

NOTE:

The fic is also available on [FIMfiction](#), for those that prefer to read there.

(8) **This Platinum Crown**

Alone.

Rarity found herself alone in the Everfree castle courtyard.

Inspecting a deflated balloon with the tip of her hoof, the limp string coiled and leading to the leg of a discarded fold-out table, Rarity swore she could still smell the grease from hay fries. Nor was this the only bit of detritus seemingly left behind. Bits of wax paper and a dozen paper cups could be seen here and there; the only visible evidence that ponies had recently visited the remote castle ruin deep in the forbidden forest.

The old palace of the Princesses seemed none the worse for wear despite the fierce duel that had taken place within it. It was early morning, the sun only starting its ascent into the heavens. Trees rustled in the morning breeze. Birds roosted in rafters and tangled vines obscured ancient statuary. It was... convincingly real. Of course it *wasn't* real.

It *couldn't* be real.

Rarity waited. When she had faced Antimony, eye to eye, to show her that she wouldn't be intimidated or dismissed, she had expected something more engaging. What, exactly, she wasn't sure. The whole idea had come to Rarity as a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing. Being transported to a mountain castle like before would have been about right. It would not have been a surprise to end up somewhere surreal and dream-like or to have nightmare creatures rise up around her. Something. *Anything*. Antimony *had* to know that she *knew* this was a dream.

This *was* a dream. An illusion.

Rarity was sure of it.

As if to test things, she forcefully and magically plucked out a hair from her mane. It hurt, yes, but really that hardly proved anything. Antimony's illusions could simulate pain. Or cause pain. It was unclear which. Yet Antimony herself was absent and had been for what seemed like hours. Had it been hours? It was hard to think; hard to concentrate.

She waited.

The sun began to set before Rarity ventured into the forest, less out of desperation and more out of thirst. It was pitch black, well past midnight by the time she reached a river she knew had fresh, clean water. This was Steven's river. It was.

The water serpent wasn't there, but then from what little she knew he could easily have gone up or down stream. It didn't *prove* anything. Antimony could have seen the river

somewhere. It being just where Rarity knew it to be didn't prove anything. This - *none of this was real*. No pony would just abandon her in Everfree after the duel. Her friends and family would *never* just leave her there.

It was hard to find a place to sleep that night. Not that she was actually sleeping. This was all an illusion. Still, her body seemed to demand sleep just as it demanded water. Everfree was about the worst place in Equestria for any pony to try and spend the night. Rarity was already filthy and hurting from the duel. She tried hard not to think about how worse she would look after sleeping in a dirty lean-to in the forest. Then again: none of this was real. Thinking that, repeating that fact to herself, made the hardship easier to endure. She would be back to her fabulous self, back in the real world, in no time!

It was all just a bad dream. When you knew it was a bad dream, how bad could it be?

Ponyville.

Ponyville was empty.

It was definitely a dream. This was definitely an illusion. *A lie*.

There was no way - no way - that Ponyville would be evacuated or abandoned. On the long walk back from the castle, Rarity knew she had shamefully indulged in the occasional thought that perhaps her friends had left after the duel. Perhaps they had left her in Luna's care, or even in Antimony's. The cruel noblemare could have tricked them somehow - gotten them to leave assuming everything was fine. It actually seemed rather unlikely the Baroness, but then anything was possible.

Rarity regretted having those treacherous thoughts now. This *couldn't* be real.

Ponyville was so quiet with no pony around. There weren't even any animals. Fences and pens were left open giving the impression that everypony had, at some point, simply decided to pack up and leave. A few empty carts lay alongside the main road leading into town. Awnings and wind chimes rustled and provided a faint background melody. Once again, Rarity had to remind herself that it wasn't real.

Despite her conviction, however, she felt she had to investigate. Picking up her pace as she entered the town, she first headed for home: her Carousel Boutique. The door was locked, but she knew where she kept a spare key hidden in the nook of a tree's roots out back. It was only on retrieving the hidden key that Rarity hesitated.

No pony knew where she kept this key... except Sweetie Belle.

Antimony wouldn't have known. She *couldn't* have known!

This -

This couldn't be real, could it?

Opening the Boutique, finding it just as she remembered, Rarity ran to the back rooms. She kept all her supplies and all her designs in a state of organized chaos and apparent disarray. Though to unpracticed eyes the mess may have appeared, well, messy, in fact Rarity knew where everything was. It was organized in her own unique way. It was a little cluttered, perhaps, but it was her mess and she liked it as it was. Seeing it now, in this illusionary world, nearly bowled her over.

Everything. Everything was just where she knew it to be. First Steven's river, and then the key to her shop, and then the unique form of organization only she knew? It was impossible that Antimony would know about these things. It was impossible that she would have details of them. No pony, not even Sweetie Belle and her parents, could recreate things so exactly! This -

This -

This *was* a dream, *wasn't* it?

"Somepony... say something..."

Dazed, Rarity emerged from her shop. Only the empty town of Ponyville greeted her.

"Somepony...? Anypony! **Please!** Somepony please say something!"

Silence was the only response from Ponyville's lifeless streets and abandoned buildings. Growing increasingly desperate, Rarity ran pell-mell to Sugarcube Corner. Despite her earlier joke that it would resemble a candy coated arsenal after her experience in the duel, seeing it brought a stark injection of familiarity and relief. Built to resemble nothing as much as a giant gingerbread house it was one of the most distinctive of Ponyville's buildings, radiating fairy tale warmth and perpetually good cheer. There were few in Ponyville who didn't have one or two fond memories of time spent with friends at Sugarcube Corner.

The shop's doors swung open, and Rarity braced herself for an enthusiastic greeting. It took a few seconds to sink in that, despite the stocked shelves and displays, the town's famous sweet store was as deserted and empty as the rest of the village. There was no effusive smile worn by Pinkie Pie as she bounced over to greet her friend. Even checking in the kitchen yielded nothing.

Nothing!

Staggering away from the supposedly happy venue, her spirits rapidly falling, Rarity slowly made her way to the nearby library. She found the door locked, but a window open. Suspecting there was no pony around to object to her unorthodox entry, Rarity snuck in via the window on the ground level. Inside, rows of neatly sorted, stacked and lined books rested in shelves, on tables and podiums, and even a few on the floor. A pony could, from the main room, see up and into the second floor where Twilight slept. Daring to look for herself, Rarity found everything in place. Just like she remembered from the sleep-over. Even Spike's little bed was there, his purple and green blanket neatly folded.

