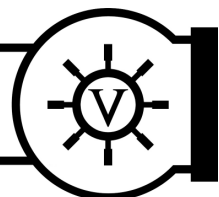


# Gift

shortskirtsandexplosions

PONY FICTION VAULT



Ponyville greeted me like a long-lost friend. I trotted down the stairs from the train depot in the morning light, feeling the weight of my saddlebag shifting with each step. A brisk autumn wind blew my way, scattering the whistling sound of the departing locomotive while simultaneously rustling the edges of my cloak's brown hood. I raised a hoof and pulled the lid of the article back over my mane, shadowing my eyes as I stood upon the brink of memories and silently gazed into the heart of town.

The golden-thatched rooftops had not lost their splendor. The happy coats of paint were as bright as ever, capturing the sunlight in just the right angle to illuminate the town like a crate of jewels in the center of Equestria. To my mute joy, Ponyville had not lost its rustic aesthetics. I breathed calmly, feeling my heart leap at every green awning, every dangling shop sign, and every fresh garden of blooming flowers that graced my vision.

The smells were as lively as I remembered, and they instantly filled me with the urge to sob, more so than the store names that had changed, more so than the strapping young stallions and mares with vaguely familiar coats, and even more so than the occasional building that had disappeared or been replaced or been memorialized into a landmark. Time had been generous to Ponyville, but it had also been fickle. Streets were different; some had been renamed. I was too afraid to look at the signs for fear that the names would be of ponies I once knew, and I would no longer have to guess as to why I wasn't seeing any glimpse of them.

I tried to stay focus, for I was there to do one thing. Sight-seeing, after all, was for tourists, and I was no tourist.

I needed a place to stay. As much as I hated to, I had to start talking to ponies, had to start asking questions if I was ever to make any progress. I tried not to obsess over how strange a sight I must have been, stumbling about in a thick brown cloak as if I had marched out of some sepulcher in the ground. The worst thing I could have done was overstress things, for that would have attracted attention. The last thing I should have been doing was attracting attention...

And that's when I stopped, freezing in my tracks. My eyes sparkled from beneath my hood upon the first sign of the silken fabrics. I marched up to the glass of a dazzling storefront in the middle of Ponyville's market district. The shop was new, certainly a place I couldn't remember. "Silver Spoon's Closet" was the name, but that wasn't what stole my breath away. My eyes clung to the gorgeous stitching, the lacy patterns, and the immaculate embroidery that embodied the silk gowns on display in the storefront window. There were three dresses erected on pale ponyquins, and not a single one of

them was a bland imitation of the others; they were each unique, each gorgeous, each perfectly and undeniably hoof-stitched with the finest care.

A slight whimper escaped my breath, fogging the glass, making me realize how foalishly close I was leaning towards the window. Fidgeting, I stepped back from the display, my foggy eyesight hovering towards the left, then the right—and then I saw it. A sign was positioned proudly upon a metal stand, embellished with elegant blue hoofwriting. “*Carousel Boutique Fall Lineup*” it declared. Towards the bottom, boldly written, was the felicitous announcement: “*See the Latest of Lady Rarity’s Fine Fashion at the Ponyville Fashion Show this October 25th. Location: Town Hall.*”

A cold breath escaped me. The autumn wind blew by again, chilling and soft, and yet I felt myself sweating profusely.

“They sure don’t have dresses like that where you’re from, huh?”

I blinked, then glanced aside. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” A mailmare giggled, blushing slightly. “I guess that was rude of me.” She fiddled with a mailbag over her flank as her gray horn glistened in the wind above a fluttering mat of blonde hair. “I just saw the cloak you were wearing and assumed you were from Stalliongrad.”

I gently nodded. “You assume right,” I said in a neutral tone.

“Oh.” Her golden eyes blinked awkwardly. “Well, I guess it makes sense.” The young unicorn smiled sweetly. “We’ve been getting a lot of visitors from your city since that huge wall fell down, y’know.”

“Yes. I do know.”

Her eyes squinted in thought as she scratched her chin. “Just how long ago was that? Three years? Four years? Ugh! My memory’s so awful, sometimes. It’s a trait I got from my mother.”

“It was five and a half years ago,” I said. “And it didn’t ‘fall down.’ It was demolished by revolutionaries after the fall of the old regime.”

“Really?” She blinked innocently and put on a crooked smile. “Well, no wonder you’re here in Ponyville to lose some steam! That sounds like it was really stressful!”

I opened my mouth to correct her even further, but stopped myself before another breath could be produced. I glanced through the edge of my cloak at the dresses once more. Swallowing a lump down my throat, I pivoted towards her and asked, “Where can I find a good hotel in town?”

“Hmm? Hotel? How long do you wish to stay?”

“Just a night,” I said. In all honesty, I didn’t truly know.

“Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t settle for anything less than the Sparkle Inn!” the mailmare said with a smiling wink. “It’s in the center of town. Look for a big tree with doors and windows. You can’t miss it.”

I felt my heart skipping a beat. “The ‘Sparkle Inn,’ eh?”

“Heehee! You don’t have to thank me!” Her horn glowed as she lifted an envelope out of her bag and trotted happily towards the nearest mailbox. “Have a good afternoon! Enjoy your stay in Ponyville! It’s the happiest place in Equestria! Heehee!”

I watched her depart in a brisk canter. With a dull sigh, I wrenched my eyes from “Silver Spoon’s Closet” and trotted towards the center of town.

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It was an inn, alright. Surrounding the bottom trunk of the treehouse, a black metal gate had been erected. There were sliding doors with patios and a tiny courtyard fitted with seats and tables where ponies from all corners of Equestria sat in busy little conversations with one another.

I had second thoughts the very instant that I stepped up to the front entrance. Ideas of searching for an alternate hotel or inn flittered through my mind, but I soon realized that the best way to proceed with my plan was to do so swiftly. So, mustering my strength, I pushed the door open.

The only familiar thing was the creaking sound that the door’s hinges made. The front room had become a lobby; the reading seats were gone, replaced by a coffee bar. Decades’ old music was playing over a series of crackling speakers, but it was of little consolation as I marched across the alien interior. Shuffling past plastic tables fitted with travel brochures, I carried my heavy saddlebag to the front counter where an earth pony with a cream colored coat and a brown mane stood waiting, smiling.

“Welcome to the Sparkle Inn! Would you like a room?”

“This used to be a library...”

“Huh?” She gave me a quizzical blink.

I shook my head, straightened my cloak’s hood, and looked her way. “Yes. I would very much like to check out a room.”

“For how many evenings, ma’am?”

“Just one,” I said. “And before you ask, I am somewhat low on funds at the moment. I would appreciate the cheapest accommodations with just enough facilities for one pony.”

“I believe we have just what you’re looking for—”

“Candy Canter!” an elder mare’s voice exclaimed from a dozen feet away. I glanced to the left in time to see a pony with a blue and pink mane poking her head out from behind an office door. “Don’t forget about Room 202.”

“I haven’t, mother!” the young filly called back, then smiled my way as she finished scribbling on a set of paper sheets. “One of the second story floors is being renovated. Don’t worry; there won’t be any loud construction in there for another week. You’ve picked a nice, quiet time to stay at the Sparkle Inn.”

“What’s wrong with Room 202?”

“Ugh... It’s the balcony window. It’s about the fifth time the pane has needed to be replaced,” she said in a lethargic tone, though she smiled pleasantly. “I swear, it’s like somepony threw a boulder through that part of the tree ages ago.”

“You’d be surprised,” I muttered.

She glanced oddly at me, but decided to chuckle anyways. When prompted, I gave her my hoofprint and paid her the necessary amount of bits. “Enjoy room 205,” she said, smiling. “You’ll like it; it faces the sunset.” She placed the keys on the counter.

“Much appreciated,” I said. The keys levitated in gently glowing telekinesis before me.

She gasped and looked at me with bright blue eyes. “You’re a unicorn!”

I jolted slightly, realizing I hadn't thought twice about my actions. "Yes?" I remarked in a dull tone. "What of it?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that..." She bit her lip, her eyes trailing around the edges of my hood. It occurred to me that she had always been staring at my cloak but didn't betray her curiosity until that very moment. "I thought that all ponies from Stalliongrad were—well—earth ponies, I-like me." She gulped and smiled politely as she leaned forward. "You *are* from Stalliongrad, yes?"

"The wall came down five years ago," I said. "Since then, the city's populace has gotten rather... diverse..." My eyes were distracted.

She blinked curiously. "Hmm? What is it?"

I was staring at a delightfully colored cardboard box resting on the counter top. There was a slot for depositing bits, and around it several elegantly illustrated equine figures pranced about, wearing Galloping Gala regalia. A series of glittering, silver-embossed words read "*Donate to the Petite Pony Ball: All Proceeds Go to Lady Rarity's Home for Orphan Foals.*"

"Is there something on your mind, Miss...?"

"Hmmm... Yes." I swiveled and marched up the wooden steps beyond the counter. "I can still smell the books in this place..."

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They truly needed to hire another pony for the front counter, for she didn't know how to be a proper salesmare. The room was fabulous: far more comfortable and astounding than the filly in the lobby had even bothered describing it. The bed was luxuriously fitted; the washroom was in immaculate condition. I spent a half hour simply sitting on the bed and drinking the place in. I spent the next half hour wishing I hadn't, for every time I closed my eyes I saw books, tomes, encyclopedias, and a pair of innocent, violet eyes.

So, with a shrug of my shoulders, I stripped myself of the saddlebag and proceeded to unpack, hoping that I might outpace the rapid flow of memories coursing through me. From the furthest pocket of my satchel, I produced a wrinkled newspaper cover. The poor scrap of paper had been through every terrible situation imaginable. It was aged, stained, and thoroughly rough-handled. Mud from the Volgallop River clung to its edges. Still, the thing was legible. I placed the thing on my bedside table, hoping that it

might serve as a reward or a punishment to me the following morning, depending on whether or not I followed through with my purpose in town.

In the warm light from the noonday sun, I stared at the cover. The four year old edition of the “Manhattan Gazette” spoke to me with the same legibility as it had when I first stumbled upon it in the streets of Stalliongrad so long ago. Partially crinkled headlines read “*The Fabulous Lady Rarity: World-Renown Fashionista from Ponyville Officially Commemorated by Princess Celestia in Canterlot.*”

A black and white photo featured a white unicorn elegantly bowing as Celestia bestowed her with a royal trinket. I didn’t bother reading the fine print that hovered beneath the display. After all, I had it properly memorized in my mind, and my heart raced upon the deep, meditative contemplation of the familiar words.

With a shuddering breath, I forced myself to stare out the balcony window. The filly downstairs was right about one thing: it truly was a beautiful view. I didn’t need a sunset to admire the golden rooftops, sparkling windows, and luscious gardens of Ponyville. I stood before the window, lowering my hood and running a hoof over the thin wispy strands of my mane. A quiet sigh escaped my lips as I glared at the glass before me. The window pane felt like a series of iron bars, blocking the crisp autumn breath of this beautiful town, imprisoning me far more viciously than any giant wall of Stalliongrad masonry.

