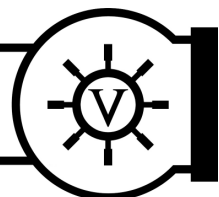


The Glass Blower

Cold in Gardez

PONY FICTION VAULT



From the first moment they met, he knew she was the one.

She was a pony of immeasurable beauty, beauty that made other mares scowl behind her back. She was a perfection of form and feature, unrivaled by any work of art. A living sculpture, given life by careless gods who knew not the strife their creation would sow. Her alabaster coat was smooth and flawless. An amethyst mane drifted absently between hues. Her slender horn tapered to an elegant point. She was, in a word, perfect.

It was her beauty that caught the glass blower's eye, but not what caught his heart. He had seen beautiful ponies before; in Canterlot they were the rule, rather than the exception. And while he had certainly felt the tug of physical attraction to dozens of mares, it was only an afterthought. Quickly forgotten. Hers might have been too, if not for a chance meeting in the market.

They accidentally bumped shoulders beside a jeweler's stall. A heavy crowd filled the square with noise. Hundreds of ponies bustled and shoved, perusing wares and haggling with steely-eyed merchants. Competition for the best goods was always fierce at the Canterlot bazaar in the waning days of summer. They eyed each other in the afternoon's fading light, the jeweler and his goods momentarily forgotten.

"I beg your pardon," he said after a pause.

She gave him a demure smile, batting her long lashes at him. Was she flirting? No, of course not. Not with him.

"Oh, think nothing of it," she said. "Just a harmless touch."

He returned the smile, and they both returned to the display of gems. Hundreds of precious and semi-precious stones awaited their scrutiny. Rubies and emeralds sat on cushions of royal velvet; topaz and garnets crowded together in trays like commoners.

"This one is rather fine," she said, pointing at a large ocean sapphire with her horn. Hints of midnight blue floated within its depths. "Regal, a fitting centerpiece for a lady's dress."

He glanced down at her coat. "Too rich for some complexions, I think. Gems should not distract the eye from their bearer."

She laughed, and it was the sound of bells. "You have a good eye. Not many ponies grasp colors so easily. But tell me, might it not work with this?" Her horn glowed a faint silver, and yards of fine cloth emerged from her saddlebags. The fabric, in a dozen shades of indigo, twisted and shaped itself according to her will, until a rough semblance of a gown

hung between them. The ocean sapphire lifted from its cushion and drifted toward the dress, coming to a rest as though it were a clasp upon its neck.

He stared, mouth gaping, at her creation. Around them a dozen ponies paused their business, whispering and pointing at the magical display. She preened at the attention.

Eventually, he recovered. "That's..." he trailed off, and cleared his throat. "My lady, I apologize. That is quite the centerpiece."

The dress unraveled and returned to her saddlebags. The gem floated back to its perch on the merchant's counter. She graced him again with her smile, then turned without a word and vanished into the crowd. The merchant chuckled quietly at the stunned expression on his face.

"Easy son," he said. "You're not the first pony to wear that look after meeting her. Save yourself the heartache, and look elsewhere."

He took a shaky breath. Her scent, a delicate lilac, haunted him. "Who... tell me sir, who was that mare? How could I have wandered these streets all these years, and never seen her beauty? How could a star such as her lie glimmering in the dust, never to be noticed? What is her name?"

He laughed again, louder. "That was Rarity, and only once a month does she grace our humble market. Each time she leaves another trail of broken hearts. Forget you saw her, son."

"I could sooner forget my own name," he said, his voice a soft whisper. "No, I will not forget her. I will catch her eye and then her heart."

"Do you know how often I've heard those words?" The jeweler sighed. "She has sworn to only give her heart to an artist as gifted as she. What you saw there was nothing compared to the masterpieces she creates."

"An artist?!" His heart soared. "Don't you see! This is fate, finally giving me a chance to earn true love!"

The merchant shook his head. "Beware this path. She is beautiful, yes, but she can be cruel as well. Fail her test and she won't hesitate to tear your heart to pieces."

But the glass blower was blinded. Her beauty, her skill, her charm, all danced within his mind. "Good sir," he said, "I appreciate your warnings, but I promise she has never met

an artist such as I. I will craft her a work of glass unlike any seen in this world, and after I win her heart, poets will write about our love for centuries to come."

It was not her beauty that attracted him. It was her grace.

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That night, he cleared every scrap of glass from his workbench. He abandoned every project – baubles, ornaments, cups and vases, all were swept aside to make space for his new dream. He emptied the sand from his furnace, to prevent any impurities from tainting his work. He drew and discarded a dozen ideas, each more elaborate than the last, searching for the one design that could win Rarity's heart.

"A bird?" he mumbled as he worked. "A hummingbird. What else could do her beauty justice? It will have wings as graceful as her mane, and a beak as sharp as her horn. Crimson breasted, and azure plumage thatched."

The first week he drew, as the full moon fell half in shadow. Dozens of plans for a delicate glass hummingbird filled his shelves. Some perched atop glass twigs, while others hung suspended from glass threads no thicker than a spider's line of silk. He drew a hatchling breaking free from a glass egg, but he realized that newborn hummingbirds were rather sickly and not pleasing to the eye.

Finally, inspiration struck in the form of a hummingbird drinking nectar from a glass flower. For a full day he drew plans for the perfect bloom, a delicate orchid the same amethyst hue as her mane. It hung from a twisting crystal vine tinted a pale green. Each petal would have to be individually forged, and fused together to form the whole.

