sat down across the table from her with his coffee.

"Uh... Dad..." Lyra said.

"Yes?"

"I've been reading your book." It was on the table in front of her. She tapped it with one finger. "There's a few things that confuse me, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, magic, for one thing. How do they use it? You say that they can just learn it, but... *anybody* can do that?"

"It takes some complex mental focus and years of practice, but essentially any character could learn it." He seemed to be speaking more openly than he had been before. It was an easier topic. "Of course, the Citadel doesn't let anyone in. They want to protect their power and teach it only to those they decide are worthy. You've read about that part, haven't you?"

"Hm..." Lyra said. She thought back. The first time she'd ever used magic, it had been an accident. "I guess I just never thought magic worked like that."

"That's the thing about magic." He smiled. "It's not very well-defined, so writers can do whatever we want with it."

Lyra frowned. That wasn't right... The exact nature of magic wasn't easy to get, even if you could use it, but there were some basics that were just undeniable. For one thing, in order to have any control over it, you would need a horn to focus it through. And it was a lot easier to learn than he claimed it was, partly because a unicorn was designed to be able to use it.

"Oh, and... unicorns," she said.

He stared at her.

"Do you have any of them in this book?" Lyra said. She quickly added, "I know Chloe likes them, but... You know."

"I don't have many mythical creatures in my world, no. Just regular horses."

Mythical creatures, like all of Lyra's friends and family up until a little over a month ago. The "horseback riding" was mentioned every so often in the book. It was like they were

just animals. It was hard to explain exactly how she felt about that. The horses weren't much like ponies except in appearance.

A lot of things in this story seemed like the humans Lyra had read about. She hadn't read anything about humans riding horses, but if the Princess had wanted to erase records of humans, that would be one of the first things to go. Along with warfare... There was a lot about that in her dad's story, too.

"It's... an interesting story," Lyra said. "I definitely haven't read anything quite like it before."

He smiled. "And I've got critics who claim it's too cliché."

"Is this kind of story normal for hu—" She caught herself just in time. Making these questions sound natural was hard. "Is it a common theme for stories?"

He shrugged. "It's a very wide genre, but some things never change."

She nodded, and turned towards the windows.

"It's all somewhat based on history, though, isn't it? You just added things to it like magic, and the countries..." She waited for his response, because she realized that the kingdom of Emathia and the nation of America sounded equally unfamiliar in her mind. For all she knew, it could be a real place.

He nodded. "There are some Greek influences. That sets it apart from —"

"Greek? You mean like... Those old stories and songs, like they'd play on a lyre. I know I've heard some things about that."

"Half of our family — my half, that is — comes from Greece. That's where the 'Michelakos' name comes from. My grandfather lived there, but I've only visited the country twice in my life."

"That's amazing!" Lyra's eyes widened. Greece was one of the countries that had really fascinated her ever since seeing the couple pages in Twilight's book. Not only had they invented the lyre — which was a very popular instrument in Equestria — she was *one* of them.

"You're interested in your heritage like I am, I take it."

"Just recently, to be honest." Finding out she wasn't Canterlot-born had greatly increased her interest in herself. "I used to –"

"What?"

"Um..." Lyra fidgeted nervously. "Nothing. I forget what I was going to say." She finished her breakfast and stared out the window again, away from him.

"Lyra..." He stroked his chin. "The doctor told me that it looked like nothing was wrong with you."

"Why would there be? I'm normal," she said.

He sighed. "When we lost you, all those years ago... Your mother and I didn't hear anything. Everything was gone, but there was no sign of a break-in, all the doors were still locked. You had just vanished into thin air. And now you've reappeared just as suddenly, and you say you don't remember anything."

Lyra lowered her head. It was too much like what Audrey had said when she dodged answering questions. "I really don't. You have to believe me." She looked up at him. "You *do* believe me, right?"

He reached over and put his hands over hers. "If there's anything you don't want to talk about..."

"I really don't remember anything," she insisted. "I'm sorry."

Lyra wished that she could make up a convincing lie. But how much about the human world did she really know? She knew Des Moines, she had kind of seen Chicago... She thought back to the list of towns she'd copied into her journal at the airport, but she didn't know what any of them were like. Anything would be better than saying nothing.

She put a hand to her forehead and rubbed it. "I... I need some fresh air. I think I'll take a walk."

Before her father could say anything, Lyra stood up, slipped her shoes on, and headed out the door.

• • •

Lyra didn't plan to stay out for long – she really had just needed a walk. It was nice and quiet out here in the woods. It was away from all the cars, so the smell wasn't quite as noticeable. In fact, it almost seemed like being in Whitetail Woods. She'd participated in the Running of the Leaves a few times there... Back when she had been a pony.

She'd almost let herself slip up.

It had just been little things, sure. But she couldn't mention that she'd always liked reading, because that had come from spending so much time at the Canterlot Library as a filly with her other father. And the reason she was "just now" interested in her heritage? Because she'd always thought she was just a half-unicorn mix, with weakened magic as a result, but now it turned out she was descended from an ancient race of humans. She couldn't say a single word about herself to her family, and it was getting impossible.

Maybe she really didn't feel like she was at home here. Lying definitely made things difficult. But she wasn't sure if she was really missing Equestria, or if she was missing that feeling of performing on stage with Randall in Des Moines... And yet she still wouldn't give up the chance to live with her human family for anything.

She walked along the side of the road, since there wasn't a sidewalk out here. One time a human went past on the other side, sitting on some kind of weird machine that ran on two skinny wheels. Lyra stopped in her tracks and watched. It seemed like they were moving forward by pumping their legs, and they were going so much faster on that machine than they would just walking. Humans really did never cease to amaze her.

She paid careful attention to the street signs and the houses that she passed. She didn't plan on going far, but the last thing she needed was to get lost. The trees thinned out eventually, giving way to a neighborhood where the houses were closer together. It really didn't seem like she'd come that far from Des Moines, this place was so similar.

This was her hometown, she realized. She had been born here. Did it *feel* like home, though? Her parents might have their doubts about her, but... Lyra was certain she was right. She had to be.

For a while she just moved on, lost in thought, until she eventually came to what must be the downtown area.

A few small shops were here. It was nothing like the big city – these buildings were scarcely any bigger than houses. Actually, Lyra realized her own house *was* bigger than a lot of these.

There was a metal stand fixed to the sidewalk, and another one of those two-wheeled devices chained to it. Lyra stopped for a closer look. She knelt down, pushing a pedal slightly with one hand. It clicked as it spun around. When she pushed the other way, it gave some resistance, and – yes, the wheel moved. She had to learn how this worked.

Another human walked past. He looked at her strangely, and she stood up quickly and moved on.

Looking around, it seemed like there were some restaurants here. Pizza, Chinese, Mexican. Those were all countries, she was pretty sure. One darkened shop had a "For Rent" sign in the otherwise empty window. But then she came to one that really seemed interesting – "Belfield Used Books."

A bell rang as she opened the door. She had a sudden flashback to that store that she'd walked into in Des Moines, just hours after arriving in the human world, but this time she could afford to look around. And she wasn't nervous about talking to that human behind the register at all.

It was a female, older than her, but still fairly young. She seemed lost in a book, even though there was something in front of her on the counter that might have been a computer. A glowing picture of an apple was on the side facing Lyra.

"I was looking for a book on human history," Lyra said, with an aside glance towards that might-be-a-computer.

The girl looked up at her. "Any specific period?"

"All of it."

She started to laugh, but then realized that Lyra was completely straight-faced. She glanced over at a section of shelves. "Well, over there is nonfiction. Are you looking for American history, or... I guess you'd be looking for world history, right?"

America. Lyra knew that was where she lived now, but not much else. "Actually, I know about some other countries, but not much about America. You have books about that?"

"Of course." The human at the register paused. "Are you from overseas? You don't seem to have an accent, but –"

"I'm from America. I just... I'm just now starting to research history. I need a good overview."

"Right..." She nodded slowly. "You didn't learn it in school?"

"My school was... different."

The girl circled out from around the counter. "I'll see what I can help you find. It looks like it'll be a slow day, anyway."

As soon as she was out, Lyra offered her hand. "My name's Lyra. I'm kind of new in town."

"Monica..." The shopkeeper returned the handshake. "Wait, that hair..." For some reason, she laughed. "You really exist."

"What? Of course I do," Lyra said. "What do you mean?"

"I was talking to a friend of mine. He said he'd met some girl with green hair on a plane who claimed she was Thomas Michelakos's long-lost daughter. And I kind of doubt there are that many green-haired Lyras in this city."

Lyra was taken back by surprise. "You know Paul?"

"He comes in here every so often," Monica said. "Small world, isn't it?"

"I don't think so..." Lyra said. The plane trip had proven that much.

"So you're staying with Mr. Michelakos now? I've met him a few times, he comes here every once in a while. I know he has a younger daughter, but I've never heard of you. Figures, that's why you'd be his 'long-lost' daughter."

"Yeah... Um, his books are pretty popular, aren't they?"

"You could say that," Monica said.

Lyra looked at all the shelves lined up to the back wall. They were divided into sections – fiction, history, travel. She didn't even know where to start. And it was hard to ask her questions straight out without getting weird looks and more questions in return.

"Anyways, you said you wanted American history."

Lyra nodded. She'd almost forgotten that. "Right."

Monica led her through some rows of shelves to a section near the back of the store. "This is what we've got. Feel free to..." Lyra had already pulled out a volume that had caught her eye and was flipping through it, looking at the occasional diagrams and illustrations. "Take a look around," Monica finished.

"Quick question. This is going to sound odd, but it's... the year 2012 now, isn't it?" Lyra said, her eyes still fixed on the book.

"It has been for a while, yes."

"And America was founded in the year 1776." She looked up. "This country isn't very old."

Monica raised an eyebrow. "You really don't know anything, do you? I'm starting to see why Paul found you so interesting..."

Lyra ignored her. "I think this one looks good. I'll take it."

"Uh... great. Glad I could help."

"Oh, and, um..." Lyra scratched the back of her head, and mumbled, "Unicorns."

"What was that?"

"Well, it's... My sister," Lyra said quickly. It was partially true, Chloe was the main reason she wanted to do this research. "She loves unicorns. Do you have any books on those?"

"You mean like children's books?"

"Whatever you have." If unicorns really *were* just stories for kids... Well, that's just what they would be in this world. It didn't really matter.

Lyra hadn't really considered it until she'd started running her mouth off to Audrey, but humans did know something about unicorns. It was odd, really – how they knew about unicorns despite there being none around. Then again, Equestria had been similar. Everything had felt so *backwards* ever since she'd come home. But now she'd start getting some answers.

Monica glanced around the store. "I'll see what I can find for you."



Lyra followed her to a section of shelves labeled "Fantasy." Obviously. They both scanned the titles printed on the colorful spines.

"There's one of Dad's," Lyra said.

"Yep," Monica said. She glanced over at her. "What was it like, finding out who you were? Had you heard of his books before?"

"No... I can't say I had. I'm reading them now, though."

"I see..." Monica crouched down to look at one of the lower shelves, then pulled out a book. She looked at it for a moment, then stood up and handed it to Lyra. "I think this is the best I can do."

Lyra stared down at the cover of the book. A plain white unicorn – a blank flank, even though he (or she, it was hard to tell) was an adult – standing in the forest. Drinking straight from a river. That was just disgusting, completely uncivilized. She raised an eyebrow. "So, is this... a novel?"

"Yeah. It's a pretty popular one. There's a movie of it, too, but I'm not sure if we have that in stock."

"You mean like what they show on TV?" Lyra said. "I think I'll just read this... I mean, I like the *idea* of movies. It's like getting to watch a play whenever you want. I just can't stare at a box like that for very long."

"Really, now? You're a dying breed," Monica said with a smile. "Seems like people don't read as much as they should these days."

Lyra looked back down at the book in her hands. "This is the best you have about unicorns, though? I was thinking of something more... informative. Factual."

"I don't know, you could check the mythology section. I doubt anyone's written a field guide, though."

"Right... Because unicorns aren't real," Lyra said. "And magic's completely made up."

"Uh... yeah," Monica said, giving her a strange look. "So, will that be all? I can check you out over at the front." She thumbed over her shoulder.

"This should be enough for now. Thanks for helping me find these," Lyra said.

"It's no problem." They headed back to the counter. Monica circled around to the other side behind the register. She glanced over the titles again as Lyra handed them to her. "That's an interesting selection of topics there, though." She slid them both into an unmarked brown paper bag.

"I guess you could say I have a wide range of interests. I've always read a lot," Lyra said with a shrug.

Monica nodded. "It's a good habit to be in. Besides, it keeps this place in business. And your dad, for that matter," she said. "Say 'hi' to him for me."

"Yeah. I'll... do that."

"I know this isn't exactly my place to pry, but... I can tell. There's something bothering you, isn't there? Something important on your mind and you don't want to talk to anyone about it."

"What? No, there's not – I'm not hiding anything," Lyra said. "Why would I be –"

"There you go. That's exactly what I'm talking about. You're acting so strange." Monica's voice was even, and Lyra fell silent. "I'm not going to ask you what it is, but... If it's really that important, then you won't be able to cover it up forever."

"I don't have a choice."

"Trust me. Sooner or later you'll need to get it off your chest. You'll feel better. That's all I'm saying." She handed the bag over the counter, and Lyra took it with slightly trembling hands. "Just some free advice."

"Thanks... I guess."

"It's no problem." Monica gave her a smile. "So will I see you again?"

"Probably."

"It was nice meeting you, Lyra."

"Yeah... Same here." Lyra turned and headed out the door without another word.

• • •

Lyra found her way back through the neighborhood to her house easily enough. She only got lost once. It hadn't been much longer than an hour or two since she'd walked out. Maybe she should apologize. Her dad was probably worried.

There was still some part of her that didn't like that she was still considered a child. She'd paid her own rent – well, half of it – for several years. But maybe it was best to live with her parents. It wasn't like she could fend for herself in this world. She needed to start learning about it.

She thought about what Monica had said. Did her parents notice she was acting strange? If Monica had, then yes, they probably had, too. But... she couldn't exactly just tell the truth.

She walked past the mailbox right by the side of the road and down the long driveway towards the house, past both of her family's cars – one was the big red one she'd come back from the airport in, the other was a smaller black one.

Her hand closed around the doorknob and pushed it open. With an uneasy smile on her face, trying to give the impression nothing had gone wrong, she walked into the kitchen.

Both her parents were sitting there together. A stack of letters was on the kitchen table. They were reading one of them – a sheet of paper that had been folded a few times. There was something on their faces...

"I'm back," Lyra said, setting her new books on the counter.

Her mother looked up from the letter. "Lyra?"

"Is... Is there something wrong?" Lyra asked. They were acting strangely...

Without another word, her mother stood up and wrapped her in a tight embrace. Lyra noticed there were tears on her cheeks.

"Fifteen years," her mother said. "You were gone for *fifteen years*."

"I know that, but..." Lyra pulled away slowly, and saw her dad still looking at that letter. She realized what it was. "Are those the results?" She headed over to look at them.

The paper was mostly a large table filled with numbers. Lyra squinted, trying to figure out what she was supposed to look at. She hadn't expected something complicated like this. Her father placed one finger on the bottom number.

*Probability of Parentage – 99.124%*

It wasn't phrased like Lyra had expected, just a simple "yes" or "no." The whole thing kind of looked like something Twilight would understand better than she would, and the decimal point was oddly precise. But it was still a good number.

What that meant was clear enough. It meant that she was who she thought she was – these really were her birth parents. But maybe even more importantly, this confirmed that she was a real human.

Lyra tried to read the columns above the final result. "What does all of that mean?" She poked the paper with her finger.

"There were only a few instances where it was off," her father explained. "They said it's probably nothing more than a simple mutation."

"Mutation?" Lyra repeated slowly. That didn't sound good.

"It's really very common in these tests. It happens often with age. It could even be a mistake in the process itself. Harmless."

"Yeah... It was probably that." Her hand moved up and tugged on her hair unconsciously. It still naturally grew green and white. Not brown.

*Sooner or later you'll need to get it off your chest. You'll feel better.*

Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder. Lyra looked over at it. "We're sorry if it ever seemed like we didn't believe you."

"No, I understand," Lyra said. "For a while... I wasn't really sure either."

But now she was. There wasn't a question anymore – this was where she was meant to be. As a human – with *these* humans.

There was a sound of light footsteps on the stairs. Chloe walked out of the entry hall into the kitchen. She rubbed her eyes sleepily and then noticed all of them standing there by the table. "What's going on?" she asked.

Lyra's father went over to her and knelt down. "Honey... We have some very good news. Lyra is going to be living with us from now on."

"Huh?" Chloe tilted her head, and looked over at Lyra, then turned back to her father. "You mean, like... always? Why?"

"She's your big sister. And now she's going to be living with all of us again."

"How is she my sister? She looks *weird*," Chloe said, frowning.

"Now, that's not –"

Lyra laughed. "It's... It's okay. Really. I've been thinking about dy– I mean, washing this out anyway." She reached up and touched the white streak.

"I'm sure you'll get used to having her around. Your father and I missed her very much," Lyra's mother said.

"But where did she *come* from?"

Lyra shifted uncomfortably. "Well..."

"We don't know where she's been, only that she's back now," her father said.

"I've never *met* her before!" Chloe said. "Why haven't I met her before?"

Her father started, "It's very hard to –" But Chloe ran out of the room and back upstairs before he could finish. He sighed, and went back to where Lyra was standing by the table. "We'll talk to her later. It's hard, forcing this on her. We never even mentioned that she had an older sister."

Lyra nodded. "I know. You didn't think I'd ever come back. I understand."

"Exactly."

Really, it was a miracle that she had. If she hadn't found those books about humans all those years ago in the Canterlot archives, she would probably still be in Equestria now. Not to mention finding them again after getting back to the human world.

"We really are glad you came back, Lyra. Even if you can't tell us why," her mother said, putting her arm around her shoulder again.

"I know. It's fine. She'll come around eventually, right?" Lyra looked at her mother, then over to her father. "I'm usually better with kids, though..." She noticed their looks, and then hung her head. "I mean, I *think* I was..."

• • •

Lyra opened her journal and found the torn-off piece of paper that she'd stuffed between the pages. The drawings it had fallen between were old ones – some studies that she'd done comparing the size of a human to a pony. It had been fairly accurate – she'd estimated a pony's height as slightly less than half of a human's, when it was really closer to two-thirds.

She smiled at the memory of when she had drawn that. Back when humans seemed completely strange and mysterious. Then she took out what she was looking for and closed the journal again, slipping it back into her dresser drawer where she hid it. She read it over. Just a numeric code with Audrey's name above it. She took it downstairs to find the telephone.

Although she'd never admit it to her family, she felt a rush whenever she used something like this. An incredible human invention that she'd never dreamed was possible, and yet here it was, and she was using it.

She pressed each number with her finger. There was that now-familiar buzzing sound when she placed it by her ear, and tilted her head to hold it in place against her shoulder. She waited for the voice to come. It all happened in sequence.

"Hello?" It was hard to tell, but it sounded female.

"Audrey?" Lyra said.

"No, this is her mother. May I ask who's calling?"

"Oh, um – sorry," Lyra stuttered. She recomposed herself. "This is Lyra. Is Audrey there?"

"Lyra? It's good to hear from you! How are things?"

Lyra was grinning. "It's great. Absolutely perfect."

"Hang on just one moment. I'll find Audrey for you."

The other end went quiet, and Lyra leaned her back against the wall as she waited. She could hear faint voices. Then: "Lyra?"

"Audrey! Hey, I just wanted to tell you something."

"How have things been?" Audrey asked. Lyra could kind of tell the difference between Audrey's voice and her mother's now, even if the phone made it so difficult. That was the problem with these things – you couldn't see the other human, they barely even sounded right. Still, it was a useful tool. Nothing like it existed in Equestria.

"My parents had me take some kind of a test. To prove if I was really their daughter," Lyra said.

"Oh, right. Your dad mentioned that..."

"The results came back. I was right. I really am Lyra Michelakos." She loved the sound of that name – it was unmistakably a human name, and carried down from her Greek ancestors. The ones who had invented the lyre.

"That's... That's fantastic news!" Audrey said.

"Yeah," Lyra said.

"I still can't believe how we found them... That was just *crazy* luck, or something."

"Speaking of which, have you talked to Randall lately?" Lyra said.

"He was your friend, not really mine," Audrey said. "I've got no clue what he's up to these days."

"Hmm... You know, I've been thinking I want to find another band out here. Get back to playing guitar," Lyra said. "I really miss that."

"Yeah. But, Lyra..." Audrey's voice lowered. "You've been... okay, right? No more... I mean, have you told your family..."

*About Equestria?* Lyra could tell that's what she meant. "No, I told you. I was just... Kidding. That was all. I shouldn't have said anything," Lyra said. "We're just going to work through it... Not knowing what happened, I mean. I still can't remember."

"That's what worries me. Memory loss usually isn't a good sign."

"It's fine. Everything's fine," Lyra said. "I really don't want to talk about it."

She heard Audrey sigh. "Well... How's everything else over there?"

Lyra's mood brightened again. "Great! I found a cool bookstore today..."

She talked with Audrey for a little while longer. Back at the airport it had felt like she was leaving everything behind again, but... not quite. Thanks to human technology, she could still talk to her friends in Des Moines. It wasn't like leaving Equestria, and knowing that her contact with her friends there was all lost...

• • •

In an odd way, Lyra felt like she was back in Ponyville, staying up late to research the history of humans.

The book she had gotten about American history was just one of countless others available to her in this world. Once she was done with this one, she could go back and find tons more information. That feeling of uncovering ancient secrets wasn't quite the same – there had been no hunt through the archives, the book was fairly fresh with clean white pages. Not to mention she was using her very own hands to turn each page. But it was still exciting. Her hands practically shook with anticipation as she began reading.

This country of America was a little under two and a half centuries old. Compared to how long Equestria had stood, that was nothing. Princess Luna's banishment by itself had lasted over four times as long as that. And to think – Lyra's first breathtaking glimpse of Des Moines had led her to think that the city must have stood for millennia.

This book started off with the basics. There actually was no Princess in this country – or a king, or a queen. They had something called a "president." Who that was now, Lyra had no idea. They had four year terms, and the book wasn't quite that recent, so whoever was in charge in 2012 would have changed by now.

At eighteen years old, humans could actually vote for the new president, among other things.



And that made Lyra realize that her own birthday was coming up soon. Summer was just about over, it would be fall before too long. She would be seventeen years old in probably a few weeks. She wasn't sure of the exact date, since her Equestrian family wouldn't actually have known the right day, but her birthday had always been in the fall, so it might be close.

She wasn't old enough to participate in her human country's government yet. And she wasn't old enough to drink. Or even just live by herself, though she wasn't in a hurry for that. She smiled to herself. No wonder Bon-Bon had always scolded her for being so childish.

Lyra hadn't thought much about Bon-Bon lately. That was for the better, though. They had gone their separate ways. Bon-Bon would live out the rest of her days as an ordinary pony making a comfortable living in Ponyville, and Lyra had, impossibly, gotten the chance to live out an "ordinary" human life. In this place called "America."

She turned back to the book in front of her to find out more about what that meant.

Now she was looking at the early history of the country. There were a few mentions of countries she was familiar with. England, Portugal, and, yes, even France. America had split off from England, so that would explain why they called this language "English." It didn't explain how it was the same as the Equestrian dialect Lyra had always spoken in. She wondered if she'd ever find those answers.

But, in order to become a country, those early American humans had...

"No..." Lyra whispered.

So humans did fight each other, and they didn't even need Discord to start it. She looked ahead, and – yes, there were even more. It was like humans defined their history around what wars had taken place.

Lyra had to stop reading.

After the Gala, when Princess Celestia had told her about humans, she'd said that war was an unavoidable part of human nature. Even before Discord, they'd fought amongst themselves for whatever reasons they could think of. Lyra had spent two sleepless nights wondering if that was really what humans – what her own species – did.

She had come here to reassure herself that humans were better than that.

But here in this world they'd never completely ended their species. And the book seemed to know that wars were terrible, that was clear from the way it described them. Flipping ahead, it looked like some of the more recent wars had resulted in protests. Humans *knew* that it wasn't right... They must.