I knew that if the sun set and I was still standing there, I would finally have lost track of the treehouse’s timeless scent of books, for I would have overwhelmed myself with tears.

Mustering my courage, I pulled the hood back over my head, straightened the cloak over my aching limbs, and made a quiet exit.

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The schoolhouse had been replaced; that almost broke my heart. I disregarded the fact that a larger, far more appropriate building with two stories and a hoofball field had replaced it. Cheerilee had been the heart of that little one-room place of learning, and I couldn’t help but wonder where she was now.

Classes were ending just as I trotted by. Colts and fillies of all ages galloped past me, chanting at each other and giggling in the crisp afternoon air. From the sheer number of them, I wondered just how greatly the population of Ponyville had exploded. I had to slow down to avoid bumping into a few of them. Several bright faces paused to gawk at

me, at my curious gait, at the even curiouser lengths of my brown cloak. From over the nearby hill, mares and stallions called the youths' names, urging them to leave the wandering stranger alone and join them so that they could trot home together.

One voice in particular stabbed at my ears, and I felt my breath leaving me in a sharp gasp.

“Berry! Elusive!” the mare exclaimed. “Don’t roll around in the ditch! You’ll get your coats dirty again! Come inside!”

“Yes, mom!” a tiny unicorn muttered. He turned and smiled devilishly at his younger, blank flank of a brother. “Race you to the front door, El! Onetwothree—GO!” He was off in a bright blur.

“Hey! No fair!” the tinier colt protested, waddling desperately after him. “Come on, Berry! You’re cheating!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Am not!”

I watched as they dashed towards the front of a beautiful, antique cottage on the edge of town. A white picket fence surrounded it, brimming with vines and flowers. A rough extension flanked the side of the tiny two-story building, built out of old stone and masonry. I saw two cellar doors, weathered by time. There was a creaking noise, and my eyes traveled up to see a dangling sign above the front of the cottage that read “Everfine Wine.” As the two colts reached the front stoop, their lungs heaving from the competitive race, a gorgeous young mare with lavender-streaked hair stood above them, chiding them gently. She ushered them into the room and gave the beautiful afternoon a thoughtful look. The sun glinted off her pale horn, and she was gone.

I stood there, frozen in place. My hooves trembled against the dirt as I forced myself to look down the path towards the shady treeline of Everfree Forest. I knew my destination, or at least I thought I did. Any moment spent wasted—no matter how felicitously—meant delaying what I had come there to do. Still, I had become powerless, and I felt myself shuffling up to the front door of Everfine Wine and knocking on it gently.

“Come in!” a melodic voice sung, making my heart quiver. “We’re most definitely open this time of day!”



I pushed the door and trotted slowly inside. I was bathed in dim candlelight as the fragrance of fermented fruit filled my nostrils. Sweeping the floor with a telekinetically floating broom was the mare, her silken locks shimmering in the amber glow of the flickering flames lining the counter behind her. She hummed to herself, clearing the wooden floorboards of dust as she covered the last remaining square inches.

“I will be with you in a moment!” she exclaimed pleasantly, her smile struggling against a frustrated scowl as she chased a final layer of sediment away. “Honestly, you two,” she grumbled towards the shapes of two colts squatting on the stairs to her right. “How many times do I have to tell you not to track so much dirt in here? I truly don’t know where you get it from. Your father’s as cleanly as they come, and Celestia knows I haven’t touched mud since I was your age...”

“We’re sorry, mother,” the younger one exclaimed.

The older one was too busy squinting my way and pointing, “What’s with the funeral shroud?”

“Berry! Don’t be rude!” the mare hissed and glanced my way. She took two seconds to politely digest the look of my wear before saying, “How can I help you today, Miss? Perhaps you’d be interested in some Northern Red Wine? Or Soft Mountain White? I hear they’re all the rage in Stalliongrad as of late.”

I trotted slowly towards her, my mouth agape. I tried to breathe calmly, tried to keep myself as professional and eloquent as possible. Despite all my concentration, my voice still came out in a shudder. “This is what you do for a living?” I gulped, my eyes darting briefly to the mare’s flank. I saw a light pink musical note, and I wanted to laugh and cry all at once. “You... sell wine?”

She giggled lightly and nodded. “Only the finest in all of Ponyville. Some may say in all of Equestria, but I do believe that’s my husband’s boasting getting the best of the village.” She floated the broom over into the corner and dusted her hooves off before walking towards me. “Still, we’ve been rated five stars in no less than six respected Wine Magazines, so that definitely speaks for something. As a matter of fact, we’re a famous stopping point for the Manehattan Grape Tour every summer. Just this year, we’ve acquired some fine imports from Dream Valley. Heehee... My husband and I are hoping we’ll become a household name in Canterlot by the next Summer Sun Celebration.”

An awkward sound filled the air. I realized that I was laughing. It wasn’t a haughty outburst, but something full of delicious joy and surprise. I clutched my chest through

the cloak and tried to calm myself. I held the chortles in behind tight lips, and to my delight, they were curved in a soft grin. “You sell wine. You are married. You have foals. I...” I bit my lip, cleared my throat, and murmured, “You must be very, very happy.”

She glanced at me strangely, brandishing a nervous smirk. “Yes. Yes, I’d say that I am. Very much so. This is the best town to live in, after all.” With a shuffle of her hooves, she curtsied and stood before the counter. “My name is Belle.”

I nodded with a tranquil smile. “But of course it is.”

“Still, how may I be of service to you today, ma’am?”

“Actually, uhm...” I tried looking out a window; I saw her tiny little foals instead. My heart skipped a beat, and I had no choice but to lock eyes with her once again. “I was wondering if you could help me find—” I froze in mid-sentence, blinking, then blurted, “Yes! Actually, I *would* like to acquire some wine!”

“Oh?” Belle trotted around until she was behind the candle-lit counter. Brushing her white and lavender mane aside, she opened a catalogue and hoofed through the glossy pages. “We have quite the selection here, unparalleled in the heart of Equestria. What did you have in mind?”

“What do you have in the way of vintage?” I asked.

“Funny that you would ask,” she said with a pleasant smile. “Our cellar is filled to the brim with samples going back to thirty, forty—even fifty years.”

“How about”—I trotted a few inches towards the counter—“Faustian Red?”

Her green eyes darted up towards me. A slight chuckle escaped her lips. “You truly are interested in the local taste, aren’t you?”

I adjusted the folds of my hood while nodding. “Let’s just say the glasses are empty back home.”

“I think I understand completely.” She closed the catalogue and nodded. “I should have at least eight bottles of Faustian Red. It’s one of our most treasured stock.”

“Mind if I take a look at them?”

“Absolutely. I can allow you more than that.” Her pale horn glowed, and a lit candle floated in her magical grasp. Unlocking and opening a creaking wooden door, she motioned for me to follow. “Join me. Perhaps you’ll find something else to your liking.”

I nodded, gave the two curious foals a lasting glance, then followed their mother down a series of winding steps. Her candle formed an amber halo around us as we descended into the winery’s cellar. The air was cool down there, but not freezing. I imagined it was the perfect conditions for what I was pretending to be interested in. The whole time, I gazed at her immaculate white coat, at the elegant stride with which she carried herself. Belle was a lady through and through, and each step we took into the darkness I tore my heart to shreds.

“Ah, here we are,” she stated, leading us directly to the center of an impressive array of densely filled wine racks. “Faustian red. It’s not as expensive as the eastern stock, but I think you’ll find the country samples as delicious if not more exquisite than the types made from Dream Valley vines.”

“Are they chronologically arranged?” I asked.

“Mmmhmm. By decade. What type of vintage are you interested in?”

Without thinking, I immediately said, “Twenty years.”

Belle squinted at the rack, then expertly found a large red bottle. She gently lifted the glass container up into the air with lavender telekinesis and rotated it before me. “There you have it. Corked in the year 1002. That should ensure a very, very sweet taste.”

“I have something of an affinity for ‘sweet,’” I said.

“Wow... heh.” She glanced pleasantly at the label on the bottle. “That was a year before I got my cutie mark. So much has happened in Equestria since then, and yet so much has stayed the same in this little village of ours. We truly are blessed.”

“1002...” I murmured, gazing at the bottle with soft eyes. “That was an adventurous year, a glorious year.”

“I don’t know what Stalliongrad was like in that decade, but we could have used a large wall ourselves, considering all the things that tried marching through here.” She chuckled dryly to herself. “Manticores, Ursa Minors, a draconequus. My older sister tells me all about it, because I was a bit too young at the time to remember the details. I’m just

glad that none of those unfortunate situations transpire today, or else I'd be talking my husband into moving our business somewhere safer."

"You are truly blessed indeed."

"I know," she said, then hid her smiling expression behind a professional exterior. "Ahem. As you can see..." She pointed at the neck of the bottle floating before me. "The seal is tight and there was little to no air contained inside when it was corked. That means the aging process went faster than—say—stock of the Fillydelphian or Manehattan variety. They tend to make their bottles through an assembly line, and it takes longer for their wines to achieve a proper taste. All our Faustian Red was made with great care several years ago, produced from the vine that belonged to the estate of Berry Punch. Heh... Now there was a mare who knew how to make good vintage. Celestia rest her soul..."

"I think I'll take it," I said.

Belle blinked in surprise at that. "Really? You don't want to look at the other bottles? I'd hate for you to leave without considering the sweetest that our stock has to offer..."

"I already have the sweetest," I said, softly gazing at her. "Besides, it was nice enough to have engaged in your exquisite company."

She stared at me. An adorable blush came to her pale cheeks as she glanced aside. "Heh, well I'm... *uhm*... glad to have been of assistance."

"Your voice is quite angelic; do you know that?" I said. "Have you ever thought about taking up singing? Professionally, I mean."

She smirked dryly. "Oh I did just that. Years ago."

"Yes?"

"Mmmhmm." Belle brushed a hoof through her bangs while quietly examining the dust gathered on the old bottle between us. "For three years, I performed at humble venues, delighting audiences from here to Baltimore."

"That sounds wonderful," I said in a warm breath. I leaned forward. "What made you stop?"

“What made me stop? Oh...” She smiled lightly as her gaze wandered to the faint spotlight that the candle had made beneath her hooves. “It was a nice thing to be utilizing my talent. Heaven knows, I had struggled so long to discover it. But it didn’t quite bring me the satisfaction that I thought it would. And when you can’t have fun doing something with so much commitment, why bother being committed in the first place?”

“Truly...”

“Besides... heh...” She rolled her eyes and smirked in my direction. “If you’ve visited the heart of town, ma’am, you’d know all about my older sister Rarity by now. Her dresses are in every storefront of Ponyville. Heck, they’re in every fashion boutique in Equestria! I knew from early on that if I really wanted to be a famous singer, I’d forever have to compete with Rarity’s popularity. And a life lived in the shadow of another pony isn’t really worth pursuing. Perhaps you couldn’t understand...”

I gravely nodded. “Actually, I think I can.”