The second week, as the shrinking moon became a sliver against the night sky, he gathered his materials. He spent hours sifting sand, sorting out the purest grains and grinding them into a powder with his pestle. He scoured the markets for additives, purchasing packets of antimony, cobalt, sulfur and gold. Every one of his cutting tools he replaced, lest some dull edge mar or chip his precious creation.

His apprentices complained at first, as he refused to let them help with his new project. This was too delicate, too important, to leave in the hooves of those just beginning to learn their craft. Instead, he let them run his store, selling pre-made glassworks and taking orders for future delivery. He even let them create their own simple works in his forge while he continued his preparations.

The third week he crafted the orchid's flowing petals and long, slender leaves. He heated his forge thousands of degrees, and used its hellish flames to melt sand into a thick puddle. The molten glass, yellow and brighter than a star, slowly cooled, but before it became too thick he inserted a long metal pipe into its center. The glob of glass stuck to the pipe as he pulled it from the forge, and as its color deepened into yellow and orange, he blew into the free end of the metal tube.

The soft glass expanded like a balloon. The hollow sphere it formed was nearly uniform – thinner spots, where the glass expanded too rapidly, cooled faster than the rest, and subsequently became stiffer and more resistant to further expansion. The result, after a few minutes of blowing and spinning the pipe, was a perfect globe of paper-thin glass, as clear as water, with a light green tint from the copper he added to the mix.

He knocked on the tube with a hammer, snapping it off the sphere, and used a diamond-edged chisel to score the glass into a dozen different patterns, all imitating the shape of a leaf. Once he was happy with three of them, he tapped the sphere with his hoof, and the whole thing broke apart. He picked out the pieces shaped like leaves, and promptly dropped them back into the forge.

Rather than let the leaves melt entirely, he pulled them out as soon as they started to glow a faint cherry red. With the help of a pair of pliers, he gently twisted them into graceful, curved shapes strikingly similar to those of real leaves.

But there was still more to do. The leaves went back into the forge. When they were hot again he pulled them out and carefully traced a series of veins on their surface. He pressed them against a wood block, transferring the faint grain of the oak onto them.

Finally, he ground their still-sharp edges with a fine stone, until they were as smooth as any leaf found in the forest. He inspected them, noting the parts he had crafted well, but also the tiny flaws always present in any new creation. Satisfied with his work, he smashed them beneath his hoof, swept the shards into the forge, and began the whole process again. Two days and nineteen repetitions later, he had three leaves that might, just might, be perfect.

It was a good start.

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"This seems like a lot of effort for a pony who doesn't even know your name."

"She doesn't know it *yet*, Sticks," the glass blower said. His friend, a fellow earth pony with a marionette cutie mark on his flank, had joined him for dinner, and afterward the two of them repaired to the glass workshop to see his masterwork. Dozens of tiny glass leaves, petals, wings and other bird fragments lay neatly ordered on his bench, waiting for the final bit of fusing that would bring them together as a whole.

Sticks reached a careful hoof toward one of the glass petals, a languidly folded purple shape that, were it not ever so slightly transparent, might well have been real. It glimmered in the dim light of the workshop, and his breath collected on its surface as he leaned in to inspect it.

"This is amazing," Sticks said. "You're just going to give it to her? You don't even know her!"

"I don't need to know her." The glass blower lit his torch, a tiny gas burner that shot an inch-long spear of blue flame from its tip. "She's perfect, Sticks. If you saw her, you'd understand." He put the orchid's stem in a leather-padded vice, and began heating the tip of one of the leaves until it glowed a faint orange. The tip sagged slightly under its own weight, and he pressed it against the stem, allowing it to cool and harden in place.

Sticks rolled his eyes. "Sure, sure. Don't you think she gets a dozen offers like this every time she visits Canterlot?"

The glass blower fused another glass leaf onto the stem before answering. A tiny curl of smoke drifted up from the hot glass, all that remained of a speck of dust that drifted too close and was incinerated by the latent heat.

"A dozen offers like this?" he asked. He gave his creation a critical eye.

Sticks watched in silence as the glass blower assembled the flower. The glass petals all fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw, as if he had measured their shape to within microns.

"Well... perhaps not like that," he allowed. "I've never seen a glasswork so beautiful. I thought only unicorns could make things like this."

The finished flower was like a jewel. The polished glass shone with an inner light that drew the eye. Its emerald stem and leaves flowed like water across the table; it glowed with all the hues of night.

"Unicorns have their magic," the glass blower said quietly. "But theirs is not the only magic in the world." He carefully fused the hummingbird's wings to its body. To the

azure head he attached a pair of black gems for eyes. Finally, he attached its beak, a tiny sliver of orange glass sharper than a needle. The bird looked ready to take flight – nearly a thousand tiny feathers had been carved onto its wings.

"This is my magic, Sticks." He picked up the glass hummingbird in his mouth and set it down beside the flower.

Sticks opened his mouth to congratulate his friend when a tiny flicker of movement stopped him. He blinked and leaned forward to inspect the sculpture more closely.

The glass leaves trembled as he exhaled.

He pulled his head back, startled, and gave the glass blower a questioning glance. His friend simply smiled, and gestured back to the sculpture with his hoof. Clear glass beads, sparkling like morning dew, ran down the stem and dripped onto the workbench with a quiet tinkle. The flower twisted on its vine, petals opening, as it sought the sun.