But it was all empty - there was nothing here. No pony here!

Moving mechanically now, Rarity checked other homes and businesses. She knew it was futile: that the town really was empty. It was less a search for somepony and more an attempt to find something wrong with the illusion she knew she had to be trapped in. The town square; the town market; the bank; the cafes and shops and homes and apartments. All empty. All abandoned. Even the unthinkable... *even Sweet Apple Acres*. Empty.

A cruel, unbearable thought pried its way into her mind:

The town hadn't been abandoned. *She* had been abandoned.

There was only one place left to check. Taking some apples off a tree in what passed for the day's meal, Rarity took one of the newer roads outside town. All too soon she encountered the first of the decorative iron gates that framed the road to Blueblood's newly constructed summer retreat outside town. Oddly, bright and festive balloons were tied to the portcullis - a effervescent contrast to the otherwise somber and oppressive atmosphere.

The peaks of the roof's crow-stepped gables and the tips of elaborately carved brick chimneys emerged from the tree line. It was a view Rarity had not expected to see again, not until the Art Festival; not at least until her reunion with her Prince. She paused, slowed, then resumed her journey with renewed determination. This building, so slowly revealing itself from behind a curtain of trees - it was going to be her house one day. Hers to share with the stallion she loved. It being recreated in such perfect detail only reinforced that fact. It only bolstered her resolve.

Antimony had made her own mistake in her commitment to realism in this dream world.

As the last gateway passed overhead, Rarity finally saw the two iconic curved stairs that flanked the frontal facade of the manor house. Here, too, she could see more of the odd festive touches: more balloons and even streamers and tables, albeit empty ones. It was as if the house had been prepped for the Art Festival and then abandoned, just as the work was half done. Balloons in all colors drifted lazily from window panes and stone railings. Three even floated in the grasp of the statue-fountain out front, comically wrapped around the right hoof of Lady Victory, just beneath the mythological scroll representing wisdom.

Just like Ponyville, the manor seemed empty - but some gut feeling, some instinct, pushed Rarity onward. This building, she suspected, was not like Ponyville. It was not like Canterlot, which she could see in the distance, recreated in all its glory. This one building would not be empty.

Wearily ascending the curved staircase to the upper front door, Rarity saw, for the first time, another pony. Her heart skipped a beat in relief and anticipation. She wasn't alone! But... this pony. It was, of course -

"Antimony," she hissed.

"How familiar," the Baroness chided from where she sat, waiting, at the top of the stairs.

"Please address me as Lady Antimony or Your Ladyship." She wore the same impassive, frustratingly calm expression that she always put on. "Did you enjoy your trek from Everfree? Would you like to wash up inside?"

"I may take you up on that," Rarity replied, well aware of how bad she looked. The offer of a nice hot bath had more appeal to it than she wanted to admit.

"You should know," Antimony warned, watching the younger mare carefully. It was then that Rarity noticed it: Antimony's eyes were different inside this illusion. There was no reddish glow. They seemed... normal. A normal orchid-violet.

"I considered letting you wander longer in that forest, but I think my point is more keenly made this way," she said with a little laugh. "Also, I do not wish to drive you insane. Yet."

Rarity inclined her head in mock respect. "I bow to your kindness, your Ladyship."

Antimony's expression darkened again, just like before, and her blush colored eyes betrayed growing annoyance and fraying patience.

"This world, however it may appear, is entirely **my** domain," she remarked, holding out a hoof to prevent Rarity from going further into the manor house itself. "The length of time you spend here can be an hour, a few days, or an eternity. I can ply you with bliss or drown you in torment. It would be wise to remember that fact."

Rarity frowned, as Antimony's hoof still held her back.

"Do you know the most common phobia among ponykind?" Antimony quickly answered her own question, "Isolophobia. A mild form of it is all but universal, so much so that it is not even considered a mental disorder. Ponies are afraid of being alone. We desire to be part of a herd. We need this contact with others."

"Without it," she lectured, and Rarity got the impression it was a speech the noblemare had given before. "Without at least seeing others and being acknowledged by others... a pony's sanity begins to slip. She begins to imagine inanimate objects to be loved ones. She divorces herself from reality, creating a separate world that is more comforting. In my experience, a normal healthy sociable mare in our age bracket can last only a week in complete isolation before losing her mind."

Rarity didn't need to ask why, but she did. To hear it from the Baroness' own mouth.

"Why are you telling me this?" Rarity cautiously inquired.

Antimony slowly lowered her hoof, but still she stood between Rarity and the door.

"It would be wise to abandon your ambitions," she stated, as if still giving advice. "In this world, I could do the most terrible of things to you. Defy me, Rarity, and I will break you. As I have broken many, many ponies before you."

Antimony held out her hoof - her clean, manicured, perfect hoof. Rarity took a long look at the proffered hoof, considering the offer.

"It isn't ambition," she corrected the noblemare.

"It is!" Antimony roared, and the hoof that had been offered stomped, hard, against the ground. "You believe yourself noble? You believe yourself my equal? I have struggled and fought and *bit* and *kicked* my way to where I am! I have *earned* the love of - !"

She quickly cut herself off, correcting her faux pas and her angry tone. "I have earned this."

Antimony leaning in closer to the exhausted dressmaker. "You think yourself right to challenge me. To take the title that was mine by right. How is this not ambition? How is it not arrogance?"

Rarity shook her head, sadly. "I wish I could explain it to you, darling. I wish-"

"You will *wish* and you will *beg*," Antimony cut her off. "To kiss my hoof and plead for my mercy. In this realm, there is no Princess Celestia! There is no Princess Luna! There is only **Antimony!**"

Her shoulders hitched, her back arched, and great white wings unfurled from her illusionary form. Her already impressive horn lengthened and in one flap of her new, massive wings she took to the air. The elaborate manor house ripped apart around her, forcing Rarity to shield herself as hundreds of thousands of bricks and tons of marble erupted into a spiraling hurricane. Spinning around, she could just see Ponyville and Canterlot in the distance, also de-materializing.

The very ground beneath her hooves came apart and she fell, through the firmament, and into what felt like water: cold and wet. Rarity forced herself up and back to the surface, teeth chattering and the hairs of her coat standing on end from the chill. She gasped for breath and her legs kicked frantically.

Equestria was gone.

