

After a quick teleportation and some warm goodbyes from Twilight and Spike, it didn't take long for Canvas Clawston to begin his solo journey as assigned by the Cutie Map. Just as the Princess promised, a train heading for Baltimore was already waiting when they arrived at the Canterlot station. Canvas wasn't sure what to expect when he boarded the train with nothing but his ticket in hoof and his art bag hanging over his shoulder; but much to his surprise, Twilight Sparkle managed to reserve him a first-class seat in one of the front passenger cars. He was a little worried about accepting such luxury, but he knew it was to help keep him in high spirits.

“Hmmm...” Canvas was comfortably seated by one of the windows, allowing him to look out at the beautiful landscape zooming past him at lightning speed. If this was just some conventional trip from one city to another, he would've likely pulled out one of his sketch pads to start drawing whatever caught his interest. But since he was on an important mission assigned by the Ruler of Equestria herself, Canvas decided to pull out something else from his art bag: a small stack of photographs he kept for inspiration.

The first photo was the one from his wedding, with himself and Troy standing at the altar with elated smiles in their matching suits. As the stallion and gryphon smiled for the camera, Princess Twilight Sparkle was posed right between them with a wing over each of their backs. Even though several years had passed since then, it was still jarring to think that Twilight herself gave her first wedding officiation for Troy and Canvas. The stallion stared at the photograph for a long moment, and sighed to himself in bliss.

Canvas flipped to the next photograph in his stack, and his smile trembled a bit upon seeing the first photograph of himself with the Clawston family's newest edition. Shortly after Troy and Canvas' wedding, the two managed to return to the Gryphon Kingdom in time for the birth of Angela's sixth child, which was also her very first daughter. The baby hatchling was born as healthy as could be, and was resting peacefully in Angela Clawston's arms in the photo. As the older gryphoness laid in her bed for some much-needed rest, Canvas could be seen beside his husband as the two posed with teary-eyed smiles next to their mother.

Canvas sighed before leaning his head back with his eyes closed. It had been a couple months since he and Troy were last able to see their sister Breeze, who was still living with her parents in the Gryphon Kingdom. The last time she was able to visit Troy and Canvas in Manehattan, the little gryphon was as precocious as could be behind her big blue eyes, her snow-white feathers reminiscent of her mother's. Canvas knew that the Clawstons had plans to enroll her in the School of Friendship in a couple years, since she wasn't old enough to attend just yet. But until that day, Canvas could only count the days before he could see her again.

Canvas waited to reopen his eyes after he moved that photo to the back of the stack. This allowed him to look at another photo that was slightly less wistful, but one of a similarly significant day for Troy and Canvas. The photograph had the two posing with extremely wide and prideful smiles, standing in front of the metal gates of what looked to be a large storage building. The two-story abode was formerly a pottery manufacturing plant when it was first built a century prior in Manehattan. By the time Canvas and Troy were able to purchase the property

to serve as their secondary home, however, it had been left abandoned for years under police custody. Canvas couldn't help but shake his head in astonishment over how they were able to find a place that nice for such a discounted price. Sure, the couple had to spend a significant amount of bits to repair the place and make it a livable home, but by the time the two were finally finished, it proved to be just as unique and comfortable as their modest farmhouse in Ponyville.

Canvas then flipped to another photo, which actually made him giggle out loud. The picture was taken at one of the many stunning vantage points at Mount Aris, where he and Troy vacationed several months prior. The silver gryphon was smiling confidently while holding the camera in one claw, and pulling his husband in close with the other. The stallion was bent in to give a sweet kiss to Troy's cheek, and in an act that his brothers-in-law all described as an "Epic Photobomb," their dog Tenor had leaned into the shot to look at the camera with his muzzle open wide, his tongue sticking out sloppily with visible drool trickling from his mouth.