"How..." His voice trailed off as the hummingbird began to move. Its glass wings flapped stiffly, slowly at first, then so fast they blurred into nothingness. With a quiet click, it lifted from the table and hovered over the flower, drinking from the jewel as though both were alive.

"This is my magic," the glass blower said again. His friend stared at the living sculpture long into the night.

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Lacking any other clever ideas for how to present the glass flower, they simply wrapped it around a branch taken from the woods outside Canterlot. The glass stem grew tiny tendrils along its length, and dug into the soft wood as though preparing to climb it like a vine. The hummingbird darted around them as they worked, occasionally coming to rest near the flower when they paused.

The Canterlot bazaar started later in the morning than usual. The chill that filled the air slowly dissipated as the rising sun chased away the night. The changing of the seasons was on the merchants' lips as they set out their wares for the busy day to come.

The glass blower and his friend waited near the fabric sellers, assuming that Rarity would stop by there sooner rather than later. They spent the early hours chatting with the merchants. Sticks kept the branch and flower hidden beneath a cloth in a simple woven

basket – the glass hummingbird perched on the handle, motionless, and only drew an occasional glance from passers-by.

Noon rolled around with no sign of Rarity. The glass blower tapped his hooves nervously. Sticks rolled his eyes at his friend's impatience.

"It's still early," he said. "She probably gets lunch first, then comes here to shop."

"What if she doesn't, though? What if she went to some other market this month?"

"Then you sell this thing for a fortune and retire." Sticks leaned down to stare at the hummingbird. It buzzed its glass wings, spraying sunlight like a kaleidoscope. "Seriously, do you know how much a noble would pay for this?"

The glass blower snorted. "I might as well sell my soul. The craftsmanship may be perfect, but the magic comes from love."

"Right. Love. For this mare you've met once. Who doesn't even know your name."

"Fine, think of it this way, then. Of the hundreds of puppets you've made, which is your favorite?"

Sticks was silent for a moment. He rubbed his chin with a hoof. "Well, the one I made to complete my apprenticeship, I suppose. I spent months on it. Years, really, if you count all the studying and practice that went into it."

The glass blower nodded. "And where is that puppet now?"

"Over my hearth. You've seen it a dozen times, at least."

"I have. Would you ever sell it?"

Sticks glanced down at the hummingbird. It looked up at him curiously, as if awaiting an answer to the question as well. He sighed.

"Of course not. I love that thing," he said.

"Are you sure? I'm sure a noble would pay good coin for it."

"Point taken." Sticks kicked at the basket lightly, sending the hummingbird buzzing into the air. It flitted around the nearby stalls, hovering over the colorful fabrics, before returning to the handle. The nearby merchants stared at it with wide eyes.

Another hour passed while they waited. Merchants and shoppers stopped to gaze at the bird, eventually forming a small crowd. The glass blower brushed off attempts at conversation, letting Sticks answer their questions as best he could. Finally, just as the glass blower was wondering if the day was wasted, the crowd around them parted, revealing a white unicorn with a surprised look on her face.

She glanced around at the crowd, puzzled by their reactions, then turned her attention to the glass blower. His breath caught in his chest. She was even more lovely than he remembered.

He could have stared at her all day. He would have stared at her all day, had Sticks not jabbed him in the side with a hoof. The crowd mumbled quietly, some ponies laughing as he jumped. Fortunately, he recovered his train of thought before making too great a fool of himself.

"Lady Rarity," he said, stepping toward her. She leaned back, her eyes wide. "For this past month I have labored at a work of art fitting for a mare of your beauty, a masterpiece worthy of –"

"I'm sorry, who are you?" she interrupted.

His planned speech tumbled to a halt. A faint well of panic began building in his heart.

"Ah, just a simple glass blower," he said. She frowned slightly, and he hastily added, "An artist, like yourself! We met last month near here, at a jeweler's stand."

"Did we?" she said, slowly. "I'm afraid I meet many ponies every month."

"Yes!" he said. "Er, yes. We spoke about a beautiful gem, and you crafted a delightful dress for it from thin air with your magic."

She tilted her head in thought. "Yes, I suppose that does sound like something I would do."

He smiled eagerly, his head bouncing. "Yes! And now I have crafted something equally beautiful for you!" He pressed his nose against the basket, and slid it across the stones to her feet.

She looked at it curiously for a long moment. The hummingbird sat frozen on the handle, as still as glass. The crowd pressed forward, tightening the circle around the two of them.

"That is an exquisite bird," she finally admitted. "And very clever, having it perch on the handle like that. It shows some talent." Her horn glowed, and the cloth in the basket parted, revealing the glass orchid wrapped around its branch.

"Aha!" she said. The branch glowed faintly and lifted from the basket to hover before her. She gave him a patronizing smile. "Now this is fine work as well. You did this all for me? I am flattered, just look at this detail! How did you manage to wrap it around this branch? I could have sworn that was impossible..." Her voice trailed off into silence as she closely inspected the flower.

The glass leaves swayed in the faint afternoon breeze. The crystal flower swung freely on its vine, brilliant and ripe with color. A murmur rose from the crowd as they saw his masterpiece in full for the first time.

Rarity's mouth hung open as she turned the branch. Her eyes widened as the hummingbird lifted from the basket and darted around her before coming to a rest on the flower. The branch trembled for a moment as the glow around her horn faltered, but she recovered her grip before it crashed to the hard stones below.