There was enough war in America's history that they classified periods of time by them, and yet Lyra didn't understand how they could even start in the first place. What would drive a human to think that was the way to solve a conflict?

She'd been in such nice neighborhoods, made friends with all sorts of different humans. It was hard to accept that they were anything like Princess Celestia had made them out to be.

Her head hurt. She'd deal with this later.

She set the history book aside and picked up the other one. It would be less stressful, she was sure. This one was just a novel – *The Last Unicorn*. The unicorn in question was pure white and blank-flanked. He (or she) looked too much like those horses Lyra had seen back in Iowa. She wondered if this unicorn could even *talk*.

Already Lyra was having her doubts about this one, but she needed to know what humans thought about unicorns. Maybe they were just as misinformed as ponies were of them.

That did seem to be the case, as she discovered. This unicorn was so graceful and beautiful and stupid that she was practically devoid of personality, and she lived out in the woods instead of in a civilized town... But the line at the beginning about this unicorn and how "she was no longer the careless color of sea foam" made Lyra shudder. It was only a coincidence... Plenty of unicorns were that color. There was her, and then there were... Others. She just couldn't think of names right now.

Lyra hadn't been expected to be so frustrated by this book. What did she really care about unicorns, anyway? It had just been simple curiosity. More about what her little sister was into than her own personal interest... She yawned, and set the book on the nightstand with the other as her eyes fell closed...

• • •

The phone started ringing – in an odd way, it almost had a musical quality, but it quickly got irritating.

"Could you get that, Lyra?" her dad called from the other room.

Lyra stood up and crossed the room to where the phone was sitting and picked it up. "Hello?" She gave the standard greeting.

"Lyra? Oh, thank goodness. I've been trying to get in touch with you for *ages* –"

She frowned. "Uh, who is this?" The voice was hard to identify again. It sounded oddly familiar.

"Come now, Lyra. You haven't been gone that long. Don't tell me you've forgotten your old roommate already!"

Her eyes widened. She moved a hand up to press the phone closer against her face. "Oh my gosh, Bon-Bon? Is that really..."

"Oh, you do remember! I'm flattered."

"I can't believe it's really you! How have you been?"

"Still the same as ever, though the house is noticeably quieter... And yourself? You just up and disappeared without a single word. I'd like to know what was so important."

"It's fantastic here, Bon-Bon!" Lyra said. "I wish you could see this place. Philadelphia is a *huge* city. And there's so many more like it. There's humans everywhere."

"Sounds like you're enjoying yourself." Bon-Bon's voice was flat. Lyra could just imagine her scowling.

"You bet! You used to say we didn't even exist," Lyra said. She paused, and shifted the phone by her ear. "Wait. Bon-Bon, how do you know how to –"

Lyra sat up in bed, stared at her dark bedroom, and instantly groaned and fell back down. She ran her fingers through her hair. What was wrong with her? Thinking that Bon-Bon could get a phone and just *call* to see how she was doing?

She took a deep breath. It would pass. Sooner or later, this would all be over. After all, they'd proven it. She *was* a human... Even if it didn't always feel that way.

• • •

Lyra took the book out to the back porch one afternoon and settled down in one of the wooden chairs, bracing herself for more painful misinformation. To be fair, this "Peter S. Beagle" probably never expected anyone who had actually *been* a unicorn to read his book. Just like her dad had said about his own books – magic was "made up" so writers could do whatever they wanted with it.

It was just ridiculous, though. Not only did this unicorn not have a cutie mark (it was never mentioned in the story, but she could see it on the cover), she didn't even have a *name*. Plus she just lived out in the woods, not in a proper house like a civilized pony. Lyra glanced up at the trees all around her. Well, she lived in the woods *now*. In Ponyville they all lived away from the forests. It was almost ironic.

It didn't make sense how this unicorn could live by herself and not realize she was "the last of her kind." Or how there could be humans in the same world as unicorns, and nobody thought it was strange. And even more strangely, the unicorn couldn't use magic, but her human companion could. Lyra liked him better. He was kind of clumsy, but he seemed to get things done. That was more than could be said about this unicorn.

Her fingers flipped through the pages slowly, and she thought about setting the book aside again and heading inside. But then – it was in the middle of the nameless unicorn being chased by the evil bull or whatever it was – something happened.

That human magician she was traveling with turned *her* into a human.

Lyra smiled. Finally, this unicorn was about to get some sense knocked into her. Lyra remembered the exact moment when the same thing had happened to her – the initial confusion, and how it was quickly replaced with relief and sheer joy once she moved her fingers for the first time and stood up on her own two legs.

But... something was wrong.

This unicorn was acting like becoming human was some terrible thing. What was her *problem*? Humans could do so much more, they looked so much better. And it wasn't even like this unicorn had ever used magic. She was shocked to be in a "mortal body" now or something. And ever since Lyra had come here and moved in with her parents, she had actually been feeling younger.

Lyra had to fight not to throw the book out into the yard. But she glanced up at the sound of the back door sliding open, and noticed Chloe had come outside.

"What book is that?" she asked. She still kept her distance on the other side of the deck.

Lyra closed the book and held it up for her to see the cover. "It's called *The Last Unicorn*."

"You like unicorns, too?" Chloe said. She moved a little bit closer, eyes focused on the book.

"Well..." Lyra's face twisted. "Kind of. I just wanted to see what this book was about, that's all."

Chloe nodded and looked away. Lyra looked at the cover illustration again. Maybe she was reacting too hard to everything the book said – after all, she had never really been a unicorn. She'd technically always been a human.

An idea struck her. "Chloe, you seem to know a lot about unicorns," Lyra said. She swallowed a lump in her throat, then asked, "Have you ever... heard of Equestria?"

It felt strange to actually say that word out loud. Lyra practically had to force it out. And yet, now that she'd said it, she was feeling better. Maybe Monica had been right. She did just need to get it off her chest.

"No. What's that?" Chloe asked. "Is that what your book is about?" She pointed at it.

Lyra smiled. "No, this book doesn't know anything about *real* unicorns."

"Well, what do *you* know about them?"

"Equestria is where all the unicorns live. But there's also pegasi, and earth ponies. Only the unicorns can use magic, but all of the ponies are still important."

Chloe seemed interested now. "Where did you learn about that?"

"Well... It's just a story I've heard," Lyra said.

Chloe took a seat in the other chair next to Lyra's, and leaned it closer. "Tell me."

Lyra smiled. "Where do I start..."

She told her all about Canterlot, the capitol city where the Princess lived. And about Cloudsdale, where the pegasi made all of Equestria's weather. And about the ponies who lived in Ponyville – Twilight Sparkle, the expert on magic; Fluttershy, with all of her animals she took care of; Pinkie Pie, who worked at Sugarcube Corner and drove her coworker Bon-Bon up the wall every single day...

And, of course, about a unicorn musician named Heartstrings.

Lyra's seventeenth birthday came earlier than she had expected. Her Canterlot family hadn't known the right date, they'd just guessed and ended up a few weeks off. For the first year in her life, her birthday would be celebrated on the actual date.

This party (if you could really call it that) was a lot quieter and more intimate than the past few had been. Living in Ponyville came with a guarantee that your birthday would always be a huge affair with the whole town invited. Pinkie Pie made sure of that. Not that everybody would actually show up – there was a huge birthday party for somebody on average of twice a week, so obviously not everybody could make it to every single one.

Her cake was store-bought, from some bakery in the city. It was good, but it didn't compare to Sugarcube Corner, in terms of flavor or decoration. Not even close. Bon-Bon used to bake whatever Lyra wanted for her on her birthday. Most years she had considered that enough of a gift. What she wouldn't give for some of Bon-Bon's homemade chocolates now...

But she had plenty this year. It was her first year with her human family, and they were the only ones at the party, not that she knew many other humans in town yet anyway. A few gifts, not very big boxes. Lyra had gained so much in the past few months that she didn't mind. Though... she was curious at what a human got for their seventeenth birthday.

They were all sitting in the living room together, Lyra in the center of the couch between her parents. She tore the paper off of one of the gifts – it was a rectangular box just barely able to fit in one hand.

"Uh... what is it?" Lyra asked, turning it over and inspecting the pictures on the sides.

"It's a cell phone. We thought you should have one," her mother said. "Just so that we can keep in touch when you go out on your own. Things like that."

Lyra nodded slowly, examining the photograph printed on the box. It didn't look like the others she had seen before. Still, it was a fascinating piece of human technology, and now she had one of her own. Like a real, normal human.

With her parents' help, she unpacked it, they showed her how to plug it in – it was called "charging" – and later how to actually use it.

It was very different from the others Lyra had seen. The top was just a flat, glassy panel, but it came to life if you pressed a button, and then the screen responded to the touch of your fingers gliding over the surface. She spent a few minutes just watching the colorful shapes slide around when she touched it.

Her mother showed her how it worked. There was a lot more to this than she realized. Not only could you talk to other humans on it, there was a camera, a music player, a watch. She could also use the Internet... if she learned how. It was odd, since she was pretty sure that the Internet was in computers and not in this tiny little phone. Whatever it was, it still seemed complicated, but she knew enough that it was useful.

There were a few other gifts, too. Smaller things. Albums from rock bands she liked, that her dad promised to help her put onto the phone's music player. Lyra was curious how exactly that would work – the discs were bigger than the player. However it worked, it was human ingenuity at its finest, no doubt.

Chloe had nearly fallen asleep on the sofa, and after she was taken up to her bed Lyra just spent a few moments with her mom and dad.

"This hasn't been an easy day in past years..." her mother said. "You're almost grown up now."

*Almost.* Lyra gave a very small smile at that. "I'm glad I got to spend this one with you. Thanks for everything."

"It's so good to have you here, Lyra," her father said.

• • •

Lyra sat up in bed until well past midnight, studying her new phone. It was giving off a surprisingly bright light even though her room was dark. It seemed incredible that one object could have so many different functions. The way it was operated, reacting to her fingertips. That was something that ponies would *never* be able to do, even if they had the technology. The tiny numerical buttons on regular phones had been impressive enough.

She flipped through the photos she had taken that day, stored on the screen but not printed out or even developed. Maybe tomorrow she'd get her dad to show her how to put her music onto it.

For now, she set it to the side on her nightstand, and picked up the history book instead. She'd been slowly working her way through it.



She was done with the other book about the unicorn. It hadn't taken too long to finish. After all of that nonsense, she'd been happily teaching Chloe about real ponies and magic. They were pretty good friends now. More than that. Sisters.

If *The Last Unicorn* had been frustrating, then human history was absolute torture. It was almost enough to kill the good mood she was in from her birthday. Lyra wanted to stop reading, but she couldn't just convince herself that humans didn't do these kinds of things. She had to face the facts if she was going to be one.

Humans kept on fighting each other. Maybe it was just an unfortunate side effect of having all these different countries, even though the war that had happened back in the 1860's seemed to suggest it didn't even take that to set humans off. And each one brought with it more of this brilliant human ingenuity, wasted on coming up with more weapons. It honestly got sickening how much they'd accomplished.

Lyra glanced over at her phone on the nightstand. Humans *were* capable of coming up with good things, if they wanted to. If ponies would have had those, she could have called her parents in Canterlot whenever she wanted. The mail wasn't nearly that fast, and it was much more impersonal than just talking face-to-face. Or whatever phone conversations were, it was close enough. She wondered how long ago humans had come up with phones.

But she turned back to the more difficult, more troubling information about "American history."

This particular book said that there had been wars up to the year 1991... Lyra had heard just earlier today that she had been born in the fall of 1995.

How would she go about asking if there had been any more since then? This book was clearly outdated. All of the recent events – pretty much everything that would have happened while she was gone – weren't written in here.

There was always Monica...

• • •

A bell rang as Lyra opened the door the following morning. She noticed Monica right away. She had hoped she'd be working again, but then she noticed someone else standing there talking to her. A wide grin spread across her face when she recognized him.

"Paul?" Lyra said. She headed over to the counter to join them.

He turned around. "Oh, wow, Lyra? I didn't expect to see you in here."

"I come here all the time," she said.

"Like I told you, I've seen her a few times in the past few weeks," Monica said. "She reads a lot. Usually it's either unicorns or American history."

"Interesting tastes..." Paul said. He looked back at Lyra. "So how've you been? It's been a while since you came out here."

"I've been great, really. Never better," Lyra said, and she honestly did mean that. "I was just coming in to get some more research... I mean, reading." She gave a nervous smile.

"Of course." Monica nodded. "I think you know your way around pretty well by now. You don't need my help, do you?"

"No, I think I'll be fine," Lyra said.

Maybe the reason she liked this store was because it felt so much like home. She walked in and was greeted by somebody she knew – this time, two of them. Other stores in Philadelphia weren't that personal. Once she had come to the bookstore in the evening and a different human was working – an older man who didn't talk much – but if she came in the mornings Monica was almost always here.

"Wait, so you really weren't kidding about your dad," Paul said, pointing a finger at her in a casual gesture. "I mean, I was almost sure you were making all that up, about having this famous author as your long-lost dad and all that. Must be crazy living with a guy like him. What's he up to, six? Seven books? And they're all huge."

"I think he's getting ready to release the eighth one," Monica said. "Wait, Lyra, you would know that. When's he coming out with that?"

"Actually, I'm not sure what he's writing now..." she admitted. "To tell the truth, I actually think those books are kind of weird. I mean, all the humans using magic, and the battles."

"It's traditional fantasy. I'd say that the generic theme is almost part of the appeal – it's very straightforward, but it's well-written. Pretty consistent quality, too," Monica said. "And it *is* cool that he's local."

"I'm with Lyra. I don't really read fantasy. Maybe some Terry Pratchett here and there. If he counts," Paul said.

"Exactly. I guess I'm just not into this kind of stuff," Lyra said. "This world is good enough for me. I don't need a different one." She frowned. "And those humans are always fighting with each other in Dad's stories..." That made her remember her original purpose. "I was reading that history book you gave me and it said that America had been in wars. A lot of them, actually."

"News flash," Paul said. "I've never heard that before."

"So... It wasn't true?" Lyra said. "I mean, if there had really been so many, you would have heard –"

"That was sarcasm, Lyra."

"Oh..." Her face turned red. She hated being called out on her lack of human knowledge.

Monica raised an eyebrow slightly. "Well, if you really want to know more about it, there should be shelves back there marked. You can find some books about the specific conflicts you're interested in."

"Well, it's more of just the general idea of the thing. I don't get it," Lyra said. She hesitated. "I know I must sound kind of clueless right now, but I've never really understood war."

"Told you she was a hippie," Paul muttered under his breath.

"Now I think you're getting more into... philosophy, maybe." Monica leaned up against the counter, one hand on her chin. "But you're asking some pretty heavy stuff. Nobody *really* understands it."

"So it's normal for humans to not understand what it means to be human?"

"I... guess? Like I said, philosophy, it's over by the –"

"Suppose that... hypothetically, I mean... a human grew up not knowing that they were human. Would they still be the same as the others?"

Paul put a hand up in a dismissive gesture. "Speaking of not understanding, I'm completely lost at this point."

"Yeah..." Lyra said quietly. She gave a nervous laugh. "I guess I've just been having some odd thoughts lately. Things have been weird."

He nodded. "And what would be normal for you?"

"That's... not easy to explain." Lyra stared at her shoes.

Paul gave a shrug. "Figured."

"Oh, by the way, check this out!" Lyra took out her phone. Her parents had suggested she take it everywhere. "I've been putting some of my friend's numbers into it. My parents showed me how it works. Do you guys have phone numbers?"

"Sure. I'll just enter that for you," Monica said. Lyra handed it to her, and once she was done she passed it over to Paul.

"I get the feeling I might regret this, but... fine," he said, tapping the screen quickly with one finger. He seemed even more adept at it than Lyra was, and she had thought she was getting pretty good at it.

She took the phone back once she was done and put it into her pocket. "Sorry if I was asking some weird questions. I'm just curious."

"No, it's all fine," Monica said.

"Thanks. I think I'll find what I came for. I told Dad I wouldn't be out long."

Lyra headed to the back of the store, locating the extensive history section. Humans certainly kept better records of their past than ponies did... for better or for worse. She realized that she was oddly willing to accept whatever these books said, more so than history back in Equestria. But if they were going to make up lies, they wouldn't say this kind of stuff.

She took a few minutes browsing around, pulling out books and reading a few pages out of each one, and came out with a good assortment. Not all of them were about war – she found a few others about inventors and popular culture. Because those things were just as human as anything else.

As she carried her pile of books back to the counter, she thought about what Twilight would think of having so much unheard-of knowledge at her disposal. What her other dad – what Dewey – would think. He probably worried about her...

"Whoa. Think you've got enough there, Lyra?" Paul said, eyeing the stack in her arms. Lyra set them down on the counter with a dull thud.

"For now," Lyra said simply.

"You're one to talk. You hardly read nonfiction unless it's assigned," Monica said.

"Well, yeah..." He scratched the back of his head. "Speaking of which, what school are you going to, Lyra? I don't know what district you'd be in."

"School...?" she said. "Well... none yet. My parents weren't sure if I was ready. They talked about homeschool."

"I guess that would make sense. Different circumstances and all."

She nodded, but this was another area she was uncomfortable with. She thought she had completed all the education she needed to five years ago. Sure, the magic classes wouldn't be useful now, but everything else was probably still applicable. Did humans have classes on using their hands, or was the behavior too instinctual to require that?

Lyra paid for the book, said her goodbyes, and headed back out towards home. Paul waited until she was out the door, then turned back to Monica.

"Time travel," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I'm calling it now. Time travel. She's catching up on all the history that's happened since whenever she lived." He thought a moment. "I'm not sure what the unicorns have to do with it, though."

"You who doesn't read fantasy..." Monica muttered.

"That would be science fiction. Not that I read too much of that, either. But isn't she like something out of a movie? Like Tim Burton, if the quirky outsider played by Johnny Depp was a teenage girl instead."

She sighed. "This is a real person we're talking about..."

• • •

Lyra sat on the couch in front of the TV, although it was turned off. Her attention was focused on the tiny screen she held in her hand. She'd found the Internet function, but

actually *using* it was a different story. It was a major source of information for humans, it had even helped her find her family – but what exactly *was* it?

Chloe sat down next to her. "Tell me more about Fluttershy," she said. "Please?"

Hearing that name gave Lyra a jolt, but it was fine. She'd told Chloe a few stories about her old friends. "About Fluttershy? Let me think..." As odd as it was, to be honest she looked forward to this as much as Chloe did. It was getting easier to relax, having all of this out in the open. And for a human, everyday life in Equestria must have sounded exciting. It was different, that was for sure... But Lyra was certain that the human world was still better. "Have I ever told you about the dragon before?"

"Spike?"

Lyra shook her head. "This was a much bigger dragon. He was sleeping in a mountain just outside of Ponyville and making a cloud of smoke. Fluttershy was the first one to see it, and she ran to the park to tell everybo– I mean, everypony else."

Using those pronouns was still hard to get used to. And Lyra had thought she was never going to hear them again after she came here. Chloe seemed to think it was cool, though.

She continued. "But Fluttershy isn't very loud. So when she got to the park, nobo–" Lyra gave a sigh, and corrected herself a second time. "Nopony heard her, and we... I mean, they were all too busy to look up and see for themselves."

"What happened?"

Good, she hadn't noticed Lyra's little slip. She had been in the park that day. Practicing her lyre, and then just taking some time off to enjoy the nice weather and talk to some other ponies. That was another thing different about Ponyville – it was so easy to meet other ponies, and yet after weeks in Philadelphia she only had a couple friends.

"That was when Twilight showed up, and she told everyone that Princess Celestia had called her to get the dragon to leave," Lyra continued. "Fluttershy was really worried, since she's actually very scared of dragons."

"I thought she liked animals."

"Yes, but dragons are different..." Lyra said. "You know that painting in the front hallway? The one Mom did?"

"Yeah."

"That's what this one was like. *Huge*. Probably bigger than our house." That was an estimation – Lyra had never seen this particular dragon, but Rainbow Dash had been talking about it for weeks afterwards.

"Why does it have all of that gold, anyway? What do dragons do with that?"

"It's what they build their nests with. And they eat gemstones. Remember, I told you Spike loves them."

"I wonder what those taste like," Chloe said.

Lyra smiled. "They probably taste better to a dragon than to one of us. Ponies can't eat them," she said. "Or humans."

Lyra's dad walked in. "It's getting late. Chloe, don't you think you should get to bed? You've got school tomorrow, remember."

"But I want to hear the rest of Lyra's story!"

Lyra smiled. "Dad's right. It's getting dark. I'll tell you the rest tomorrow." She was a little relieved, actually – she'd reached the end of her own personal experience with that story. She'd have to dig deep in her memory to remember what she'd been told about the actual trip. Rainbow had certainly made a big deal about it.

"You promise?"

Lyra nodded, and Chloe headed upstairs to bed. Then her father joined Lyra on the couch.

"You know, I've been hearing a lot about Equestria from Chloe lately. Whenever I'm driving her to school, she's usually got something new to tell me."

"Yeah, I was actually just telling her another one of the stories..." Lyra said. It was odd, being so open about her past now. But everybody thought that she was making it up, just like that other writer had made up his maddeningly inaccurate unicorn novel. "What has she told you?"

"Oh, all about the ponies, the magic, the princesses." He smiled. "It certainly sounds like something she'd like. You came up with all of that yourself?"

"Of course," Lyra said, shifting her eyes.

"You're pretty talented. Maybe you could even write someday – children's books, something like that."

Lyra shook her head. "I think I just want to stick with music. It *is* my special talent." She realized that she was talking about it like it was her cutie mark. How much did Chloe know about those? Had she mentioned them to their dad? "I mean, I've always been told –"

"Told what?"

"Oh..." Lyra said. "I was told... Well..." Her mind worked frantically. She couldn't say that her other family – and Bon-Bon – had wanted her to pursue a musical career. "Audrey... said that I was really good at the guitar. She said I could have a future doing that. Join a real band someday." It was partially true – Audrey had been impressed at Lyra's talent, but she had never really offered that much encouragement towards a career.

He gave a heavy sigh. "I thought maybe something had come back to you."

"Sorry... Maybe it did, just a little, but I just can't tell what it is." Lyra lowered her eyes. "So you think Equestria would be good for kids' stories?" She was eager to change the subject. And her dad's opinion on real magic would be interesting to hear, even if he didn't realize that's what it was.

"Sure. It's not quite my taste, obviously, but Chloe sure seems to like it. I keep hearing about one character... Fluttershy?"

Lyra nodded. Chloe liked to hear about Fluttershy more than Heartstrings, and that was quite a relief. Talking about her own experiences would be difficult. This was a better way to start. "Yeah. I saw the picture Chloe drew. It really looks like her." She quickly added, "How I imagined her, I mean. I guess I'm pretty good at description."

He laughed. "Maybe your mother could do something with all of this. She's been looking for material."

Lyra gave a small grin. "Maybe."

They talked for a little while longer. The topic drifted away from Lyra's stories on to more serious stuff – the school year was starting, and there were some decisions to be



made there. If Lyra would join the other humans her age at the public school, or if she'd get her own special lessons at home.

Her mind was still stuck on what her dad thought of Equestria. So that's really all Equestria sounded like to humans – stories for little kids. Well, Lyra had been talking about it that way. She'd leave out most of the really awful stuff. Just a few sparing details about dragons, and make parasprites seem like something that could be laughed at. Rebuilding what was left of the house after they'd gone through sure hadn't been funny. Lyra had been fortunate they hadn't gotten anything really valuable.

But the one thing she'd never so much as *mention*... Discord. He had been on Lyra's mind a lot lately. Reading about the wars in America's past had made her think about him. But he was sealed away in stone in Equestria. There was no reason to worry about him. Humans were in total control of this world. Even if he'd driven them to extinction in another one... But nobody needed to know that.

There was a lot to look forward to this year.

Lyra's parents had been talking about school lately. At her age, most humans were finishing up their final year of "high school." But, in all likelihood, she'd be getting homeschooled. They could tell that her education wasn't quite on track, no matter how much she tried to fake it.

What she'd been learning from the history books was useful, and more than anything else, that was the subject she was behind on. When she looked at the history of other countries – ones that she had read about in her old books – familiar things starting popping up, though they were all centuries ago. The recent stuff was what was important, though. And what was difficult.