In its place was an Ocean, endless and dark. There was no land in sight, from horizon to horizon, and though the sky still shimmered with bright stars, one nightly fixture was absent. In this world, this illusion, there was no moon. Rarity kicked and tried to keep afloat before will overpowered instinct and she tried to drift and conserve energy. She knew how to swim, after all. All she had to do was keep her head above water.

Hours passed.

Hours, and Rarity's body began to burn. There was no driftwood to hold onto. There was no raft on this black, moonless sea. There was no land to paddle towards. She had feared some sea monster lurking in the depths below, but then even that terror had been replaced by the slow and agonizing realization that no tentacles or toothy beast was needed. The cold and the constant

need to keep safely afloat were killing her already.

The numbness took her legs first. They became hard to move. Then it crept into her chest, seizing her heart and lungs. It became hard to breathe, her pulse felt far too slow, and her vision blurred. She zoned out and tasted salt as water poured into her nose and throat from an errant breath. Rising her face to break the surface, she coughed violently. Ponies were not meant to swim for long periods of time, even under ideal conditions.

Rarity drifted, kicking only occasionally.

Before slipping silently into the still, lightless waters of the sea.

- - -

Bells tolled in Ponyville.

Woken early by the sound, Rarity kicked off her covers and squinted her eyes. The sun had only just risen, sending lancing streams of light into her room. But it was a strange, warbling light, full of reds and oranges instead of the usual bright yellow-gold. Off color or not, it was still enough to wake a pony up. Rarity groaned and rolled around on her bed, attempting resistance even in the face of Celestia's divine light.

Around her room, paintings of Canterlot could be seen hanging from the walls. A bust of Princess Celestia, a gift from her grandmother, smiled with regal grace from the top of her dresser. Dolls and magazines were strewn around the room with less obvious organization, alongside pads of paper and a constantly rotating set of hoof-drawn pictures.

Rarity rolled herself into and under the covers, trying to hide from the tolling outside. Eventually it became too much of a distraction to even try and sleep through. Small legs bounced off the bed as Rarity scampered to her window, intent on identifying the source of the disturbance. She couldn't see the town chapel from her room, but she could see the school. The heraldic and Equestrian flags were at half-mast.

Sniffing the air, the filly headed downstairs.

"Mom?" she called out, bounding down the stairs. "Dad?"

She found them in the kitchen and dining room. By the smell, Rarity could tell her mother had somehow managed to burn the oatmeal. Again. Father never seemed to mind, but Rarity had quickly learned to cook for herself. Usually the morning was lively in their household, but as she took everything in, she could see somber expressions on her parents' faces. Father seemed to be glaring at his newspaper.

"Oh, hey there my little marshmallow!" Rarity's father quickly cantered over to pick her up and place her on his back. Rarity giggled and tugged at his mane.

"I'm not a marshmallow!" she objected, sticking her nose in the air. "And I'm not little! I'm four years old!"

Normally, her father would then say something like: "A four year old marshmallow!"

But his mood was dampened enough that he only craned his neck to nuzzle her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, turning to the open faced kitchen where a pink unicorn with an indigo-blue mane seemed to be watching her family with tears in her eyes. "Mom? What's wrong? Why are all the bells making so much noise?"

Mother lowered her eyes. "Oh, Rarity, it - it isn't anything-"

"She'll learn about it in school, dear," Father argued. "Rarity. Something did happen yesterday."

"What?" she asked, curious and now a little concerned. She was already about to ask, 'is school canceled?' when her father explained.

"Our Prince is dead," he said, softly. "He passed away last night."

"Our Prince?" Rarity asked from stop her father's back. Did he mean the Prince up in Canterlot?

- - -

Rarity watched with wide, sparkling eyes as the ranks of guardponies parted, revealing Equestria's New Prince. He was a colt, of course, but only a little older than herself. A older mare stood at his side or behind him: a statuesque and noble looking Lady with the same sort of pink coat Rarity's own mother had. Her mane and eyes were a deep ocean blue and she wore a formal all-black dress and veil. This had to be the Grand Duchess. A beautiful platinum crown was the only bit of color in her ensemble.

Rarity quickly found her attention focused less on the noble lady and more on her son. The New Prince! The new Blueblood! He was dressed in an impressive coat with shawl collar, defined with royal blues and purples and laces of silver. Sparkling gems glittered in the cloak around his shoulders and back. His coat was pure white, like Rarity's father's, and his mane was a light shade of gold. A small scabbard hung from his belt.

Rarity couldn't help the stars forming in her eyes.

He was the cutest, most handsome and dashing colt she had ever seen!

"We, Blueblood the fifty second, have taken upon ourselves the Duchy of Canterlot, your neighbor and patron. We embrace you, Ponyville, and affirm our commitment to warm relations, open roads, and everlasting protection."

He could also speak pretty loudly! Rarity doubted she could scream that loud and still be heard as far away as everypony was. All around her, ponies stomped their hooves in applause. The entire town of Ponyville had been gathered in the town square to greet the new Prince and to

receive his renewal of vows. Up on the stage, the little Prince - Rarity wondered if he even had his cutie mark yet - glanced nervously around at his audience. Blue eyes lowered and he politely inclined his head in a smooth and practiced bow.

Still, he looked... sad.

He wasn't smiling. Then Rarity shook her head, reminding herself that of course he would be. His father was gone. Anypony would be sad. Now he was Prince, and he had to travel around to show everypony that what had been done under his father would continue under him. Even a little filly understood that much.

The Mayor then rose up to the platform, bowed to the Prince and kissed his hoof. She then went into another one of her boring speeches. Rarity craned her neck, trying to keep sight of the Prince and his Duchess mother. Even standing on her father's back, it was hard to see over everypony's heads. Ditzzy and the other pegasi had it easy. They could just fly, or hang out on top of a cloud. All the unicorns and earth ponies were stuck on the ground.

Looking around, Rarity noticed Applejack from school. The other little filly, Rarity's age but in a different homeroom, had been done up in a pink dress. Her brother, around Prince Blueblood's age, wore a proper black coat. All the Apple Clan were out in style, for once. All of Ponyville's major landowners and upper class types had been given front row seats for the renewal of vows. Some, like the Apples, would even get to meet the Prince or Duchess personally. Rarity hoped they understood just how lucky they were.

Her family wasn't rich, and they didn't own a huge farm.

They hadn't helped to found Ponyville.

Rarity felt a little sting of sadness, but set her hooves on her father's back and quashed it.