Her lips moved, though no sound emerged. She stared at the living glass for what felt like an eternity to the glass blower before turning to him. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"You made this?" she whispered. He could barely hear her over the crowd.

"I did," he whispered. He could tell his triumph was near. Any moment now, she would pledge her love for him. He wanted to speak, but didn't trust his voice just yet.

"It's magical," she continued. "I never dreamed of anything like this. It's so wonderful..." She trailed off again, this time with a look of concern on her face. Her eyes widened and darted back and forth between him and his creation.

"Is it enough?" he asked, taking a step forward. "Have I passed your test?"

She took a quick step back; he was too enamored to notice. She stammered, her gaze dancing around the crowd before briefly coming to rest on his forehead.

"But you're not a –" She stopped herself before she could finish the thought. He didn't notice. She swallowed, collected herself, and spoke again.

"This... craftsmanship is unmatched, certainly." She gently floated the branch back into the basket. "This is a good effort, but my art is not only well crafted, but useful. Does this flower attract suitors at a ball? Does it keep its bearer warm?"

Her question was like a punch to the gut. He reeled slightly as he realized she was rejecting him.

"But you said it was beautiful," he said quietly. He felt his jaw begin to tremble.

She cleared her throat daintily. Her head rose, and a more confident note entered her voice.

"I said it was well crafted, but you have yet to meet my challenge. Try again, if you think your art is worthy." She gave him a respectful but shallow nod, then turned and vanished back into the crowd.

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The first week, as the sting of Rarity's rejection flowed like poison through him, he drew. His apprentices offered a few suggestions, but mostly they were as baffled as he. What sort of glasswork would a lady find useful as well as beautiful?

They went through a dozen ideas. A telescope, a jewelry case, a pair of reading glasses, hairpins. He drew plans for them all and discarded them just as quickly. None were perfect.

When the answer finally occurred to him, he sat, dumbstruck. Only after his apprentices splashed him with a bucket of water did he come to his senses. He rushed to his drawing board to put his plan to paper before it could escape him.

In retrospect, it was obvious. Rarity was a beautiful pony, and what was more beautiful than her mane? And what did mares with beautiful hair need? A comb, of course.

It would be large. Half its length would be the handle, the rest a fine-toothed comb suitable for teasing and styling a lady's mane. He considered several models for frame, and settled on a lean jaguar, its tail the handle, its body gently cradling the comb's teeth. White glass, he decided, with tiny rubies for eyes and a light silver filigree along its spine.

The second week, as the pain of rejection faded and was replaced by a cautious hope, he gathered his materials. The glass itself was easy enough – he kept a ready supply of tin to create milk glass for his shop. He had enough silver left over from an old project for the filigree, and the ruby eyes only took a quick trip to a local gem vendor.

The handle caused him the most trouble. Pure glass, while appealing from a minimalist perspective, was insufficient for his purpose. The comb needed something physical to bind the attributes he was planning. It needed more. It needed to be *perfect*.

A wire wrap of two metals, woven together, would do the trick. Gold, untarnishing, would represent beauty and its endurance through the ages. A thousand years after he and Rarity and the kingdom of Equestria were gone and dust, the gold wrap on the comb would still shine as bright as the day he presented it to her.

To represent her magic he needed a second element, one that was hard to find and ruinously expensive. Fifteen grams of meteoric iron, harvested from a fallen star and drawn into a hair-thin wire. It cost him more than he made in a normal month in his glass shop.

The third week he crafted the comb. It required fewer pieces than the hummingbird, with its separate flower and leaves and stem and petals. The whole comb started and ended as a single ingot of molten glass, mixed with a pinch of tin powder for a pure white color. He let it cool in one of his forge's chambers, then slowly rolled it into a rod a foot long, thicker along half its length.

He shaped the handle first, giving it a slight curve and a gentle plumb at its end. The rest of the cat's form he roughed out in the still-soft glass. He poked a series of holes in the tail to anchor the wire wrap. Satisfied that he had the general shape correct, he slid the frame back into the forge for the first of many times.

For the rest of the week he crafted the comb's one hundred teeth. After a few minutes in the forge, it was soft enough for him to use a pair of hardened steel pliers to pinch an edge of the glass frame and pull it into a slender spike. With a bit of practice he was able to get each tooth the exact same length and shape with only a minimum of correcting necessary.

Once all one hundred teeth were done, he spent a full day perfecting them. They were dangerously sharp, and he blunted their tips slightly to prevent unexpected injuries. He used a polishing board as thin as paper and fine as silk to smooth them to perfection.

Finally, the frame and teeth were complete. He sent it one more time into a special, cooler chamber in his forge, only slightly over a thousand degrees. When the glass began to glow, but long before it began to soften, he pulled it out and let it temper in the warm air of his workshop.

He set the comb on his table beside a hammer and inspected his work critically. Although time was running out before Rarity's next visit, nothing less than perfection was acceptable, and he would not hesitate to smash the frame to pieces in response to a single flaw.

Every tooth was perfect. The frame was elegant, elaborate and flawless. The tail, though still bare, made for a perfect handle. He put the hammer away in its drawer.

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"So, you really think you have a chance?" Sticks asked. He had visited several times during the past month, but this was the first time the glass blower hadn't chased him away for disturbing his work.

"What do you mean?" the glass blower mumbled. He held a spool of gold wire in his teeth and was carefully measuring out a hoof's length of the metal to begin wrapping the handle. The smaller spool of iron sat beside him, waiting for its turn.