“But then I met Shot Glass,” she said, then giggled like she was a little filly again. “My husband,” she clarified with a wink. “He was so quiet, so reserved, and yet so full of remarkable things to say and sappy little compliments whenever I happened to see him. Soon, we started talking. Then we started going out. And, sooner than later, I realized that I had fallen head over hooves for him. Two years later, after buying this cottage on the side of town, we married, and we’ve been cheerfully running the business ever since. Our little winery may not be nearly as famous as Rarity’s Carousel Boutique, but that doesn’t matter. After all, popularity isn’t everything. Heheheh...”

“You’re right,” I said. “It isn’t.”

“Ugh! Listen to me going on and on like crazy,” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes. “You see, this is why I let Shot Glass do all the talking. Ahem. So, ma’am, you would like the 1002 Faustian Red vintage?”

“Very much so.”

She led me back up to the cottage. We talked about the weather and the local flora. I made simple little jokes, only to hear her simple little laughter, relishing the melody that she was too humble to flaunt anymore. Minutes later, I paid for the wine and she gave me a paper bag within which she slid the bottle. I placed the wine in a deep pocket hidden beneath the folds of my cloak.

And then she spoke to me, “When you first arrived, I could have sworn you were going to ask me something unrelated to wine.” She leaned her head aside with a curious glance. “Do you remember?”

“Oh, I... uhm...” I fidgeted, coming down from a warm cloud as I reacquainted myself with the purpose for being in that town to begin with. “I was... looking for a certain zebra...”

Belle blinked. “A zebra?”

“Yes. She used to... That is, I was told that she once had a hut nearby in which she lived and brewed potions.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“Zecora,” I said. “And her hut was located in the center of the Everfree Forest, as odd as that may sound.”

“The Everfree Forest?”

One of Belle’s foals suddenly blurted, “Oh, you mean Z-Town?!”

“Berry!” Belle snapped at him, frowning. “How many times do I have to tell you?! We don’t call it by that name in this household!”

The older colt blinked and gestured. “But Mr. Snips and Mr. Snails are always calling it—”

“I don’t care what father’s business associates say! We need to show that we’re better than that! Now go upstairs and finish your homework!” She cleared her throat and gave me a calm glance. “There happens to be a... *district* to the east end of Ponyville where several equines of Zebraharan descent have moved into.” She smiled pleasantly. “I happen to know this ‘Zecora’ of whom you ask. She was the first of her kind to set hoof in Ponyville, and several of her friends and distant relations have formed a community of sorts nearby.”

“Where nearby?”

She motioned with her hoof while saying, “Travel south along the dirt path, hang a right at the abandoned windmill, walk east for a hundred paces, then turn left at the pair of hollow trees. You’ll see their branches adorned with ritualistic masks and rain sticks.

Don't let their garish art frighten you. The zebras simply relish any opportunity they have to decorate their houses with trinkets from their homeland."

"I think I'll manage," I said, lingering, staring at her bright green eyes. I wondered how many decades were left before they too lost their lustre, dimming like the shadowed winery around us. Some of the best vintage of life couldn't be corked. "It was nice talking to you. You have... a very sweet personality. Just like the Faustian Red, I'd say."

She smiled, once again bashful, once again young. "I've been called 'sweet' before."

"I imagine you have." And I left, quick as a shadow.

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It really was a town unto itself. A tiny dirt courtyard surrounded a gnarled tree carved to form a rustic hut. Bordering the wide circle, inching into the shrubbery and dense foliage of the Everfree Forest, several simple houses resided. Every wooden inch of the structures was either painted with bright contrasting colors or studded with decorations, totems, and other samples of distant, desert artistry. I couldn't exactly describe the place as "impoverished," for there was a communal atmosphere to the place that chased away any notions of pity. The zebras lived intimately with one another, sharing tasks and conversations as if they were all close brothers and sisters. They worked in pairs, chopping down dying trees, tending to crops of foreign origin, and building fresh new woodsheds for storing tools. I could tell that the district was still rapidly growing, and furthermore that the zebras were electrified by the desire to make this happen. All the while, they carried an air of optimism, communing with nature, and relishing in the cool air that blew through their monochromatic manes.

None of this, however, stopped them from gazing fixedly at me as if I were a walking statue. I trotted awkwardly into the heart of their little hovel, adjusting the folds of my cloak to hide my features. I had no doubt that they knew I was a unicorn; I just couldn't tell from their neutral expressions if this was a welcomed thing or not. Two little foals innocently sprinted past me, running little circles around my legs as they giggled and stammered in a foreign tongue. I smiled at them, then glanced over to see a young mare with a buzzed mane squatting beside a wagon she was repairing.

"Excuse me," I remarked.

She looked over, brushed the sweat from her striped brow, and stood up. She was considerably taller than me, but then again, I had become quite frail over the years.

“I do apologize for interrupting you,” I said. “But I was wondering if Zecora still lives here.”

The mare’s eyes blinked as her brow furrowed. “Mother Zecchy?” she uttered in a remarkably deep voice.

I gulped and nodded. “Yes. I can’t imagine that name describing anypony else.”

She looked over my shoulder and shouted a string of indecipherable words. A teenage filly shuffled up, her hair braided with exquisite orchids. The mare gave her a command, and the filly nodded obediently before turning my way.

“You wish to see Mother Zecchy?” she asked in a far more recognizable accent. “Then follow me, ma’am.”

“Much appreciated,” I said. I turned and followed the briskly trotting filly, only to groan at myself when I saw where she was leading me too.

She shuffled up to the front door of the treehouse standing obviously in the center of the village and knocked her hoof on the entrance. After half a minute, the door opened and a muscular stallion peered out. The filly stood before him and pointed at me, “A pony from Ponyville wishes to see Mother Zecchy.”

The stallion frowned, glancing my way with a modicum of disdain. “She doesn’t look like she’s from Ponyville.”

“I’m sorry if this is an inconvenience,” I said, bowing my head slightly. “I was shopping for potions, but no market west of here has what I’m looking for. I’ve heard ponies far and wide speak of Zecora’s masterful craft and—”

“Zecora no longer makes potions,” the stallion grunted. “She is a very old and wise shaman and needs rest in her graying years. Sorry. We cannot help you—”

“I am f-fully capable of work on this beautiful day,” a voice wheezed from inside the treehouse. After a brief coughing fit, it took on a melodious tone. “You should know better than to turn needy souls away.”

The stallion sighed, his eyes clenching shut in momentary frustration. After a breath, he turned and bowed towards the interior. “Yes, Mother Zecchy.” He turned and gave me a lethargic glance. “You may enter.”



I decided to do so without saying another word. As I walked inside, I was greeted with rich incense and a million other indistinguishable smells. The stallion and teenage filly trotted in after me as I approached a large bed, upon the edge of which a wrinkled specimen with graying stripes was just then sitting up. She looked towards me, her gorgeous mane flowing with finely braided silk tresses.

“Ah, a distant traveller from Stalliongrad, I see,” Zecora remarked, once more stifling a cough as she stood up on wobbly, brittle legs. “What need have you of my esteemed alchemy?”

“Please,” I stammered, stretching a hoof forward. “You don’t need to get up on my behalf. I shouldn’t be long.”

“The day I fail to be a p-perfect host is when I’ll know I’ve b-become a ghost!” She hobbled slowly across the wooden interior and came to a shivering stop above a rickety stool before easing her graying flank down. “Ahhh... Though of good health I be bereft, I suspect I have many waking years left.”

I exhaled slowly and gave her a gentle smile. “I would say you have twice as many years left for beauty, Miss Zecora.”

“Nopony has given me a finer compliment,” she said with a weathered smile. Wheezing once more, she cleared her throat and managed, “Now, how can I solve your predicament?”

“I’m only here because no shop in Ponyville has what I need.”

“I suspect that what you request is something that would serve your homeland best.”

I smiled. “You’re right, I am from Stalliongrad. And in the gray city, there’s an overabundance of rats.”

The teenage filly shuddered. The stallion beside her rolled his eyes.

“Ah, Equestria’s most prolific pest.” Zecora brushed aside a few of her silken white bangs. “It’s been many years since Ponyville had a nest.”

“Which I suspect is why the marketplaces around here don’t sell any packages.”

“Packages?”

“Of rat poison,” I said.

The stallion murmured something in a Zebraharan tongue. Zecora gave a retort, adding a few rhyming sounds of foreign ilk before glancing my way. “A package, I’m afraid I cannot help you find. However, I’m sure that I can lend a bottle of what you have in mind.”

“A bottle?”

“A vial, to be more precise.” Zecora gestured towards the teenage filly; the youngster galloped over to a counter full of containers at the elder’s command. “Its contents should have a very potent effect on mice. The reason you won’t find anything like this in Ponyville, you see, is that these ponies subscribe to a very different philosophy.”

I gulped and nodded. “I’m familiar with the earth pony tradition of Winter Wrap Up. The locals are all about coexisting with nature. I’m guessing the poisoning of rats is ‘beneath them.’”

“How lucky, then, for the local populace that the zebras arrived to get rid of their rodent menace.” She winked my way. Her green eyes sparkled with a youth that haunted me. I felt the weight of the wine bottle beneath my cloak and tried to hide my shivers. “I’m sure if any of them traveled to Stalliongrad,” she continued, “they would faint to see what lengths you go through to get rid of your vermin taint.”

“Yes, well, over a hundred years of isolation will have a sizeable effect on any city’s philosophy,” I muttered. “I’m just glad to have been given a room in a local inn without anyone questioning the little revolution we had.”

“Do not succumb to the ill rumors that locals spread of your land,” Zecora spoke as the filly trotted slowly towards her with a vial crafted of emerald glass. “Ponies gossip in fear of what they do not understand. I know this better than most of my kind, and yet I’ve chosen to put such prejudices in the back of my mind.” She took the container from the filly and held it between two hooves, smiling proudly. “Ah, yes, I do believe that this should do the trick. A mix of manitocore venom and cactus nectar should make the rats’ death very quick.”

“I suppose that’s a good thing.” I leaned forward. “How much do I owe you, Miss Zecora? I can’t thank you enough...”

“Your only payment is to rid me of this juice,” she said. “For I seriously doubt there will come another visitor who will require its use.”

The stallion once again protested, and the elder once more cut him off.

Zecora looked at me again, her eyes hard and imploring. “Though I am not a pony, I too respect all life. I only give you this because it is far more merciful than the knife. If only all living things didn’t prey upon another, then even the smallest of souls we wouldn’t have to smother.”

“Hmmm... I doubt very much that the rats would respect us in like turn.”

“And yet, that is the rats’ loss and the equines’ gain.” She smiled pleasantly. “The ability to give and take is what makes us stewards of this plane. Whether it be the gift of light or the curse of deceit, it is our place to savor what is bitter from what is sweet.”

I fumbled for something to say; my mouth was suddenly very dry for some reason. Eventually, I uttered, “I shall take your words of wisdom with me, Zecora, wherever I choose to go.”

“I accept such ample payment with glee,” she said, chuckling in a lively manner. “You have brought pride once more to my alchemy.” She hoofed me the emerald vial. “Be frugal with your concentration, or else the rats will sniff their way past the application.”