"I'll meet him one day!" she declared, to her father's surprise.

"What?" he asked.

"One day, I'll meet the Prince," she said with a grin. "And I'll marry him and we'll both be happy!"

Father watched her out of the corner of his eye, for just a second or two.

Then he chuckled. "I hope the Prince likes marshmallows then."

"Dad! I told you! I'm not a marshmallow!"

- - -

"Here," Antimony whispered, standing over her prone opponent. "Let me show you... how malleable your reality is, dressmaker."

- - -

Rarity fought not to blush as she danced with the stallion of her dreams at the most magnificent event of the year, the Grand Galloping Gala. Prince Blueblood was not quite the stallion she had imagined and dreamed of for so many years, but she found that she didn't much care about her expectations any more. Despite her outward confidence and poise, she still couldn't be sure why he had singled her out - unless it was because of her Element of Harmony - when there were so many other fair ladies of the court watching them with envious eyes. He had even traded off dancing with his Aunt, the Princess herself, to be with her!

Rarity tried not to ruin things by obsessing over 'why.'

She was having fun. Her friends were having the night of their lives. She couldn't imagine a more magical and wonderful night, and it wasn't even over yet. Pirouetting and matching the Princes' steps in the marche, Rarity recalled how she had dreamed of marrying the Prince as a filly. She still entertained the wild fantasy from time to time. But it was realistically just that: a fantasy. A dream. Fleeting and wonderful but, of course, impossible.

Wasn't it?

- - -

"My sweet lady Rarity! How wonderful to see you again!" Blueblood bowed even as the words left his mouth. A pair of stoic royal guards flanked the sides of the door as he entered her humble Ponyville Boutique.

Rarity felt the ribbon she had been levitating fall from the trembling grip of her magic.

"Blueblood?" she stammered and immediately blushed at the too-familiar tone. "Your Grace. What a surprise...!"

"I know, I know! Dropping by un-invited like this." He chuckled and smoothed back a lack of blond mane. "Luckily, surprise was just what I intended. We must be in and out of town before you-know-who decides to arrange a party we sadly do not have time to attend."

You-know-who being a certain pink party pony.

"But... we?" Rarity asked. "You... I don't recall you using the royal 'we' like this before?"

And, how *did* she know him well enough to say that?

"Ah, yes. By 'we' I mean myself and my fiancée," he explained, stepping aside.

Despite wearing a dapper suit and vest for a casual visit, the mare he introduced was more elegantly attired. She wore a delicate dress of white and gold, decorated with gemstone drop beading and artistic lace panel detail. It was an inspired and fascinating design... one Rarity wondered why she hadn't thought of herself. Looking at it on this new and strangely familiar mare almost seemed to strike her with *deja vu*.

"Your fiancée?" Rarity found herself asking, and regretting how shocked dumb she sounded.

"Yes, it has been in the works for years, but our families only recently finished negotiations on the dowry," Blueblood said with a passing, far off look. "But, I digress! You see, talk turned to the eventual wedding itself. My Lady and I would very much appreciate it if you were to have a hoof in designing, if not making, a matching dress and suit for us."

"Of course! And congratulations!" Rarity exclaimed, her thoughts racing with the possibilities and opportunities. Designing for a royal wedding? She would be the talk of Canterlot! She would - *she was* -

"...my manners? Allow me to introduce Lady Antimony, Baroness of Mareseilles, Lady Grand Cross of the Royal Celestial Order, and future Duchess of Canterlot."

This wasn't r-

Rarity felt a spike of pain. A corrective jolt in the back of her head. She winced, eyes closing briefly and blocking out the tableau before her. The pain passed, leaving only a faint impression behind. Her eyes reopened and fortunately neither Blueblood nor his new bride seemed to have noticed the faux pas.

"I'm honored," Rarity quickly said, though for some reason she didn't feel it.

She stared at Blueblood, looking, waiting for... something. He seemed happy and oblivious to her concern. The latter was a bit vexing, especially after the -

Especially after the *friendship* they had struck during the Gala.

But he seemed happy, so she told herself to be happy for him. Of course he would marry another noble. Of course he would find a perfect, beautiful noblemare of high birth. It was what all the magazines and tabloids had speculated on. The question was always which noblemare would rise to the challenge. What did she, a simply dressmaker from a little country town, have that could compare to the vast dowry that so many of these Ladies could offer?

He was a Prince, after all. She was -

She was happy for him.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, holding the side of her head. "I fear the excitement is getting to me. I have a... a headache..."

"I'm sorry to hear such news," Blueblood said, walking closer and dipping his head to examine her more closely. *More intimately*. It seemed to make the pain a little sharper. "Is there anything I can do? I have a royal physician on call..."

"No. Thank you." Rarity bowed deeply, to the Prince and to his blushing bride to be.

"Please give me the honor of designing for you. You won't regret it!"

Blueblood gave a happy little titter. "Good! Excellent!"

"I'm sure we won't regret using you," Antimony added, and a flood of pleasure swept away Rarity's headache. She looked up at the beautiful noble mare. She knew she should have been at least a little envious of her, but -

But instead she only felt awe and devotion.

"Just a little more. And then..."

How...

How very interesting Ponyville was. Really. It wasn't like the small towns in Prance or Two Rivers. Superficially, it was similar, but there were many distinct touches that reflected its unique history. To say nothing of its unique location!

A hydra, really?

Fascinating. They had been hunted to extinction in the northern territories. Father had a set of skulls from the last one on display in his great Castle Keep of Marestricht. She had never seen a living one. Antimony still had not, really, since she was simply seeing it as Rarity saw it. It was only a reflection of a memory, but it was *close* to seeing it herself. Simply fascinating.

"Just... a bit more," she whispered to herself, eyes ablaze.

Inside her eyes, inside her mind, inside her illusions...

"Welcome, everypony!"

Antimony smiled as she greeted the Ponyville sextet and Elements of Harmony. The illusionary reality had run longer than she had expected, the better to reinforce its mind altering effects. In this realm, it was the day before the Art Festival and she - and Blueblood - had invited their friends from the town to a private party at the now complete manor.

As the six mares entered, looking around the house and the many and varied snacks and waiting servants, Antimony felt herself relax. All was well in this realm she had absolute control over and she had been privy to the most interesting spectacles in the form of these girls' adventures. Things she had only heard about from her spies became so much more vivid and real, from the defeat of Discord to that little situation Alpha Brass had conspired to cause in Canterlot to Twilight Sparkle's little assistant growing to a massive size due to his draconic greed.