"Daaawww!~"

Canvas flinched upon hearing that sudden coo from a mare beside him. When he looked up from his seat, he was greeted by the sight of a train attendant with a bubbly smile underneath a poofy blue mane. The purple mare was wearing a standard attendant outfit that matched her colors, and she pointed at the photograph Canvas was holding in his hooves. "That is *such* a cute picture!" she said cheerfully. "What's the dog's name?"

“Oh, his name is Tenor,” said Canvas, quick to smile back in response. “He’s a Saint Bernard that Troy and I got years ago. He’s a big boy, but he still thinks he’s a lap-dog.”

The attendant giggled with a hoof over her mouth. “Yeah, I’ve met dogs like that before. My sister’s roommate had a rottweiler who acted the same way. His name was Hooter.”

Canvas may have still been smiling, but his head tilted in confusion as he raised a brow. She quickly sighed and added, “She was an Ornithologist, and named him after a pet owl she used to have.”

“Oh! Okay, that makes sense.” He gave a small scoff as he shook his head in nostalgia. “Geeze, the only reason I even know about Ornithology is because of Troy.” He pointed to his husband in the photograph for clarification. “You know how sometimes you learn things about your partner *after* you get married, that you never would’ve expected to know? Well, in my case, it was when I found out that my husband had *Ornithophobia*.”

The attendant’s head reeled back and her eyes widened in surprise. “Wait, seriously?” she asked, before taking a closer look at Canvas’ photo to make sure he was referring to that specific gryphon. “But... But how could a gryphon be afraid of *birds*?”

“Well, not all birds,” noted Canvas in clarification. “Only *talking* birds, like parrots or cockatoos. He had a traumatic experience as a kid when he was attacked by a parrot, and ever since then he can’t even be in the same room as one. And yes, he’s already aware of the irony.”

Despite the mare’s surprise, her pause only lasted for a second before she tapped her chin in thought. “HmMMM... Well, I suppose it would make sense for a gryphon to be creeped out by them. I mean, if I was part avian, I’d likely see parrots in the same veil as ventriloquist dummies.”

“That’s exactly what *he* said!” said Canvas, looking up at her wide-eyed. After letting out a bewildered huff, the stallion smiled and added, “Still, I’m just glad that it wasn’t anything *too* shocking to learn after getting married, you know?”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that,” she said with a playful roll of her eyes. As she reached into the inner pocket of her blouse to give Canvas a menu for the snack car, she spoke with a smile. “I will say though, it really seems like you got yourself a great husband there.”

Canvas’ smile widened immensely at hearing such sincerity. Considering how much discrimination and heartache he faced in his teenaged years as a closeted stallion, it really meant a lot for him to hear such genuine praise for the love he was experiencing now. And as he looked back at the photo of Troy, Canvas let out a long and forlorn sigh while smiling optimistically.

“Yeah... he really is the perfect mate.”

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“I WANT A *DIVORCE!!!*”

Back in Manehattan, the silver gryphon was looking absolutely livid while standing at the head of a large table. Several ponies were seated across both sides of the table, and had their gaping muzzles covered with their hooves in shock. But among the horrified gasps and remorseful looks on their faces, it was a skinny brown stallion at the very end who tried to speak out. “W-Wait a minute!” he shouted frantically. “You... Y-You can’t actually *mean* that, can you?!”

“DO I LOOK LIKE I’M LYING!?!” roared Troy as he shot a venomous glare at the stallion who dared to speak up. “I have spent YEARS dealing with nothing but absolute CRAP!! And you know what?! I’M SICK OF IT!! *I WANT TO BE SINGLE AGAIN!!!*”

Another round of stunned gasps swept across the table, with a couple of ponies pushing their half-eaten plates forward from lost appetites. One of the mares had to hold both hooves over her face to keep from sobbing, though it did nothing to dampen Troy’s furious scowl. After several seconds passed, the gryphon slumped back in his seat with a bitter groan, and tried to keep himself from snapping again as he clenched his beak tightly. “Ughhh... I swear... Sometimes I wish I never even got married to her...”