“I’ll make use out of every drop,” I said in a low voice, cradling the glass canister like it was a tiny infant. “You’ve... been of great help to me. You’ve been of great help to many ponies.”

She chuckled dryly, coughed, and leaned back in her seat, gazing at me with thin green eyes. “Generosity, I see, has solidified my name.” Her wrinkled lips curved. “You should venture into town; you’ll meet a far greater pony who’ll teach you the same...”

• • •

I trudged ahead in a cold canter, my eyes narrow, my muzzle firm. The sun was setting, but I didn’t bother admiring the crimson hues drenching the quaint buildings on either side of me. Ponyville was enjoying its last breath of excitement: ponies came home from work, loitering in front of stores, smiling and laughing over the latest gossip. Music played gently through the streets as I entered the downtown district. I passed through the wide shadow of town hall, slicing my way through the fragrance of baking bread and candied sweets. I didn’t stop for anypony, even as curious citizens stopped to glance at me and my foreign threads. Not once did I pause to look at the beautiful dresses on dazzling display in the storefronts facing me. I headed directly forward, on a mission, for I knew exactly where I wanted to go... where I needed to be.

The building was still pink, albeit not the wildly painted spectacle that it once was. Several of the ornamental cupcakes and candles had been replaced with normal chimneys. I didn't stop to gaze at them either; I reached the door and gave it a firm shove.

The bell above jingled with the same tone it always had. I felt like I had been flung back in time. I expected a blue face with plump dimples to be smiling at me. Instead, I was greeted with a pair of sapphire eyes and an orange mane drawn into a ponytail.

"Hello!" The mare curtsied from behind a glass counter full of baked sweets. "Welcome to Sugarcube Corner! My name is Pumpkin! What can I get you today?"

"A glass of water, thanks," I muttered.

She blinked awkwardly, her young face awash in perplexity. "Oh. Uhm... Just water?"

"Yes."

"Alrighty! Do you... uhm... want a table for two or—"

"I'm alone," I said, darting a nervous glance towards the front entrance.

"Well, that's fine too!" She said, smiling politely. She called over her shoulder. "Hey! Pound! A tall glass of spring water, if you will!"

"Just a second, sis!"

I became aware of a hushed wave of voices behind me. I turned around to look. A crowd had gathered in the old eatery that evening. They sat in chatty clusters, their bright faces leaning over half-eaten glasses of sundaes and banana splits. They all looked so young and innocent. Not a single mare or stallion was my age, and for a moment that made me worry...

"Here you go, ma'am!" Pumpkin returned, levitating a glass of water with her cream-colored horn.

"Thank you..." I fidgeted with the pockets of my cloak for a bit.

"Oh, it's... *uh*... on the house!" She smiled brightly, gesturing at the water. "Just water! Heehee! If you want anything else, let us know! In the meantime, enjoy your stay!"

“Right.” I levitated the glass sharply towards me, almost spilling its watery contents.

I winced. I had to stay calm. This was a Friday evening. I had planned for months on end to arrive on this day, at this moment, at this place. My memory hadn’t gone bad yet. Everypony stopped by here on a Friday evening; I knew this. All I had to do was sit and wait. So, stumbling into the corner, I did just that.

Easing my aching haunches onto a bench in the corner of the place, I cradled the glass of water in two hooves and stared at the front door. I heard a sloshing sound. Glancing down, I saw several rivulets forming in the surface of my drink, betraying my shivers. I took several meditative breaths. I focused on the discussions of the patrons in the eatery, on the sound of their voices, on the smiles that brandished so many bright faces. I remembered when I was one of them, when I was happy, when I was at peace. It was so many dark winters ago, cold winters, agonizing months spent staring at the wall and not believing that it could actually come down. Glimpses of the world beyond had fluttered towards me, like brief flashes of light between the granite cracks, carrying with them the dazzling glitter of a life I could never live, could never taste, could never have, even when I utterly deserved it.

No, I couldn’t let myself fixate on this past. This was my moment, a time of reckoning. This was my precious gift to myself. I had planned for it, dreamed of it, and yet I quivered like a pathetic little foal upon the eve of it, surrounded by the scents that used to be mine, wishing I could be there and a thousand miles away all at once.

An hour passed. The light of the day dwindled beyond the windows. I started to breathe heavily, pierced by a horrible fear. *What if I had picked the one Friday in the entire year when they actually wouldn’t appear?* I tried to tell myself that such a possibility was absurd. We always went to Sugarcube Corner on Fridays. We always—

The bell jingled.

I looked up at the doorway. My heart did somersaults. The first thing I saw was a brown, broad-rimmed hat. I felt my eyes moistening, then positively twitching as soon as her beautifully rural drawl bellowed across the room.

“Yeeeha! I’m famished! I’m not sure what I should do first: wet my whistle or get some pie down my belly!” Her limbs were well-toned, full of thick muscles from years of undoubtedly doing the same strenuous activity day after day with absolute faith. Her mane was short, reduced to a patch of gray and blonde threads. *Blessed Celestia, why did*

*she cut it?* It was amazing; *she* was amazing. “Reckon y’all wanna place your orders before me? Seems only proper, what with the tedious work y’all have been doing...”

“And like you haven’t been sweating up a storm?!” Twilight Sparkle trotted in after Applejack. Her mane wasn’t long; as a matter of fact, it had been styled into several gorgeous curls, which was the confirmation I needed to see that she had finally met a stallion. *Oh thank heavens.* “Performing a census on local wildlife isn’t nearly as tiring as bucking apple trees, AJ. This week’s been a veritable walk in the park!”

“I would enjoy walking in the park,” said the gentlest of voices, and I simply wanted to die. She was as beautiful as ever. None of the blemishes of age that adorned Applejack’s and Twilight’s smiling faces could be seen on hers. The mare’s hair was shorter, but that was hardly a crime. The same silken sheen glistened in the lamplight as Fluttershy stood beside her two friends and said, “It’s been a long time since we had a picnic.” Her voice was soft, but there was so much confidence in it. I was so proud, I wanted to sob. I settled for biting my tongue and hiding within the shadows of my cloak. “Oh, I have an idea!” Fluttershy continued, out of my sight. “Once the census is done, Twilight, what say we all plan to spend a day in the country?”

“Uh... I-I promised Caramel that we’d celebrate our honeymoon early this year,” Twilight said, blushing as adorably as ever. “He knows more than anypony how carried away I can get with projects for Princess Celestia. I don’t want to disappoint him again this year.”

“That’s okay. We can plan for later this month before winter hits,” Fluttershy said.

“Like hay we will!” Applejack took her hat off and fanned herself. “Lemme have a word with ‘Mel! I’ll set his apples straight!”

“Oh come on, AJ, please...”

“I mean it! Romancin’ is great and all, but some things come first! ‘Mares before marriage!’ That’s always been my motto!”

“We all know that, Applejack,” Twilight said.

“Hmmm...” Fluttershy bravely added, “I think Mayor Ace knows it too.”

“Fluttershy!” Applejack gasped, nearly dropping her hat.

Twilight and Fluttershy giggled at Applejack’s expense.

Applejack slapped her hat back on, blushing furiously, though she did her futile best to hide it. “Y’all know not to bring him up! I have enough trouble trotting into town these days as it is!”

“Yes!” Twilight managed between cackling bits. “I’m sure the Mayor has enough too!”

“Ohhhh... You fillies are impossible!”

“Somepony rang?” a raspy voice exclaimed, darting through the ringing door in a blue blur. My eyes lit up with color the very moment I glanced at her. I felt my heart flying the same loopy-loops that she always did.

“Rainbow!” Applejack exclaimed. “You made it! I thought you had a show this weekend!”

“Oh, I totally do.” Rainbow Dash nodded, folding her forelimbs as she hovered in the corner. Her short mane had a hairclip adorned with a winged logo. “But I figured I’d drop on by anyways.”

“But...” Twilight gulped. “Don’t you have to be with the rest of the team in Los Pegasus tomorrow night?”

“Hey! I’ll manage!” She shrugged and smirked as devilishly as my mind’s eye had always recreated. “Besides, it’s worth it to congratulate the mare of the hour!” She opened the door ajar and whistled shrilly. “Hey! Get in here, you two! Stop dragging your tails!”

“Oh please, Rainbow. When will you ever stop being so positively boorish?!” And then she trotted in, and my blood went cold. The eatery lit up from her pale coat, every corner but mine. “Ahem.” After tugging in numerous hovering shopping bags, she stood in place with an elegant smile and waved her hoof. “Hellllllo, everyponyyy!”

As if on cue, every other equine in the place clapped their hooves and waved back. After the excitement settled down, her sing-songy voice refilled the arena.

“Oh! What an afternoon it has been! Every shop I went into, the owner wanted to chat my ear off about one thing or another!” She rolled her blue eyes and mocked fainting. “Yesssss I’ll be there in person to host the fashion show in town hall! Yesssss I’ll be sure to make mention of your fabulous establishment, along with all the others I’ve committed to plugging. Good heavens! I should update my list! Now... where did I put it?” She cupped a hoof around her muzzle and called out the doorway, “Oh, Pinkiiiiie!”

“Nnngh... Just... One... Second... Rarity!” The bright earth pony limped her way into the eatery, balancing several heavy bags on her spine. She panted and panted until Applejack leaned in to relieve her of some of the weight. “Whew! I thought ‘shop until you drop’ was just a slogan! Please say this bag is full of ice water!”

“With all them samples you’ve been takin’ of your own goods throughout the years, I think you could use a lil’ bit of exercise!”

“I could use a little bit of an arctic blast right about now!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed through a sheen of sweat. “I think this is what it feels like to go jogging through a dragon’s stomach!”

Suddenly, Pumpkin was trotting over and hoofing Pinkie a glass of water. “Here you go, Auntie Pinkie!”

“Thanky thanky!” Pinkie took the ice cold glass and guzzled it in one gulp. “Ahhhh. Water’s so nifty! I think that’s why ponies are so full of it! What do you think?”

“Please, Pinkie, don’t dramatize,” Rarity said with a flutter of her eyelashes. “We only spent two hours shopping, if even that!” Her coat was perfect. Her mane, albeit slightly frayed on the edges, still had a remarkable purple shine to it. Still, after so many years, she had a great deal more beauty than the rest of her companions. No pony knew it more than her, and it showed. “Besides, you volunteered. It’s not like I didn’t warn you.”

Applejack squinted curiously at the various bags of tightly wrapped items. “Just what were y’all so itchin’ to purchase anyways?”

“Mmmmm... Wouldn’t you like to know?” Rarity cooed.

“Rarity...” Twilight Sparkle smirked with thin eyes. “What are you up to this time?”

“Oh, nothing, darling.” Rarity suppressed an airy laugh, then said, “Merely a token of my appreciation for you fine ladies helping me with the upcoming fashion show. I seriously couldn’t shine without all of your selfless contributions.”

“Oh Rarity,” Fluttershy walked over and nuzzled her dearly. “You shine enough on your own. You needn’t thank us for what’s only your innate talent.”

“On the contrary, dear!” Rarity exclaimed, bright eyed and flabbergasted. “You are the light of my life! How could I be possibly be brilliant without each and every one of you?”