It had been impossible to resist watching closely, or even taking opportunity to insert

herself here and there into events. The better to augment and supplement the illusion's positive and negative reinforcement, of course. Rarity had a truly invaluable cadre of allies in her fellow Elements of Harmony. For all the differences they sometimes had, they were a reliable group.

One could not ask for more than reliable, loyal allies - for these friends of hers.

The illusions all deferred to her, of course. It was important that Rarity subconsciously sense that her friends were all in lock-step with her in this. Antimony willed them to bow to her and thank her for the invitation, to show the basic modicum of respect and obeisance. After that, though, she let them "free" to act as Rarity imagined they would act.

Pinkie Pie bounced over to oversee the fair distribution of sweets and party favors much to the consternation of the servants. Antimony had to remind her that the party's treats were to be parsed out over several hours, and not consumed all at once. Twilight Sparkle quickly became distracted by a framed treatise on magic in the library, trying to explain its historical and scholarly relevance to her bemused friends. Rainbow Dash and Applejack had found the croquet set left out, but the former had also brought some sort of discus that Rarity imagined she intended to toss about.

Given a reprieve from Twilight's lecture, Fluttershy soon entered into a casual discussion of the Everfree's ecology with Antimony's husband. With *Blueblood*. He was the most difficult of the illusions to maintain. Antimony knew his presence was necessary, however, despite the trouble it took to control him and rein in Rarity's own view of things. So long as she remained in control, all was well. The illusory world was much like the real world in that respect.

Things were going so well, in fact, that negative reinforcement had not been necessary for some time. Rarity was all but "trained," as Antimony's family called this use of her eyes. It was a description she did not favor herself. A pony could do much with the gifts she had been given. The bending of another to her will was one such possibility. If her brother or sisters only knew what it involved, they would not be so keen to recommend her use of it. A life was not easily or lightly tampered with, nor a mind re-wired.

Still: all was well. *Soon*.

Soon she would be able to leave this world, and assert her earned dominance.

The group talked and snacked and soon moved outside to the back acres. Fountains and entrances to themed gardens stretched out before them. A game of croquet and then badminton eventually ended in favor of Rainbow Dash's peculiar thrown disk. Antimony felt a tug in the illusion as Rarity's own view of things conflicted with her own. The issue, as it often was, related to Blueblood. It seemed unlikely to the Baroness that the prissy Prince would indulge in such an unusual game, cantering around on the grass to toss some disk here or there.

Couldn't they play Polo instead, perhaps? They could use teams of three and...

Antimony had to keep the world from changing. If Rarity wished for Blueblood to engage in this curious activity, then there was no harm in allowing it. It was simply strange. That was all.

Not partaking in the game, Antimony watched from a cushion on the grass. A silver tray rested on a small wooden table with tiny sculpted ponies holding it up in place of legs. Enamel cups and dishes provided for coffee or tea, scones and fruit cakes of all colors and varieties. A silver-maned servant, one of the manor's male domestic staff, stood within a respectful distance to cater to any need. A gramophone had been left on a chair to play music, next to a clavichord that Antimony had played earlier, recalling lessons learned as a foal. Even without having to tweak things in this world, she was still quite accomplished on the keys. It was required of all her family to learn a courtly instrument.

This place: this illusion. It was... nice. So very nice.

"Have you given thought to my earlier proposition?" Antimony asked, glancing to her left where Rarity also sat on a cushion, watching her friends play.

"I have, and I'm afraid I must decline." Rarity dipped her head in a respectful bow. "While the position of *maîtresse en titre* - of first mistress - would be an honor, I do not think I would be comfortable accepting."

Antimony nodded, expecting - and reinforcing - that answer.

"I understand," she replied. "My Blueblood has become fond of you, so I thought it fair to give offer. But you must be free to do as you wish. I'm sure you'll find a special somepony of your own soon."

"It isn't really that."

"Hm?"

"I would... I would *like* to be with him, but not like that. I'm still not sure exactly what to think," Rarity admitted, and Antimony frowned inwardly, applying just a little illusionary pressure. To reinforce. To correct. But only a little.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I think... you'll have to forgive me," Rarity said, looking a little afraid to speak her mind.

"Go on," Antimony pressed. "I'm curious. What is on your mind?"

"I just... I feel so very sorry for the both of you." Rarity's answer took the noblemare by surprise. "I can see it so very clearly, darling. You don't love him, do you?"

Antimony's ears twitched in annoyance. "I don't see how that matters."

"I'm not surprised you don't," Rarity said with a sad shake of her head. "But you will one day and by then, I fear it will be too late. I can't begin to understand what your families gain by this marriage, but is it really worth losing your chance at love? And Blueblood... Prince Blueblood I mean. He seems happy, but something... something keeps telling me he isn't. It just doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel real."

"I can't help but think, if you go through with this, that you'll both be unhappy," she admitted, giving the Baroness a sympathetic look. "And that something bad will happen."

"Is..." Antimony had to couch her words and control her temper. "Is that all you care about? There is more to life than self-indulgence. There are many things that can make one happy."

Rarity bowed slightly in apology. "I didn't mean to offend you, your Ladyship. I'm very sorry, but - that's just how I feel."

"Well, you're wrong," Antimony replied, but couldn't bring herself to administer a small corrective reinforcement. Not when she knew, deep down, that Rarity was right. To an extent.

"I *will* be happy," she said, and contented herself with watching the game in the garden. "All I have to do is win."

- - -

"All I have to do... is beat *one... little... pony*."

- - -

Rarity emerged from the endless black sea, eyes wide and gasping for air. Her lungs spasmed and harsh salty water rushed up from inside to flood out her mouth. The icy cold liquid stung her throat and nose and worse, she collapsed bonelessly and gracelessly into it as she grasped for solid ground. Her hooves desperately scraped and found purchase on smooth stone.

Hacking and coughing, she looked up at her nemesis.

Antimony stood, just as she had a moment before, her chin high and her orchid-violet eyes calculating. Rarity tried to rise like she had before - she could see the manor house, the familiar tress that divided it from Ponyville, even the distant snow capped mountains that sheltered Canterlot. Everything was just as it had been before the world turned to dust and spiteful shadow, casting her alone into a dark, terrifying sea.

"It can all end," the noblemare said and Rarity involuntarily shivered. She extended her hoof.

She didn't need to say why.