"Well, she turned you down in front of everyone. I thought you'd spend the whole month mourning, but here you are, ready to try again."

The glass blower set the gold spool down. He put the comb in a vice and carefully threaded the end of the gold wire through one of the needle-thin holes in the handle. For a while there was silence as he wrapped the handle in the first layer of wire.

"She seemed impressed with the hummingbird," he said. Behind him on a shelf, the glass flower rustled as though in a breeze. The hummingbird spent most of its time outside, sipping from flowers in his neighbors' gardens and confusing their cats. "She said it was perfectly crafted, just not useful. This will meet her standards, I think."

"Seems a bit fragile. Won't those teeth break the moment she touches them?"

The glass blower shook his head. "It's tempered. You'd need to hit it fairly hard to break it." He rapped the teeth with his hoof to demonstrate their resilience.

They were quiet while he worked. When the handle was fully wrapped in a layer of gold wire, he set the spool down and reached for the meteoric iron. Fastening the free end in another hole, he began wrapping the handle again, this time in a wider pattern that allowed the gold beneath to show through.

Sticks broke the silence. "It's just... I don't want you to get hurt."

"What do you mean? Tomorrow's going to go perfectly."

"Or she'll reject you again. I don't know how much you can trust her."

The glass blower glanced up at his friend. "What does that mean? Are you calling her a liar?" he asked, his voice soft.

Sticks held up a hoof. "No, I'm just saying... Look, I don't want you to get hurt tomorrow, is all."

"And I said, tomorrow will go fine." He turned and removed the finished comb from the vice, and set it on his workbench. It glowed like a pearl in the dim light.

"Look at it," he whispered. "It's everything she asked for."

Sticks leaned over the comb carefully, as though expecting it to leap up and bite him at any moment. It remained still as a stone. Finally, he frowned and gave his friend a questioning glance.

"That's it?" he asked. "It doesn't move or anything?"

The glass blower chuckled. "There is more than one type of magic, Sticks. The hummingbird wasn't enough for her, but this will be."

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They waited by the jewelers' stands for her, in the same place as the previous month. A small crowd quickly gathered, eager to see what treasure the glass blower presented to her this time. More than a few noble ponies watched from the edges or chatted quietly with the gem merchants, making sure to keep an eye on the pair. The crisp air of the late fall was filled with excited conversations.

Rarity did not keep them waiting long. She arrived an hour after the sun's late rising, and walked directly through the crowd towards them. The sea of ponies parted for her and closed into a circle around them once she had passed.

Sticks shifted nervously from hoof to hoof, eyeing the crowd around them. The large velvet jewelry box, hanging from his mouth by a thin ribbon, was already the object of more attention than he was comfortable with.

The glass blower, by contrast, was calm. A small smile rested on his lips, and grew as Rarity approached.

"Lady Rarity," he began, "you said my glass was perfectly crafted but lacked utility. This month, I hope to meet your challenge with artwork as beautiful as it is functional." He nodded to Sticks, who set the velvet box on the cobblestones and pushed it toward her.

She stared at the box for a moment. Those in the crowd closest to her saw the faintest tremor in her hoof as she reached out and lifted the lid.

The comb rested on a plush velvet cushion, white and bright as the moon. All one hundred teeth glinted in the sunlight, looking like dozens of perfect needles lined up in a row. The gold wire, half hidden beneath the dark grey overwrap, seemed to glow with its own light. The market filled with a loud, excited murmur.

She stared a while at his work, her nostrils flaring. Finally, she lifted it with her magic, and inspected it with a critical eye.

"It is... well crafted," she allowed. Laughter drifted from the crowd, which she ignored. "Very well crafted. But it is just a comb. I have dozens like it."

The glass blower shook his head. "Try it," he suggested.

She sighed, and trotted over to the nearest jewelry merchant. Like all such stalls, it had a large mirror for potential buyers to use when trying on new baubles. She adjusted the mirror, spent a long moment gazing at herself in it, then carefully pulled the comb through her mane.

The results were immediate. Although Rarity's mane was already styled, the comb made it *perfect*. It grew fuller and thicker; stray hairs evaporated like mist. Its purple hue deepened, becoming more vibrant. Each strand shone like a jewel in the sun and cast indigo reflections on her alabaster coat.

Rarity stared into the mirror with a blank expression on her face. The silver light around her horn faltered and faded, and the comb fell to the ground with a quiet tinkle that broke the silence. The glass blower trotted over, picked it up in his mouth, and set it on the counter beside the mirror. There was not a scratch on its polished surface.

The glass blower stood beside her, both of them gazing in the mirror. Eventually, he leaned down to her ear.

"I think you are beautiful enough, even without the comb," he whispered. The crowd around them began to buzz again. The noble ponies pressed closer, trying to see the comb for themselves. "I don't care what your mane looks like, or whether your coat is flawless and smooth. There are a thousand beautiful ponies in Canterlot, with riches and power and fame. None of them love their art like you. None of them would challenge the world like you. None of them have your beauty within."

She stepped away and drew a shuddering breath. Her eyes, as before, fixated on his forehead, where a unicorn's horn should be. He stared back, unperturbed.

"This isn't fair, I..." She trailed off. "That is, I mean..." She shook as words failed her. He reached out to steady her, but she danced away with sudden grace.

"Not yet," she said. "You have shown craftsmanship and utility, but there is more to art than those. True art is timeless. The great works of history are as renowned today as they were when Princess Celestia was young. Craft me a work that will be celebrated for generations, and you will have my heart."