Other than all that academic stuff, though, Chloe was getting really excited for something she called "Halloween." Lyra had been listening to her, and taking some mental notes. It would be at the end of the month, and there would be costumes and going door-to-door to get candy. This was clearly the human version of Nightmare Night. It was almost the same day, too.

It wasn't the same harvest festival Lyra had read about. None of the same customs from her old books. In fact, Halloween was almost exactly the same as Nightmare Night – it was a little eerie. Though it certainly couldn't be in honor of Nightmare Moon, could it? Chloe had heard that story but didn't talk about any connections to the upcoming holiday. Whatever humans did this for, Lyra figured she would find out more once the day finally rolled around.

And after fall, it would be winter, and she'd get to experience another human holiday. Christmas. Lyra remembered how exciting and colorful Canterlot had gotten around Hearth's Warming Eve, and wondered how humans in Philadelphia celebrated their winter holidays. The city was bigger. Maybe their celebration would be, too.

And then it would be a new year, and she'd go through winter and spring and the next summer with her human family. It was getting a little easier to fit in each day that went by. Soon she'd be just like any other human.

• • •

It had started out pretty much like any other morning in the Michelakos household.

When Lyra woke up she could hear the faint sound of her father typing on the computer in his study down the hall. She got dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and headed downstairs for some breakfast.

Eventually Chloe came downstairs, got a quick bowl of cereal, and sat down across from Lyra. They talked a little while. Not always about Equestria, either – as Lyra had hoped, those stories had just gotten her sister to open up to her. She also told Lyra about her school lessons and the new friends she'd made in her class.

"Will you take me out trick-or-treating?" she asked suddenly.

"That's... the candy part, isn't it?" Lyra said.

"Obviously!"

Lyra grinned. "Of course. That's my favorite."

"Alright, Chloe, are you all ready?" Dad had just come downstairs. He got his coat off the back of one of the kitchen chairs and started to put it on.

"Yeah." Chloe stood up to get her bookbag. Lyra watched how the two straps fit over her arms, and the weight would be centered on the back – almost like a saddlebag, but modified. "I'll see you later, Lyra!"

She watched them head out the front door together as she finished her breakfast. The school was out pretty far away. Apparently there was some kind of long yellow car that took most of the kids, called a "bus," but it didn't come out to the houses near theirs. That's why their dad always had to drive her to school.

It was weird how far away the schoolhouse was. Back in Ponyville – *No*. Lyra shook her head. She had to stop being reminded of that at every little thing. She hated to admit it, since she loved being human so much, but – was she getting a little homesick?

More footsteps coming down the stairs, and then her mother appeared in the front hallway. "Did they leave already?"

Lyra nodded. "They just walked out the door."

"Good. I'm going to head out to the store for a few things. Do you want me to pick anything up for you?"

"Some more of those..." Lyra tried to remember the weird name. "Pop Tarts."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's pretty much it. Oh, and maybe some apples, too."

"Okay. I'll be back soon." She grabbed her purse and car keys, and headed out the garage door. Lyra could hear the low rumble of the huge door opening by itself. A few minutes later, the car engine started and faded away.

Once she was alone, Lyra stretched herself out on the couch and wondered what she would do for the rest of today. The television was there, but she'd never really gotten into the habit of watching it. A couple times she had watched "movies" with her family, which were like entire human plays that took place in there. They used magic a few times, but her mom commented on it and called them "special effects." For the most part her own family wasn't as addicted to the glowing screen as Audrey's was. She messed with her phone a little bit. There was music on it now.

She considered rereading something. The last few books she had purchased had been devoured in the past couple of weeks. She was already filling up a shelf in her room with her collection, and it easily exceeded her old collection of human research that she had left back in Equestria.

That was it. She'd take a walk and go visit the bookstore again. It was still early morning on a weekday, so Monica would probably be working.

Lyra grabbed a pen and paper and wrote a quick note, just in case she was gone longer than she expected. Of course, her parents could always call her, but she could tell they got uneasy if she left for a long time and didn't say anything. It was understandable. Considering what they'd been through.

She found her jacket in the hall closet and slipped it on. The weather was already getting pretty chilly. She left the note on the kitchen table, checked that all the doors were safely locked, and stood in front of the front door.

One last thing...

Lyra held her phone in one hand, with the cord and the "ear buds" draped in the other. She poked and slid her fingers around on the screen to open up the music. Her dad had shown her this. The triangle meant "play." A quiet, crackly sound could be heard from the tiny speakers. Not sure what to expect, she slowly inserted one of them into her ear,

finding the right place to lodge it in place. And – unexpectedly – the music was now coming through her ears as clear as if the band was right there in front of her.

Testing it, she took it out, pulling it away from herself. It was still barely audible, but once she put it up close, the sound was perfect. Even better than the stereo she'd used at Audrey's house.

She put the other ear bud in right away and it was like all the other sounds around her just vanished. This was wonderful. The song was a familiar one – "Highway to Hell," a song she had played with Randall's band. With the music playing inside her own head, as it seemed, she headed out the door.

Her usual route went through the woods around her house, through some other neighborhoods, and into the downtown area where the bookstore was. Lyra had been meaning to explore the town, check out some of the other locations around there. Maybe she would do that today.

A car drove past. She hardly heard it through the heavy beats of the music pumping directly into her ears. She watched it as it went past, checking to see if it was her dad coming back from the school, but it wasn't either of her parents' cars. After it went by, she was left alone again.

The music really did enhance what would otherwise be a boring, uneventful walk. There were rarely any other humans out here, either on foot or in vehicles.

She stared up. The woods were looking different this time of year. The leaves were starting to change colors, and there was a thin covering of them on the road. No doubt they had been shaken off by the cars driving through. She wondered if there would be a Running of the Leaves to make sure the others fell off before it was time for winter. She'd done that a few times in Ponyville, non-competitively, usually running alongside Bon-Bon at an easy but vigorous pace. It did kind of look like Whitetail Woods out here. If it weren't for the human road going through here, and that single car that had driven past a few minutes ago, Lyra would have thought she was back there.

She let those thoughts clear away for the time being. Lyra stared up at the oranges and browns above her, enjoying the music coming through her ears. It made her want to get out her guitar and learn some new songs. Maybe after she came back from visiting –

"Enjoying your walk, Heartstrings?"

The sudden voice – unexpected and perfectly clear – had made her stop. She spun around, expecting to see someone behind her, but oddly enough she was still alone. All she could hear was her music, anyway, the ear buds blocked out just about everything else.

"You're getting along quite well on just two legs, I see. Like any other human. You really are one of them, aren't you?"

Whoever he was, he'd called her Heartstrings. And...

The voice was coming through her headphones.

Lyra yanked them out of her ears. She was frozen in place, staring at her phone, but she knew it wasn't really coming from that. No, it had just been a trick. She knew this voice. Even if she didn't quite remember what had happened the last time he appeared, she knew enough.

"I just wanted to stop by and offer my most sincere gratitude. If it weren't for you, *Heartstrings*, I never would have found this place." His tone of voice became mocking, condescending, when he said her name. No, not her real name, just her old pony name. "And to imagine, you were right there in Ponyville the entire time! If I had known there were humans left, I wouldn't have wasted my time there. No, humans are far more fun."

The voice was coming from nowhere. At the same time, it was all around her. Everything was oddly still.

"I'm rather fond of humans myself," he said. "I suppose we have that much in common, you and me. All that technology, right? And their hands that they use it with?"

Now it sounded like he was behind her, but when she spun around to face him – nothing, just more empty road.

Lyra finally found her voice, though she couldn't help how shaky it sounded. "W-where are you?"

"Oh, I'm exactly where I want to be – here, in the human world. Can you imagine? A separate world, filled with millions of humans, and it's been right next door all along."

That was right – he *was* in the human world. That definitely wasn't good. But for some reason, all Lyra could think about was that bookstore downtown.

"You're really quite a lot of fun, you humans. And just look at how amazing this world is! Leave you alone for a couple thousand years and you accomplish all of this."

Her voice was a little stronger this time. "How did you get here?" she demanded. "How did you find me? What are you *doing*?"

She heard laughter. "I think you know *exactly* what I'm planning. You see, I've been terribly bored, like you couldn't even imagine. I've been in need of some good old-fashioned chaos. Or – my mistake – the humans here have all *new* ways to create chaos! I do look forward to this, I really mean that."

She gritted her teeth. The voice seemed to come from nowhere, but it was all around her. The movement through the trees – that was just the wind, wasn't it? A few scattered leaves fell down in front of her.

"There's more to humans than that. I've been studying them – us," Lyra said. "We're better than that."

"From the looks of things, you've all made quite enough chaos without my help. We'll see about that."

The voice sounded like he was right behind her now. But she was still alone – or was she? Was this really happening? It couldn't be...

"Well, I didn't plan to visit for long. Just long enough to drop in and leave you with something. You see, there's a whole world of humans out there waiting for me, and let's just say you'll be happier if you're not one of them."

She felt something brush the top of her head. Her hand shot up, but it had already passed her by. Her knees went weak. Things were going blurry.

"Do you realize that there are *billions* of you in this world? Not thousands, not even *millions*. I could find millions of you in just one city. And it's not too far from here, is it?"

The last thing she saw was Discord's grinning face in front of her.

"Like I said, Heartstrings – my sincerest thanks for your help."

• • •

Lyra woke up groggily, feeling a bit sick. There had been some really weird nightmares lately, but that one had been the worst dream of them all.

Her eyes snapped open.

This... wasn't her bed, though. She was still dressed in the same clothes, though they were feeling kind of loose and baggy. Her face was right against the hard black stone of the road, a few dry leaves scattered around. Memories of what had just happened came flooding back to her.

*Discord.*

Of all the crazy things that she'd woken up from, this was the one that had actually been real?

She tried to pick herself up off the ground – she'd fallen unconscious, she wasn't sure why. How long had she been out? It was still daylight, just... kind of cloudy... It was hard to tell. She stood shakily to her feet, her spine bending uncomfortably, but then she tripped over her own tail and landed hard on her back. She let out a groan. Her forelegs stuck straight up into the air, and the loose sleeves fell down over her hooves.

Lyra stared at them, frozen in horror.

"That *jerk!*"



For a while, all Lyra could do was stand there. She looked at her tail. Down at her hooves. At the edge of her vision, she could see the tip of her horn.

But there wasn't any time to waste. She wasn't quite sure how long she had been unconscious. Lyra kicked off the shoes from her back hooves. They didn't fit anymore, they would only slow her down. She had tried to reorient herself, reminding herself which direction was home, and just started running – well, galloping would be more accurate.

Any minute now she would wake up. She *had* to. There wasn't any way that Discord was *here*, in Philadelphia.

Something fell into her eye, and she skidded to a halt, blinking it out.

A few more followed. Thick brown droplets... Pretty soon puddles of chocolate milk had started to form on the road. Of course. Just like he'd done in Ponyville. Lyra shook her head and started again.

Her shirt and pants were loose and baggy, and they were getting soggy in the rain. They'd probably start to smell from all this milk... No, why was she thinking of that now?

The lyre necklace, matching her cutie mark that had just reappeared on her hip (*flank*, she corrected herself), beat against her neck as she galloped along the side of the road towards home. She passed by a car that had stopped on the side of the road. She noticed that the tires were now square instead of round. Whoever had been driving it must have left it there and continued on foot.

Finally Lyra reached her house. No car in the driveway. Maybe she hadn't been out as long as she thought. Her mind went back to the abandoned vehicle with the square wheels. She hadn't even seen what things were like in town, but they must be bad. How were the humans reacting to whatever had happened? More importantly, how would her parents react when they came home and found her like this? There was no telling when exactly they would return. She'd deal with her parents... and Chloe... once they got here.

If they were okay.

For now, she put on a final burst of speed and dashed up to the front porch. The key was in her pocket. Her first instinct was just to reach a hand in and take it out, but obviously that wouldn't work. It took some effort to direct even a small amount of magical energy

and lift the keyring out of her pocket, fit it into the door, and then actually try to open it. It seemed to take forever. There was a reason why doorknobs in Equestria didn't actually turn.

The door finally flung open and she practically fell inside, glad to get out of the rain. She stopped to take a breath. With one back leg, she kicked the door closed behind her.

Everything here looked so *big*.

She'd never been in a human home as a pony. She just remembered being in Canterlot Castle for a few moments, and how everything seemed smaller after she was on two legs. Nothing here was meant for ponies. Without hands, she was pretty much useless right now.

She lifted one foreleg and stared at the wet, matted green hair. It was an odd sensation, having this all over herself. How had she ever been used to it?

More importantly, what did she do now? Discord was out there. Her family would probably come back sooner or later. Based on the clock, she had been gone less than an hour. It was better than what she had thought. But whenever they got here, she'd have to come clean with them about all the lies she'd been telling. She really didn't want to think about that.

But first, she was dripping milk all over the floor. There was nothing she could do about Discord, but this was not the best impression to make.

Lyra headed for the stairs, tripped on the first step with a small cry, and continued slower than before. These stairs were too narrow. It hadn't been a problem before. When she was human.

There were two showers up here. One was vertical, the other had a bathtub. She knew she wouldn't fit into the upright one very comfortably, so she went for the other.

She shook her necklace off her head and let it fall onto the counter, then she twisted her body and pulled off her wet clothes with some difficulty. It was hard, but using magic was still too unwieldy. For some reason, she recalled Bon-Bon asking her if wearing clothes all the time got to be a hassle. Without hands, it did seem that way.

There wasn't any choice but to use her magic to turn the water on. She struggled with the faucet for a while until she got blasted with cold water, then managed to turn it to the other side. She let out a sigh of relief, and let the warm water clear her mind.

Too much was happening too fast. Discord had somehow escaped again. And she had brought him here, or at least opened the way for him. Humans were going to go extinct again. There was nothing she could do about that. There was nothing *anybody* could do without the Elements of Harmony.

Clearing her mind had been a bad idea.

She pushed the faucet back in with her hoof to shut off the water, and tried levitating a towel towards herself. The basics of magic were slowly coming back to her. Her coat would still take some time to dry completely, with all the wet fur, but at least she wasn't sticky anymore.

Lyra headed into her bedroom to find some clean clothes. Sure, ponies didn't always wear them, but she still wanted to *act* human. Besides, she had been dressing herself every day months before she became human. She found a clean white shirt – she was proud of herself when she managed to close the buttons with magic. The clothes were still too big, but she didn't care.

As she pulled the shirt down over her head, she caught a glimpse of her lyre on the dresser, and her guitar stand next to that. She would probably never get to play guitar again... Which made her wonder how her friends in Des Moines were dealing with Discord. It was hundreds of miles away. She wondered if the chaos had spread that far.

Now she was dressed, she was clean enough, and there was nothing to do but brace herself for the inevitable.

She noticed her necklace glinting on the bathroom counter, and tossed it back over her neck. It was something of a good-luck charm at this point.

*Back in Canterlot Castle, when she'd said goodbye to her adopted family and assured them that everything would be safe in the human world...*

She paced down the hallway into her real mother's painting studio. It wasn't that she was going anywhere, she just couldn't sit still. An unfinished painting was there – it would be a book cover for some other author. Beyond it was a window overlooking the front of the house. The long driveway leading to the road... where her dad was running up to the door, shielding his eyes from the chocolate milk rain.

Lyra panicked.

She shot out of the room, rounded the corner through the hallway, nearly tripped again going down the stairs. She had just enough time to see the door start to open. Without even thinking, her horn glowed and the door slammed closed. She slammed her entire weight against it and paused to catch her breath.

Her eyes widened. "What am I doing..." she muttered. Still, she didn't step away from the door.

"Lyra? If you're in there, open the door! What's going on?" It was her dad's voice. If he saw her...

She didn't say anything. What *could* she say?

"Who's in there? Lyra, say something! I'm not sure what's going on out here, but there's... something raining, the car broke down, I had to run here from –"

"Dad? Uh..." Her voice was weak. "Remember those stories I told Chloe? About Equestria?"

"Lyra? Good, you are home. Just open the door." He sounded relieved.

"It's really important. I need to tell you something. Now."

"We can talk inside. I know things are weird out here, but there's no reason to lock me out." She could tell from his tone that he was getting impatient.

She slowly moved away. "I'm... sorry," Lyra said. She stared at the floor.

Her father came inside. He glanced around for her. "Lyra? What's..." That was when he looked down. Whatever he had been about to say next, he couldn't manage to get it out after he saw a small green pony in place of his daughter.

Lyra, on the other hand, started blurting everything out all at once. "I'm sorry. I never told you anything. I just wanted to be normal. I've never wanted anything more than just a regular life as a human, and I thought you'd believe me if I said I forgot everything, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He couldn't say anything. He just stared at her. Then, he managed to force out a single word. "Lyra?"

"It really is me." She looked up at him, feeling especially short now. She frowned. "You're not... mad at me, are you?"

"You're a... unicorn," he said dumbly.

"I really *am* a human! And I'm your daughter. But I came here from Equestria. It's all real, everything I told Chloe about. I was a unicorn for most of my life." She pawed at the floor with her hoof awkwardly. "I'm sorry. I lied to you. Are you mad?"

He knelt down in front of her. "Are you... Did you do those things..." He glanced outside, where it was still raining.

She shook her head. "No. My magic can't do that. I *wouldn't* do that. I just want to be human!"

"You can do *magic*?"

"Well, yes, but..." She let out an exhausted groan. "That's not important now. It's Discord." Everything came tumbling out again. "He followed me here to find all of the humans who are still around, that's why it's raining chocolate milk and why he turned me back into –"

Her father cut her off. "Who? You're not making any sense..." But something told her he'd barely heard a word she said. The way he was looking at her reminded her that unicorns were supposedly made up in this world.

Lyra stopped. "It's... going to take some explanation. Could you just... wait a minute, please?"

She turned and stumbled up the stairs again. She went straight to her bedroom and started digging through her drawers until she found her journal. It started to glow, and she headed back downstairs with it floating along by her side. She felt like it took more effort than it used to just to lift it, but at least it was in the air.

Her father had sat down in the living room, and had a hand up to his forehead. He looked up wearily when she came back.

"Here. These are the notes I was taking while I lived in Equestria. I read a lot of things in books, but I also –" Lyra noticed he was staring at the book floating in front of him. "Go on, take it."

"How are you doing that?"

"It's just basic-level magic... Oh." Her eyes lowered. "Um, I know what you write about, but magic really isn't anything too special. Most unicorns can't do much more than this." She nodded her head towards the book.

"It's floating in midair. How are you doing that?"

Lyra rolled her eyes. "I learned this when I was seven. I told you it's nothing special."

"You've been doing *magic* since you were Chloe's age? Lyra, how exactly did you turn into..." He gestured at her with one hand.

She took a deep breath. "All those years ago, when I disappeared? I still don't know how, but I was taken to Equestria. It's that other world that I've told Chloe about. I wasn't making any of those stories up. I really knew those ponies."

He nodded slowly.

"As for learning magic, most unicorns start a lot younger than that... I just caught on slowly." She shrugged. "Humans aren't even supposed to be able to do magic, so I guess that's why it was hard for me. I didn't know that until not too long ago."

He hesitantly reached out and touched the cover of the old journal as if he wasn't sure if it would be solid. Then he let his hand close around it and took it from her. With some relief, she let go of it and the aura faded. Maintaining that levitation spell had been hard work.

Lyra lifted her head. "Speaking of Chloe, where is she? And Mom?"

"I had already dropped Chloe off at school when it started. I... don't know what happened next. It was too confusing."

"Oh..."

It seemed as if her father was beginning to come back to his senses. That was good. "But, Lyra, the first thing I need to know is what's going on outside. The rain. All the flat tires. At times I was almost certain that I saw street signs and mailboxes moving on their own. You know something about this, don't you?"

"It's worse than I thought..." she muttered to herself.

"What is?"

"It's Discord. He's the spirit of Chaos, and he used to be in Equestria, but he followed me here, and now..." Lyra caught herself talking too fast again. She slowed down. "Back in Equestria, he caused humans to go extinct. It was a long time ago. I think he's trying to do that again. By turning them against each other."

"Extinct..." Her father repeated the word, taking in what it meant. "But... chocolate milk? Doesn't that seem like some kind of strange joke?"

"That's the worst part. It *is* a joke. To him."

"And... this Discord isn't human."

"Of course not. Humans couldn't do all of that. We can't use magic." She looked up at her horn. "Not normally, at least."

"So all those years, you didn't know that you were –"

She shook her head. "My other parents never told me that I was a human. No." She looked at the book. "I did research on humans, though. Deep down, I knew what I was. Those are my notes."

Lyra hopped up on the couch next to him and sat down. He looked at her in surprise.

"Is it normal for unicorns to sit like that?" he said.

"Oh. Um... I started doing this because I saw pictures of humans sitting this way." She looked down at herself. "It's not as comfortable as I remember."

He glanced down at the book again, then up at her. "It sounds like there's a lot you need to tell me."

"About sixteen years of it," Lyra said. "But... I guess I can't do anything else right now."

She told him about the Grand Galloping Gala, stopping frequently to explain what that was and what Canterlot was like. She included as many of the details about Discord as she could remember. Of course, at the time, everything about Discord had been overshadowed by finding out that she herself was a human. She couldn't really blame herself for wanting to block out everything about their extinction.

"Princess Celestia sent me back to this world just a few months ago. I've been human ever since. Until now, I mean," Lyra said.

Her father seemed a bit more calm now. He gave an odd, uneasy smile. "I never would have imagined that was what happened to you when you vanished. We thought you were dead. It seemed more likely than anything else."

"Yeah, I never found out how that happened. It just... did, I guess."

"Magic."

"Maybe."

"And right in our own home, too..." he muttered. "It's all a bit much to take. But you're here, and you're a unicorn." He sighed. "I don't have any choice but to believe it."

"The only human I ever told was Audrey, and she just thought I was crazy. I didn't have any proof then."

He looked down at the journal again and turned it over in his hands. The binding was old-fashioned, a hard cover and thick parchment pages. More like an Equestrian book than a human one – at this point, Lyra was familiar with the differences. He opened it up and started looking through it. Slowly, taking time to read the notes scribbled in margins in between drawings.

"These are all of the studies I did about humans. I found a few books in the library – my other dad was the head librarian there." Lyra watched over his shoulder. "These ones are from back when I was living in Ponyville with Bon-Bon."

He glanced up. "Who?"

"My roommate. She was an earth pony. She didn't really like that I talked about humans all the time..." She watched him turn through a few more pages.

He stopped on a rough sketch of a city street. "This looks like downtown. How did you know about this?"

"Those are based on these dreams I had. Cities like Philadelphia were never in the books, since Equestrian humans never got that far, but I still knew about this world," she said. "I must have been remembering when I used to live here. It was such a long time ago, though."



"That's... definitely interesting." He looked through a few more drawings. Lyra noticed that the rain had stopped hitting the window. "You seem to have a real fixation on hands."

She looked down sadly. "Yeah. You probably wouldn't understand, since you've always had them... But that was the best part of becoming human! Getting fingers of my own. I could play my lyre like it was meant to be. It was invented by the Greeks, right? Our ancestors." She smiled. "I've always just wanted to be human. And I was, for a few months, anyway."

He was studying her notes closely. "Lyra... Equestria clearly isn't part of this world."

"No. Of course not." She tilted her head, giving him an odd look.

"You knew about Greece?"

"It's weird. A lot of the countries I read about were the same. I didn't realize it until I was here, so it was too late to ask Princess Celestia..." Her voice trailed off. "I don't understand it. It just happened."

He nodded, and looked back down at her journal. She noticed what page he was on. It was a highly detailed sketch of a pair of hands – one on each page of the spread.

"This is actually when I started taking notes by hand. See how my writing improved? And it was easier to get those details into the drawings. I found out I could actually manage a quill better with my fingers than with my magic." In an odd way, it was exciting getting to share this with a human. With her dad.

"This was when you became human," he said.

"Well, no, that was a little later..." She stared at the ceiling. "I... did a little experimenting with magic..."

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I told you. Hands were a pretty exciting concept back then. They still are, really."

"What did you do?"

She avoided his eyes. "I'd rather not say."

He closed the journal and sat it to the side. For a moment he stared out the window into the backyard. "You know, it looks like it calmed down."

"What?" Lyra lifted her head. "That can't be right. Discord wouldn't just be *gone*."