She smirked and tilted her gaze up at Rainbow Dash. “Though it would help if some of you were actually on time for once.”

“Hey!” Rainbow frowned and folded her arms as the mares around her chuckled. “Excuse me, *Lady Rarity!* Some of us gotta travel around the continent for a living! Besides, I don’t see why you’re complaining! I got you the stupid Griffon silks from the east coast just like you asked, didn’t I?”

“But of course...” Rarity waved an elegant hoof, smiling towards the floor. “I tease, Rainbow, I tease. I’m awfully glad you made it here, despite your busy schedule. It’s very generous of you.”

“Yeah, well, it takes a lot to come all the way down here just to sit and chat at Sugarcube Corner when instead I could be flying loops around Mount Everoats with the best of them!”

“Especially when they keep fixin’ you closer and closer in formation to Soarin’ at every show, huh?” Applejack added with a wink.

There were more chuckles. Rainbow Dash was blushing furiously. “Hey! Shuddup! Nnnngh...” She brushed her prismatic mane back behind her hairclip and growled, “Let’s just get this over with already.”

“Never before was a finer sentiment uttered!” Rarity turned towards the server. “Ahem. Pumpkin...”

“Yes, Lady Rarity?!”

“Please, little one, just ‘Rarity’ will do. I carry the title only when on stage before the Canterlot fashion scene.” She reached a forelimb out and hugged Fluttershy closely as she said, “I’m still basking in the success of my summer lineup, so I think it’s only fitting I pay for my fine friends here.”

“What?!” Fluttershy gazed at her with bright eyes. “Really, Rarity? Again?”

“But of course! I don’t see you as often as I used to! I may not be as busy as Rainbow Dash here, but that doesn’t mean I can’t show how happy I am to be with the most important ponies in my life!”

“That’s awfully nice of you, Rarity,” Twilight said. “After this week, it means so much to me to just relax and be given a fine treat.”

“Well, prepare to relax your hooves off!” Rarity gestured towards Pumpkin and said, “She’ll have four of your finest gourmet doughnuts: glazed—of course—and with a bowl of cherry jam to dip them in.”

“Sure thing!” Pumpkin said, scribbling a pen magically across a pad of paper.

“Rarity!” Twilight gasped, her eyes twinkling as she smiled. “After all these years, you still know how to read my mind!”

“That’s because there’s still a part of your brilliant head that refuses to grow up, darling.” Rarity chuckled. “Speaking of which, we should all know what Pinkie wants...”

“Mmmhmmm.” Pumpkin scribbled some more. “A Triple Fudge Sundae Surprise for Auntie Pinkie...”

“Oooh! Oooh!” Pinkie hopped repeatedly in place. “Extra sprinkles! Extra sprinkles, please!”

Rarity rolled her eyes and nodded at Pumpkin. “Better humor her or else we’ll be here all night.”

More chuckles filled the air.

Pumpkin smiled at the fashionista. “And what about you, La—... er, Rarity?”

“Oh dear...” Rarity tilted her head up, scratching her fair chin with a white hoof. “I do believe I haven’t anticipated that question so soon.”

“Always thinking about yourself last?” Fluttershy remarked.

“Please, don’t insult me.” Rarity’s friends laughed as she finally brightened and said, “Oh, I’ll have what all the fillies and colts are into these days. What’s the name of it? A ‘Vanilla Sunrise?’”

“Very good choice!” Pumpkin said with a nod, writing the order down. “What size glass?”

“Oh, good heavens! Small, of course! After all, I must stand upon the runway these days!”

Applejack chuckled and said, “I’ll have some cherry pie, please. No whipped cream.”

“Some yogurt would be nice,” Fluttershy added. “But not too much.”

“I hate flying on a full stomach,” Rainbow Dash said. “Do you still have energy drinks around here?”

“Minotaur Machine,” Pumpkin declared. “It’s new this week.”

“Heck! I’ll give it a shot! What’s the worst that could happen?”

“It’s been an absolute delight knowing you, Rainbow,” Rarity said, glancing across the eatery. “Oooh! An empty booth! Ahem...” She batted her eyelashes at Pumpkin. “Mind if we help ourselves? Hmmm?”

“Go right ahead,” Pumpkin said before trotting off towards the counter. “I’ll get Pound right on those orders.”

“We are ever so grateful,” Rarity said, hovering two bags along with her. “Uhm... Would you mind, Applejack?”

“I got the rest, sugarcube,” Applejack said, heaving the rest of the satchels on her shoulders. “Don’t you sweat yer pretty mane none. Lead the way.”

The group moved past me, chatting gaily. I watched them, my eyes straight and solid as I peered out from beneath my hood. None of them looked my way, not even Rainbow Dash from her lofty position. I forgot how energetic and lively these little get-togethers could be. The group bunched together within the echoes of their cheerful voices. The only thing that mattered was each other, and it was a pleasure to observe. I could only wish I had the will to smile at it.

“Hey, since you guys are using the bench, mind if I take one of the chairs from another table?” Rainbow Dash asked, still not having touched down. “I kinda want to stretch my legs, and it’s really cramped on your side of the table. And... well... you know how my hooves are—”

“Yes, Rainbow,” Twilight remarked, sliding into her seat as she rolled her eyes. “We all know how your hooves are.” She smiled as her friends chuckled. “There’s an empty chair right over there. Go ahead and grab it.”

“Cool! Thanks...”

“What’s inside the bags?!” Pinkie chanted. “What’s inside?! Huh? Huh?”

“Pinkie, you know very well what’s inside them,” Rarity chided while patting her friend’s pink shoulder. “You helped me buy them, remember?”

“Yeah! But I closed my eyes for the best parts!”

“Come on, Rarity!” Applejack leaned in as Rainbow Dash squatted in a chair beside her. “We’re all chompin’ at the bit to find out what you splurged on us this time!”

“Very well then!” Rarity magically lifted one bag and laid it on the table. “Ahem. Fluttershy’s first.”

“Awwwww...” Pinkie playfully pouted. “But she’s always first!”

“How very observant of you, Pinkie. If you looked after as many animals as she did, you might deserve immediate attention too.”

“Do Pumpkin and Pound count as animals?!”

“If I find a hair in my energy drink, then they just might,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Hehehehe,” Rarity giggled, then slid the bag over to Fluttershy. “Now go on, dear. Open it!”

“Rarity, you really didn’t have to...”

“Uh uh uh uh! We’ve been through this!”

“Fine...” Fluttershy sighed, brandishing a bashful smile as she dug her hooves into the bag. “But one of these days we’re all going to afford to give you half the things you bestow us.”

“Perish the thought!” Rarity leaned in, leaning a chin on her hoof, positively beaming. “Now open it!” She shuddered with a gleeful breath. “*Mmm!* Swiftly!”

Fluttershy gasped, pulling out several identical lengths of bright pink wool. “Oh! Rarity! These are lovely! They’re just the right size for—”

“Indeed!” Rarity’s smile cracked even further. “Cherish! Precious! Seraphim! Gabriel! Frolic! Honey—All your little bunny rabbits!”

“Awwwww...” Fluttershy leaned in and nuzzled the soft fabric as if they were newborns. “I just know they’re going to look absolutely adorable on them all!”

“Wow,” Rainbow Dash uttered. “That Angel sure was a pimp.”

Applejack hissed and smacked Rainbow in the shoulder.

“Ow!” the pegasus rubbed her side and frowned.

“Mind yer manners,” Applejack said, folding her forelimbs and looking at the group. She then smirked. “Besides, on the farm, we call it a ‘stud.’”

The mares around the table laughed.

“I’m sure your sister-in-law isn’t one to argue,” Twilight said, winking at Applejack.

“Oh for pete’s sake!” Applejack exclaimed as even more laughter enveloped her side of Sugarcube Corner. She nevertheless smirked and straightened her hat as Rarity slid a bag over to her.

“Cheer up, Applejack, and open your present next!”

“Reckon it better be a noose or I’ll never get any lick of peace ‘round here...”

“Heeheehee!”

“Heh heh heh...”

I watched as Applejack opened her bag of gifts, then Rainbow Dash, then Pinkie Pie and finally Twilight Sparkle. The group grew louder and louder as the festivities carried on. After every turn, the equine recipient leaned in to hug or nuzzle Rarity. I could see the fashionista’s expression growing warmer and warmer from each loving embrace. She was the center of attention, and the room positively shimmered around her.

To my right, I heard the undeniable clatter of a tray full of dessert dishes being placed upon the glass counter. My body went numb, jolting only when I heard Pound’s booming voice.

“Order’s ready, Pumpkin!”

“Got it! Thanks!” Pumpkin called from over her shoulder, attending to a group of patrons two tables away. I saw her hooves shuffling. In a matter of seconds, she’d be trotting over to lift the tray in her telekinesis and carrying it towards the six chatting mares.

Now was my opportunity. I felt my heart beating as if I stood on the precipice of a high, jutting cliff. Everything was about to collapse; it just needed the right shove. With an expert squint, I tilted my hooded head forward and aimed my horn towards the far side of the room. I targeted a table where a pair of sweethearts were seated, staring at each other and murmuring sweet nothings. With a burst of telekinesis flung stealthily across the room, I knocked their sundae off kilter. The thing fell to the floor, the glass container shattering loudly as ice cream and sugary froth soiled the tile. They gasped, staring wide-eyed at the mess, perplexed beyond belief.

Several other patrons were glancing at the scene, startled. Pumpkin, as dutiful as ever, marched over to the mess and knelt beside it. “Oh, don’t worry! It’s quite alright!” she remarked as cheerfully as she could, waving a hoof before the couple. “This sort of thing happens all the time. Heheh. Ahem.” She craned her neck towards the ceiling. “Pound! Cleanup beneath Table Twelve!”

“Be right there!” I counted the seconds, but hardly needed to. With a flap of his wings, Pound hovered over the counter, carrying a mop with one hoof and a bucket in the other. He joined his sister in the cleanup; everypony was watching them. No soul was looking towards the kitchen, towards the six mares’ orders, towards me.

By that time, I was standing up, looming above the glass counter. I gave the far end of Sugarcube Corner one last look, held my breath as if preparing to dive into a lake of ice, and pivoted gravely towards the plates of dessert. My eyes darted over the tray until I saw what I was looking for: a tiny glass of platinum ice cream.

### *Vanilla Sunrise.*

I reached a hoof deep into my cloak. My heart throbbed with each prolonged second it took to fiddle for my goal. My hoof brushed against the wine bottle, and that’s when the shivers began. I fought them bravely, reaching deeper, clasping the vial. I pulled the slender container out. Its emerald surface glistened in the lamplight, like her eyes, like a song fading away in my numb ears. With a pulse of magic, I twisted and tugged at the vial’s cap. I fumbled until I heard the pop of the lid coming loose. My nostrils flared; the air of the eatery tingled with a bitter scent. I heard Pumpkin’s and Pound’s hooves shuffling. The mares laughed: Pinkie Pie giggling and Rainbow Dash’s voice cracking.