Last month, her rejection had stung him. Now, he smiled. She was within his grasp.

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The first week he drew, while the ashen grey of winter replaced the colors of fall. No planning was necessary this time; the design sprang into his mind as soon as he returned to his shop. He set the comb on a shelf next to the glass flower, pulled out rolls of parchment, and began to write.

She wanted timelessness? He would give her time. He procured texts on astronomy from the Canterlot library, and with their aid sketched a rough plan for an armillary sphere. A small globe at the center, as wide as his hoof, represented Equestria. The first ring, a foot across, contained the sun. The next ring held the moon, the final ring the stars and constellations. All rotated freely around the planet, keeping time with the night and day, and changing of the seasons.

The second week, as other ponies prepared for the winter solstice, he gathered his materials. Although he could usually craft metal components with his forge, the metalwork for the stand and axis required a specialist's touch. Perfection, as always, was the key, and sometimes that meant going to other craftsmen with specific skills. Fortunately, brass was the traditional metal for armillaries, and was very cheap compared to the meteoric iron used in the comb.

The third week, he crafted the sun, moon and stars. Again, the astronomy books came in handy, as he traced outlines of craters on the thin glass shell of the moon, and scored constellations on the outmost ring of glass.

The globe took far longer than he expected. He created and smashed four separate glass Equestrias before one met his standards. Rather than a single sphere of glass for each globe, he crafted a dozen, one for each color of the seas and land. Blue for the deepest ocean, green for the jungles and forests, tan for the deserts, white for the icecaps. He carved them into a hundred pieces, and fused them together into a stained-glass globe. A magnifying glass was needed for the individual lakes and rivers.

He set the separate pieces on his workbench and stepped back to view them. He mentally reviewed her criteria: craftsmanship, utility, timelessness. Satisfied, he nodded to himself. This had all three.

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"I'm worried about you."

The glass blower looked up at his friend, and blinked a few times to clear his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping well, and his eyes felt scratchy beneath their lids.

"What, why?"

"You keep obsessing over her, over this thing," Sticks said. He gestured at the pieces of the armillary sphere on the table. "You've made two incredible masterpieces for her, and she's turned you down twice. Don't you know why?"

"She has high standards. You wouldn't expect her to give her heart away to just anyone, would you?"

"No, and that's the point. Why do you keep thinking she's going to suddenly love you, just because you make this... thing for her? What is this, anyway?"

"It's an armillary sphere," the glass blower said. He set the circular stand on the table, and carefully fastened a wide brass circle to it, forming a vertical hoop several feet across. A long, thin metal rod topped with an arrowhead transected the circle. At the center, speared by the rod through its north and south poles, hung the glass globe of Equestria.

"It's a map of the heavens," he continued. "Each ring represents a celestial body: the sun, moon and stars." He tapped the separate pieces with his hoof as he counted them off.

Sticks gave the contraption a puzzled look, then shook his head and turned to look at the glass blower. "Whatever. She's not going to accept it."

"She has to. She said she would."

"She *lied*." Sticks brought his hoof down on the workbench with the word. The glass blower frowned as the components shook. "This whole stupid challenge is a lie. I did some asking around. It turns out she's in love with some unicorn prince. She never expected anyone to actually take her up on this."

The glass blower waved a hoof dismissively. "She wouldn't lie about this, Sticks. Art is everything to her."

They were silent for a while. The glass blower tinkered with his creation. Sticks thought about what he should say.

The glass blower picked up the model sun, a solid sphere of clear glass, with a set of tongs. He stuck it into the forge, and after a few minutes it began to glow: first a dull red, then a bright orange, and finally a brilliant, blinding yellow-white. Just when it was about to start dripping, he pulled it from the forge, and brought it over to the table. Sticks backed away nervously.

"Hey, careful with that," he said. "It looks hot."

"It is," the glass blower said. The glass sun was easily the brightest object in the room, casting shadows just like its namesake. "It will cool quickly, though. Glass radiates heat much faster than it conducts it."

Sticks wasn't sure what that meant, but he had learned over the years to trust his friend. For several minutes they waited, though the glass sun grew no dimmer. Finally, the glass blower held his hoof near the tiny star, nodded, and dropped it onto the workbench.

Sticks couldn't help the small scream that escaped his throat. Everything he knew about glass from his friend insisted that the table should burst into flames, followed by the rest of the workshop. Instead the brilliant orb rolled a few inches before coming to a stop. The wood beneath it didn't even smoke.

"See? Already cool," the glass blower said. He chuckled at Sticks' expression.

Sticks leaned over the glass sun, squinting against its light. He reached out and tapped it with a hoof, setting it rolling across the table.

"How...?"

"Didn't I tell you? Unicorns have their magic. I have mine."

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The market started at its usual time, though the sun was only a distant promise beneath the horizon. The gas lamps that lit the streets of Canterlot were still glowing when Sticks and the glass blower arrived at the jewelers' stalls. They had borrowed a cart to carry the armillary sphere, and didn't bother concealing it.

The crowd was twice as large this time around. Several guard ponies wandered the edges of the market, keeping an eye on the mob. Hundreds of merchants and buyers pressed forward, eager to see the glass blower and his work. The jewelers, previously quite happy to have an attraction next to their stalls, now seemed nervous.