"But you're still a unicorn."

She stood up and trotted over to the window and stared into the backyard. It was eerie how quiet it was. "I don't know why it would stop. I can't help but think that maybe..." She let out a gasp.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Discord said something about a larger city that he was heading for... Maybe he didn't mean Philadelphia. Are there any bigger cities around here?"

"Philadelphia really isn't that big of a city. He could be headed anywhere. New York, or Washington..." He sat there for a long time with his head in his hands. Lyra leaned forward, but didn't say anything. What was there to say?

"If Discord is as dangerous as you say..."

"He is," Lyra said. "I told you. He's already driven us to extinction once."

"Yes. But you've been to Equestria. You know more about him than anyone else." He thought a moment, then asked, "Didn't you say he broke free a year ago?"

"Yeah, but Twilight and her friends took care of that. They used the Elements of Harmony," Lyra explained. "Did Chloe ever tell you about Nightmare Moon?"

"The name rings a bell."

"It was the same thing that time."

He nodded thoughtfully. "How exactly do you use those Elements?"

"Me? No, I can't..." Lyra sighed. "The Elements of Harmony are the only thing that can stop him, and that was all Twilight and her friends. I never had anything to do with that. I was just an ordinary unicorn. Most of us never had to do anything like that."

"So those artifacts are the only power that can stop him..." He seemed thoughtful. "It... seems common enough, in stories. And only certain heroes can wield them."

"This isn't one of your books. This is real life," Lyra said. "Even if that *is* how it works," she admitted.

"That's what makes it difficult... I take it there's no other way to fight him."

"If you're talking about using human weapons, that's the worst thing that we could do! Humans can't just take all of those armies and bombs and just give them to him."

"And yet... That's probably what will happen before long."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a threat. What other way can we deal with him? You say that's a bad idea, but nobody else knows what you do."

Lyra sighed. "Yeah, but... What I know is that humans can't stop him. We're only making him more powerful."

There was nothing else to say. The worst part was that Lyra knew what Discord had said was true. Coming back to the human world was what had caused him to cross over here. It was really all her fault.

The television turned on. Her dad had picked up the remote and changed it to the news. A human reporter was standing in the middle of a street drenched with milk in front of what was left of a building. The walls had vanished and the rooms inside stood intact in the middle of the lot.

She glanced down at her necklace. All she could think about was that last day in Canterlot. Her horn glowed as she reached out for it, and her dad watched with interest. Magic interested him – that was understandable, he'd written about it for years and never seen any until today. That was when she felt something odd. She let out a small noise of surprise and the necklace dropped back down.

"What's wrong?" her father asked.

"I'm... not sure," she admitted. "That's never happened before." With one hoof, she gently prodded the necklace, but it seemed harmless now.

"You've always worn that... Where did it come from?" her father said. "The chain doesn't look like the right size for a... pony."

She shook her head. "It was a gift from the Princess, right after she made me human."

"Princess Celestia." He was catching on, but it was clear that up until now he'd never given Lyra's stories much serious consideration. "She's the most powerful unicorn in Equestria, as well as its ruler..."

Lyra tilted her head. "Well, not exactly a unicorn. She has wings, too. She's about as tall as you are. Not to mention she's thousands of years old..." Lyra had bent down to examine the necklace more closely. The sensation when she'd lifted it towards herself... It hadn't happened when she'd first taken it off, but –

"You really spoke to a unicorn who was over a thousand years old," he mused.

"Yeah. Human rulers don't live that long, do they?"

He gave that shaky, nervous laugh again. "Things are different here. But as I was saying... A piece of jewelry given to you by a powerful magical being... It doesn't seem like it would just be a simple gift."

"What are you saying?" Lyra looked up at him. "I guess I've never actually used magic with it before, but that's not how things in Equestria work. There aren't enchanted objects everywhere like in your books." Hesitantly, she started to lift it up and over her neck again for a better look. "Besides, I'm not even sure what it would –"

"– do," Lyra finished, but her father wasn't there anymore.

Surprisingly, nobody was staring at her even though she had just appeared out of nowhere. But why would they? It wasn't anything out of the ordinary for a unicorn to teleport into the middle of Ponyville.

Lyra stood there for a moment dazed. First Discord, now this. She wasn't back in Ponyville. She *couldn't* be. Where was her dad?

The necklace. It must have been enchanted. So maybe her dad *did* know something about magic; he'd been right about this, at least. She tried to remember what she'd done – it had been nothing more than just touching the charm with some magic, and then it had reacted. Her horn glowed as she tried again.

"No, please... Don't tell me this dumb thing stopped working *now!*" She focused as much magic as she could onto the tiny lyre, held it up in front of her eyes, shook it violently. Nothing.

"Are you okay?" A stallion had stopped to stare at her, apparently concerned.

Lyra dropped the necklace. "I'm... fine. Completely fine." She gritted her teeth and trotted off in the other direction before he could say another word.

It was sort of familiar. The stalls set up along the road indicated it was a market day. No cars here to get in the way of everybody walking from one stand to the other. Lyra moved forward, one hoof in front of the other. The ground felt real enough. It wasn't some kind of illusion. At least, she didn't *think* so. Ever since Discord had showed up, nothing felt real.

"Hey, Lyra! Where've you been?" She recognized the voice. It was Daisy, a pink earth pony that she had occasionally bought flowers from. Lyra stared at her. It was weird talking to a pony. Daisy tilted her head. "You alright?"

"Uh, hey... Long time no see." She smiled uneasily, and hurried past.

She'd really gotten used to being around humans. These ponies, with all their different colors and horns and wings and four hooves and no hands... it was just *weird*.

The air here smelled so clean, and even with the usual bustle of a market day it was quieter than a typical day in Philadelphia. It was almost nice. But she didn't want to stay here. Her world – her *family* – was in danger, she had to do something...

"Lyra, you're back!" She turned at the sound of Apple Bloom's voice.

"Hey, Apple Bloom..." Lyra said. "Wait, are you running the stand all by yourself?"

"Yep! Applejack had to go out of town for a while, so she said I could handle it!" Apple Bloom said, beaming with pride. Lyra noticed she still didn't have a cutie mark.

"Out of town..." Lyra echoed. She considered it for a moment, then wandered off into the crowd again.

"Wait! Ain't you gonna buy some apples?" Apple Bloom called, but Lyra ignored her.

It would be a good idea to find Applejack. And Twilight. She didn't see any of the ponies she needed in the crowd. There were familiar faces here and there – ponies she recognized from her concerts, or parties she'd attended.

"Lyra?" That voice made her stop dead in her tracks. She'd recognize her anywhere. "Lyra, it really is you, isn't it? It's been so long!"

Lyra turned around slowly. "Hey, Bon-Bon..."

Bon-Bon trotted up behind her, then frowned when she noticed Lyra's shirt and pants. "Still dressing up, I see..." Lyra said nothing. She'd bought these clothes a place called Target, in Philadelphia – a store for humans. And they must look pretty goofy right now – too baggy, hanging off her small pony body. "But Lyra, it really is good to see you again. You simply must stop by to visit. I haven't rented it out yet, but I think I'll offer it to somepony. It gets rather quiet, living alone."

"Yeah, it probably does. Listen, I'd love to stop, but I'm in a hurry."

"Slow down. I want to hear all about where you ran off to. You didn't tell me a thing about where you were going. I even asked your parents where you'd gone, and they didn't –"

"My... parents?" Lyra said. Obviously Bon-Bon meant Dewey and Cirrus. "Right. They're probably worried, aren't they..."

"I was in Canterlot and happened to see them. I know you ran off from Ponyville without giving me any warning, but I thought you'd at least tell your own *parents* where you were going. The looks I got when I asked where you'd gone! They're worried sick about you."

"Listen, uh, Bon-Bon? This is going to sound weird, but... I am really here, aren't I? This is all actually happening?" Lyra prodded Bon-Bon in the shoulder with one hoof.

Bon-Bon drew back. "You're acting strange... More than usual, at any rate. What *have* you been doing?"

"It's hard to explain, and you wouldn't believe me anyway," Lyra said. She glanced around. "Right now I need to find Twilight. Is she at the library?"

"Twilight? I believe she was just called back to Canterlot with the others. What's the hurry? Just stop and visit for a while. I think you owe me an explanation after –"

"To Canterlot?" Lyra said. "Of course... Celestia must know that Discord's back."

"Discord?" Bon-Bon said, her eyes widening. "Wait, what do you –"

"This is perfect! No time to waste. I need to get back to Canterlot. The Princess can turn me back to normal." Lyra took a moment to remind herself where the train station was, then turned and galloped off.

Bon-Bon stared open-mouthed after her, then, with a groan of irritation, chased her through the crowd of ponies.

Lyra weaved through the crowded streets. None of the ponies seemed to be in any hurry. They must not have gotten the news yet. Princess Celestia only invited the bearers of the Elements to Canterlot. Did they even know that Discord had escaped?

She found the train station at the edge of town. Finding her way here had been easy. She remembered this town better than she realized. At the moment, the station was practically empty. No ponies were traveling today. A bored-looking stallion in a blue uniform was waiting at the counter, watching her.

"I need the next train to Canterlot. And fast," she told him. She pulled her wallet out of her pocket with magic, and removed a five to give to him.

He stared at the slip of paper in confusion. "Is this supposed to be worth something?"

She realized what she'd done, and pulled it back. "Oh, um..." The sign said tickets were five bits. Not five dollars. She slipped the money back into her pocket. *Now what?* she wondered.

"Lyra! You only just got here, and you're already trying to leave?" Bon-Bon came up behind her.

Lyra spun around, grinning madly. "Bon-Bon! Perfect! Listen, I need to borrow five bits. It's important. I probably won't pay you back."

"You... what?" Bon-Bon stared at her.

"It's urgent," Lyra pleaded.

Bon-Bon sighed and removed some coins from her saddlebag. "Here's ten. Make it two tickets." She turned back to Lyra and jabbed a hoof towards her. "But I expect an explanation."

They trotted over to the station platform to wait for the train. Lyra sat on a bench, pulled up one sleeve, and rubbed at her front leg with the other hoof. "How did I ever stand being covered in all this hair? It's so *itchy*..."

"We've got some time," Bon-Bon said. "Now let's talk. Where have you been, and what's this about Discord?"

Lyra sighed, and began rubbing at her other leg. "I don't know where to start..."

"The Gala would be fine."

"Right..." Lyra said. "That was the night when I spoke to Princess Celestia, and she told me –"

"You had an audience with the Princess?" Bon-Bon said. "Lyra, that's –"

"Let me finish," Lyra said. "I thought she was keeping an eye on me, and it turned out she was. She knew about the research I had been doing. She told me all about humans."

Bon-Bon let out a sigh. "Humans again? You ran off looking for *humans*? I thought you'd finally come to your senses. You're worse than ever, Lyra. No wonder your parents were worried about you."



"Dewey and Cirrus aren't my parents. They adopted me," Lyra explained, rubbing at her leg again. She could scratch it much easier if she just had her hands... "I'm not really a pony, Bon-Bon. I'm a human."

Bon-Bon's eyes widened. She shook her head. "You really *are* crazy."

"I've been living with the other humans ever since then. I can't really explain it, but there's this whole other world where we still exist." Lyra gave a weak smile. "You wouldn't believe the things I've seen there."

"You're right about that." Bon-Bon rolled her eyes. "I *don't* believe you."

A whistle could be heard down the tracks, and Lyra jumped up from the bench, steadying herself on her hooves. The train rolled in with a puff of smoke from the engine.

The conductor took their tickets. Lyra could hardly wait to get to Canterlot. If she got help from the Princess, and from the Elements of Harmony, maybe things would be okay. If not... She didn't want to think about that.

Bon-Bon hopped up onto the bench and settled down on it. "Maybe Discord is back. Maybe he made you completely lose your senses, and that's why you're raving about these ridiculous legends again." She waved her hoof as she spoke. "I've said it before, but I really mean it. You need help, Lyra."

Lyra was sitting upright, but it just wasn't as comfortable with this spine. "He *is* back, but he's not in Equestria. He's trying to... well, he made humans go extinct once, and now he wants to do it again."

The train started rolling out of the station. "Why did I even follow you..." Bon-Bon muttered, staring out the window.

Lyra groaned in exasperation, and her horn lit up as she tried to take her wallet out of her pocket. It hovered in front of her face as she pulled out some money. "I can prove it! Look at this."

"What is it?"

"This is a five-dollar bill. It's human money. Look, there's a human's face right on it!" It flew up right in front of Bon-Bon's face, and she flinched. "That's one of the presidents. And this here, where it says 'The United States of America.' That's the country I live in. We have lots of separate ones, but so far I've only been there."

Bon-Bon squinted at it. "I don't know where you got this, but..."

"I had to borrow bits from you because I don't have any Equestrian money left. I sent all I had left to you."

"Lyra, this is just paper. No pony would ever think this was worth anything."

"Well, neither did I, at first." Lyra put her face into her hooves. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say... Audrey never believed me about unicorns, either."

"Who?"

"Audrey. She was my first human friend. At first I wasn't telling her anything about Equestria, but it just got to the point where I was hiding too much..." Lyra looked down sadly. "She called me crazy. At that point, I realized humans aren't too much different from ponies. There aren't any unicorns there, or even ponies like you. They don't believe in us. And I couldn't do any magic to prove that I..." Her voice trailed off.

"This is... quite a story, Lyra." Bon-Bon paused a moment. "But that's the problem. All these theories, and you've never had any proof. How can you expect any pony to believe you?"

"My dad believes me. He saw me after... after I changed, but..." Strangely, Lyra started to grin. "But I do have something else from home."

Her phone lifted itself out of her pocket. Bon-Bon stared at it. "What are you doing?"

The device floated down and she cradled it in her two front hooves. The screen was dark.

"It's..." Lyra realized that it wasn't going to turn on. Not if she couldn't use her fingers. She sighed. "Well... It's not going to work unless..."

It was a crazy idea. It probably wouldn't even work, considering how long she'd gone without using magic. A complicated spell like this could easily go wrong, but what other choice did she have?

"Bon-Bon, I know you didn't want me using this spell, and I'm sorry, but you have to see this." She gritted her teeth, and focused everything into her horn, and then into her hooves.

"Lyra, what are you –" Bon-Bon screamed when she saw what Lyra was doing to her hooves. "No, not again. Lyra, we're in *public!*"

Lyra winced in pain. She'd forgotten how much it hurt to transform herself, not to mention the additional mental strain from the magic.

Bon-Bon had glanced around and seen that they were, in fact, alone in the carriage, but she was still fuming. "Lyra, I mean it. This *has* to stop. Do you even realize how *wrong* that is?"

"You're right about that. These really aren't very correct, anatomically..." Lyra inspected them, flexing the fingers. She didn't even have nails on them. It wasn't just the fact that she hadn't done magic in months, and they didn't come out as well as before. They'd never really been close to human hands. But they would do for now.

"Just... just take the spell away right now, you're like some kind of monster or something!" Bon-Bon cringed, but she couldn't look away.

Lyra took her phone in her hands, and turned it on with the meaty fingers growing out of her forelegs. She poked one onto the screen, and sure enough, it responded. The screen lit up. It was hard to control it with much precision. Princess Celestia couldn't turn her back to normal soon enough. A message appeared, telling her there was no reception. She hadn't expected any, but that wasn't what she was using it for. She tapped it with her fingers and brought up the photo album.

"Look at this." She held it up to Bon-Bon.

"What? Lyra, I don't understand what you're doing."

"It's called a cell phone. Lots of humans have these. But see this photograph? That's me, and my sister. That's what I actually look like," Lyra said.

Bon-Bon was speechless. It was probably a combination of both Lyra's deformed hooves, or hands, or whatever they were, and the photograph on her phone. "I can't... You..."

After living with Lyra for years, Bon-Bon knew a human when she saw one. And that's exactly what was in this photograph. Two humans – one with brown hair, and a larger one with the same color of mint-green hair that Lyra had. Now, the color could have been a coincidence, but there was something undeniably familiar in that smile. Even on the face of a strange creature, it was unmistakable.

"That's..."

"It's me and my younger sister. Her name's Chloe," Lyra said. "She's really interested in unicorns. My whole family's kind of obsessed with magic, to be honest."

"Your family?"

"I told you. I was born a human." She took the phone back, and looked down at the picture. "I wonder what's happening to them now... Mom's never going to believe this. Chloe... well, I really have no idea what *she'll* think."

Bon-Bon took that in for a moment. The picture was honestly hard to deny, but believing Lyra right now required her to believe that for the past four years she had been living with an alien creature from another world. Maybe that would explain the lack of etiquette and occasionally of rational thought...

"Now, don't think this changes anything. Even if you're right, and you are a human, it doesn't make you any less insane," Bon-Bon muttered.

"You believe me?" Lyra grinned.

"I know I shouldn't..." Bon-Bon said. She stared at Lyra's hands again and cringed. "But... please just take that spell away."

Lyra turned off her phone, then with one last examination of her hands, changed them back. She bit her lip as they were sucked back in and reformed into a hoof. Not for much longer, she hoped.

"So..." Bon-Bon shuddered just watching Lyra. It wasn't just because of that unnatural spell she was using. As hard as it was to accept... "You... really are a human? I just don't see how that's possible."

"It's all really hard to explain. I just got done telling my dad that I've been a unicorn all these years. He wasn't sure how to take it." Lyra stared out the window. "And then I ended up here, and he's got no idea what happened to me..." She looked down at her necklace.

"Now arriving at Canterlot! Now arriving at Canterlot!" The conductor's voice called out the name of the station as they pulled in. Lyra was fidgeting restlessly in her seat.

The brakes squealed as the train slowed down and pulled into the station. "Finally. I can't believe how *slow* this thing is," Lyra said.

"Lyra, it's always taken this long to get to Canterlot. You've made the trip even more than I have."

"If we just had a car, we could have been here in less than half the time. I mean, it's so close you can even see the castle from Ponyville!" Lyra hopped up from her seat and headed out. Lyra didn't stop for a moment as she spoke. Bon-Bon tagged along behind – she didn't know what she'd gotten herself into, but there was nothing else to do except follow. "I'm pretty sure that Philadelphia *alone* is bigger than Ponyville, Canterlot, and everything in between."

Bon-Bon tilted her head. "I've been to Fillydelphia, it's really not that much larger than –"

"No, I said *Philadelphia*," Lyra corrected her. "That's the human city where I..." She groaned, and said, "We've wasted enough time already. We have to go."

"Lyra? Just hold up for a –" But she was already gone. "What did she mean by a 'car,' anyway?" Bon-Bon muttered.

Bon-Bon struggled to keep up with Lyra as she made a beeline through the crowded streets of Canterlot towards the castle. For somepony who claimed to have been walking on just two legs for the past few months, she sure was fast.

"Lyra, slow down!" she called, but it didn't seem to make any difference. Bon-Bon shook her head in annoyance and put forth a burst of speed.

Soon enough she lost sight of Lyra, but it was clear enough where she was going. Pausing for breath, Bon-Bon continued at a slower pace. A few ponies asked her about the unicorn who had just gone charging through, but she denied any connection.

As she had expected, Lyra had gone to the castle, but Bon-Bon was hesitant to go anywhere near her when she found her arguing with one of the Royal Guards. She had forgotten what a hassle Lyra could be when she was worked up about something.

"I told you, I need to get in there! The Princess will understand!" Lyra was saying. "Just let me through!"

"Our orders are not to let anypony in. That's final," the guard said. His stern expression hardly moved.

"But I know where Discord is! I need to hurry!"

Bon-Bon stepped forward. "Lyra, please, there's no need to bother them..." She flashed a very embarrassed smile at the two armored unicorns, then turned to Lyra. "Let's go." She put a hoof around her and started dragging her back.

"Bon-Bon, I told you. There isn't much time!" Lyra had started to follow Bon-Bon away anyway. She sighed in frustration. "I can't even get back home without the Princess's help."

Once they were out of earshot, Bon-Bon checked around, then said in a low voice, "The last thing we need is to get arrested. I'm still not sure *what* to make of you right now, but I know that much."

Lyra sighed. She looked back at the guards, who stood there almost motionless. "It's not like them to have such tight security at the castle. What's going on?"

"And I thought you didn't trust the government."

"I've felt differently ever since I found out what they were hiding."

They were back in the bustle of the Canterlot streets. A few ponies were seated outside a café, making pleasant conversation. Lyra had understood that things in Ponyville would be calmed down, but here in the capitol? Didn't anyone wonder about the guards, or notice that there was a statue missing from the gardens? And not just any statue, either – everybody knew Discord after last time.

"I still need to get the Princess's attention, no matter what. There has to be some other way into the castle..." Lyra said, rubbing her chin with one hoof. She stared up at the towers spiraling above the town.

"Nothing illegal. Please," Bon-Bon said.

"I know," Lyra grumbled. She began to wander off again.

It was hard to believe she'd been at home in Philadelphia just hours ago. That was already feeling normal to her. This... As much as she remembered Canterlot, it was beginning to seem like a fairy tale. Like it was to Chloe. And yet the faces here were familiar. It was like she'd never left.

"I have to admit, this has been something of an adventure, Lyra," Bon-Bon said. "But I don't see what more there is to do. I'm about to head back to Ponyville. Then I can start to forget any of this ever happened."

"We can't give up. This isn't just about humans now. I told you. My family's back there."

"Well, yes, but..."

"That's my home now. To be honest... I didn't really want to come back to Equestria."

"Is it really so wonderful being one of those... things? Don't you miss it here? What I wouldn't have given to grow up in a city like Canterlot."

"No, there's not really..." Lyra's voice trailed off. It wasn't exactly true. There were some things she missed here. "Wait, isn't that..."

She stared at the dark blue unicorn in the midst of the crowd. She had thought she'd never see him again.

"Lyra?" He adjusted his glasses, as if he couldn't be sure he was seeing things correctly.

She ran up to her adopted father as soon as she saw him. "Dad..." She slowed down. "I mean... Well..."

He stared at her. "How did you get here? The Princess told us you wouldn't return..."

"It's a long story," Lyra said. "It was my necklace. But I couldn't have done it as a human, it was only after Discord turned me back into a pony –"

"Discord? You mean..."

Bon-Bon stepped in. "Mr. Dewey Decimal, isn't it? Do you realize what your daughter's been up to? She went missing for months and suddenly comes back saying she was –"

"Human, yes." He nodded. "What did you mean, Discord? He's in that world now?"

"That's why I need to get to the castle. There might still be time to stop him," Lyra said.

Bon-Bon's mouth hung open. "You knew about this the whole time?"

"Of course," Dewey said. "Cirrus and I did consider telling you after Lyra left, but Princess Celestia suggested not to. We're really quite sorry, but Lyra's origins have been something of a royal secret."

"I knew she wasn't like other ponies, but I never thought that she wasn't... well, a pony!"

"Dad, you're still working at the Royal Archives, aren't you?" Lyra said.

"Of course. I'm not getting that old yet. There's still a couple years until I retire," he said. "Why?"

"Can you get me into the castle? Unless I can tell the Princess what happened, and get her to help me, I.. don't know what will happen to the other humans."

"Of course."

Lyra led the way again, trotting at a brisk pace. She glanced behind her to be sure the others were keeping up. Bon-Bon had hung behind, making a face, but she hurried to catch up and ran alongside Dewey.

"You and your wife were raising a *human* filly," Bon-Bon said.

Dewey stared at her. "Yes, we were."

"Bon-Bon, we don't actually call ourselves fil—" Lyra started.

"You seemed like such perfectly normal Canterlot ponies when I met you!" Bon-Bon said. "Why did you get yourselves mixed up in all this?"

"We weren't sure about her, at first. But Lyra turned out more or less like anypony else. The Princess still has her doubts, but personally I'm somewhat fascinated by the idea of humans." He turned to Lyra. "So what is it like, where you came from? What are the other humans like?"

"They're amazing!" Lyra said. "It took me a while to find my real family. Turns out the place I arrived was hundreds of miles away from home. But my friends in Des Moines helped me get back to Philadelphia – those are human cities, by the way – and it's really not that hard for humans to travel that far. I was in this thing called a plane..."

Dewey listened with interest to Lyra's story as they headed to the castle. Bon-Bon thought it all sounded even more outlandish than Lyra's old theories. A giant metal tube



that could fly faster and higher than a pegasus? It all sounded so insane, and yet she'd seen that photograph on some kind of device that obviously wasn't from Equestria...