- - -

"I can't see a darned thing! What's goin' on?"

"Yeah, Twilight, what *is* goin' on out there?"

"I - I don't know."

If his pony friends were having a hard time seeing, Spike had it worse. It was still dark out, less a problem for him than most ponies, but from what he could see Antimony and Rarity were standing still in the center of the courtyard. Rarity was on the ground, barely moving. It couldn't be, but... was it over?

'This... this is what I wanted, isn't it?' the thought sickened him, but it was true, wasn't it? 'If Rarity wins, then it's only a matter of time. She'll marry that jerk of a Prince. She'll leave Ponyville. I'll never have a chance to tell her how I feel.'

She had to lose.

He had already realized this; already accepted it, back when he destroyed Blueblood's letter. All Rarity had to do was lose. It wouldn't be the end of the world. Why was it so hard, seeing it about to happen, to just accept it?

Sure, she would be sad for a while.

But she'd get over it. Spike was *sure* of it. He'd be there to help her get over it.

'Help her recover from a problem I helped cause,' he admonished himself, his little hands balling into fists. 'I can't watch this, can I? Even if it's what I wanted, I can't watch it happen.'

"Come on, Rarity!" Rainbow Dash pawed the ground, fighting to hold herself back. "Don't just give up!"

'I can't watch it. I can't...'

"I don't think she can move," Fluttershy said, craning her neck to try and see.

"Probably not," Twilight agreed. "Some sort of visual paralysis spell? But that isn't unicorn magic."

'Rarity. I'm sorry. This is my fault. I'm so sorry! Rarity!'

"If she can't move, then how's she gonna fight back?"

Spike opened his eyes and saw Sweetie Belle being held back by her parents, just a stone's throw away. Luna's guards were in the air, circling, preventing anypony from getting closer.

'Don't give up!'

- - -

Lady Antimony, the esteemed and beloved Baroness of Mareseilles, just couldn't understand it.

She had not been lying earlier when she remarked that she did not enjoy torture. Granted, a part of her did enjoy inflicting a *little* pain during a duel, but then a part of her enjoyed receiving it as well. As a unicorn, she never felt so alive - so free - as when she could truly cut loose with her magic. Many other noble mares seemed to feel the same way, with the determination, courage and honor they showed in a duel.

Antimony loved it. She *loved* dueling. She loved fighting.

Fighting was life. Fighting was honor. Fighting was proof of one's convictions and one's place in the world. Rarity was fighting her now like no mare had before, and in a realm Antimony controlled every aspect of. She just couldn't understand *why*. If Rarity had **demanded** the right to be Duchess, **demanded** that she had a right to rule, and then galloped through Hell to earn it - **that**, Antimony could understand. **That**, she could respect.

Why? Why would this insane dressmaker go so far, and for what? Having pierced her mind with her illusions, Antimony could see that she did not desire power. She truly did not want to be Duchess of Canterlot. She had no idea of the secrets and the forbidden power the Blueblood family had sealed. The forbidden spells of Starswirl! The Tartarus Key! The Obsidian Codex! The Lexicon of Dragon Names! Actual Sand from the First Hourglass! Star Caller's Seal!

Spells to bend and twist and remake creation!

Spells from the Old Kingdom! Spells to give unicorns the powers once had, now wielded only by Celestia and Luna. Spells that could bring fire from the sky and shatter the barriers between worlds! Magic, it was whispered, to even make unicorns into alicorns.

Not... not that she would *use* many of these spells, of course. It was the rightful and honorable duty of the Greatest House in the land to assist Princess Celestia: to guard and maintain the treasures and dangers of the past. The Bluebloods were the heirs of Princess Platinum, who had first sealed the spells of the past. The Terre Rare, too, were the heirs of Platinum. *The true heirs.*

Rarity did not seem to either know or care about any of that. Like Blueblood, she was concerned with more mundane things with little interest in the grand scheme. Antimony found it hard to fathom, but she had encountered other mares like that: ones skilled in magic, but not terribly interested in it otherwise. They pursued the Platinum Crown not out of a desire for knowledge or to find purpose in the fulfillment of destiny. They did it simply to seek high office, or to one up a rival, or even because they were smitten with Equestria's handsome Prince.

Why? Why did Rarity persist?

Why did she fight a duel she must have known she would lose? Why had she dared to look her opponent in the eye, knowing it was her doom? Antimony didn't want to truly believe that her opponent was so foolish, so stupid, so divorced from reality. From what she had seen and heard, Rarity was an intelligent and charming mare. During the fight she had thought quickly and creatively. Many, many other duelists would have lost to her.

Why? Why? Why?

"How much longer are you going to make me do this to you?" Antimony asked, and she even allowed Rarity to hear her.

Unlike the other unicorn, she was mentally aware of both her dream realm and the real world. While it was true she could keep Rarity suspended in this illusion for a long time, eventually even she - the most powerful daughter of the Terre Rare - would run out of magical energy. Two weeks of absolute illusion was her limit. No pony's mind would survive that long, however, so calling it 'an eternity' was not that much of a white lie.

She floated down to where Rarity lay, on her side, unable to even move.

"Look at you," she remarked, sadly. "Rarity. It is time. Time to give up."

Blue eyes, once so determined and defiant, looked up at her in defeat.

"You have caused me no small measure of vexation, but I suppose you are a saint next to some of the other mares who wished to take what is mine. You have my respect, but it is time... to give up and go home."

Antimony held out her hoof, just inches from Rarity's lips. She didn't need to say what had to be done. All the other unicorn had to do was crane her neck forward, just a little, and kiss. In the real world, too, Antimony held out her hoof. Their positions there were much the same: Rarity had long since collapsed onto her side, back in the castle courtyard.

Now, in both realms, she began to inch forward, lips puckering.

Antimony licked her own lips in anticipation. *Finally*. With this, finally, all things would be back on track. She would marry Blueblood and bear his heir. Only then would he, and his house, finally be allowed to fade from prominence. She would even do him a kindness and allow him to pass away peacefully, in his sleep. Then, at last, the Terre Rare would pick up where the Bluebloods left off. The first thing Antimony would do, as Grand Duchess, would be to erect a great monument to Lady Arsenic. By decree, the Stable of Lords would be convinced to pass a resolution proclaiming Arsenic as the One True Heir and Blue Belle as the usurper.

All would be made right. Equestria itself would be made right. In strength. Through strength! Like the Princesses themselves! It was the Divine Order made manifest!