The glass blower noticed none of this. Although Sticks had forced him to get a few hours of sleep the night before, he still looked like a mess. His mane was ruffled despite Sticks' best attempt at combing it, and his eyes were puffy and bloodshot. He would have collapsed, had he not been leaning against his friend.

Rarity arrived with the dawn. She actually had to force her way through the crowd – her contest was no longer the attraction; the glass blower's works were. This seemed to cause her no small amount of frustration, and her features were tight with anger when she finally reached them.

If the sphere fazed her, she didn't show it. Perhaps, Sticks thought, the past two demonstrations had taken the surprise out of his creations. Either way, she gave the armillary only a brief glance before turning to its maker.

If his artwork didn't startle her, his appearance did. She flinched, then stepped forward, the anger on her face replaced with concern.

"You... you don't look well. Are you ill?" she asked.

The glass blower laughed quietly. "No, and soon I will be better than ever. How do you like this, Lady Rarity? Is it as timeless as you demanded?"

She gave him a final, worried glance, and turned to the armillary sphere. The tiny sun slowly orbited the glass globe, casting stark shadows across the crowd. A few inches further out a silver moon, glowing with its own cold light, followed in a slower orbit. Finally, an outermost ring of glass, several feet across, hung motionless. Inside were a thousand tiny points of light, and a dozen constellations drawn in glowing lines.

"It is... fine," she said. "Well crafted. Useful, in its way, to an astronomer. But how is it timeless? How will future generations remember this?"

He chuckled again. "I suppose that depends how you define timeless, then." He reached out with a hoof and touched the glass sun, freezing it in place.

Around the three of them, the world grew dimmer. Colors slowly vanished, as though washing away in the rain. The sound of the crowd faded into silence, and everything around them slowed to an unnatural stop.

Rarity looked around in panic. A sea of frozen faces looked back, unmoving, unchanging. Birds hung in the air overhead. Even the wind ceased blowing. For a long moment their breaths were the only sound.

"By Celestia," Sticks mumbled. He gazed around the frozen scene in wonder. "What have you done?"

Rarity fell back onto her haunches. Her eyes were wide and panicked as she turned to the glass blower. "Put them back, please," she begged. "Whatever you did, put them back!"

He sighed quietly, and removed his hoof from the armillary sphere. The sun slowly began to move again, and color returned to the world around them, followed by sound and motion. Sticks felt the tight grip on his heart relax. Rarity trembled.

The crowd babbled in confusion. For the first time ponies pushed to get away from the sphere, rather than toward it. The guard ponies suddenly looked very serious.

"What... what was that?" Rarity asked. She had managed to stop shaking, though her voice was still weak and thready.

"You wanted a timeless piece of art?" the glass blower asked. He seemed oblivious to the panic in the crowd or the shocked reaction from Rarity. "This is it. Simply stop the sun in its orbit and time around you will cease to flow. It is the greatest thing I have ever crafted." He stared at the armillary for a long moment, then turned to her. "Tell me, have I met your challenge? Will you accept my love?"

She stared at him, shocked into silence. Sticks squeezed his eyes shut.

"Please," he said. "Just tell him the truth! Look at him. He won't stop!"

Rarity looked between them, then at the armillary. It spun slowly next to the glass blower, its artificial sun shining with all the light of the true dawn behind them. Her face softened, and for a moment, Sticks thought she would do the right thing.

But then her features hardened. The haughty indifference she had worn when they first met returned, and she stood. Sticks choked back a sob.

"This is timeless, I suppose," she said to the glass blower. "And useful, and well crafted. All three of my criteria you have met." A dreamy smile appeared on his face.

"But," she continued, "where is its beauty? Where is its charm and grace? Craft me the most beautiful artwork, this one last time, and I will promise you my heart."

It was music to the glass blower's ears.

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Sticks pushed the workshop door open. As he had expected, the glass blower was still inside, working in the dark.

He pushed his way in, careful not to trip on the random bits of junk littering the floor. The apprentices waited outside, too frightened to enter. The glass blower stood at his worktable, mindlessly polishing a large sheet of glass.

Neither spoke for a while. Sticks wasn't even sure his friend was aware of his presence. He moved closer, and saw that the sheet of glass appeared to be an oval mirror.

"You're going to do this, then," he said. It wasn't a question.

If the glass blower heard him, he gave no sign. He continued to polish the mirror.

"Just promise me that this is it. If she rejects you again, you come back here and forget her. Keep the hummingbird if you want, but sell the comb. Your apprentices tell me they haven't been paid in weeks."

The glass blower mumbled something. His breath fogged the mirror for a moment, before the cold air sucked the moisture away.

"What?"

The glass blower looked up. "I said, we don't need to sell the comb. The palace gave me a fortune for the armillary." After Rarity had rejected the glass blower's third offer, the guards confiscated the sphere. The last Sticks had heard, it was securely guarded deep within the palace, along with other magical artifacts too dangerous to leave at large.

Sticks scowled. "What about your apprentices, then? Did you just forget about them?"

"Bunch of whiners. Tell them the bits are under the counter, in a bag next to the flux." Sticks heard a rustle behind him, and knew the apprentices were already moving.

"You shouldn't say that about them," he said softly. "They've stuck with you these past months, despite all this."

The glass blower snorted. "It will be over soon. Once she sees this, there will be no more doubt. It will be over, Sticks."

"It's just a mirror. As flattering as it is, I don't think that's what she meant."

"Oh, not just a mirror. Look!" The glass blower tossed his rag to the floor, where it joined a pile of dozens of others. He slid the mirror to the edge of the table and lifted it for Sticks to see.