"I was hoping my family would know something about what happened to me when I disappeared, but they didn't know anything," Lyra was saying. "My dad's a famous human writer. His books are about magic. Completely inaccurate, but anyway... He never suspected that's what really happened to me, though."

"Cirrus will be happy to hear you're doing alright out there..." Dewey slowed down. They were nearly to the castle gates. "Of course, you don't have time to stop and chat, do you?"

Lyra shook her head sadly. "I hope I haven't lost too much time already."

They hurried the rest of the way to the gates.

"Mr. Decimal, sir!" The royal guards recognized him immediately. "Is there anything we can help you with?"

"My daughter has important information to relay to the Princess. It's imperative that you let her through."

"We were told not to –"

"The Princess will understand. Just let her through. I'll be taking full responsibility for this."

The guards looked at each other, then stepped aside to let Lyra go through. She ran for the entrance immediately, then stopped to turn back.

"Thanks."

"It's no problem, really," he said.

She hesitated. "I... might not be coming back. For real this time."

"I understand that, Lyra. But you said there wasn't much time."

Lyra bit her lip. "Well... Thanks. For everything." She turned and headed on alone into the castle.

"You only *considered* telling me," she heard Bon-Bon say. "You'd think that if somepony was going to be living with a –" Her voice faded as Lyra stepped inside.

Canterlot Castle. Passing through the entrance hall made Lyra remember the Gala. Today everything was eerily silent and still. As she headed up the stairs, she remembered after the party. Probably the most significant night of her life. She was easily able to remember where Princess Celestia had led her – that hall was likely where everybody was gathered now.

It was up the stairs, through several winding hallways. She was quickly running out of breath, but she saw the massive doors just ahead. Only a little bit further, and... With a burst of magic power, she flung them open and ran through.

Princess Celestia was there. In front of her were six ponies – the bearers of the Elements of Harmony. In total there were seven pairs of shocked eyes staring across the long hall at the pony who had just burst in.

Silence for a moment – no sounds except Lyra gasping for breath. She finally found her voice. "Discord's back. I saw him."

"Lyra?" Twilight was the first one to speak. Her voice echoed. "What are you doing here? And... you really saw Discord?"

"Great! You can lead us right to him!" Rainbow Dash said. "Where is he?"

"You're *sure* you saw him?" Pinkie tilted her head. "'Cause I haven't seen any chocolate or cotton candy lately and I thought it'd be everywhere!"

"Of course. He did all of that. It's just like last time." Lyra crossed the hall to join the others. An ornate chest was behind the Princess, and she could see the Elements inside. "And he turned me into a pony."

"You've always *been* a pony, sugarcube." Applejack lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, no, actually, I..." Lyra's voice trailed off. Now that she had stopped running, she realized how tired she was. "Uh..."

The Princess stepped forward. "It's as I feared... Seeing you here has confirmed that, Lyra."

Twilight spun around. "What? What do you mean? You... know her? What does Lyra have to do with this?"

Celestia paused. "Several months ago, I sent Lyra back to her homeland. It's a world entirely separate from our own," she said. "Lyra didn't know it herself, but she is actually a creature called a human."

"She's a... a what, now, exactly?" Rarity said, frowning.

"I've never heard of those before..." Fluttershy said.

"No, you gave me that research assignment on humans, and..." Twilight shook her head in protest. "They don't exist. Everything I read proved that! Besides, nopony has ever seen a live one."

"Until Lyra was found, I thought humans had gone extinct centuries ago. And now that Discord has found them... I'm not sure what can be done," Celestia said. "I was unsure if you'd be able to use it, Lyra, but I did send you with a way back. You will be safe here."

"Huh?" Lyra said. She shook her head. "No, that's not what I came here for. We need the Elements of Harmony. Discord hasn't been there for long. He's only just getting started. There must still be time to stop him if we just hurry."

"Discord has escaped from his prison again. That proves he's already stronger than we thought. And with the power he draws from humans, he will most likely be unstoppable."

Celestia's words hung in the air for a while. Lyra shook her head again. "No. We have to try."

"Lyra, um..." Twilight was struggling to find the words to say. "This... This is the *Princess* you're talking to! You can't just say 'no' to her!"

"Princess, you know better than anybody what happened last time Discord took control of humans," Lyra said. "And I've seen what humans are like now, and it will only be worse. If we don't do something now, Discord will get more powerful. And he'll head to Equestria next."

Twilight shook her head. "I don't see what you would know about –"

"Wait a minute, Twi." Rainbow Dash spoke up. "We've all known Lyra for a few years now. I don't know what she is, but don't you think we should try to help her?"

"But the Princess said it would be dangerous..." Twilight looked up at her mentor and waited for a response.

"Lyra." Celestia seemed thoughtful. "What do you know of the humans in your world?"

"They're... well..." Lyra hesitated.

"Are they peaceful?"

"Of course! Everybody I've met has been nice to me..." Lyra said. "But..." She sighed. "It's complicated. I've met a lot of good people, but... You were kind of right about humans. We *do* fight each other. I don't think we can just turn our backs, though, because humans are more than that! If we let Discord go, he'll just take over all of the bad parts, and we can't sit back and let that happen."

"Princess?" Twilight said, but Celestia was waiting for Lyra to go on.

"Discord was still unfamiliar with the humans in my world," Lyra said. "It seemed like he wasn't doing much more than just messing around when I left. I can't say what he's up to now."

"And that means he won't be expecting us. I say we go," Rainbow Dash said.

"Help *humans*?" Pinkie said. "Am I the *only* one who's heard of them? Come on! They'll eat us up!"

"I'm not going to eat anybody, Pinkie," Lyra said in a flat voice. Her stomach turned. *Not again, at least.*

"We're certainly not getting anywhere by standing around," Rarity said. "Lyra seems to be the only one who knows what she's doing, so I say we follow her and get it over with."

Applejack shrugged. "Might as well, I s'pose."

Celestia hesitated. "It's extremely dangerous," she said at last. "If all of you are willing to take the chance –"

"We've taken care of Discord once already. It'll be no problem to do it again!" Rainbow Dash said.

"The last time Discord attacked humanity, Luna and I were powerless to stand against him. I cannot be sure what will happen if you try to oppose him now."

"But you're letting them try..." Lyra said. "Right?"

"He's going to be more powerful than he was a year ago, but how much, I cannot say. Whether you can defeat him or not, I need you all to return immediately. The enchantment on Lyra's necklace will still work." The Princess lowered her eyes. "If it comes to the worst, the best we can do is prepare to defend ourselves here."

"So, uh... I'm kinda lost here. Where are we goin'?" Applejack said.

"Just try to get us closer this time," Lyra said. "The human world is big. You were way off the mark when you sent me last time."

"I'll do what I can," Celestia said.

"Oh, and one more thing." Lyra held up a hoof. "Could you do something about these?"

It was too dark to see exactly where they had ended up.

"Twilight? Rarity? Could you guys maybe..." Lyra looked down at them expectantly.

Twilight did nothing for a moment, then shook herself. "Oh. Of course." Her horn lit up, casting a glow all around them. The light glinted off the jewels in the necklaces each of them wore. "You really can't do magic anymore, can you?"

Lyra shook her head. "But it's not that bad, honestly. I've gotten used –"

"What is *that*?" Rarity exclaimed.

She rushed over to something that had caught her eye. As she got closer, they could see from the light of her horn that it was a store display. All around them – shelves, racks, clothing everywhere.

"I'll admit I wasn't sure about you before, Lyra, but if this is the human world, I completely understand," Rarity said. "Now did you say that you humans wear clothing *every* day?"

"Of course," Lyra said. She looked around – it seemed to be a normal department store. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness, and everything seemed to be in order, other than the fact it was empty.

"Any of this look familiar?" Rainbow Dash said. "You are supposed to be our guide, y'know."

"There's stores like this all over the human world. We could be anywhere," Lyra said. "There were some like this in Philadelphia, where I live, but they also had them in Des Moines. And everywhere in between, probably."

"Um, that's great, but... Could we get out of the dark? I don't like it here..." Fluttershy said. She shrank down, backing up slowly. She hit something. She looked up to see a headless human figure. She squeaked and flew close to the group.

"It's just a display. Come on," Lyra said. "The layouts of these places are usually pretty similar. The exit should be this way."

Twilight's horn lit up even brighter to allow a circle of light around the seven of them. They moved slowly through the eerily silent store.

"You'll have to excuse me, Lyra, but you said that there are shops like this *everywhere* in the human world?" Rarity said. Her eyes moved all over the store, constantly finding something new to look at. "I suppose you would need plenty of clothing if you were to have an outfit for every single day, but... Oh, this is simply *magnificent!*"

"Let's hurry it up, y'all. I don't like how quiet it is," Applejack said. "Discord could be anywhere."

Pinkie Pie seemed to be the only one unfazed by their new surroundings. If anything, she was giving Lyra a suspicious glance – her hands, her stature – but she seemed excited more than anything else.

"You already saw him?" she asked. "What did he do? Did he do the chocolate rain thing again? What about the cotton candy? Giant apples? Those weird bunny things?"

"It was just like last time," Lyra said bitterly. "He was just getting started."

"Oh, come on. You have to admit he was a *little* bit funny, right?"

It got a little bit easier to see once they got closer to the windows, but not by much. It was night outside.

"I didn't think I was gone that long..." Lyra said.

She expected the front doors to be locked. Strangely enough, it opened easily. She held it open for the others. They stepped out of the dark building and into the open street.

Applejack stared up at everything around her. "Looks like Discord's already done a number on this place..."

Towering structures surrounded them. Looking up at the one they had come out of, it was a glassy reflective surface all the way up to the sky. Down the street were more buildings, boxy shapes with endless windows. A few billboards – advertising mobile phones, airlines, a few logos that Lyra recognized. A bike was locked on to a pole with a crossing sign. There were street names, but they were only numbers.

"No..." Lyra said, shaking her head. "No, it's always like this."

"Y-you mean this is normal for you?" Fluttershy said. "There's... no grass, or trees..." A car sped past – the only one moving on the street – and she shrank back. "I don't like it here."

"It's just a city like the one near where I live. Bigger, though..." Lyra looked around at the surroundings. Other cities she had seen would pale in comparison to this. There was more of everything. Larger buildings, tons of cars, even if most of them weren't moving. Definitely more advertising.

The only thing there wasn't much of were humans. At least not as many as Lyra would expect to see in a city of this size. They stared at her. Normally humans wouldn't give Lyra a second glance, but here it was like they didn't want to approach. One held up a phone, probably taking a picture.

Rarity scrunched up her nose. "It could do with some redecorating. These buildings seem a little drab..."

"Kinda reminds me of Manehattan," Applejack said. She watched another car go by. "And what in the heck are those? Are they supposed to be movin' like that?"

"There's way too much to explain," Lyra said. "First of all, we need to find out where we are. The Princess said she would try to drop us somewhere close to Discord. At least it's not the middle of nowhere like last time."

Twilight was quickly taking inventory of everything around her. She was currently focused on a stoplight glowing red. "That's supposed to be there, too?" She looked to Lyra for confirmation. "You said the human world wasn't exactly like what we've studied, but this isn't *anything* like what we studied. None of this makes any sense!"

"Please, Twilight, I really don't have time to explain everything." The first time Lyra arrived in this world, there had been a gradual transition into a city that wasn't even this overwhelming. She could only imagine what an overload it must be to ponies who had never been here before. "If you want, I guess I could find you some books to take back with you. But for now, there's no time."

"But these are the same creatures you studied..." Twilight said. She watched some of the humans across the street. "I think that much, at least, is the same. Isn't it?"

"You're sure none of them are going to eat us?" Pinkie raised an eyebrow.

"Humans don't eat ponies. Trust me, I've lived here for a while now," Lyra said. "Actually, we eat a lot of the same things you do." Which wasn't a lie. Just not the whole truth.



"Enough talking," Rainbow Dash said. "We came here to beat Discord again, so where is he?"

"Lyra, you did say that everything here is normal?" Twilight tilted her head. "I'll admit it doesn't look that way to me, but it doesn't seem like Discord's up to his usual tricks."

Lyra looked up at the sky. It was dark, completely starless. The ground was dimly illuminated by scattered lights in the windows, but the street lamps were dark. She wondered what time it was. Her phone was in her pocket. Now that her fingers were back to normal, it was easy to turn it on. It said the connection was back.

It also said it was just past five in the afternoon.

She scratched her head. "That's... I mean, it feels like that should be right, that's about how long I was in Equestria, but it shouldn't be this dark."

As if in response, the sky immediately brightened. The sunrise took only a split-second and then the sky was clear and blue. It was blinding for a moment until their eyes adjusted.

"Lyra, just one more question. Who controls the sun in this world?" Twilight asked. "Obviously it's not Princess Celestia... is it?"

Lyra shook her head. "It's supposed to just happen on its own. This isn't right."

"On its own? That's simply ridiculous," Rarity said.

"Look, I really don't have time to explain everything about this world. Just let it go. It's too complicated. You guys just need to get to work," Lyra said.

Lyra watched the crossing signal. It was flashing a red human hand – the symbol for "stop," as she'd come to learn. But then it was replaced with a six-pointed pink star. That flashed a few times, then changed to three red apples, a multicolored lightning bolt, a cluster of blue diamonds...

Her concentration on that was broken by a hollow thud. She jumped, and looked over to notice one of the store mannequins in the window had fallen over. She let out a sigh of relief until the one next to it stepped forward and started pounding against the glass.

"We'd better get out of here," she said.

"Hold on. We don't even know where Discord is yet," Twilight said. "We'll just get lost."

Lyra pointed at the crossing signal again, which had gone back to the pink star. "I think he's already found us."

Applejack watched the flashing lights, which had gone back to the three apples. "Now I'm pretty sure it's not supposed to do *that*."

"Just stay here, Lyra. We'll go take care of Discord. We'll find you when we're done," Twilight said. She looked at the charm hanging around Lyra's neck. "After all, you've got our only way to get back."

"Right. I should let my parents know I'm okay, too..." Lyra said.

Lyra watched them gallop off into a hazy, colorful blur in the distance. The sky went dark again and it was impossible to see them after that. She shuddered, and reached into her pocket for her phone.

It was somewhat comforting to use it with her normal fingers again. She really appreciated the slenderness and flexibility after using her crudely-formed hoof hands just hours ago. Here was the contact list, only a few names listed, and the one she wanted was...

Home.

Maybe it would still work. Discord wouldn't know how to ruin the phone system, would he? Even Lyra wasn't sure exactly how they worked.

It would be best not to wander too far, like Twilight said. She hoped they wouldn't get lost here. She hoped that she wouldn't get lost here. There were a few stores around with familiar names – Walgreens, or Office Max, but they weren't the same ones from Philadelphia. The same stores were all over the place in the human world. She could be anywhere. Maybe this was the capitol of America, it was definitely big enough.

She stared down at the phone in her hand, remembered its purpose, and dialed the number for home. It would be over soon, wouldn't it?

It rang a few times. She knew the sound. If it kept going, it meant that the human on the other end didn't pick up the phone in time. She frowned when it rang again, almost worried that nobody would answer...

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Twilight's head was down, looking at the strange yellow stripes on the road. It was made out of some odd black stone. Were the stripes supposed to be there, or was that Discord? It was so difficult to tell.

There was a blaring noise and a screeching to her left. One of those wheeled machines had just come to a stop as they went past.

Rainbow Dash flew higher to dodge. "Watch where you're going!" she yelled at it.

"What *do* you reckon those things are?" Applejack said. She glanced back at it, but kept galloping along with the others.

"I don't know. There's no time to worry about that, though. Just stay close, everyone," Twilight said. "He might try to separate us again. We can't let that happen."

"Um, Twilight? Do you even know –" Fluttershy's voice faded out as she was distracted by more humans. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Well... no," she admitted. The road they were on kept leading them down farther, so she continued to follow it.

There was a rumble coming from behind them, some glass shattering. Another machine was driving along the side of a building, a couple stories above their heads. It kept going until it was around the corner onto the other side.

"I didn't know they could do *that!*" Pinkie Pie said. "It looks fun!"

"Do you think it's supposed to be able to do that?" Rainbow Dash said.

"I'm going to guess not," Twilight said.

They barely paused to watch it as they crossed another intersection under those red and green flashing lights. It was almost like that hedge maze – just an endless labyrinth of grey buildings. At least they hadn't been separated. Things were confusing enough as it was.

But they were together. Discord hadn't had time to play games with their minds, he didn't even expect them to show up, and the Elements would work.

Maybe.

• • •

"Hello?"

"Mom?" Lyra's face broke out into a relieved grin immediately. "Thank goodness. I'm back."

"Where are you? Your father..." Her mother hesitated for a moment. "He said you were..."

"Yeah. I'm human again. Everything's going to be alright."

There was a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear."

"Wait, you... You believe me?" Lyra said. She had just finished explaining everything to her dad, to Bon-Bon, to Twilight... The last thing she had expected was for her mother to not have any questions.

"He said something about a 'spirit of chaos,' something like that. We're fine here now, but a few hours ago I'm not sure what was happening. It's not that difficult to believe you turned into a unicorn." There was a pause. "And you left chocolate milk hoof prints on the stairs."

"Sorry."

"It's fine, Lyra, but where are you? You said you were back, but where?"

"From Equestria," Lyra said. She began to pace. "Look, I brought the Elements of Harmony with me. I think Discord is in this city. We'll have him taken care of in no time."

"The city? You're in New York?"

"I don't know," Lyra said. There was a metal cart with a green umbrella next to her. The umbrella began to spin, lifting it up into the air, eventually rising over the tops of the buildings. "Whoa! Uh... We just appeared in the middle of it all. I have no idea where we are."

"After things stopped happening here, there started to be stories that whatever it was had moved to New York City. It's been all over the news."

"Already? That seems fast," Lyra said. "I guess that's how human news travels, though, isn't it?"

"You really did grow up in a different world, didn't you?" her mother said. "Lyra, just tell us where you are. We can probably be there in a couple hours to bring you back home."

"No, don't come here yet! It's dangerous. We'll have Discord taken care of in no time, just... keep your distance until then. I'll call you later." She looked up to see where that cart had gone, but didn't see it.

"You're sure?"

"Trust me. He already did this to Ponyville... but they stopped him then, and they can stop him now."

There was a pause. "Just be careful, Lyra."

"I will," she said. "I'll talk to you soon... Bye." She ended the call, switched off her phone, and slid it back into her pocket. Now to wait for the others to put a stop to all this.

Someone bumped into her from behind. She turned around and saw it was a young human male with a large camera around his neck.

"Excuse me," she said softly.

He stopped for a moment, then spun around. "Hey, you see anything around here?"

"Huh?"

"A guy on 43rd Street said he saw a herd of unicorns go stampeding through. Right through traffic." He made a sweeping gesture with his hands. "You see anything like that?"

Lyra frowned. "They weren't *all* unicorns..." she muttered.

"You saw them? Which way'd they go?"

"I mean, uh..." She scratched the back of her head. "Unicorns? That's not possible."

"Look around you. There's crazy stuff all over the place. A buddy of mine said he saw the Statue of Liberty switch arms, like she just got tired of holding up the torch after all those years. You've at least seen the thing with the sun, right?"

"Oh." She looked up at the sky as if it was about to change right that moment. "It'll all be over soon."

He looked at her strangely. "I dunno about that, but I gotta see what's down there." He continued running down the street.

Lyra stood there dumbfounded. The human world was doomed to destruction, and yet they just wanted to watch.

She shook her head, and kept walking at a brisk pace. There was no telling what else might come alive. She crossed the street. A few people here were talking to each other, watching her as she went past. She passed a store with the windows broken. A car that had somehow turned itself upside down.

A sign overhead had a guitar, almost like the one she played. This one was red, probably a different model. A music store? Or a concert hall? On closer inspection, it actually said Hard Rock Cafe. Like it was a restaurant or something. Whatever it was, something about seeing that sign made her feel a little bit better. Things would be back to normal soon enough, she could go back to playing her music.

She took a closer look at the windows. Whatever this place was, it interested her.

"Lyra?" The voice behind her was familiar. "No way... I'd recognize you anywhere. What are you doing here?"

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"Can we maybe slow down, please?" Fluttershy had stopped running and started flying, but even then she was beginning to lag behind.

"Perhaps we should. All this running and we haven't found anything," Rarity said. A trash can got up and ran away as they approached. "Other than... that, I suppose."

The grid of flat streets and cold stone and metal buildings seemed to come to a clearing. A few of those wheeled machines were sitting around. Two flagpoles with unfamiliar banners stuck up in the middle of the plaza. Giant human faces stared down from huge posters. A few panels were dark.

"Do you think this goes on forever?" Fluttershy said.

"Course not. It can't," Applejack said. She glanced around. "I think."

They came to a stop. The roads split off and went in different directions. It really was just another maze. No wonder Discord would come here.

Suddenly everything went dark. The sun had set again, as quickly as it had risen. It took their eyes some time to adjust to the moonlight.

"Ah, the Elements of Harmony. I'm surprised to see you here, I really am."

Twilight's head jerked up. "Discord!"

He was in one of the posters, his claw curled around the shoulder of a female human. "So Celestia decided that the human world was worth saving and sent you here. That's certainly unexpected."

Rainbow Dash flew up right in front of his face. "Stop joking around and get out here!" She turned around and kicked him, but he quickly moved away and circled around to one of the dark panels on the other side.

"Let's not be too hasty, Rainbow Dash. Enjoy your visit. This is New York City, home to about eight million wonderful humans, give or take a few hundred thousand," he said. Then he gave a shrug. "Or at least it was. Just a light cola storm and some tricks with their giant statue and they all pack up and leave town. At least some of them. But looks like there will be more coming just to see the show. What can I say? Humans appreciate chaos just as much as I do!"

"That's enough," Twilight said. "We didn't come here to play your games. I may not be sure what this place is, but I know that we need to stop you."

Discord sighed, and then emerged out of the flat panel. His form became three-dimensional as he pulled himself away from it. He glided down to float before them.

"Alright, girls. Let's just get this over with, shall we?" He folded his arms across his chest and waited for them to make a move.

Twilight stepped back for just a moment. Then she turned to the others. "Ready?"

"Let's finish up here so I can go home," Rarity said.

"Sounds good to me," Applejack said.

The pendants around each pony's neck began to glow. They could feel the familiar rush of power – although they had only used the Elements twice before, it was unmistakable. And slowly, their hooves lifted off the ground until they hovered in front of Discord.

Something changed in his bored expression – a look of realization.

There was hardly enough time for him to register the burst of color emerging from each pendant, forming into a vivid rainbow against the grey backdrop of the city. It surged through the air, swooping up high before dropping down and heading directly for the draconequus.

The rush of power seemed to last forever, though it couldn't have been more than a couple seconds. Slowly, the pendants darkened, returned to normal, and each of the ponies floated back down and placed their hooves back on solid ground.

The light cleared.

Discord idly inspected the talons of his left arm. "You know, for a second there, even I was sure it was going to work."



"Randall?"

He was probably the last person Lyra expected to see here. She had only a vague notion of where New York was, but if that's really where she had ended up, she would be hundreds of miles away from Des Moines.

"What are you doing out here, Lyra? You've heard about what's going on, right?"

"This... isn't Des Moines," she said.

"Uh, you okay?" Randall squinted at her. "I know people have been getting a little weird lately, but are you feeling alright?"

"Weird? Weird how?"

"Well, there was my cousin. I was staying with him, but..." Randall's voice trailed off. "You really don't look too good."

"It's fine. I guess you could say it's been a rough day. But it's fine. It'll all be over soon." She took a look around. "Is this New York?"

He nodded, still eyeing her strangely. "You didn't know that?"

"Well, no." Lyra looked around her. "What are you doing here?"

"Like I was saying, I've got a cousin out here. Said he knew some people out here, I might be able to take the band farther. Then he started getting weird, just earlier today. Started yelling at me, said that I was trying to take advantage of him. I was out for a walk to see if he'd cool off later, and that's when stuff started getting *really* weird." Randall shrugged. "Maybe *I'm* the one who's going crazy."

Lyra shook her head. "No, it's not that," she said. "But your cousin... He's not usually like that, is he?"