He then leaned forward to rest an elbow on the table, and perched his chin atop his raised claw for leverage. Meanwhile, across the crowded and silent dinner table, all that Troy and the others could see was a black void starting at the edge of the stage. The audience chamber was visibly empty, save for the front row where several ponies were watching studiously and jotting down notes on their clipboards. And in the middle of the tightly-packed group, a burly stallion with a thinning mane and thick glasses pulled out a large megaphone to yell out, **“CUT!!! Minty Fresh, you had a line there!”**

“GAH!” The green mare who had been ‘crying’ earlier instantly broke character, and winced in annoyance. “*Dammit,*” she muttered to herself, shaking her head disappointedly. She quickly wiped the tears off her cheeks with a hoof, and glanced over at the gryphon apologetically. “I’m really sorry, Troy.”

“Hey, it’s totally fine,” he assured her with both claws raised and a smile on his beak. “Trust me, I’ve had a few blank-out moments like that myself. Just be glad it happened *here* and not during the actual show.”

Minty blushed with a thankful smile, and nodded at Troy graciously while the other actors all chuckled to themselves. As soon as the director stopped their scene, everypony at the table went right back to acting normal on the stage. Since they were all sitting in chairs, everypony felt comfortable and the mood became fairly calm. But alas, Troy breathed out heavily as he looked up at the stage lights high above. “Geeze, do those have to be so hot?” He then used a

handkerchief in his pocket to carefully dab his forehead of any excess moisture. “I swear, I’m sweating more than a *hoofball player* in this thing.”

Such response received several affirming nods from the other actors, who were all struggling to keep cool in their thick vintage clothing. Troy may have been raised in warmer climates, but even he was growing hot underneath his black woolen jacket. Fortunately for them, they overheard the director shout once more “*Alright, let’s take a fifteen minute break for now, guys. We just got some fresh ice at the refreshment table, but be careful to **not** smudge your makeup!*”

Half the cast barely heard the director’s warning as they instantly rushed out of their chairs. The group of overheated ponies were quick to trot backstage, with several of the unicorns in the group helping to pull off each other’s costumes with their magic. Troy was the last to exit the main stage, but was fortunate to feel his jacket being undone with the help of Minty Fresh’s aura. As soon as he slipped past the curtains, the gryphon sighed in relief when he felt the cooler air against his damp feathers. “Aaaahhh...”

Troy’s face lit up when he saw a bottle of root beer floating in a green aura in front of him. Minty Fresh was holding a bottle of her own, and waited for Troy to take his own before they tapped the caps in solidarity. Troy used a swipe of his talons to quickly uncap both of them without issue, and was the first to take a hearty swig. “Mmmnnnnghhh...” Troy sighed out even deeper, and nodded appreciatively to the mare still chugging her own. “Thanks, Minty! I swear, I nearly tried to drink that *fake* glass of water on the table a couple times during rehearsals.”

“Same here,” said Minty with a shrug, taking a couple breaths to keep from belching. She was still smiling up at the gryphon, but her apprehension was still visible behind the thick locks of her white mane trailing down her face. “Ugh... I still can’t believe I flubbed that line, though. That was like, one of *three* lines I had in that scene!”

“Hey, it’s okay!” Troy was quick to try and console her despite his own fatigue. “Believe me, I felt just as worried about myself when I was performing *my* first stage show. And I was the friggin’ lead!”

Minty giggled with a nod while covering her mouth with a hoof, and then shrugged in understanding. “Yeah, I suppose you have a point there. Like, I’m still really flustered about finally getting a Bridleway role, but it means a lot to hear you say that.”

“Hey, I know how it feels to be put under pressure. I mean...” Thinking it over, Troy had to scoff with a shake of his head as he reflected on his first Bridleway role. “... Man, it’s still nuts to think my first role ended up being the first gryphon to perform *Hinny of the Hills*. I swear, I was worried I was going to start molting from all the stress I was under.”

“Yeah, but that performance was *fantastic!*” Minty Fresh huffed with a skewed muzzle.