The world outside was dark, and yet it paled to what was about to happen next. With the grace of silken lace, I tilted the green vial over, aiming its contents towards the froth of the Vanilla Sunrise.

And that's when the door bell jingled again, and I was serenaded by the sound of angels.

"Lady Rarity! Lady Rarity! You're back!"

I gasped. With a jerk, I clung the emerald vial close to my chest and spun around.

An orange pegasus held the front door open as three young foals scampered through the entrance. They made straightway for the party at the far end of the eatery, where Rarity was already sliding out of her bench to stand before them.

"Oh! Do be careful of the broken glass, you little dears—Ah!" She shrieked as she was tackled in a furious hug. "Ohhhh ho ho ho ho!" She rolled her eyes and chuckled merrily as she surrendered to their combined weight, falling to her haunches in an unladylike slump as she hugged and nuzzled the three young ponies in turn. "Well, looks like a few upstart rapsCALLIONS are quite joyful to see me!"

"We got your presents, Lady Rarity!" one foal, a filly, nuzzled her dearly and spoke, beaming, "Those roller skates were the best! I showed them off to all the other kids!"

"It wasn't nearly as awesome as that scooter you got me!" a colt added, his eyes bright. "You're the coolest unicorn ever!"

"Heh..." The pegasus trotted over to the group, smiling calmly. "I'm a big fan of that last choice, to be perfectly honest."

"Heya, pipsqueak," Rainbow Dash remarked, reaching up to ruffle the orange mare's violet mane. "Keepin' it real down in groundtown?"

"Ugh, don't rub it in," Scootaloo replied, rolling her eyes. "I heard about your latest show, Rainbow. Nice job with the Double Buccaneer Blitz. How'd Spitfire do with the followup act?"

"Well, she's not living up to her name these days, that's for sure."

"Awwww... You almost sound remorseful."

"Yeah, almost."

Scotaloo chuckled, then looked over at Rarity. “Need a hoof with them?”

“Erm... Actually...” Rarity sweated nervously, overwhelmed by the happy children.

“Sorry, Rarity,” Scotaloo said. “I couldn’t hold them back. We were walking back home after playing some hoofball in the park. As soon as they found out that you were back in town—well—I j-just couldn’t stop them!”

“Nothing to apologize for, dear.” Rarity finally stood up as Fluttershy reached over to usher the three foals off of her. “Ahem...” Rarity smoothed her coat hairs and straightened her mane before speaking with a smile, “There’s nothing I cherish more than keeping track of their progress.”

“Did you hear, Lady Rarity?” one colt exclaimed, leaning forward with a happy grin. “High Grass moved in with a family in upper Trottingham!”

“Oh? Did he?” Rarity bore a humored smile. “Why, the little dear! Trottingham! That’s a place of considerably high class! I wonder if he will finally learn how to use silverware properly?”

“Heeheehee!”

“And... A-and Fast Feather finally heard back from her mother!” the filly added with a bounce. “She’s feeling better! She should be out of the hospital any day now!”

“Yeah!” the third foal exclaimed, nodding. “Scoots says that they’ll be staying at an apartment right here in Ponyville!” He turned and looked up at their young chaperone. “Isn’t that right, Scoots?”

Scotaloo smiled and nodded towards Rarity. “That’s five children going to a good home in the last month alone. I’m telling you, Rarity, this idea of yours was the best thing to happen in Ponyville for decades.”

“Well, I would hope so!” Rarity chuckled, patting two of the children on their little heads. “That was the whole point of this endeavor, was it not? I mean, I would love to shower these little darlings with gifts until kingdom come, but—” She paused, squinting curiously at the third child. “My my my, why the sad face? Don’t be shy, darling. You can say anything to Lady Rarity!”

The filly’s head hung towards the floor. She gazed up eventually, her eyes dim and moist. “It’s just that... I-I’m so glad for ponies like High Grass and Fast Feather. I really am! It’s



really nifty that they found new homes. But I just... I just wonder when I will finally have m-my turn..."

Twilight Sparkle gave a sympathetic expression while Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie cooed softly.

"My little pony..." Rarity trotted over and knelt by the filly's side. She placed a hoof on her shoulder, staring at her deeply with twinkling eyes. "You must understand that such things take time. Just because you have to wait doesn't mean you're any less deserving of affection. You see; money, diamonds, and riches aren't enough to give you everything. Yes, they're providing you a splendid home for the time being. But to truly look after a pony, to raise a child as one's own: it takes courage, commitment, and—most of all—love. Otherwise, you could have been tossed into just any household without a second thought, like most institutions outside of Ponyville are apt to do. If I'm not mistaken, you've been through a bit of that unsavoriness before, am I correct?"

The filly sniffled and nodded her head limply.

"Well, I promise you that you won't endure such hardship ever again," Rarity said with a smile, caressing the filly's face. "My gift to you is simply this: a chance to find a household where you'll truly be happy, where the mother and father who take you in will be ready and willing to adopt you not just because they can, but because they deeply desire to. And it won't take nearly as long as you think, dear. It didn't take long for the likes of High Grass and Fast Feather, now did it?"

"Mmm... no..." the filly said, her tiny tail flicking as she managed a hopeful smile.

"Well, good things come to those who wait, darling. Just have faith in the future. I certainly have, and look where it got me!" She winked. "It's a great deal more spectacular than roller skates. Hmm? Wouldn't you agree?"

The filly giggled, stood up straight, and boldly imitated Rarity's eloquent voice: "Oh yes! Most fabulously so!"

The ponies nearby chuckled merrily. As Scootaloo tapped the foals' shoulders, urging them to head on home, they leaned in to give Rarity one last hug. She returned the gesture just as intimately, her cheeks warm from the joy flowing off of them.

I stared at all of this, breathless, still clinging the green vial of aromatic poison to my chest. I glanced towards my right, seeing a wall of the Sugarcube Corner adorned with framed newspaper articles. The sight had a haunting impact on me, but not for the

reasons I initially thought. There were the obligatory articles related to the Elements of Harmony, the defeat of Nightmare Moon, the banishment of Discord, and even the world-famous success of Rarity's Carousel Boutique.

But for every single one of these instances, there was a corresponding newspaper snippet that documented something else. I saw headlines detailing "*Famous Fashionista Opens Local Home to Equestrian Orphans*," "*Carousel Foundation Adds New Wing to Ponyville Hospital*," and even "*Fashion Philanthropist Dazzles Again: Volunteer Fundraiser Scores a Record-Breaking Eight Hundred Thousand Bits*."

I felt my breath quickening. A nervous twitch cascaded down my face, tightening in my jaw as I then saw a photograph of Rarity standing proudly in the middle of a bleacher full of four dozen happy foals. A teenage Scootaloo stood by the side of the picture, along with a trio of matronly mares. A series of words was plastered upon the bottom of the snapshot: "*Lady Rarity's Home for Orphan Foals, Opening Day, June 12th 1013*." The caption had a beautiful glitter to it, like the eloquent, silver font that embellished a deposit box lying on a hotel counter somewhere.

My nostrils flared. I could already sense the shivers leaving me, soft as a dissipating ghost, righteous as a second wall crumbling. I popped the cap back over the end of the green capsule; it sounded like a crackle of thunder to me and me alone.

"Oh, hello there!" Pound Cake remarked as he returned to that end of the eatery with his mop and bucket. "Are you being helped, ma'am? Is there anything we can get you?"

"No. No, thank you," I said softly, turning towards the exit. "I think I have all I need."

• • •

I traveled east under starlight. The blanket of night had long fallen over Ponyville, but I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even shut my eyes. I could only move, swiftly on quiet hooves, trotting between the chirps of lone crickets on either side of my path.

When a dark shape loomed like a black obelisk before me, I knew I had arrived at my destination. Squinting, I spotted the edges of equine statues glistening in the crescent moon's glow. After so many years, she had kept the exterior of the Boutique so beautifully polished. I was almost proud of her. Perhaps this was all more than mere vanity; perhaps she simply wished to beautify the town after all.

I stood before the door, its crystalline panels reflecting the brown shape of my cloak. I reached a hoof forward and toyed with the knob. The entrance was locked; it refused to

budge. With a deep breath, I tilted my head forward and relaxed my mind. My horn glowed, casting a pale glow over the bright features of the boutique's lavish exterior. Navigating the leylines of space immediately ahead of me, my magic drifted into the locking mechanism. The tumblers twitched and flexed, and soon the door gave way with a gentle click. I couldn't help but smile.

I trotted into the cylindrical abode, my nose assaulted by hundreds of familiar smells. A sigh escaped my lips, echoing against every wall that was blissfully intact. It was terribly dark inside the place, but that made very little difference to me. With great speed, I boldly pierced the depths of the place, confidently avoiding every wall and obstruction. My hooves made snow-light scuffles against the tile, and I tried to imagine the industrial hum of a sewing machine in their place. I passed a line of half-finished dresses, and I was thrown off-balance for the first time.

I flashed the gowns a look, squinting, attempting to ascertain the hidden genius inside the hems and stitches and lengths of ribbon. There was nothing that I understood, nothing that felt even remotely palatable to me. For the first time, I was not blinded by envy, and yet all I could taste beyond was a great miasmic cloud of perplexity. There was no denying that there was a creative intelligence to the fashion, but I just couldn't quite put my hoof on it.

Sighing, I gazed past the gowns and towards a moonlit stretch of floor in the far corner of the place. The far end of the room was empty; there wasn't even a tiny bed or pet dish. A sour lump formed in my throat, and I found myself rotating to face the opposite end of the boutique instead.

It was then that something unique shimmered before me in the gray starlight. It was the speaker of a record player, positioned high on a wooden shelf. Beneath it, several vinyl records rested in tight formation. Trotting over, I reached forward with glowing tendrils of magic and counted my way down the discs from left to right. On the seventh record, I stopped, then pulled the vinyl from its sleeve. I narrowed my eyes upon the label, then smiled warmly. It was just the title I had expected to see. Gently, I lowered the disc onto the spindle, turned the record on, and lowered the needle.

Not long after, the deep bass strings of a cello dripped deliciously through the boutique, tantalizing my ears, soothing my nerves. I closed my eyes and tilted my head up, drifting with the undulating rhythm, indulging in its melancholic beauty. The memories of the song lifted my heart, and the loneliness that stretched those recollections to ribbons squeezed a fresh stream of tears from my eyes.

I was so entrenched in the instrumental that I barely heard her hoofsteps until they came to a scraping stop at the open entrance to her dark-lit establishment. The sound of slumping gift bags pierced my ears, disrupting the rhythm, and then her gasping voice cannonballed inward.

“My stars! What is the meaning of this?!”

I heard her rushing towards the front counter. There was a fumbling noise, then the sound of a matchstick being struck. With a soft orange glow, a candle was lit, then carried into the heart of the boutique until its pulsating dance illuminated me.

“Hello?” Rarity’s voice exclaimed, carrying a bitter hiss of incredulity. “My dear, I dare not guess what you think you’re doing, but Ponyville has zero tolerance for trespassing! Who are you and why—?”

“There was always such a succulent sweetness to it,” I said, sniffing one last time as I regained the strength in my lungs.