"No, he's usually pretty cool. Don't know what got into him."

"It's just like last time..." Lyra said. Discord really was trying to corrupt humans. She hadn't seen it yet, but this proved it.

"What time?"

"It'll be fine." Lyra looked up at the sky. A couple minutes ago it had gone to night again. It was hard to tell how long she'd actually been here.

"If you think so." He shrugged. "Some people are saying it's the end of the world. I dunno, I was thinking that would be more fire, and demons rising up out of the ground. Earlier I saw some street lamps that had turned into peppermint. Like, actual candy."

"That'll happen," Lyra said.

"You've seen it too, huh? Well, I guess everyone has."

"Yeah..."

"You know, it wasn't until after you had left town that it really hit me. You're Lyra Michelakos. I mean, you really must've hit it big when you got back home," Randall said. "And you came out to my house that one day practically begging for money."

"Yeah, it's been pretty good," Lyra said absently.

"We had another guitarist for a while, but he just wasn't as good. Didn't show up to practice, didn't seem serious about it. If you wanted to, Lyra –"

"Lyra!" She turned her head up at the voice, which had come from above her. "*Finally*. I've been looking all over for you," Rainbow Dash said, swooping down next to her. "All these humans look the same. Good thing your mane stands out so well, huh?"

"Dash? What's going on?" Lyra said. "Wait, did you..."

Rainbow Dash bit her lip. "See, that's the problem... The Elements weren't any good against him. He was too strong."

Lyra's jaw dropped open. "What?"

"Uh, Lyra..." Randall said. "There's a... flying horse... talking to you."

Rainbow Dash turned to him, then looked back at Lyra. "Do you know this human?"

"Yeah, we were in a band together back in Des Moines. But what were you saying about Discord? The Elements had to work. They had to."

"The others said I should go ahead and try to find you. We need to get back to Equestria, and fast."

"I've seen some pretty insane things before. But this probably takes it," Randall said. He pointed at Rainbow Dash. "Lyra, you realize that's *not* normal, right?"

"Yeah, I'd like to see what you humans consider 'normal,'" Rainbow Dash said, rolling her eyes. "I can't wait to get out of this place. There's just no room to fly with all these buildings everywhere."

"Randall, this... This is Rainbow Dash. She's a friend from... back home."

"I thought you were from Pennsylvania," Randall said.

"Well, yes, but..." She groaned. "I've already explained this enough times today," Lyra said. She turned back to Rainbow Dash. "I don't care what you do, but we need to stop Discord. There has to be some other way."

"The Elements were at full power. If they didn't stop him, I don't know what would."

"I don't know," Lyra admitted. "But we'll come up with something."

"Like what?" Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "Look, Twilight just told me to find you so that we could go back and report to the Princess. I'm going to go find her, so don't go *anywhere*. Got that?"

Before Lyra could get another word in, Rainbow Dash had already flown off. She turned back to Randall, who was still wide-eyed in disbelief.

"So... what was that about?" he said.

"It's a long story, but all this chaos is being caused by someone called Discord. He's trying to... well, drive humans to extinction. Again. That's another long story. Rainbow Dash and the other ponies were supposed to stop him. I can't believe it didn't work..." Lyra crossed her arms and stared at her feet.

"You're friends with talking horses."

"I used to be one, kind of."

"It's the end of the world and talking horses are going to save us," Randall said. "I guess that's not the strangest thing I've heard today."

"Good. I don't feel like explaining it again," Lyra said.

That seemed to be the end of the matter for now. Randall just couldn't think of anything else to say. He ran his fingers through his scraggly hair. Lyra glanced around trying to see if Rainbow Dash or anyone else was coming back. Nothing, except for a bright yellow car walking past underneath the bunches of bananas that had probably once been stoplights.

The others were just going to give up on humans and let this happen. Lyra couldn't believe it. Of course, they didn't know any humans here... She just couldn't let this happen to her friends. Her family. Humans were good, or at least a lot of them were, and Lyra just couldn't let that go so easily.

It was a few minutes before the others showed up, Rainbow Dash leading the way.

"There's more of them," Randall said, looking up. His tone was flat.

"Lyra..." Twilight said. "I'm sorry. But we couldn't do anything."

"I heard everything," Lyra said, frowning.

"Lyra, I really am sorry. But you have to let us go back," Twilight said. "You have your necklace, right?"

Lyra's hand reached into her pocket for the necklace, then she stopped. "No. You need to find another way. There has to be something else we can do."

"The only other time the Elements didn't work was when we weren't... well, ourselves," Applejack said. "They should of worked here, but they didn't. I can't believe it myself, but we just weren't enough to stop him this time."

"You heard what Princess Celestia said before we came here. Discord draws too much power from humans. And here he is in a world with tons of them all giving him power..." Twilight looked up at Randall, as if she'd just noticed him standing there.

Something flashed across Lyra's mind. She glanced at the necklace Rainbow Dash wore. "That's just it, isn't it..." She rubbed her chin.

"What is?"

"I'm going to need to borrow your necklaces. And your crown," Lyra said, turning to Twilight.

Twilight's jaw dropped open. "What? *Borrow* them? What are you talking about?"

"The Elements of Harmony. I'm going to need them for a little bit," Lyra said.

Twilight shook her head frantically. "Lyra, do you even know what you're *saying*? You can't just *borrow* the Elements of Harmony!"

"In the time I've been human, I've made some friends who are just as good as any pony I ever met. If humans are giving Discord his power, then we can take it away," Lyra said.

"Um... What exactly is going on?" Randall said.

"You'll help me, right?" Lyra spun around to face him. "I mean, we can't do this unless we have everyone..." She counted out on her fingers, muttering something under her breath. "How quickly do you think Audrey could get here? Nathan, too."

"Those kids you were staying with back in Des Moines?" Randall scratched his head.

"Yeah."

"That'll be a while. They shut down the airport, at least the ones around New York." He glanced at the ponies again, then back at Lyra. "I still don't know what's going on here."

"They could still drive, right?"

"I... guess, but what do we need them for?" Randall said.

"We'll need... six of us. I think I can get this to work..." Lyra said. She nodded. "Yes. If we can just get everybody together. I've got some phone calls I need to make."

Twilight shook her head. "Not just anypony can pick up the Elements of Harmony. These are very powerful magical artifacts that –"

"You used them after you'd known each other for a day," Lyra pointed out.

"Well, yes, but... Still, you're a *human*. You can't even use basic magic!"

"Lyra, I understand why you wouldn't want to leave this place, but we don't have any choice, now do we?" Rarity said. "I recommend you come with us."

"And do what? Just wait for Discord to finish up here and follow us back to Equestria?" Lyra said. "We've got one more shot at this. We need to try."

Twilight exchanged a glance with the others.

"Uh, Twi, I think you understand how the Elements work better than any of us. I'm leavin' this one up to you," Applejack said.

With some effort, Twilight finally managed to speak. "Well... fine. But we have to stay here."

"Wh-what? I really don't want to stay here much longer..." Fluttershy said. She cringed. "Actually, I want to leave. Right now."

"Well, we can't just give the Elements to the humans and leave," Rainbow Dash said. "This better not take too long."

"We're staying here while Discord's got all of his kooky stuff going on?" Pinkie said. "This'll be fun!"

"Actually, when you put it that way..." Lyra thought for a moment. "Randall, do you have your car here? The big one we moved all of the band equipment in?"

"Well, yeah." Then he added, "If it hasn't sprouted wings and flown away." On any other day, that would have sounded like sarcasm.

"Great. We'll go back to Philadelphia for a while. I think it'd be dangerous to stay around here much longer. Paul and Monica are there anyway, and I think we'll need them..."

"And we're taking... your friends here?" He gestured at the ponies.

"Of course."

"They've usually got trailers for moving around horses. I don't have one of those."

"They aren't like horses from our world. It'll be fine." She looked over the group. "It might be a tight fit, though."

"What do you mean?" Twilight said. "Horses?"

"But... where are we going?" Fluttershy said.

Lyra was reminded of something that happened months ago. Strapping herself into the front seat of Nathan's car and nearly having a heart attack when they started rolling backwards into the street. This time they wouldn't even have the benefit of seat belts.

"This'll be your first time in a car... Just sit back and try not to panic *too* much."

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Towards the end of the school day, a few mentions had been going around about weird stuff happening on the East Coast. Mostly New York, but some surrounding areas too. Audrey hadn't thought much of it at the time. It had sounded like a joke.

It was later in the evening now and she'd been in front of the computer looking at updates and photographs for a few hours. New posts seemed to keep on appearing as soon as she finished reading one. It was all over the place.

This particular photo was showing a section of the street that had turned into rolling hills, swooping up and down like a roller coaster. The pharmacy and the department store behind it seemed unaffected. She zoomed in, leaned close to the screen, squinted. It didn't seem edited, though she was no expert.

Her cell phone rang.

She picked it up and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"You've seen this, right?" It was Nathan's voice. "The stuff over in New York?"

"Yeah... Whatever it is," she said. She read what the photographer said about the image – that the formation in the street had just appeared suddenly, as solid as if it had always been like that. It was possible to drive over it, provided nothing had happened to your car. Some vehicles had been affected by whatever it was – anything from turning plaid to suddenly coming alive.

"I was thinking it was a hoax – some elaborate prank, but I don't know," he said. "It's coming up on CNN and stuff too. I don't think they'd be able to hack *all* the major news networks."

Audrey clicked a link to some other photos. A message board where people were raising a lot of the questions she herself was wondering.

"It's all kind of..." She looked for an adequate description. "Cartoony."

"I'm still not sure if I'm convinced, but you've gotta admit, it's starting to look like it's for real," he said.

"I hate to admit it... but yeah," she said.

One poster on this board was raising their doubts. Photoshop, mass fake accounts all run by a few people, and of course hacking. They weren't the only ones to think that way. But it was seeming more and more like a desperate attempt to deny what was right in front of them.

"And did you see those pictures of Times Square?" he asked.

"Which ones?" Audrey tried to remember. "The billboards that came to life, or the flying hot dog stands?"

"No, these are the new ones. The herd of unicorns. A bunch of people had pictures of them."

"Unicorns..." That stirred something in Audrey's memory. "No, I haven't seen that yet."

"Yeah. All different colors. A couple were flying," Nathan said. "People only started mentioning them about half an hour ago, but there's dozens of photos."

She typed the phrase "times square unicorn" into the search bar and looked at images. Sure enough, there were plenty of different photos. If it had been photoshopped, it probably would have taken someone a lot of time and effort.

"I'm just not sure what to make of it," Nathan continued. "I've heard some people are heading out there to see it for themselves. Photographers, mostly, but also just some sightseers."

"Wait a minute..." Audrey clicked one of the images. Zoomed in. The herd of whatever they were was in the distance, but there was a person standing in the midst of them.

"What?"

She stared at it for a few moments, then slowly raised a hand to her mouth. "She wasn't lying," she said softly.

"Huh?"



Audrey shook her head. "It's crazy. I *told* her she was crazy."

"What are you talking about?" Nathan said.

"Lyra. Back when we found her parents, I told her I needed to know where she came from. And... Well, she told me."

"What does Lyra have to do with any of this?" Nathan said. "I mean, she was pretty strange, but all of this is on a *whole* different level than that."

"Lyra insisted that she used to be a unicorn. I don't remember everything, but her story was pretty detailed. Something about turning into a human. But... she's in these pictures, and I think she has something to do with all of what's going on over there."

The other end of the phone was quiet, then, "Wow. I mean, really, *wow*. I wondered if this was some kind of bizarre alien invasion. That idea's been tossed around online a bit. And you made first contact, Audrey! Heck, you let her stay at your *house!*"

The home phone rang. It went a few times, then stopped. Someone else must have answered it.

"I wish I remembered what she told me..." Audrey said. "I mean, it sounded crazy. It still does."

"Coming from Lyra, I'm not too surprised. She always was kind of odd."

"Audrey, it's for you." She turned around to see her mother standing in the doorway, holding the phone out towards her. "It's Lyra."

"Huh?"

"She said it was important."

Audrey lifted her cell phone back to her ear. "Listen, Nathan, I'm going to have to call you back."

"Wait, what -" She closed it and put it on the desk. Then she stood up and took the phone from her mother. She lifted it to her ear slowly. It was the perfect opportunity to find out what was happening, but she had no idea what to say.

"Audrey!" Lyra's voice was familiar enough.

"Uh, hey, Lyra..."

"Good. I tried to reach your cell phone, but it didn't work," Lyra said. "Listen, I need you to come to my house. As soon as possible. It's really important." There was a faint voice that was hard to make out through the background noise, then Lyra said to whoever it was, "It's a phone. I'll explain later, alright?" Then, speaking to her again: "Sorry about that, Audrey."

Lyra's house? She meant in Philadelphia, probably... Unless it was the other place. Ponyland or whatever. Audrey finally found her voice. "What's this all about? Was that you in New York?"

"How did you know I was there?" Lyra sounded surprised.

"There were pictures of you on the Internet. With these unicorns. You weren't making that up when you told me, were you?"

"No. I wasn't. I tried to tell you," Lyra said. "But listen. It's really important that you get to Philadelphia right now."

"Right now? You realize how far that is, right?" Audrey said, rubbing her forehead. "And, on top of that, it's a school night, I can't just go halfway across the country –"

"I made it here in half a day last time," Lyra said. "What's the problem?"

"You *flew*. We booked it days in advance. I could try that, but even then it would be –"

"That'd take too long..." She heard Lyra sigh. "Look, the entire survival of the human species is at risk here. I need you and Nathan here, *now*."

Audrey was taken aback by that. Lyra sounded serious enough, though she did have a tendency to overreact to things... Then again, those photos. Audrey spun around in her chair to see it still up on the monitor. "The survival of the human race," she repeated.

"Yes," Lyra said.

"This has something to do with everything that's been going on in New York today, doesn't it?"

"That's just the beginning. But you'll come, right?"

Audrey sighed. "I'll see what I can do, but... You *are* halfway across the country."

"We'll deal with that. When do you think you can get here?"

She went through the options in her head. Flying on such short notice would be impossible. She didn't have her license, though even if she set out on the road now it would take – what? An entire day or two. Not to mention having to explain this to her parents. They'd seen what was happening on the news, but had just shrugged it off.

Audrey scratched the back of her head. It was odd, but she felt like Lyra really wasn't exaggerating the importance of this. "I don't suppose you or your friends have any magic that would help here, would you?"

"No, Twilight says it's way too far to teleport." Lyra sounded oddly casual, talking about teleportation like that.

"I don't know, then," Audrey said with a sigh. "Like, two days. That might even be generous."

"Seriously?" Lyra said.

"Look, I don't know how people get around where you're from, but this is a long trip," Audrey said.

She heard Lyra sigh. "You're right. Cars are a lot faster than Equestrian transportation. Just hurry, alright?"

"Sure, I'll see what –" The line went dead. Lyra must have hung up already. Audrey set down the phone, leaned back, and ran her fingers through her hair.

Audrey had always known that Lyra wasn't quite normal. The way that she'd acted that first day, for the entire duration of her stay afterwards. She wasn't exactly *human*, was she?

But as for what to do now...

It sounded important. For whatever reason, Lyra had chosen her to do... something. Maybe that's why she had come to this world. Even thinking about "this world" as if there really was some magical land beyond it sounded ridiculous. What exactly did Lyra expect Audrey to do here? And why couldn't she have found someone else closer?

Lyra had also mentioned Nathan. It might be good to call him. Figure out what to do. Audrey was about to pick up the phone again, but it rang before she even touched it.

"Hello?" She half expected it to be Lyra again.

"So I just got a call from Lyra. Interesting story," Nathan said.

"She just called me too," Audrey said. "Uh... What are you going to do?"

"Well, first of all, I thought the end of the world wasn't for a couple more months."

"Seriously, Nathan."

"Alright, alright. Well, I'm heading out to the car now. I'll swing by your place in a few minutes. Pack some snacks if you want them, there's a long drive ahead of us."

Audrey was shocked. "You're just *leaving*?"

"She said it was urgent."

"You know how long it's going to take to get out there, right?"

"I told you to pack something to eat. And are you okay with driving part of the way? It'll count towards getting your license. Your parents will be happy about that," Nathan said. "Besides, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Something weird is going on out there, and we're involved! You've gotta admit, that's pretty cool."

"Sure," Audrey said, shrugging even though he couldn't see her. "Maybe it is."

"Alright. I'll see you in a few minutes."

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Lyra sat in the front seat next to Randall, staring at the road in front of her. It was a "highway" – she'd never actually driven on one, though it seemed kind of like the first place she'd seen in the human world. They passed a sign that said "Philadelphia." They'd be home soon.

"Are you done talking to yourself yet, Lyra?" Pinkie asked.

"I told you. I was talking to my friends in Des Moines. That's what phones let humans do."

"So when can they get here?" Twilight said. She stared out the window, still getting used to how fast everything flew by. "It seems like human transportation is as fast as you promised. I'm amazed this is possible."

"The talking purple unicorn in the back seat is impressed that I can drive at sixty miles an hour. Because *that's* weird," Randall muttered.

"It is if you're from Equestria," Lyra told him. "Anyway, Audrey said... maybe two days."

"Two days?" Twilight said.

"Ugh. This morning I didn't even know what 'humans' *were*, and now I'm stuck here for the next two days?" Rainbow Dash said.

"Am I the only one who's ever heard of humans? Bon-Bon's always talking about them at Sugarcube Corner!" Pinkie said.

"She does?" Lyra turned around.

"Well, she talks about you always talking about them. But that means she's talking about humans. Kinda."

"Two days seems like a mighty long time to wait around..." Applejack said. "You sure you still wanna try this, Lyra?"

"Sure. We'll just... wait at my house for a while," she said. "At least my sister will be excited to meet all of you."

"Make a left here... We're that house. Right there." Lyra pointed at where the main road broke off into her driveway.

Randall pulled the van in, and parked in front of the house. It looked unchanged. The chaos had obviously left when Discord did.

She turned to the back seat. "Well, here we are. Home."

"With your human family," Twilight said.

Lyra hopped out of the front seat and slid open the side door. Pinkie practically bounced out immediately.

"That was fun! Except for the whole being packed into a small space for two hours, but let's do it again!"

"No thanks. I'm just glad to be back somewhere that looks halfway normal," Applejack said. "Still... that house does look mighty big."

"I will admit I'm impressed," Twilight said, looking back at the vehicle. "How did you say it worked again?"

"You use magic, and you can't figure out how a car runs on gas," Randall muttered. He turned to Lyra. "So, this is your place, huh? Looks pretty nice."

"We can stay here while we wait here for the others to arrive. In the meantime, I'll find Paul and Monica," Lyra said. "They probably saw what happened this morning." *Had it really only been today?* Lyra thought.

Right now it was getting late. As they'd gotten farther away from New York, the light had become normal. It was nine o'clock, dark, and would probably stay that way for as long as it was supposed to. However Discord had been playing with the sun and moon in the city, it was somehow only affecting a small area. *For now.*

Fluttershy seemed transfixed by the trees and the sounds of crickets around her. Only the sound of a passing car back on the main road snapped her out of it. "You... live here, Lyra?"

"It's my family's house," Lyra explained. She led them up to the front door as she spoke. "My dad – I mean, Dewey, back in Canterlot – he had a photograph of it that he found with me. That's how I found out who I really was."

"I was the one who recognized it," Randall said.

"Thanks for that," Lyra said. "My dad's actually a famous writer in the human world."

"Really? What about?" Twilight asked.

"Well... That's hard to explain..."

As if he knew they were talking about him, Lyra's father came out of the front door and headed over to them. He noticed Lyra immediately. He couldn't think of what to say. Then, he simply commented, "You're back to normal."

She nodded. "I hope it stays that way."

He looked behind her at the ponies, as if he had only just noticed them. "And these are..."

"Oh! Uh... You must be Lyra's father," Twilight said. She gave an uneasy smile. "She's... invited us to stay here for a few days."

"Y-yes..." He stared at them for a moment – mostly at Twilight, then he noticed Rainbow Dash hovering a few feet off the ground. "There's really all sorts of you..."

"These are some of my friends from Ponyville. They tried to stop Discord, but... it didn't work," Lyra said. "But I've got another plan."

"You're Thomas Michelakos, aren't you?" Randall said. He walked over and extended his hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

Lyra's father took his hand. It was almost as if seeing another human with them was the most surprising part. "And who are you?"

"Name's Randall. I'm one of Lyra's friends. I'm not sure what she's got in mind, but I've got something to do with it." He shrugged.

"Lyra, what exactly *are* you doing? I thought you said the Elements of Harmony would stop him," her father said.

"They still can," Lyra said. "At least, I'm pretty sure. We just need to adjust our plan."

Without another word, she ran ahead to the front door. She could hear a voice from inside, probably the television. Her mother was there waiting by the window, looking at the van. She turned when Lyra entered.

"Lyra, you're back? You never called us," she said. Then, squinting out the window at the ponies headed their way, "What on Earth..."

"They need to stay here for a little while. There's been a change of plans," Lyra said.

Chloe stepped out of the kitchen and into the hallway. She seemed sleepy – on most nights, she would be asleep by now. "Lyra's back? Is she..." A look of disappointment seemed to cross her face, but it instantly vanished the moment Twilight came in the front door. "That's...!"

"You *live* here, Lyra? It's... pretty big." Twilight's eyes moved all over the entry hall, taking in every detail. She paused for a moment on the painting of the dragon.

Lyra noticed that Chloe had gone speechless. She walked over and knelt down, putting a hand on her sister's shoulder. "Chloe, this is Twilight Sparkle. I know I told you I made those stories up, but..." She smiled. "I lied."

Chloe's mouth hung open as she stared across the hallway at the ponies. For a moment, she couldn't do anything, but then...

"Fluttershy?" Chloe ran up to the pegasus, who shrank back instinctively.

"Um... Who are you?" she managed to whisper.

"Fluttershy, this is my little sister. Chloe," Lyra said. "I've told her all about you and Ponyville."

"Huh?" Fluttershy seemed to calm down, but was still uncertain. When Chloe reached out to touch her nose, her eyes stayed fixed on the hand.

"It's okay," Lyra said. "I knew you'd be excited to meet them, Chloe."

"I-I'm so sorry," Fluttershy said. "It's just that... I'd never seen a human until today, and I..."



"It's fine, Fluttershy. There's nothing else we can do for now, so why don't you two spend some time together?" Lyra said. "I'm sure Chloe would love to get to know you."

"But why would –"

"You really can communicate with all kinds of animals?" Chloe said. "Tell me about the time you took care of Princess Celestia's bird! That one's my favorite."

"Huh? You... know about Philomena?" Fluttershy said. "I still feel terrible about making such a mistake... You really want to hear that?"

"I'm sure you can tell it better than I can," Lyra said.

"Follow me, Fluttershy!" Chloe said.

Chloe ran upstairs to her room. Fluttershy examined the narrow stairs before deciding to fly carefully over them instead of trying to climb them.

"So how long do we have to stay here? I'm sick of this place already," Rainbow Dash said. She slowly stretched out her wings, making a face. "If you need me, I'll be outside making sure these still work."

She turned and headed back out the door, taking a running start before she flew up into the air and out of sight.

"Don't mind her. She just didn't like the ride here. We've never been in one of those 'cars' before," Twilight said.

"Just excuse Rainbow Dash. I assure you we're not *all* so terribly rude," Rarity said. "May we come in?"

"Of course," Lyra said. "You don't mind, right, Mom?"

Before they entered the living room, Lyra's mother took her aside.

"They're staying *here*?"

"It'll be fine. I know that we have 'horses' in this world that are just animals, but... I was a pony like them for most of my life, and they're much closer to us that you realize," Lyra said.

"Your father told us about you. And we looked at the journal you left here."

"Just... don't mention that we have meat in the freezer."

"You *are* a vegetarian... That's why, isn't it?"

Lyra shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah. I still can't convince myself to eat that stuff."

"There it is. Coulda *sworn* I heard more voices..." Applejack glanced towards the living room as she left the hall. "But it looks empty."

The voice she was talking about came from the television in the other room. "Reports are still flooding in from those still in the city, along with shocking video and photo evidence of..."

Lyra's mother watched the ponies as they wandered into the house. "Ever since you went missing. You really *were* a..."