“Seriously, I remember seeing one of your shows when I was still in high school, and I was

totally floored by your singing! Like, I'm still kinda mad that you didn't get nominated for a Poni Award as 'Best New Performer'."

The mare's praise was starting to get to Troy. He looked away from her with a sheepish smile. His feathers began to ruffle out in embarrassment, and he blushed heavily underneath; but he felt compelled to say humbly, "W-Well, uhhh... Yeah, my parents were just as upset about that as you were. Heh heh heh..."

Despite the gryphon's attempt to downplay his stage success, it was hard for him to deny how lucky he felt to achieve such a high reputation so quickly. The weeks spent in rehearsals and choreography for *Hinny of the Hills* may have been absolutely ruthless, but the moment he heard the audience's thunderous applause at the end of his first show was nothing short of gratifying. Not to mention, since Troy had spent most of that time away from his husband -- who was busy painting that portrait for Shining Armor and Princess Cadance up in the Crystal Empire -- being able to reunite with Canvas after his performance was just as rewarding as the pay he received for his hard work.

"Troius Clawston?" shouted an unfamiliar voice from nearby, prompting Troy and Minty to glance over towards the source. For all the chatter and banging equipment backstage, the mood quickly turned silent when the cast and crew saw who was at the entry doors. Three Royal Guards in full armor walked in, with the unicorn in front holding an envelope in his aura. As Minty and the others all watched in stunned silence, the Guards went up to Troy and handed him

the letter. “This is an urgent telegram issued by Princess Twilight Sparkle, which she insists on you reading in private.”

The gryphon was left wide-eyed, and he instantly snatched the note before running off. All of the other cast members started to look at one another while muttering in hushed voices, many of them worried about what the ‘urgency’ in that telegram could possibly mean. The three Guards stood in wait as they looked over at the doors of a nearby dressing room, where Troy scurried off to read the telegram privately. After only a minute of awkward silence, even the director out in the auditorium could hear the bellowing shout of Troius Clawston’s voice:

“CANVAS WAS SUMMONED BY THE CUTIE MAP!?!”

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Much like Princess Twilight Sparkle had promised back in Canterlot, Canvas’ train arrived in Baltimore just around noon. Because of that, the train station was absolutely packed with ponies by the time the artist hopped off the train. His art bag was closely nestled to his side as he tried to maneuver himself through the crowds; and since this was the first time that Canvas had visited Baltimore in years, his lack of knowledge about the city was leaving him feeling overwhelmed already. Regardless, by the time he was able to venture down a large hallway towards a less dense portion of the station, the stallion could only sigh to himself and mutter, “Man, I’m *soooo* glad I decided to leave Tenor with Fluttershy...”

Since he only had his art bag to worry about, Canvas was able to walk around the station freely while scanning the area. He highly doubted that his friendship mission was going to start here, but he wasn't one to be dismissive when the details of his quest remained so vague. All that he knew from Twilight was that he was destined to head to Baltimore for... *something*. No specific names. No address. No familiarity with the city itself. And worst of all, not a single clue pertaining where to actually *go*.

Canvas let out an exasperated breath as he rounded another corner, and found himself near one of the station's main exits. From the massive windows that covered the wall from floor to ceiling, Canvas paused his steps as he stared out at the giant city waiting before him. Due to how many buildings and houses he could see, his muzzle clenched tightly along with a feeling of overwhelming dread. Nevertheless, the stallion tried to quell his worries as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay, okay..." Canvas tried whispering to himself in order to organize his thoughts. *"So... you're an artist in Baltimore who has to help somepony with a friendship problem. Or, someone, if they're not a pony... Hmmm..."*

A few ponies walked past Canvas while he stood by himself, but none of them tried to approach him and interrupt his thoughts. Meanwhile, the stallion continued to mutter to himself as he tried

to think logically. “*Let’s see... if I was meant to find a specific place in Baltimore to go, where would I try to look?*”

Canvas remained in the station as he looked around with narrowed eyes, hoping to find something that could catch his attention and give him a starting point for his quest.