The mirror didn't seem too special, he thought. He looked no different in it than he had that morning, looking into the bathroom mirror as he did every day. Tan coat, blond mane, marionette cutie mark. Long strings, descending from the ceiling, attached to his hooves and head. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary –

He leapt back in shock, and looked up at the ceiling for the strings. Nothing but dark rafters and drifting dust. He glanced quickly down at his hooves, but they were bare as well.

"What the..." He looked back at the glass blower, who had turned the mirror around and was gazing into it. "By Celestia, what is that thing?"

"It's a perfect mirror," the glass blower muttered. "It doesn't just reflect; it shows us as we are within. It shows the *true* us." He sighed quietly, and continued. "When I look in it, I see a pony as fragile as glass, blinded by love, ready to shatter at the slightest touch." He reached a hoof up to touch his cheek, and flinched, as though really about to break.

"But I also see a happy pony. The happiest pony in the world, Sticks, because his dreams are about to come true. At long last, Sticks, all my dreams are about to come true."

Sticks felt sick. The room seemed to spin for a moment before he recovered.

"Don't do this," he said. "That thing won't get you what you want. If we were meant to see inside ourselves, our eyes would have that gift. Smash it. Break it before it hurts someone."

The glass blower scoffed. "I knew you would say that. I knew you wouldn't understand. But when she looks into this, and sees the beauty in her that I already see..." He reached up to lovingly touch the glass. "She will be mine."

• • •

The crowd at the market was as large as before, though it kept a respectful distance. For once, no ponies attempted to bother Sticks or the glass blower as they waited. The large contingent of guards, sent from the palace specifically to keep everyone away from his artwork, might have had something to do with that.

Sticks had debated not showing up. He already knew what would happen. It was like watching a train wreck in slow motion. But the glass blower was his friend, and friendship meant being there for your friends, even when they hurt themselves.

The mirror was on a simple wooden stand. Sticks had insisted on covering it with a cloth, lest they start an unintentional riot simply carrying it in public. The glass blower hadn't minded; indeed, he didn't seem aware of anything.

Rarity arrived later than Sticks expected, well after the sunrise. A pair of guards escorted her through the crowd, but left her to make her own way across the empty space to the glass blower. They could see she was already shaking. Her mane was frazzled and shapeless.

She stopped a dozen feet away. She barely gave the two of them a glance before turning to the covered mirror. Sticks could see she was biting her lip.

"Lady Rarity," the glass blower said. "Thank you for coming. At last we can put all this behind us." She gave him a terse nod. To Sticks, she gave a questioning, almost frightened glance. He shook his head slightly.

"You asked me for craftsmanship, utility, timelessness and beauty," the glass blower continued, oblivious to their silent exchange. "I spent days wondering how to craft the most beautiful work for you, when I realized the answer was always before me."

He whipped the cloth from the mirror with a flourish and stood back. "Look in the mirror, and see."

Sticks moved to her side before she could approach it. The glass blower gave him an annoyed glance, but didn't interfere.

"Please don't do this," he whispered to her. "Just tell him it was never a real challenge. Nothing good will come from looking in that mirror. Swallow your pride, tell him the truth, and leave. *Please.*"

She gave him a pain-filled look, and for a moment he thought she might actually do it. But the arrogance returned to her face, and she turned away from him in disdain.

"You flatter me," she said to the glass blower as she approached the mirror, "but I see mirrors every day. There is nothing special about them." She came to a stop before the looking glass, and stared.

For a long moment, nothing happened. All were silent; all held their breaths in anticipation. The glass blower smiled as though he had already won. Sticks felt a tendril of dread wrapping around his heart.

Finally, her expression began to change, from haughty indifference to puzzlement, then to surprise, followed quickly by shock, tinged with horror. She stepped away from the mirror, but could not free her gaze from its grasp.

"What is this?" she choked out. "What are you showing me?!"

The glass blower frowned, puzzled. This wasn't what he had expected. "Beauty, of course," he said. "It's a perfect mirror: it shows us as we truly are."

"You lie!" she shouted. Her lips drew back, exposing her teeth. Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "There is nothing true about this!" She reared up and brought her hooves crashing down on the mirror, knocking it from the stand onto the cold, hard cobblestones.

A normal mirror would have shattered, but this was a special mirror, a *perfect* mirror. It clattered and came to rest with only a few chips along its edges. But Rarity was not done.

"I am beautiful!" she cried. She brought her hooves smashing down on the mirror. The cracks grew.

"I am honest!" She slammed her hooves against it. "I am true!" Again.

"I am a good pony!" she screamed. With a flash of light that left everypony momentarily blind, the mirror shattered into a thousand glittering pieces.

The glass blower stared at his broken creation, not moving, his mouth agape. Rarity sobbed quietly, her white legs marred with thin streaks of blood where flying bits of glass had cut her. Sticks sank to his haunches, head low in defeat, mourning for two wounded hearts.

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Rarity never returned to the Canterlot bazaar.

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The glass blower worked long into the evening. He worked as the tallow candles around him guttered and went out. He worked until the moon, high overhead, was the only motion in the night.

Through the long night he worked, warmed by the hellish fires of his forge. For all his remaining years he worked, but never again did his creations truly live. Ever they were only glass, for they lacked the magic of love. He worked, and worked, and as he worked the winter night outside was not half as cold as the winter in his heart.