"Yeah. I would have told you, but you wouldn't have believed me," Lyra said.

Pinkie Pie hopped over to the screen. "Look! That's us! How'd we get in there?"

"It's television," Lyra said distractedly. Her eyes were fixed on the screen. This was the news, and yet they'd only left the city a few hours ago... How could they know so quickly? She was only slightly less confused by it than the other ponies were.

"How is the image appearing there?" Twilight stepped up to the screen until her nose was practically pressed up against it. She blinked a few times, and squinted. "It's some kind of illusion..." She turned around, wincing and putting one hoof to the side of her head. "Lyra, I thought you said humans weren't capable of magic, but..."

"I thought the same thing at first. But it's not," Lyra explained. "We just have... advanced technology. It makes up for not having magic."

"All the stations have been reporting on this nonstop today. We started seeing pictures of you not too long ago," Lyra's mother said. At the moment, the screen was showing blurry images of grey buildings shimmering and changing to all sorts of garish pastel colors. "What did you say was going on there? Nobody's been able to explain it."

"What Discord does makes no scientific or logical sense," Twilight said. She looked back at the screen. "Much like... a lot of things here."

As the report on the television went on, Lyra and the ponies explained what they knew. What Discord had done a year ago in Ponyville, and what they had seen in New York. And how the Elements of Harmony hadn't even left a scratch. Lyra stepped in every once in a while to clarify some aspect of either human or pony culture that the others didn't understand.

"Ponies were able to save Equestria, but you have no connection to this world. I think that's weakening you somehow," Lyra said. "We need humans to use the Elements instead."

"So I'm basically an honorary magical unicorn for the day, is what you're saying," Randall said.

"This morning, you told me there was nothing humans could do," Lyra's father said.

"I'll admit that the exact way the Elements work isn't completely understood, even by ponies," Twilight said. "They were originally used by Luna and Celestia, but now we're the current bearers. Still, humans have absolutely *no* magic power... I'm not sure you'll be able to use them."

"Twilight, I told you. We're not giving up," Lyra said.

"And I understand that. We just left a huge city, and traveled for two hours through a huge expanse and there were humans everywhere," Twilight said. "This world is a lot bigger than I imagined. And... It's just as important as Equestria, even if we aren't accustomed to it."

Suddenly there was a dull pounding against the front door. Everyone's head turned at the same time. Lyra's father was the first to stand up.

"I'll go check on it. You stay here."

He left for a moment and went to the entry hall. They heard the door unlatch and swing open.

"I don't get it!" It was Rainbow Dash's voice. She came into the room looking slightly more annoyed than earlier. "The *doors* don't even work here."

Lyra inspected her fingers idly. "Not for you, at least."

"Good. Looks like you finally decided to join us," Rarity said.

Rainbow Dash frowned. "So how long are we staying here for?"

"Until we've figured out how to stop Discord," Lyra said. "Nathan told me he'd come and bring Audrey with him as soon as he could. We'll just have to hold out until then."

"Great..." She rolled her eyes and hopped up onto a chair to settle down. "This better work, Lyra."

• • •

Lyra woke up the next morning, hardly aware that she had fallen asleep at all. The day before had been so hectic that she had hardly realized how tired she was. Going from being a human to a pony and back again hadn't exactly helped, either. She must have collapsed on the sofa in the living room and been out before she even realized.

"Mornin', Lyra," Applejack said. She was sitting in front of the television, still switched to the news, but wasn't paying any attention to it at the moment.

"Oh. Hey." Lyra rubbed her eyes. Her attention turned to the image on the screen – still New York, and it wasn't looking any better.

"I thought I'd let you get your rest. You goin' out to try and use the Elements of Harmony and all," Applejack said. "Looks like nothin' much has changed. Discord's still raising a ruckus out there, but everything's fine and dandy here."

"That's good." Lyra glanced out the window. She noticed Fluttershy and Chloe in the backyard, talking to each other. "So... What do you think? About humans using the Elements?"

Applejack tilted her head. "Well, I don't know exactly, it's more Twilight's cup of tea, but... However unicorn magic works, I don't think it's the same thing as the Elements. Those times that I've used the Elements, it's always just happened. Hard to explain. I guess you could say I can feel somethin' happening, not just with me, but with everypony. If your friends are really as good as you say, maybe it'll work."

Lyra thought about that for a moment, but she was interrupted. Twilight trotted in from the front hall, followed by Lyra's father.

"Lyra, you're awake," she said. "We were just having a discussion on magic. Your family seems shockingly uneducated on even the most basic principles." She turned back to Lyra's father. "No offense intended, of course."

He laughed. "Before yesterday, I wasn't even aware magic was real."

"So I've heard..." Twilight said. "Lyra, how did you ever manage getting by without it?"

Suddenly, Rainbow Dash stumbled through the front door. Her wings were outstretched and she panted for breath. Finally, she managed to say, "I think we've got a problem. Discord's messing with the clouds."

"You mean the cotton candy?" Lyra said. "That was here earlier. Is it back?"

"No. Something else," Rainbow Dash said. She stared out the window. "I was trying to get up to the cloud level, but... it's *way* too high up. I ran out of breath before I could even get there. I never run out of breath that fast."

"That's it?" Lyra said. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Why would he do that? I just don't get it..."

"The clouds are always like that," Lyra said.

"Huh?"

"I realized that when I was on the airplane. The clouds in this world are much higher up than in Equestria. And we don't have weather production up there." Lyra hesitated. "It all just happens on its own."

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Great. The entire *world* is one big Everfree Forest."

"I agree it sounds difficult, but it's a fascinating study," Twilight said. "Anyways, Lyra, so far we only have two humans to use the Elements of Harmony. You said you had others in mind."

Lyra nodded. "Audrey and Nathan are still going to be a while to arrive. What time is it?"

"The middle of the afternoon," Twilight said. "You've been sleeping for hours."

She hadn't even noticed it, but the clock on the wall said it was already past three. Lyra jumped off the couch and scrambled to her feet. "I need to get going."

• • •

The streets downtown were strangely empty. Normally this place felt familiar, but ever since Discord had shown up yesterday nothing was quite the same. Lyra couldn't put her finger on what it was.

The bell by the door jingled as Lyra pushed it open and entered the bookstore. She went straight to the front counter like always, but... Monica wasn't there. Instead, an different human was there, his face hidden behind a copy of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*. He set it down when he heard Lyra enter, but she had time to recognize a blurry, distant picture of Twilight Sparkle on the front page.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Monica. She works here," Lyra said. "Do you know where I could find her? It's really important."

"She works in the mornings. She's not here right now. Can I help you with something?"

Lyra shook her head. "It has to be her."

"Important, huh?"

"Very."

He searched the counter for a moment, then took out a scrap piece of paper and started writing something down. "You a friend of hers?"

"Yeah. A friend," Lyra said.

"Here's her address." He pushed the scrap across the counter and Lyra took it. "It's not far from here. You head down the street and turn on the third street down, take a right."

"Thanks."

"Haven't seen many people in here today. Still shook up from yesterday, I guess," he said. "What do you think of all that? And now they're saying New York has it even worse."

"Yeah. Weird." Lyra looked back at the address she'd been given. "Thanks for you help. I gotta go."

Without another word, she headed back out the door.

• • •

It took Lyra a while to find the right street, and then it was only a matter of finding the right house. It was a neighborhood kind of like Audrey's. The houses were close together, not quite as large as Lyra's. From what she had seen, this was typical for humans.

She was still searching for the house when the rain started.

Somehow all it took was a few drops for her to realize that it wasn't regular rainwater. The pink clouds spreading over the neighborhood told her the rest.

"No..." Lyra muttered, staring up at the sky. "Not *now!*"

She put a hand up to shield her eyes and ran down to find the right house number. She was getting closer now, it couldn't be more than a few houses down...

"Lyra? What are you doing out here?"

She lifted her head at the sound of Paul's voice. He was on the front porch of one of the houses, sitting on a bench and staring out at the weather.

"Paul? Great! I was looking for you!" She ran up to the cover of his porch. "Listen, we need to find Monica right away."

"You've seen this, right?" He gestured to the rain. "It happened earlier today, too. I'm *sure* it can't be natural."

"It's not. We need to stop it. Where's Monica?"

"Whoa, slow down. She lives right next door," Paul said. "But what's the matter with you? I mean, chocolate milk rain isn't exactly the end of the world."

"But it's coming. You said she was in that house?" Lyra glanced over at it. She gestured for him to follow. "Come on."

She practically sprinted across the yard and up to the front door of the next house. She rang the doorbell and stood there waiting. The rain was dripping from her clothing onto the welcome mat. As much as her soggy clothes were bothering her, she had to admit it was still better than being a pony covered in all that itchy, matted hair.

Paul came up behind her. "I didn't quite get what you said. You said the chocolate rain *is* the end of the world?"

Lyra nodded. "Yeah."

"Some stay dry and others feel the pain..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

The door finally opened. Monica seemed surprised to see them. She was dressed in a T-shirt and sweat pants. "Uh, hey Lyra..." She scratched the back of her head. "How did you find out where I live?"

"The guy at the bookstore told me. Listen, there's no time to explain right now. I need you to come over to my house."

Monica looked at Paul, who shrugged. "She's not telling me anything, either."

"Look, I'll explain on the way. You'll understand once you meet Twilight and the others," Lyra said. "But the future of the human species is depending on us right now."

"Uh..." Monica stared at her, then sighed. "At least let me get dressed first."

She let them into the house while she went upstairs to change. Lyra leaned against one wall, her arms folded. *Soon*. They had four of the six humans they needed... The other two might still be hours away, but there was nothing she could do to hurry them up. Hopefully this chaos wouldn't get in their way.

"You actually think you have a way to prevent the end of the world? I mean, I can't really deny that what's happening out there isn't normal, so I *guess* I trust you," Paul said. "I always could tell there was something different about you, Lyra."

"That's what the other ponies always said," she muttered.

It took a moment for that to register with him. "What do you mean, 'ponies'?"

• • •

The rain hadn't let up by the time they got back to Lyra's house.



"Let me get this straight, because I might not have heard you through this rain, but... You used to be a *unicorn*?" Monica said.

Lyra said nothing, but led them down the driveway and into the house. It seemed much quieter after the downpour outside.

"You always showed up asking about unicorns and American history," Paul said, wiping his shoes on the mat. "Guess that explains it."

"I just wanted to understand human culture better. I'd never even heard of America until I left Equestria," Lyra said.

"Lyra? That you?" Applejack's voice came from the living room. "I think you'd better come in and see this..."

"Who was that?" Monica said.

"Well... my friends from Equestria are here. They're going to help us set things back to normal."

Lyra headed to the living room, where nearly everyone was gathered around the television. Rainbow Dash was sitting by the window to the back porch, staring outside.

Monica's eyes were huge. "Of... course. Your friends from Equestria."

"Lyra, things aren't looking good. Discord's got Filly..." Twilight corrected herself. "*Philadelphia* under his control, but this says that it's still centered in New York."

"It's spreading..." Lyra said. "How far does it go?"

"We're not sure yet," Lyra's father said. "The local news is getting reports from all over the county."

Monica had hesitantly gone into the living room to look at the television with the others. "I've been hearing bits and pieces about this stuff in New York. So this whole thing... *That's* what we're up against?"

"What's out *there* isn't normal, but all of them, *they're* completely fine," Paul said. "I'm just making sure I've got this straight."

Randall stood up and walked over. He put an arm around Paul's shoulder. "You'll get used to it. Guess we'll be working together. Welcome to the honorary magical unicorn squad."

• • •

The remainder of the day was tense. Everyone had seemed to settle into an ease earlier, getting used to meeting residents of other worlds, but now the ponies and humans were all nervously taking glances out the window. The rain continued, the sun kept rising and setting every couple minutes.

Fluttershy and Chloe were practically inseparable. Lyra noticed them looking out the back windows at the trees. The forest itself was normal, but there was a squirrel trying to figure out how to climb now that its legs had turned into three-foot-tall stilts.

"Oh, I do hope the poor dears are alright..." Fluttershy said.

"Did this happen the last time?" Chloe said. "Lyra never told me about Discord."

"Well, yes, everything was fine eventually... But only because Twilight helped us to stop him. If she hadn't been there to remind us of our friendship, the Elements wouldn't have..."

"It's alright, Fluttershy. The Elements will work this time," Lyra said.

"Are you... sure?" Fluttershy said.

Lyra wasn't sure what to say. New York *was* pretty far away. The chaos already covered the entire area from here to there, and it was probably still expanding, yet all they could do for now was sit here and wait...

Aside from everything that could now be seen happening right outside, even just seeing her human friends and family with the ponies she'd left behind in Equestria was odd. Rarity was examining the paintings in Lyra's mother's studio, commenting on the accuracy of the dragons and other creatures. Paul, once he had gotten over the strangeness of the whole situation, seemed to get along well with Pinkie. And Lyra's father had convinced Twilight to demonstrate a variety of spells for him, often asking Lyra what she had been able to do.

In a way, Lyra felt like she was the only one aware of the huge responsibility looming over her. She and the other humans had to take the Elements, not even sure that they

would work, and if they *didn't*... Well, humans would be a lost civilization again. She'd always assumed they *had* been. But to have been a part of this, to have lived here, and then possibly be responsible for letting it all fall apart – *again* – that would be too much.

So for the remainder of the day, she tried to distract herself like the others were. Her knowledge of both the human and pony worlds were making her a useful link. And the more Paul, Monica, and Randall understood about Equestria, and the Elements of Harmony, the better chance they'd have.

Lyra pulled out her cell phone to check the time. It was about ten at night, though it was almost impossible to tell by looking outside. She was in her bedroom, showing her small collection of books to Twilight.

Twilight lifted up one of the books. "This one, about 'American history.' You said that's the name of the country you live in?" She inspected it more closely, then compared it to the others. "None of these books have covers. What happened to them?"

"It's human publishing. We don't always have thick covers on our books," Lyra explained.

"Weird..." Twilight flipped it open. "This is an entire land not mentioned in any book I've ever read. I must admit I find it fascinating..."

"You can take those back with you," Lyra said. "I've read them already. And there's a lot more at Monica's store."

"Are you sure? I mean... Princess Celestia doesn't want *anypony* to know about this. If books about your world fell into the wrong hooves –"

"Um... Am I interrupting?" Fluttershy peeked her head through the doorway.

Lyra glanced up. "No. What's going on?"

Rarity stepped in front of her. "We just thought you should know that another one of those..." She tried to remember the right word. "Well, another one of those human carriages is outside. Do you think it's the other humans you told us about, Lyra?"

Lyra and Twilight exchanged a glance, then Lyra headed out and down the stairs. She opened the door and stepped out into the chilly air.

She recognized the old grey car immediately. It was the first one she'd ever ridden in – all those times going back and forth from band practice.

"Audrey! Nathan!"

Nathan looked up at the sound of his name. "Hey, Lyra." He stared at her. "You look... normal," he said.

"What do you mean?"

Audrey was leaned against the car on the passenger side, staring down. She yawned. "We've been on the road all day. Would you care to explain what's going on?"

"Back in Cleveland, we got held up by what the radio was calling 'adverse weather conditions.' Turns out they meant Coca-Cola thunderstorms," Nathan said. "And then the radio started playing everything backwards and we couldn't change the station."

"I know it's weird. But we're going to stop it," Lyra said. "I'll introduce you to the others, and then we need to get back on the road."

"Looks like we've got all six of the humans now," Twilight said. She trotted up from behind Lyra and examined the two standing by the car.

"Wait, that's..." Audrey suddenly seemed much more alert.

"It *talks*," Nathan said.

Twilight gave an irritated sigh. "Of course I do. Are we going to have to go through this again?"

"This is Twilight Sparkle. She's one of the original Elements of Harmony," Lyra said. "And... she's a friend of mine from back home."

"I heard you mention a place called 'Cleveland.' I'm not familiar with the geography around here, so that would be...?" Twilight looked at them expectantly.

The two of them said nothing for a moment, then Nathan said, "It's... Well..."

"I've been driving through Candyland for the past ten hours. All I want to know right now is what's going on and why you need us," Audrey said.

"Ten hours..." Twilight frowned. "With as fast as human transportation goes... I'm no expert on this, but that must be a very wide area."

"We got slowed down. There was a lot of traffic, because of all the confusion with the street signs getting up and walking away, and we passed through a farm field that was turning into popcorn, and..." Nathan's voice trailed off. "I'm explaining this all to a purple unicorn now."

"It might already be too late. We need to get on the road, now," Lyra said. "I'll go tell the others."

Audrey put a hand to her forehead. "At least we got out of the car for a *few* minutes..." She stretched out.

Nathan looked over at her. "Told you it'd be an adventure."

"How is it possible that this van has even *less* leg room than your cramped little Civic?" Audrey said.

"Better get comfortable. How far is it?" Nathan said. He leaned back, stretching as much as he could.

Lyra sat in the front seat of the van, where she had a good view of what Philadelphia had become. The sky had turned a sickly green color and was splotched with low-lying pink clouds. They drove through what had been a small neighborhood, though the line of driveways led to empty lots. At the end of the street was a tower made up of all those houses, now stacked haphazardly on top of one another. As they passed the main city, they could see entire blocks had floated up into the air and become islands.

Twilight was seated in the back between Paul and Monica. The other ponies were still at Lyra's house. The van was big, but only big enough for the six humans plus one pony. Twilight had volunteered to come along – after all, she had done the most reading. On the Elements, as well as on humans.

"It took us about two hours to make this trip in the other direction. How is it looking?" she said.

"Oh, no problem," Randall said. He slammed on the brakes as a swarm of levitating pies floated across the road ahead of them. He watched them go by with a completely expressionless face. After they had passed, he hit the gas again and they rumbled forward. "It's just a *great* day for driving back and forth across three states."

"You're being sarcastic, aren't you?"

It hadn't taken them more than fifteen minutes after Audrey and Nathan arrived to load up the van and hit the road. Lyra was glad to finally be on the way – she hadn't been able to see much of the corruption from home, and it was turning out worse than she had expected.

"So now I think it would be a good time for you to explain what exactly is going on," Audrey said. She inspected the necklace she was holding, the one that Lyra had thrust into her hands before practically ordering everyone into the car. "This is what you tried to tell me before, right? About the unicorns?"

"I still can't believe you didn't mention any of that to me..." Nathan muttered.

"Not all of us are unicorns. 'Ponies' is the more general term," Twilight said.

"I get that you didn't believe me before, since it really does sound crazy," Lyra said. She craned her neck to look at Monica in the very back. "And humans aren't very well informed on unicorns, either. That book you recommended was all wrong."

"Yeah, I see that now... I thought they would at least be the size of a regular horse," Monica said.

"And humans think that unicorns live out in the woods, too," Lyra said. "Like animals or something."

"Seriously?" Twilight said. She looked at Monica and tilted her head. "I mean, technically the library *is* built inside a tree... Ponyville's not a big town by any standards, but we at least have houses."

"What are you really, though?" Audrey said. "I'm still not clear on that part."

"A human. Just like you," Lyra said. "I came to Equestria when I was still very young. I'm not sure how. But I was adopted by the ponies who found me, and Princess Celestia turned me into a normal unicorn filly."

"Just a normal unicorn..." Audrey shook her head in disbelief.

Twilight spoke up. "Well, relatively speaking, from the Equestrian point of view you're all *much* stranger than –"

"So how is it that I found you wandering around in the middle of Iowa if you came from this magical land or whatever?"

"That's kind of a long story. The truth is, I always wanted to be a human. I think there was some part of me that remembered that I was born in this world," Lyra said. "I had these dreams... Not to mention all of the books that I found about humans. I studied you for years."

"No wonder you're such an avid reader," Monica said.

"The information we had was limited, though. The Princess removed most of what was left of humans after... well..." Lyra bit her lip. That was exactly what she wanted to avoid happening to this world.

"From my understanding, and this is all fairly new to me as well, humans did live in Equestria up until the point where Discord wiped them all out," Twilight said.

"Wiped them all out. And that's what we're up against now. Good, no pressure then," Paul said.

"Wait, so all of this that's happening now – that caused humans to go *extinct* in your world?" Audrey said. "I get that this is insane, but how does it end up doing *that*?"

They drove over a long, deserted bridge as they left the city behind them. On either side you could see the river flowing – a thick brown that was probably more chocolate milk. The surface was covered in tiny ripples as the rain hit it. The road changed to a checkerboard pattern about halfway over, and once they had finished crossing they were greeted by trees with red-and-white peppermint trunks. A green metal sign told them "Welcome to New Jersey."

Paul stared out the window at the bizarre landscape. "Thank goodness, it's completely unharmed," he said.

"I don't think it looked anything like this when we drove through the first time," Lyra said.

"No, what I meant was..." His voice trailed off. "Geez. You really did grow up in some other world, didn't you?"

"Getting back on subject, what Discord is doing goes far beyond just the chaos he's causing on your world itself. He also drives ponies – and humans – against each other," Twilight said. "He did that to me and my friends when we tried to stop him in Ponyville."

"And he's doing that to the humans here now. He wants to start conflicts between us, until we finish ourselves off," Lyra said.

"Which he'd *already* started doing in New York," Randall said, shaking his head. "Place was a madhouse."

"Good thing we're headed directly to the center of the whole thing," Paul said. "I mean, it wasn't *nearly* crazy enough out here already."

Looking out at the world they were driving through, it was hard to believe this was the same human world she'd come to. Lyra was actually used to the human world by now, or at least as used to a place like this as you could get. And there was still this sick feeling



that if she'd never come here, Discord never would have found out that humans were still around, and none of this would have happened in the first place...

"I was never actually supposed to find out I was a human. I just kept having these dreams about this world, even though I didn't know what it was," Lyra said. "And the Princess found out about the studies I'd been doing –"

"You mean the research project she assigned me?" Twilight said. "So all that time that I was reporting back to her on our findings, she was actually just interested in *you*?"

Lyra nodded. "She realized that I knew more about humans than I was supposed to. That's why she gave me the choice to come back here, if I wanted. And of course I did."

"You would actually choose Earth over the place where you came from?" Monica said. "I talked to the other ponies, and they made it sound like a pretty nice place. Over there."

"I guess, but... Finding out I was human was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me," Lyra said. "You wouldn't really understand. Not until you've had to go your entire life with hooves..."

"How long had you been human before I met you?" Audrey said. "You were playing a harp. With fingers... How did you learn how to do that?"

"I'd only been a human for a few hours at that point," Lyra said. "Besides, the first time I ever –" She stopped. "Well, I mean, of *course* that was the first time I'd ever had hands... But it came naturally to me. I was meant to be human, after all." She didn't really want to go into detail about those early experiments. Not in front of humans, but *especially* not in front of Twilight.

"Freaky musical talent aside, you were pretty hopeless out in the human world," Nathan said. "I always knew there was something different about you."

"Well, yeah. Des Moines was so different from anything in Equestria."

"If Equestria is anything like this..." Paul watched another car go past – flying upside down along the road.

Twilight shook her head. "This is all Discord's work. Equestria is usually much more normal." She thought for a moment, then added, "I haven't seen much of what's considered 'normal' for you humans, though."

"But I'm really glad that I met you, Audrey," Lyra said. "Even if our first meeting could have gone better..."

"Oh. That. Right... Unicorns don't eat that kind of food, do they?" Audrey said. She gave an odd laugh. It sounded forced.

"You meet a visitor from another world, and you made possibly the *worst* first impression they could have gotten." Nathan shook his head. "You're lucky she even stayed around after that."

"Wait, what are you talking about? What happened?" Twilight looked at Nathan, then back to Audrey.

"It's nothing. Just... a cultural misunderstanding," Lyra said. "That's really all it was. But it's the thought that counts. The important thing is that, when you talked to me, I really started to feel like I belonged here. I realized humans could be just as friendly as ponies. And that's why now, I know that we can use the Elements to save our world."

"Yeah, let's just skip to what we're trying to do right now," Audrey said. "You still haven't explained what we have to do with any of this." She looked at the necklace again. The gemstone on it felt authentic, but it looked tacky. She had half expected it to be plastic when she first saw it.

"Discord can only be stopped by the power of Harmony," Lyra said. "And, as my closest human friends, I know that you'll be able to help me."

Monica reached up and put a hand on Audrey's shoulder. "We're new to all this too. But we were talking with the ponies at Lyra's house – you do get used to them, after a while – and it's really simple."