She fidgeted, squinting confusedly in my direction. “Huh? Sweetness? What do you mean?”

“Octavia,” I said, gesturing towards the record as the luscious cello strings reached a fever pitch. “I always listened to it when I felt stressed. I wondered if you ever did the same. However, judging from the dust on the vinyl, I’m guessing that’s a negative.”

“Ma’am, I do apologize in advance for my temper, but this simply will not do! You have broken into private property and I must kindly ask you to—”

I turned towards her and, in one motion, lowered the cloak’s hood from my head. She froze in mid-speech, her mouth agape. The whiteness of her coat paled even more, and in her enlarged eyes I saw the reflection of what she trembled at, complete with its weathered white coat and graying facsimile of a wispy, purple mane. She nearly dropped the candle, but clutched it at the last second, as if fearing that somepony would rip her heart out the first second the light was snuffed. For a brief moment, her eyes glazed over. I thought they were tears—I even hoped so—but with a blink, the pearl blue irises reformed, and a limp sound accompanied her whimpering voice, like the distant shudder of dying cicadas.

“I knew...” She gulped and stammered, “All this time, I kn-knew that you would return. I knew that you would c-come back for m-me...”

“Did you?” I asked curtly, my tired eyes narrowing on her. “Did you truly?”

She stumbled back, one quivering hoof after another. In a numb slump, she fell to her haunches, cuddling the candle stick in the crook of her hooves. A hot drop of wax drifted down to her dainty coat, but both of us knew it wouldn't possibly burn her.

The lengths of the boutique bowed in her glossy eyes, like a phantom world drawing away from her beyond the looking glass. “After all these years, I had... I had feared the worse...”

I paced slowly about while the cello music serenaded her exquisite collapse. “You've accomplished an awful lot these past few years for a soul who's been so mortified,” I said. “Highlighting fashion shows, sponsoring charity events, being honored in person by Princess Celestia herself...”

She was drawing in shallow breaths at this point, planting a trembling hoof against her sweating forehead. Through gnashing teeth, she murmured, “I was s-so alone. Please, you h-have to understand...”

“I understand enough,” I said coldly, standing behind her, casting a dark shadow against her, the music, and the moonlight. “But I wouldn't mind allowing you the grace to humor me...”

She gulped. I heard a tiny buzz, like gossamer wings at the bottom of a steep well. Her voice dripped weakly out of her, lonesome and foalish and cornered. “When the hive was destroyed... When Chrysalis was—” She winced, shuddering all over with an unnatural twitch. “When our Queen was *slaughtered*, her glorious shell incinerated, there was no place for me to go. I was stuck here, lost, l-like a child in the middle of the wilderness...”

“Were the others ‘children’ too? Hmm?” I loomed above her, our bodies resonating with the crescendo of the mournful instrumental. “After all, they panicked and fled like true little foals. There are very few souls in Equestria who know the truth behind the disappearances of Cherry Jubilee, Fancy Pants, and Braeburn. There are even fewer who are willing to live with that truth. Tell me, after two long decades, what made you stay here?” I paced around until I was in front of her. My eyes narrowed below my gray bangs. “What made you so different, darling?”

She bit her lip. Her molars momentarily had pointed edges to them, but shrunk back to normal as she murmured, “I couldn't run away, not like them. I couldn't leave the post the Queen had assigned me to.”

“And why not? Were you scared?”

“Yes!” she shrieked, buckled, and shuddered. “And no...” she said limply.

I raised an eyebrow.

She looked up at me, her eyes soft and sad. In the warm kiss of candle-light, they almost looked real. Perhaps they were, for she intimately continued, “I was *selfish*.” She gulped and said, “I could have revealed myself. I could have told the truth. Maybe then everypony would have tried looking for you... and th-the others...”

I exhaled long and hard, my eyes falling towards the floor. “And yet, would it have made any difference?” I thought out loud, a thought that we both were having, though it took the stronger of us two to say it. “When the griffon air battalion invaded the hive clusters, they brought a ferocity and violence that their pony allies never stooped to. Every square inch of the grim landscape was carpet bombed. None of your brothers and sisters were spared, as most well know.” With a sigh, I trotted over towards the shelf and brushed my hoof against the records, clearing a swath of dust with meager passion. “What most *don't* know, however, was that every real pony replaced by your Queen's loyalest of subjects were also situated at ground zero.”

I turned. I glared at her. Even from several feet away, I could spot the burning blue reflection of my gaze in her eyes.

“I wonder if it ever kept you awake at night. I wonder if you ever thought what it must have been like...” I strolled icily towards her, accompanying each sentence with a frigid shuffle of my hooves. “To one day be with your friends, your loved ones, your family. To have sunlight and songbirds one moment, and then the next moment to awaken to flames and destruction. I saw first-hoof the end of a civilization that had stolen everything from me, and yet I was too overwhelmed with horror to relish in the agony of the beastly creatures who had brought me there to that hell. When a wall of the hive collapsed on me, searing my flesh, encasing me like a corpse within a tomb of dead, smoldering stone, I was too shocked to register the pain.” I came to a stop, leering above her once again. “Did you ever think of that? Did you ever think of the pain I've endured?”

She gazed up at me, and a tear ran down her pale cheek. “Every day...”

I simply stared at her.

She gulped and wiped her face with a hoof, gazing at the line of unfinished dresses. “I... I had been trained to mimic your personality, your gifts, your social graces and way of speak. But to capture your heart? To capture what made you so special and why so many ponies respected you?” She gulped hard and clenched her moist eyes shut. “When the hive was destroyed, every important part of me had dissolved. I could either face the world alone, or stay right where I was. I... I ch-chose the easy way, but not because of cowardice...”

“Then why?”

Her eyes opened, and she did something I did not expect. She smiled. “Because of the love,” she stammered. “Dear, delicious, entrancing love.” She looked up at me, sniffled, and said, “The ponies that surrounded me: they were so trusting, so supportive, so blissfully intimate. I know... I-I realized then as I know now that I had stolen your life from you, your one sacred place in this world. But then I started to think...” She paused, her breath gathering strongly this time as she courageously uttered, “How much more of a coward would I have been if I ran? If I abandoned the spot that had suddenly become destined to me?”

I stood before her, quiet and contemplative. The music had dwindled into the distance, softly dying, like my resolve.

“What... What if you had indeed perished?” She stood up, yet still trembled. “What if the griffons had truly finished you off along with the other ponies and the entire hive? Would nothing come back to Ponyville to fill my place? *Your* place?” Her eyes narrowed as her breath became firmer, more passionate. “What kind of a hole would that rip in lives of the friends you had made here? What kind of a loss would that be to your family? I hadn’t just been filling a post here in Ponyville, I had become the one pillar holding up a complete catastrophe from happening...”

Wincing, she tossed her head, avoiding my gaze as she faced the far wall of the place.

“I know! It sounds... It s-sounds like a pathetic excuse. And perhaps it is. After all...” She took a deep breath, shuddering. “I relished your friends’ love. I thrived off your sister’s adoration. I blossomed from your parents’ trust and respect. I grew stronger here than I ever could have on the run, much less with the hive still intact. And yet, as the years went by, and my strength grew...” She gnashed her teeth and whimpered, “So did the g-guilt! B-Because this was never my life! This was yours! I... I-I was given a gift that I didn’t deserve, and the one sole benefactor had been crushed beneath the bodies of all my long

lost siblings. I didn't have to live with it, and yet I did!" She finished the exclamation with a shriek as two more tears fell down her cheek.

I gazed at her glistening face in the candle-light. For once, I saw warmth in the room, and it wasn't where I thought it would be. Calmly, I looked her in the eye. "And your charities?" I murmured. "Your donations and your philanthropy?"

She sniffled and gave me a sideways glance. "Isn't it obvious? I had no idea if you were coming back or not. So I—"

"What?" I remarked, my eyes soft and neutral. "You felt guilty, you felt scared, and you felt responsible." With a deep breath, I smiled and said, "And yet, in two swift decades, you accomplished more feats of generosity than I ever could have been capable of doing."

She sniffed, her face wrenching in confusion as she looked innocently my way. "Wh-what? How... How could you—?"

"Is it really so strange to see?" I asked softly. With a gentle nod, I said, "I know it was hard for me to grasp. But now, everything is all clear." I trotted directly towards her.

She flinched away from me, her face grimacing in fear.

"Shhhh..." I raised a hoof and rested it on her shoulder. "Do you really think I came here to take back something that someone other than myself has so blissfully perfected?"

Squinting at me, she blinked and whispered, "Haven't you?"

"You think fate is that simple?" I remarked. "Would you feel any solace to know that I have a life now? And one that I'm rather proud of?"

She blinked, her eyes twitching. "But... But you were—"

"Rescued," I uttered with a straight face. "Salvaged. Dug out of the rubble like a diamond in the rough. Just days after the hellish siege upon the hive, an expedition of earth ponies had ventured into the ruins to examine the damage that the griffons had done. A handsome, kindly stallion was the first to find me. He brought me back to his home in Stalliongrad and single-hoofedly nursed me back to health. There, recovering from my wounds and coming to terms with both the life I was robbed of and the new existence I had been granted, I adjusted to the local culture. My stallion was there to help me every step of the way, and I adored him for it. We've since married. I now have everything I had ever once dreamed of: a priceless sweetheart and a beautiful home." I smiled softly



and added, “And I’ve foaled two gorgeous children—healthy sons—to follow in my hoofsteps. I have a happy life, and I would not trade it for anything, most definitely not for one that I haven’t rightly lived for the past twenty years.”

She gazed at me, her face warming and collapsing all at once. I saw the layers of many dark, dismal years peeling away, exposing her trembling soul to the warmth and sunshine that had belonged to her all along for the entirety of two paranoid decades. I was certain every inch of her wanted to hug me, to embrace me and sob with relief, but she was clearly too afraid to do so still.

“All these years,” she exclaimed breathily, like a mare who had just given birth and was cradling a newborn life for the first time. “If I had known...” She sniffled and planted a hoof over her trembling lips. “If...if I had only been given a single clue about this before...”

“It couldn’t have been helped,” I said. “These long decades, I’ve thought of you. I’ve thought of what you may have been doing, of what fallacies and pretense you may have been assailing upon my loved ones. Were you fulfilling their dreams, or insulting their intelligence? The more I dwelled upon it, the more the thoughts festered and churned inside of me, until it threatened to destroy my new life, until it threatened my very family.” I took a deep breath. “And so, with ample courage, I buried those qualms until I could afford to silence them, until I could afford to learn more and decide what to do about my past self, and about the double of mine that had so easily filled her slot.” I gazed off into the shadows. “And then the one barrier between us fell...”

She murmured, “Stalliongrad’s wall...”

I nodded. “And finally, I could come here. I could give my new family a brief leave of absence, and see what had become of my *old* family”—I looked at her once again—“and find out for sure if I could leave them in the capable hooves of a soul as generous as I, if not more so.”

She blinked at me, her mouth agape. “I... I...”

“Can I?” I breathed sharply, gazing at her with deep intent. “Can I trust my sister, my friends, and my very own name in your charge?”