And all that was required, *now*, was for one stubborn Element of Harmony to kiss her hoof. Rarity's lips were close enough now for her breath to tickle the trimmed fetlock around Antimony's hoof. In both realms, Antimony felt her body tense with anticipation, eyes closed, as she waited.

"Rarity."

Eyes snapped open. *That voice*. That little whisper. She recognized it from the other day.

Rarity heard it too.

"Rarity!" it repeated, more forcefully, in the youthful soprano of a child's voice.

"Sweetie Belle?" Rarity asked, eyes wide as she tried to identify the source of the voice.

Antimony snarled as her prey pushed away, rolling over onto her other side. Rarity's body in the real world did the same. *So close!* She had been so close! What was happening?

Shifting slightly back to the castle courtyard, Antimony saw it.

Even though Luna's two guards had posted themselves between the Ponyville crowd and the still ongoing duel, that had only kept them from intervening directly. Food and festivities forgotten, they had pushed up to the very limit of the courtyard's edge. There, at the forefront, standing between her mother and father, Antimony could see the little unicorn filly she had recognized before from the Ponyville school. *Sweetie Belle*. The little filly was... cheering?

How undignified she was; one did not 'cheer' at a duel.

"Rarity! Get up!" Her voice pierced the veil between that world and Antimony's illusion. Which shouldn't have been possible. No sensation should have leaked through from that direction. Rarity herself was insensate when under the absolute illusion. It couldn't even be coming from Antimony's own senses, which did work in both realms.

"Rarity!" another voice joined in. An older stallion's. It was followed by a mare's voice, also calling her name. "Come on, Rarity!"

Antimony focused her power, adding another layer to the already absolute illusion.

"Rarity!" "Rarity!" Rarity!" "Rarity!" "Get up, Rarity!"

More damned voices.

Voices she recognized, unlike the other two: the stallion and mare. Those voices belonged to the Elements of Harmony. As they repeated their cry, against all logic, Antimony identified them: that first one was Twilight Sparkle. There was no doubt about it. The second had to be that timid pegasus, Fluttershy. The third was the noisy farmer from Sweet Apple Acres. The fourth was Pinkie Pie. The fifth was the pegasus tomboy with the rainbow mane and tail!

"Rarity!" "Rarity!" "Rarity!" A virtual chorus of voices soon joined in. Too many for Antimony to pick out names. "Rarity!" "Rarity!" "Rarity!" "Please, Rarity!"

"Rarity!" one young voice stood out from the others. "Don't give up!"

To Antimony's mounting anger and frustration, Rarity rolled onto her stomach and with wobbling legs and labored breath, she forced herself back up. Despite her exhaustion. Despite her drained magic. Despite the pain, the injuries, the mental starvation and conditioning. *Despite everything.*

"You!" Antimony growled, all pretense of civility put on the back burner. "You're using the Elements of Harmony, aren't you! **How!** How are you doing this without your Element?"

Back in the real world, somehow, there was only silence.

Antimony couldn't believe it. Why was the crowd so silent in the real world, but producing this tumult in her illusion? As the real Rarity fought to get back on her hooves, looking for all the world like a strong breeze could knock her back to the ground, Antimony saw no livery around her neck. She was not wearing her Element of Harmony. Even in the dream realm, she wasn't.

This made no **damned** sense!

Backing away a step in both worlds, Antimony recoiled as faint wisps of magic began to form around her opponent. Rarity seemed surprised by it herself, turning her head to watch the colors of light around her as they circled and spun, leaving scintillating contrails in their wake. More and more of them appeared until Ponyville's dressmaker was all but engulfed in a ever-widening hurricane of magical energy. Antimony took another step back, lifting a leg as one of the brighter lights nicked her.

"This magic!" she gasped, recognizing it. "Pegasus magic?"

Another of the swirling lights came close to hitting her, and Antimony recognized it as well.

"And earth pony magic?" she asked, incredulous. "And unicorn magic!? And..." And others she didn't even recognize. "Just what is this? Just what are you doing!" The Baroness reared and stamped her hooves. "Just what kind of magic is this?!"

"You don't recognize it?" Rarity asked, haltingly, as she looked up with wide bright eyes.

All at once, the swarm of colors became a screaming, lightning fast rainbow.

"This," she declared, blue eyes alight with a fire of their own. "**This is the magic of friendship!**"

The words hit Antimony a moment after the light did. In the real world, the two mares vanished amid a blast of multi-colored light, but within Antimony's realm - within the world she commanded, a single hoof pushed back against the rainbow of light.

That single hoof split the beam, ripping it apart into a twisting, slashing sextet of colored beams.

"The magic of **friendship**?" Antimony hissed, adding her other front hoof to help block the rainbow of light. "Is that what you call it! What a joke! You're just leeching magic from your friends! **Like a parasite!** I wasn't aware you had that kind of power!"

"And you called me stubborn," Rarity replied, lowering her horn.

Antimony grunted, still pushing back the rainbow. "All you're doing is using others to compensate for your own weakness!"

Rarity stood on her hind legs, a rainbow light building into a scintillating accretion disk around her. She pushed herself forward, one painful step at a time.

"Your illusions. Your world. I only just noticed it," Rarity explained, the five bright lights of her friends pulsing around her. "It's empty, isn't it? Is that really the world you're happiest in?!"

"A pitiful dressmaker like you doesn't have the right to lecture me!" Antimony pushed into the surging wave of rainbow colored magic before battering it down with her hoof. "Is this really the magic of friendship? Huh? *Is it!* Because I don't need it! I'm stronger than you! Stronger than all of you!"

She laughed as she lifted one hind leg and forced herself forward.

"In this world... in this realm... there is only Antimony! I don't need any pony else! My own power is all that matters! Throw everything at me and more!" The noblemare screamed, shaking her mane behind her as it became unbound. **"I'll crush it ALL!"**

Her alicorn wings, gifted as the God of her personal world, unfurled in glorious splendor. The illusionary world around her darkened and contracted and roared with fury as a sun exploded from the nothingness behind her. The blazing star was no gift from Celestia - it churned and boiled with dark energy and twinkling stars. Black tendrils began to seep into the rainbow, turning it into a ruddy, messy brown.

Laughing in excitement and triumph, Antimony pushed herself upstream, corrupting the rainbow... until, at last, she stood almost horn to horn with Rarity, towering over the smaller mare. The once bright and solid rainbow that poured from around the Element of Generosity was now a broken and darkened shade of its former self.