"So what happens after we do... whatever it is we're meant to do?" Audrey said. "I mean, all this doesn't just vanish, does it?"

"Actually..." Twilight said. "It does. Everything in Equestria was set back to normal by the power of the Elements. They use a very powerful type of magic, which is why they can rival even Discord's power."

"Oh, so that'll just fix everything. After we've been having chocolate milk rain and magic ponies all over the place... I wonder if *anything* will really be back to normal."

Lyra shifted her weight, folded her arms. "Well... yeah. It'll have to be," she said. "Look, we'll worry about that later."

"You're sure we'll be able to do this, Lyra?" Audrey said.

She hesitated a moment. "Of course. It'll work."

• • •

The trip back to New York didn't seem to last nearly as long as it did the first time. It was oddly empty out here on the roads – there were patches where the road start to twist and turn, running up and down in random directions, or it would be covered in a layer of soap. Audrey claimed it had been like this all the way back to Ohio – which she clarified was a couple hundred miles away.

When they passed a car, it was usually heading the same direction as they were. Deeper into the cloud of chaos covering the human world. When Discord had come to Ponyville, Bon-Bon – most ponies, actually – had wanted to get out of town. And Lyra had agreed. Why would anybody be going *towards* it?

"The bridge into the city is coming up," Randall said. "Get ready, everyone."

Lyra was snapped back to the present, and looked up. The roads around them were still empty of traffic, but they could see something up ahead. Given what they'd just driven through, it could be anything.

"What is that, anyway?" Lyra leaned forward.

They were coming up closer to whatever it was. Dull green shapes on the road ahead. They stood out more than they usually would, against the road and metal bridge frame that had turned into a garish mix of bright colors and patterns.

"Wait. We need to turn around," Nathan said suddenly. "There's other ways into the city, right?"

"What's the problem?" Lyra turned around.

Audrey had seen whatever it was now. "That's... Randall, turn it around, right now."

Randall squinted. "A blockade? You've got to be kidding..."

"You mean... the human military?" Lyra's eyes widened. Sure enough, the green shapes were trucks, humans in green uniforms. It was hard to tell, but it seemed like they were carrying weapons that she recognized from photographs in her recent studies.

Randall was beginning to slow down. "There's no way we're getting past this. Any bright ideas?"

"Speed up." Twilight said it like an order.

He turned around for stare at her. "*What?*"

"You have to get in there. Discord's probably using them to keep us out. Just keep going and don't slow down."

Lyra shook her head. "I've read about this. We can't do that, Twilight, if they have the kind of weapons that the books said –"

"Just do it!"

Randall, probably in spite of his better judgment, slammed on the gas. The human soldiers in front of them were motioning at them to stop. Then, when they got closer, raised the black objects they held.

"What are you –" Nathan started to say, but then they were all blinded by a momentary flash of white.

They were suddenly already partway across the bridge. There was a loud noise from behind them, some kind of rapid clattering noise on the pavement and even on the back of the van.

Randall spun around. "You crazy purple horse, what did you just *do?*"

"Whoa, eyes up front!" Audrey yelled.

The car swerved, but he steered it back on track. Randall glanced up at the rearview mirror and gave another burst of speed.

"Simple teleport magic." Twilight winced. "We're past the guards now. I knew it would be hard to transport something like this, but... ugh..." She rubbed her forehead with one hoof.

"They were shooting at us," Audrey said in disbelief. She looked back at the line of trucks, growing smaller as they sped away from it. "We could've been killed! We could *still* get killed!"

"I was worried that would happen. How did Discord manage to get the human military out here?" Lyra said. She could feel her heart racing.

"This happens all the time in movies. Weird stuff is happening in the city, the military gets called in to help," Paul said. "They were sent right to his door."

"Great. The last thing we need is for Discord to have humans already starting to fight each other," Lyra said. "Let's keep going. We need to find him."

The city was coming into view. Lyra had only been to New York once, and Discord had already been here at that point, but it wasn't hard to notice what had changed. Buildings were sticking out at odd, tilted angles. Most of them were still grey, while others had changed into whatever colors Discord had felt like – bright pink, green, blue, even a few with stripes or polka-dots.

Nathan watched a taxi go past, leaning sideways on two wheels and climbing up onto a wall. "So what's Discord look like? How will we know when we find him?"

"Head for the center of the city. That's where we found him last time," Twilight said.

"That was around Times Square, wasn't it?" Randall said. He looked around, but the street signs had changed to become unreadable squiggles and crude doodles. "Doesn't matter. I've got no clue where we are."

The bananas hanging above the road which may have been stoplights at one point were shaking slightly. A low rumble was coming closer. Eventually they could feel it shaking the van itself. Randall hit the brakes.

"That sounds big. Is it him?" he said.

"I don't think so," Lyra said. "Discord doesn't usually –"

A massive green foot came down in front of them, striding across the intersection. Lyra leaned forward for a better look. It was a massive figure in some kind of green cloak, the same dusty green as the foot had been.

Everyone gaped at it in disbelief. There was a long silence as it walked past, and the vibrations from the footsteps died down. Whatever it was, it was headed across town now.

"Was that..." Nathan started to say.

"I think so, yeah," Randall replied, nodding slowly.

"I really shouldn't be as surprised as I am, given the situation..." Monica said. "How about we go the other way? We'll avoid her."

"Sounds like a plan," Randall said. The van lurched to life again and turned the corner.

The pavement was cracked and the ride was getting bumpier as they went further into the city. There was no sign of that giant thing, whatever it had been. Every once in a while, they would have to drive around a piece of a building that had fallen off, or a car abandoned in the middle of the road.

"I don't think she was moving too fast. Should be easy to avoid her," Randall said. He sounded relieved.

"Why do you keep saying 'she?'" Twilight said. "What was that, any –"

A whistle blared from behind them, and a train sped down the road they had just passed.

Nathan leaned towards the window, watching it pass between the buildings. "How are we supposed to avoid something like *that*?"

"Just keep going," Lyra said. "And be careful. Discord could do anything."

Randall shrugged, and hit the gas again. He was checking carefully around each corner now. "And if you decide to do any of that teleportation stuff again, warn me first, alright?"

"Got it. Sorry," Twilight said.

The van skidded down the road, but the way ahead was suddenly closed off when a skyscraper burst through the road and stretched above them. Randall swerved just in time to miss it, and headed around the corner.

"He's blocking us off. Go that way!" Lyra pointed ahead.

"Where did that *come* from?" He glanced in the mirror, but another one smashed up through the street, then another one, blocking off all the exits. "Did I mention earlier that this is completely crazy? Because it's *completely crazy*."

"We're going where Discord wants us," Twilight said. "This is it. He was never like this last time..."

"I knew we were up against something big, but that?" Nathan said. "You still haven't really explained this. What do these necklaces do, anyway?"

"That's complicated," Lyra said.

The ground was shaking, and all around them the city was shifting, moving itself to block off all escapes. Now entire buildings were being pulled down into the ground, clearing off an area as others sealed the last of the exits. Randall slammed on the brakes.

He slumped back in the chair, his hands still gripping the wheel with white knuckles. "What now?"

"Discord knows you're here. If you're going to face him, this is the time to do it," Twilight said. She looked out the window, but everything was still now, and completely deserted. "Good luck."

Lyra was the first one to swing open the door. She reached up and straightened the crown on her head. It didn't feel like anything other than just dull metal. It was a wonder that it even fit a human. Just a non-magical human...

The side door slid open, and Audrey stepped out, followed one-by-one by the others. She stretched. "I'm still not clear on what's going on here, and now I'm getting a *really* bad feeling about this."

Lyra's legs were shaking from the crazy ride through the city. Or maybe it was just nerves, it was hard to tell. She glanced around the clearing they had stopped in, and couldn't help but feel like this place was eerily calm compared to the rest of New York. The buildings had stopped moving, but there was no way out. None of them had doors, just flat walls where they would have been.

"Lyra, is that you? I wondered if I'd be seeing you again." The voice started off coming from nowhere again. "And... Oh, what's *this*?" He sounded amused.

A bright flash right in front of them, and Discord was there, a snakelike body towering above the humans. He twisted around, reclining as he examined them. His eyes narrowed, then opened wide as a grin spread across his face.

"The Elements of -?" He couldn't hold it in anymore – he started to laugh. "I wondered what you would do when I gave you back your magic, Lyra, and you came up with *this*? It's more than I ever expected! You manage to make yourself human again, and you get your little human hands on the Elements of Harmony? It's too rich, Lyra, simply too rich."

"What... What *is* that?" Audrey said. Despite everything they'd just driven through, now she looked genuinely shocked, as did the other humans.

"I apologize. Where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself. Discord, spirit of chaos and disharmony, as well as this world's new ruler. You're probably already familiar with the changes I've made." He gestured around himself, though it was nothing more than a ruined city block.

"Lyra? Any bright ideas now?" Nathan muttered. Lyra turned her head slightly to see him, but his eyes hadn't moved away from Discord.

"I'm sure that your old friends must have told you what happened, Lyra. Those Elements didn't work for them, and they certainly won't work for *you*. Not even Luna and Celestia could help the humans once I had them."

Lyra still remembered what she had been told by the Princess. Humans were too chaotic already. Discord grew to incredible power by using them... What was she doing here? She'd just brought him more humans to play with...

Discord continued, obviously pleased with himself. "Ever since I've set up my new capital here, humans haven't failed to advertise it for me. They're coming in by the flock now. Surely you must know how fascinated humans are by the idea of the end of the world. They're just *begging* for it to come, Lyra. I'm only doing what humans have been looking forward to for years now."

Lyra had to say something, but what? She managed to force something out. "N-no. Humans aren't just chaotic. We're more than that." She wasn't sure where she was going, but she had to make something up. Stall until she could think of something better.



"Oh, I beg to differ. I've been through this all before. You've only just arrived, Lyra. You haven't even scratched the surface of what your species has to offer. Did you enjoy the welcoming committee?"

It was coming to her now. She looked around at her friends. Audrey's eyes met hers. The message was clear – what now? And then Lyra saw the necklace. The one she'd chosen to give to her.

"I'd only just gotten here when I met Audrey, and she was my first friend," Lyra said. "She let me stay with her. Without her kindness, I would have been lost in this world."

"What are you doing, Lyra?" Audrey whispered.

But Lyra kept going. "And then I met Nathan, and he gave me something – just a guitar, but it meant so much. I finally found what I was meant to do as a human. It's one of the most generous gifts I've ever gotten."

"You still owe me for that..." she heard him mutter.

Discord leaned back, and rested his head on the talons of his left claw. "This is all *very* fascinating. Do go on."

She turned around, looking for her other friends. "And Randall welcomed me into his band. I got to perform music with real humans. And he even helped me find my parents. Even now... He's always shown some real loyalty. Even if he thought I was crazy."

"You *are* crazy," he said. But there was a grin on his face.

"You're bringing me into this now, aren't you?" Paul said.

"Of course," Lyra said. Everything was just coming to her now. "Out of all the weird new things I experienced in the human world, that airplane was the strangest... But I wasn't afraid, because you shared your laughter with me."

"And now..." Monica's voice sounded expectant.

"You helped me overcome one of the hardest challenges of all, Monica. All this time I'd been lying to everyone. But you... You convinced me that I had to be honest. To my family. To all of you. To myself. And I'm so much happier now that everyone knows the truth about me."

Discord groaned. "How much longer is this going to go on? All this means nothing. Do you really think you humans can use the Elements of Harmony?"

"Of course we can. Magic has nothing to do with this... The important thing is that I realized that all these humans were the best friends I'd ever had, and that I belonged here in this world with them. I thought I'd never be a normal human, but thanks to them..." Lyra realized that she was probably feeling overconfident at this point, but might as well go all the way. "I know that we can accomplish anything."

What happened next felt too fast to comprehend, and yet everything seemed to have slowed down. Lyra felt some kind of power flowing from her – it was almost like when she'd used magic as a unicorn, but of course she had no horn anymore. It was going to the crown on her head, focusing on the gemstone. She could see a purple light flowing out of it. And that was joined by even more beams coming from behind her – from each of the humans.

All that she really needed to understand could be seen on Discord's face. His eyes had gone huge as soon as he realized what was happening. For a while there, Lyra had been thinking this was all a huge mistake, too, but now she knew better. She heard something that might have been him screaming, but it sounded very far away.

Lyra could still feel all that power rushing out of her. And, somehow, she could feel it coming from the others, too. The entire time she was very aware of their presence, that all of those powers had combined into one and was now rushing out, over the city, across the entire country, to places in this world she'd never seen.

At some point Lyra's feet touched back down onto the street. She'd never realized that she had ever been lifted above it. Her senses came rushing back to her. Her surroundings changed from blurred colors into more defined forms. A city square, with a very odd statue in the center. The familiar smells of the human world – those smoky fumes from their cars and the faint smell of fried food from a nearby restaurant. It was all so quiet, but then -

"Now, seriously... What the hell just happened?" Paul said.

She hadn't thought it would be possible.

The very idea was just *unimaginable*...

But there was even *more* talk about humans spreading around in Ponyville now than Bon-Bon had ever heard, even when Lyra was still living with her.

About a month had gone by since Twilight Sparkle had returned from Princess Celestia's errand, and the news of what they had done spread quickly. Or, to be more accurate, once Pinkie Pie had spilled the truth to everypony in town, the others hadn't thought it was worth keeping it quiet anymore.

And as much as Bon-Bon wanted to distance herself from the entire thing, she was practically the center of attention. Everypony knew she had been Lyra's roommate for four years. Now that Lyra had turned out to be some kind of creature from another dimension, everyone wanted to know if she'd ever been different, or weird, or done any odd things.

Why, yes, Bon-Bon would tell them, now that you mention it, maybe Lyra *had* been a little strange from time to time.

The last time she had seen Lyra, she had gotten something of a rough explanation from her. Bits and pieces, at least, and all of it was completely insane. Her father – or adoptive caregiver, whatever he was – had explained the rest. Lyra was a real human. How that stallion and his wife had done it, Bon-Bon just couldn't comprehend.

Bon-Bon couldn't be sure what upset her more – the fact that Lyra had been right, and humans were real, or that Lyra was a human herself.

But really. A human *and* the Element of Magic? When you added that to the equation, it added up to say that nopony would ever hear the end of this.

The timer on the oven went off with a "ding." Bon-Bon carefully removed the tray of cupcakes and set them on the counter. No matter what strange gossip was spreading around Ponyville, business at Sugarcube Corner was going on as usual, and here in the kitchen it was nice and -

"Bon-Bon!" The peace and quiet was broken, again, by Pinkie Pie. She bounced into the kitchen from the front door.

Bon-Bon gritted her teeth, then forced a smile. "Pinkie, what are you doing?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take over in here. You'd better go outside!"

"What..." Bon-Bon wrinkled her nose. "I've hardly gotten started. What are you talking about?"

"Just look!"

Bon-Bon sighed. Pinkie was a good baker, regardless of anything else. She didn't have to worry about the kitchen. She just had to worry about whatever it was that had her so excited. At this point, she truly believed that no news was good news.

She trotted out through the front room of the bakery, out from behind the counter. She headed for the front doors, which led right to the outdoor seating that she still occasionally ate at on her days off..

And froze.

"No..." she breathed.

"Bon-Bon! I can't believe it!" Lyra stood up from one of the tables and ran over. Except...

She was definitely recognizable – the voice, the hair, and the overly energetic behavior was unmistakably Lyra. But she wasn't a pony.

"Lyra, what –" Bon-Bon started to say, but Lyra wrapped her front legs – no, *arms* – around her neck and she froze. She could feel those fingers, clawlike, yet soft and dull, in her mane. She only let out a breath when Lyra took her arms away and knelt down to be at eye level with her.

"It's great to be back in Ponyville. It's like nothing ever changed," Lyra said, looking around. "It's weird. I've gotten so tired of talking about Equestria, since everybody's always asking me about it back home, but actually being here isn't so bad. And –"

"Lyra, what are you *doing*?" Bon-Bon hissed. Her eyes darted around. She noticed some ponies across the street who had slowed down to see. "Everypony's staring at you! How did you even come here in the first place?"

"Twilight came over and brought me here. I'm supposed to meet with Princess Celestia later today," Lyra said, looking innocent enough. "But she said I could stop by here for a while. Besides, we hardly had time to talk before."

Bon-Bon stared at her. "You're meeting with Princess Celestia?" she said, not believing what she heard.

"Yeah. She wanted me to come. But come on, Pinkie said she'd bring out some food for us. I can't tell you how much I've missed Sugarcube Corner."

Lyra stood up. Bon-Bon, painfully aware of all the eyes staring at them as ponies passed by, slowly followed her over to the table. The way she walked, it was just *odd*. How could something on just two legs be that tall and still support itself?

"So how have you been, Bon-Bon?" Lyra sat down on a chair in the same odd, slouching position she'd always used, folding her arms in front of her.

"I've been... fine," Bon-Bon said.

"That's good. How's business at Sugarcube Corner? Doesn't look too busy right now."

"It's been fine..."

"I didn't really get a chance to look around last time. I was in such a hurry."

"Yes..."

They sat there quietly. Bon-Bon tried not to stare at Lyra, or even look at her. She noticed an unfamiliar newspaper on the table. Definitely not one of the Ponyville papers.

Finally, she couldn't hold it back any longer. "Lyra, what were you thinking coming back here looking like that?"

Lyra frowned. "You could at least *act* happy to see me."

Bon-Bon sighed and shook her head. Honestly, she could think of quite a few choice words for Lyra right now, but she was choosing to be polite. "It's not that, it's just... well..."

"I *had* to come. Princess Celestia's really concerned about what's going on back home. Discord didn't exactly go by unnoticed." Lyra pushed the paper towards Bon-Bon's end

of the table. "See? There's Rainbow Dash, right on the cover of *USA Today*. This one's from a few weeks ago, but all the talk still hasn't died down."

Bon-Bon stared at the cover of the human newspaper without really reading it. The picture was of Rainbow Dash, or at least a blue- and rainbow-colored blur in front of some kind of odd grey building.

"Humans had never really seen ponies until they showed up. Most of them think they were all part of the chaos Discord was causing," Lyra said. "Think about it. It just causes a lot of confusion when these weird creatures show up and humans haven't even seen plain old magic before."

Bon-Bon's eyes narrowed. "Oh, yes. It certainly *does* cause confusion when strange creatures show up."

Lyra didn't notice the remark and went on. "The Princess wants to decide how much contact Equestria will have with humans now. I mean, a lot of humans are pretty obsessed with figuring out what happened. My friends decided not to talk about it, not that they really understand it themselves." She shrugged.

"Oh, of course. You just gave the Elements of Harmony to a bunch of your human friends and they don't even know what they *are!*" Bon-Bon rolled her eyes.

"Well, no. It's really hard to explain how it works. Even *I* don't really get it," Lyra said. "The important part is that we stopped Discord, right?"

"You do have a point..." Bon-Bon said. "What happened to him, anyway?"

Lyra shrugged. "I dunno."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"He turned back into a statue, but... I'm not sure what happened to it. Twilight wanted to find out how to get him back to Equestria, but he just vanished. Paul thinks the government might've taken him to study. They were all over New York investigating after we stopped him. They still are, I think." Lyra looked down at the paper on the table. "And nothing's been on the news about him. Believe me, I've been paying attention."

"So you're just leaving Discord in *your* world?"

Lyra sighed. "This is all really complicated and I don't quite get it. My dad said it's normal for the government to be tight about 'national security issues.' I'm just going to tell Celestia what I know and she'll decide what to do next." She drummed her fingers on the table in an idle motion. "But I've had enough of all this serious stuff. How are you?"

"Well, I've been..." Bon-Bon realized what Lyra had just said. "Princess Celestia is considering *more* contact with humans? That's absolutely the *last* thing we –"

"Well, she's not really sure yet. That's what I'm here to talk about with her. For the moment, I'm the only human she wants in Equestria," Lyra said. She scratched the back of her head with those fingers of hers. "But I thought I'd ask about bringing my sister over for a visit sometime."

Pinkie Pie came out of the front door, carefully balancing a tray on her head. She trotted over to where they were sitting and let it slide down onto the table.

"Here you go!" she said.

Lyra stared at it as if she'd never seen food in her life. "Cake from Sugarcube Corner... I've missed this more than you could believe." She picked up the fork – not with magic, with one of those... hands – and started eating immediately.

Bon-Bon shook herself, forcing herself to stop staring, and said, "Your... sister?"

"I know I told you about her," Lyra spoke in between bites. "I've got a younger sister. Human. Well, I guess that's obvious. But Chloe hasn't stopped talking about Equestria ever since it happened, and when Twilight showed up today..." Lyra smiled. "Anyway, I thought that a trip to Canterlot would make a great Christmas present for her. If I'm allowed."

"*What?*" Bon-Bon gasped.

"Christmas. My family says we really do celebrate that, just like I read about. It's right around Hearth's –"

"No, you're saying you're bringing *another* human here? To Canterlot, on a huge holiday when *thousands* of ponies from all over Equestria will be there?"

"Yeah. Chloe would love that." Lyra took another bite of her cake and grinned contentedly.

"After all the commotion you're sure to cause coming here like that, you're going to bring another human – somepony who's never even *been* a pony – and just walk around Canterlot?" Bon-Bon said. "Don't you think you've already done enough to Equestria?"

Lyra twirled the fork around between her fingers. "I know, isn't it great? Just... if Chloe does get to come for a visit, you have to be nice to her." Lyra bit her lip. "I... may have given her some unrealistic expectations about Equestria."

"Oh, for the love of –"

She was interrupted by a voice from behind. "Come on, it's just Lyra."

"*You* go talk to her, then."

"Uh... I... Fine!" Scootaloo trotted up to the table, with Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom close behind. "Uh, we had a question."

"Sure! What is it?" Lyra said.

Scootaloo went quiet. Apple Bloom shot her a look, then said, "Well... We were wondering..."

"Is it true humans don't get cutie marks?" Sweetie Belle said.

"Yeah!" Apple Bloom nodded. "And... that you lost yours when you turned into one?"

"Sure did," Lyra nodded.

The fillies looked at her in shock. "But... You're okay with that? But it takes so much work to get a cutie mark!" Sweetie Belle said.

"Well, I still know that music is what I want to do," Lyra said. "I don't really need a cutie mark to know that. Actually, it's been clearer than ever since I became human."

Scootaloo turned around and walked off, with the other two fillies following. "No wonder Rainbow Dash said she didn't like it over there. It sounds weird."

"Rarity didn't seem to think it was that bad..."

Bon-Bon watched them leave, then turned back to Lyra. "I'd already heard enough about humans to last a lifetime... Now that you've shown up, it'll never stop. You really have no



idea what you've done to Equestria, do you? I always worried that you'd go too far, and *now* look."

"Well... yeah," Lyra admitted. "I would have preferred if nobody found out. Like I said, things are getting complicated back home, too. All I really want is to have a normal human life."

"Have you ever been a normal *anything*?"

Lyra smiled. "Maybe not," she said. "I guess it's a little easier now that my family knows about all of this." She waved the fork around. "They think it's so fascinating that I used to be able to do magic. And they're happy to explain whatever I don't understand about the human world. I was already fitting in pretty well before."

"It's good that you fit in somewhere," Bon-Bon said.

"You'd understand if you ever got to see the human world. It really is better than I ever could have imagined." Lyra seemed to think for a minute, then her eyes lit up. "Hey! Do you want me to ask the Princess if you -"

"No."

"Your loss." Lyra shrugged. "Chloe's just thrilled, though. She thinks it's the coolest thing ever that I was a unicorn. She was obsessed with them before she even met me."

"She certainly is your sister..."

"What do you mean?" Lyra tilted her head.

"Well, you have so much in common," Bon-Bon said.

Lyra laughed. "Nah, we're like total opposites. I'm kind of jealous that she got to be a human her whole life. She doesn't realize how lucky she is."

"You haven't changed at all, have you?"

"Of course I have," Lyra said, flexing her fingers. "Just look at these."

Bon-Bon gave an exasperated sigh and shook her head, unable to find the words. Lyra looked down at her empty plate a bit sadly, and noticed the slice of cake still sitting untouched in front of Bon-Bon.

"Are you gonna eat that?"