She looked at me, and for the first time she saw a twinkle in my jaded eyes, a sparkling radiance that she had always effortlessly imitated, but never quite understood, not until now. “But...” she practically whimpered. “But it would all still be a lie!”

“But it will be a beautiful lie,” I said, smiling softly. “A fantastic artpiece, like a gorgeous gown made to dress up a model who knows her place within the spotlight.” I squeezed her shoulder lovingly as I explained, “We are, after all, artists of the trade, actresses in our own right. The ability to give and to take is what defines us, and what verily defines those around us. What a pity it would be if my selfishness got in the way, taking something you have fermented into sweetness and transforming it into something horrid and bitter instead. And for what? To defend the nebulous concept of a divine truth? My husband and children deserve more. My old friends deserve more. And you? I think, after twenty long years, you’ve righteously earned a lot more than you give yourself credit for, darling.”

She looked at me, and at last her smile was warmer and brighter than the candle-light. I had no doubt that if I could touch the tears coming out of her eyes, they would have been searing to the skin, as all true flames of conviction are. “There has never, ever been a greater gift than what you’re bestowing upon me now...”

“No,” I said, looking deeply in her eyes. “The greatest gift is what you’re giving to my friends.” I swallowed and managed a fragile smile. “Keep them happy. Keep them secure. Help them attain their dreams, and allow them to revel in the new memories they have yet to live out, much like the plethora of happy thoughts you’ve already donated them all these years.” I paused, then added in a merciful breath, “And look after my sister, so that her days are spent as blissfully as yours and mine can now be enjoyed.”

She nodded, sniffing as she murmured, “I will.” She patted my forelimb. “You have my promise.”

“Now there’s a good lady,” I said.

A few dry chuckles were exchanged between us, and we both became aware of the dull hiss emanating from the nearby speaker as the record skipped at the end of its play through.

“All these years, I never gave it a thorough listen,” she said, her face long and contemplative.

“Why not, pray tell?”

She shrugged limply. “It was never truly mine,” she said. “But, now that I’ve heard it...” She smiled faintly. “I must say you’re right; it really is quite sweet.”

I looked at her. “You should go forth and find your own music,” I said. “Find your own cheer, as you have brought so much new and creative felicity to Ponyville.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” she said.

“I’m quite certain that it will come to you naturally, my dear.”

She gazed at me upon hearing that. With a blink, she glanced once more at the record. She scurried over, gently removed the disc from the spindle, and slid the vinyl into its sleeve. Trotting back, she hoofed it towards me. “Here. You should have it. Take a piece of your old home to your new home.”

“Hmmm...” I smiled, my wrinkled features reflecting brightly in her eyes. “How swift you are to perform benevolence. I suspect that you truly are addicted.”

“I’ve learned from the best,” she said.

“And yet you have surpassed it.” I magically took the record and floated it towards me. “Who knows? Maybe my husband will have acquired a taste for cello playing by the time I return.”

She smiled, nodding gently as the tears rediscovered themselves in her eyes. With a gentle swoop, like a falling star, she flew into me and gave me a dear, dear embrace. “I shall never forget what y-you’ve done, wh-what you’ve given me today...”

I reached over and patted her softly on the back. “See that you don’t,” I murmured into the moonlight.

• • •

On a sidewalk of Ponyville, in the gentle glow of autumn morning, Rarity strolled down a line of stores with Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle trotting alongside her.

“And so I said, ‘Darling, if you truly wish to look beautiful, you must learn to respect yourself above all others!’” The alabaster unicorn batted her eyelashes and posed majestically in the glittering sunlight, brushing a hoof through her purple mane. “A model is no good unless she realizes how gorgeous she is inside.”

“Wow, that’s quite the pep talk, Rarity,” Twilight said.

“Did it work?” Fluttershy asked.

“Oh! Exquisitely!” Rarity winked as they began crossing the street. “She posed for what undeniably turned out to be the most fabulous photo shoot in the last five years! There are already at least a dozen agents clamoring to get her to sign a new contract with Canter Castle Records!”

“Canter Castle Records?” Twilight remarked, blinking wide. “You mean she’s a singer as well?”

“A most gifted one too! I do believe Equestria finally has its new Sapphire Shores!” She gave an airy laugh. “Why, she has both the poise and the pizzazz! It’s a winning combination! Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Still, Rarity...” Fluttershy smiled proudly. “She would never have gotten her big break if it wasn’t for you. I can say this from experience, after all. You know how to put ponies in the spotlight.”

“Yes, I do suppose I have... a talent... for... that...” Rarity’s gaze fell to the floor as she stopped in the middle of the street.

Fluttershy and Twilight froze in their tracks, giving the fashionista a double-take. “Rarity?” Twilight remarked, her face full of concern. “What’s wrong?”

Rarity’s face was pale. Gulping, she looked up and tried to put on a brave smile. She produced, at best, a quivering facsimile of one. “I... I was just thinking...”

“Yes?” Fluttershy leaned forward, breathless.

Rarity sniffled and ran a hoof across her face as several tears sprang free from her eyes. “How... How terribly lucky I am—and blessed—to have you as friends.” She choked momentarily and squeaked forth, “To be so loved...”

“Oh Rarity...” Twilight trotted over and held her close. “You deserve the absolute best.”

“Please, don’t cry,” Fluttershy said, nuzzling her gently from the other side. “We hate to see you so upset...”

“I do truly, *truly* love you,” Rarity whimpered, clinging to their embrace. “All of you,” she emphasized, shuddering between breaths. “I don’t th-think I tell you th-that enough...”

“You show us, Rarity,” Twilight said, getting teary-eyed herself. She smiled and caressed her friend. “You give us so, so very much.”

“Yes,” she nodded, her face melting even more. “But I c-can give you so much more.”

“Shhhh...” Fluttershy stroked her shoulder. “Just give us yourself, your friendship. That’s all we ever need.”

“I will...” Rarity said, smiling as she clenched her moist eyes shut and hung in their forelimbs. “I promise. I will... I *will*...”

Above the warm scene, leaning against a wooden railing, I watched from my hotel balcony. I gave the mares a lasting glance, preserving the memories like I always had for so many years. With a soft smile, I hoisted the hood of my cloak over my head, turned around, and trotted into my room. I packed my things, including a wine bottle and an old record. Strapping the saddlebag to myself, I exited the room and walked down the stairs to the lobby.

I gave the young filly at the counter my keys and turned to leave the treehouse, when something suddenly anchored me in place. Fidgeting, I ultimately turned around, pulled two bits out of my cloak’s pocket, and deposited them into the donation box bearing a fashionista’s hoofwriting. Then, with a singular purpose, I trotted out of the hotel, crossed the lengths of Ponyville, and caught the next train to Stalliongrad.

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Two days later, grungy streets greeted me with a cacophony of dirty noises. Dogs barked in the distance, their mangy octaves echoing off graffiti-stained walls flanking garbage-strewn alleyways. Two blocks down, one of several ghastly shrieks lifted into the gray air and was just as swiftly swallowed by chimney smoke before anypony could pretend to be concerned. A few distant thuds resonated over the grimy rooftops as yet another band of revolutionaries violently fought for a desolate courtyard of Stalliongrad with home-brewed explosives.

I reached my apartment building, stumbling over a passed-out stallion who clung to an empty bottle before the first floor entrance. The smell of excrement filled my nostrils as I sauntered down a dimly lit lobby. Through thin walls, I heard couples arguing, mares rhythmically yelping, and foals crying themselves softly to sleep. In a meditative pace, I marched slowly up three flights of creaking stairs, startling pigeons into flying through shattered window panes that loomed high above.

After an interminable journey, my tired hooves shuffled to a stop before my apartment door. Fumbling over four sets of locks, I finally opened the thing and stepped on through, nearly tripping over a pile of envelopes plastered with intimidating money figures. Slapping the door shut behind me, I stood alone in a narrow crevice of a one room home. Kitchen cabinets hung loosely off their hinges, stained with age-old signs of the tenants who had wasted away before passing on their hovel to this lonesome soul.

Squeezing my way towards the twin-sized bed, I unhooked the saddlebag from my body and disrobed the cloak from my bony features. I lit a candle, illuminating the scars on my forelimb where a lone survivor had single-hoofedly ripped herself free from the ruins of a bombed out hive decades ago. I raised the tiny flame with flimsy telekinesis, gazing limply at the tiny window above my bed. The light from outside had been dimmed long ago—not from the soot that had formed a curtain of grime along the translucent surface—but by the layers upon layers of multiple newspaper clippings that I had obsessively plastered over the glass. As I had every day of my life before my trip to Ponyville, I glanced over the headlines: such nuggets as *“It’s a Wonderful Boutique: Ponyville Fashionista Climbs the Charts to Superstardom,”* *“Rarity of Ponyville – The Most Fabulous Element of Them All,”* and *“Equestria’s New Shining Dress Sensation Comes From Humble Town.”*

With a soft breath, I lowered the candle onto the bedside table. I turned around and gently opened the saddlebag. With extreme care, I pulled the wine bottle out. I smiled pleasantly at it, happy that it hadn’t broken during the train ride back. After all, I had no more bits left to buy anything else quite like it.

Placing the container onto the table, I next pulled out the record. Gazing longingly at the label, I opened a nearby cabinet on the other side of the claustrophobic room, exposing a record player. I placed the disc on the spindle and lowered the needle. I had to give the wooden body of the device a few heavy swats before it agreed to work. After a slow, distorted start, the splendid sound of cello music filled the room, almost drowning out the muffled and disgruntled conversations of the next door tenants. As Octavia’s talent washed over me, I emptied the last of my saddlebag’s contents before making one last trip to the kitchen drawers.

I returned to the bed with a large, round container. It was a grimy, considerably chipped thing, hardly resembling a true wine glass, but it would have to do. Uncorking the bottle of Faustian Red, I poured a generous amount of the crimson substance into my cup, swirling it until a bitter scent lit the air. I then settled back onto the mattress with a prolonged sigh.

Gently, I rotated the glass around in my hoof, allowing the wine to breathe. I thought of Ponyville, I thought of Twilight and my friends, and then I thought of Sweetie Belle. Her green eyes were still so innocent, so full of life. I only got a chance to see her children for an instant, and yet I had easily fallen in love with them, as I had with everything. It was a happy enough thought, I suppose, and so I took my first sip.

Then, as the instrumental lulled my twitching ears, I thoroughly indulged in the glass, finishing it with a few luscious gulps. I savored each drop of the vintage grape, feeling my senses spring alive, like diamonds glittering in the rough. Sometime when the crescendo reached its peak, I exhaled, pondering about zebras and golden thatched rooftops and beautiful dresses. I really had no choice but to smile.

“Hmmm...” I murmured between the strings, cradling the empty glass to my chest. “It truly is so very sweet.” With a wave of magic, I levitated the glass and lowered it onto the bedside table beside an uncapped emerald vial.

As the first layer of darkness drifted over me, snuffing the lonesome candle out before my eyes, I inhaled the great black enormity beyond. It embraced me like a peaceful ocean, a quiet sleep, the greatest gift.