Unfortunately, despite how large the main station may have looked, all he could see were dozens of ponies trotting to and from the trains. At the opposite end of the station, Canvas could see automated ticket dispensers. Beside the row of futuristic-looking machines was a small window with a sign above that read ‘**Information**’; unfortunately, Canvas could also see a sheet of paper taped over the window with the words “*Out until 3pm.*”

“Pbbt~” With a sharp whinny, Canvas sighed hoarsely before deciding to walk up towards it anyway. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt to at least *check...*”

As he walked across the spacious entryway, Canvas tried to keep note of his surroundings while countless ponies trotted past him. However, it was hard to really discern much when the concrete floors were impeccably clean, and the loudspeakers hanging by the ceiling weren’t announcing any additional information. By the time he got up to the Information counter, Canvas groaned once more when he saw nothing but an empty chair through the little window. After rolling his eyes, he turned himself around to head back to the exit. “Well, *that* was a waste of...”

The stallion froze in place, and his eyes widened when he caught sight of something unexpected. From the point he was previously at, he had assumed that the Information counter was at the *corner* of the entryway; but much to his surprise, there was actually a small hallway that led to some public restrooms. And hanging on one of the walls of that hallway, a massive bulletin board was posted up and littered with posters and pamphlets. Above the corkboard was another sign, which was titled “*Upcoming Local Events.*”

“Oh, *perfect!*” Canvas’ face lit up, and he quickly ran up to the board. He knew that his discovery was barely a hunch at best, but it was still *something* to give him some kind of clue about his goals. After all, any information about what the city could provide was worth its weight in gold right now. “Alright, let’s see,” he said to no pony in particular while scanning the large board. “There has to be something worth noting...”

Canvas took his time while reading through the countless posters and fliers hung up on the board; unfortunately, despite how promising his find may have seemed, it didn’t take long for his muzzle to skew in disappointment. Most of the posters hung up were either for events that happened weeks ago, or were for venues that he had no interest in. For example, Canvas was sure that his talents weren’t needed at an *Elderly Clogging Lessons Class*. And to add to his frustration, it was growing difficult to actually read some of the posters when so many others were overlapping one another with tacks or sticky tape.

“Jeeze, how can anypony find an event through these?” Canvas leaned in closer to better scan some of the older fliers, regardless of any additional doubt. He even reached out with a hoof to lift up some of them, just in case something was hiding underneath. But alas, as the minutes passed with the station continuing like normal, Canvas was growing more upset the longer he spent fiddling through various worn-out posters. “*Ugh...* At least give me *something* meant for this weeke--*OH!*”

The moment those words escaped his muzzle, Canvas’ eyes widened when he saw today’s date posted on a bright pink poster. It was nestled underneath two older fliers, so the pony wasn’t too surprised to have missed it for so long. He lifted up one of the papers to see what was above the date, and Canvas’ face lit up excitedly upon seeing some key words printed across the eye-catching design:

Art! Expression! Competition! Entertainment! And More!

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” It may have only been the bottom descriptions of something he had no knowledge of, but Canvas’ attention was piqued the moment he saw the word ‘Art’ in such a bold font. Considering how cluttered the board already was, the artist decided to simply rip the poster from the display with a hard yank of his hoof. The paper came out effortlessly with only a tiny tear at the top, the title of the event proudly displayed right underneath:

10th Annual Baltimore *Tattoo Convention*

“... Uhhhhh...”

Canvas grew *especially* wide-eyed the moment he read that title, his muzzle remaining partially open in confoundment. A moment of confusion later, he read through the event’s details without saying a word. According to the flier, the convention was slated to have over one *hundred* artists in attendance, and was set to be a weekend event that began at noon that very day...

Canvas had no negative opinions about such a taboo craft, but he still needed a moment to process such a... *discovery*. As he stared out blankly in the middle of the station, all he could think to do was say to himself, “... Well... *That’s* definitely not what I expected...”