Antimony raised an illusionary hoof over her head, and a second black sun grew just inches from her sole. The lens of the black sun parted, revealing a sea of twinkling stars suspended in the darkness, the otherworldly energy warping into the outline of a claw-like pincher.

"Your friends... and family...!" she roared, eyes flashing and a smile on her face. "Even together, you're WEAKER THAN ME!"

"Rarity."

That voice - that voice was new. It was new, but both mares recognized it.

"Blueblood?" Antimony hissed. "But he isn't here-"

"Rarity," the voice whispered. "I was wrong. You *can* win. You *have* to win!"

Antimony snorted, still pressing down on her opponent. "Pointless!"

"I almost gave up," Rarity whispered. "Without even knowing it, I almost gave up."

Her eyes closed, for just a moment -

And another star, bright crystal clear and twinkling, appeared among the others.

"But I won't!" she yelled, taking one last step forward. **"Even your illusions can't extinguish how I feel!"**

Rarity's eyes opened, and the rainbow around her expanded five fold and blasted away the darkness that had corrupted it. Blazing brighter than before, it redoubled its assault. No words were spoken, no sounds could be heard over the white roar of the magic of friendship, bolstered and empowered by love. Antimony's upper lip curled in distaste as the rainbow ripped through her blocking hoof, swelling and crashing and engulfing her leg and then her body in rainbow colored light.

"But I... in this realm I... I'm...!"

Her legs and lower body vanished, leaving her to tumble, half an upper torso, in midair. Shockingly slowly, she fell back and into the chromatic stream, the black energy at her hoof tips breaking away into slivers of nether. Her wings vanished next into the stream of rainbow light, dissolving instantly.

'I'm losing? I'm losing. I'm losing! I'm losing! I'm losing! I'm losing!!'

Her back felt warm, and her eyes widened with fright and horror.

'NO! I can't lose! I can't lose! Not to her! Not to anypony!'

Soon, the rainbow tide covered even her mouth, open in a gaping silent scream.

'T - I - '

And then Lady Antimony's illusionary world shattered.

The whirlpool pillar of churning rainbow light lasted only a second in the castle courtyard, fast enough that a pony could blink or look away for just a moment and miss it. No pony, however, could miss hearing the scream that followed. A shallow crater had been blown away from the two dueling unicorn mares and the air visibly crackled with magical energy.

In the middle of it all, one mare - her white coat caked and crusted with dirt and her mane cut short - crouched on all fours. In the air over her, another mare twisted in midair, her back arched as a cascade of six colors spun around her like a school of hungry, frenzied piranha. Lady Antimony screamed and howled and kicked and flew through the air before hitting the dirt hard

enough to kick up dust and blades of grass.

From where she sat, Princess Luna glanced to her right. The image of Lord Cruciger was as unwavering and impassive as it had been all night. Except for the occasional movement in the one eye behind his metal mask, the faintest of visible cues, he could have been mistaken for a still image of the great Duke and not the stallion himself. Now, that one eye crinkled and narrowed in some veiled emotion.

Abruptly, his image wavered and vanished.

The two projecting unicorns promptly collapsed onto the ground, no longer having to maintain the spell. The third, the one in the middle who had been under Cruciger's possession, stumped and fell flat on his face. All three were still breathing but unhealthy black smoke pooled around their horns. Their master, the fourth unicorn guard without a mask, simply lowered his eyes.

Antimony continued to scream.

Long legs kicked at the dirt, uprooting clods of grass and soil. The rainbow still coiled around her like a multi-colored snake, constricting the noblemare. Her screams soon turned to choked curses and sobs. Upside down and on her back, a pair of eyes - still flickering with red illusionary magic - saw the absence on her side of the courtyard.

"Father!" she cried, tears in her eyes. "Father please! Wait! I'll do anything!" Hate filled eyes turned on the mage guards. "Bring him back! I command you to bring him back! You're WEAK! You're ALL WEAK!! He didn't leave me! Bring him back!!"

Then her face disappeared beneath the frothing rainbow and she choked out another curse.

Princess Luna closed her eyes to not have to watch the all too familiar scene. She knew a rainbow like that and what it could do. The Elements of Harmony, as far as she could tell, had **not** been taken out for this fight. She would have prevented it if some pony had made the attempt. It would not have been honorable. A pony entered a duel only with the skills and magic she had inside her. This was something else.

The fact of the matter was simply that friendship alone had magic. This was true many times over when it came to an Element of Harmony. There was no telling what these six could do, even in defiance of reason and rationality. Fate had decided this duel. Which was not to say that some pony - or some alicorn - had not helped Fate along a little.

Not that Luna had any idea where her older sister even was at the moment.

Finally, back in the courtyard, Antimony's voice gave out and she stopped struggling. The other side of the field was stunned silent by the sudden reversal. Quite a few ponies looked shocked, either at the unexpected and dramatic display of magic or at how it had laid low the Baroness from Prance. Even Luna's own guards, trained to be impassive, were looking over their shoulders at the battlefield to see what would happen next.

In the blasted crater, Rarity's form wobbled and slowly moved away. Turning around, then around again, looking for something - she found it a moment later. Pawing at the dirt, she unearthed a still intact cupcake. An attempt to pick it up with magic failed, as the pastry lifted a couple inches or so off the ground only to fall again. Lacking even the magic to do the job, Rarity pathetically tried her hoof only to fall face first into the dirt.

Seconds passed and she slowly raised her head. It took longer still for her to get back up, and with a grimace, the filthy duelist gingerly picked the cupcake up with her teeth. One step followed another. Antimony wasn't moving. The crowd on one side of the duel watched with baited breath; the group on the other refused to watch, Luna exempted.

Somehow, Antimony sensed the approach of the other mare.

Her struggles abruptly resumed, her hind legs kicking wildly and frantically to reorient herself. Rarity picked up her pace, knowing better than to let the noblemare get on her hooves. Stumbling on an exposed rock, Rarity nearly fell - a mistake that would have left numbing agent and cupcake sludge on her face - but soon stood over Antimony. By the rules of the duel, which had not yet progressed to *à outrance*, neither mare could physically touch the other. Luna watched closely to make sure the rules were adhered to.

Rarity, standing over Antimony, opened her mouth. The cupcake fell-

And Antimony rolled sharply to the left, knocking Rarity to the ground and avoiding the falling pastry. Both fashionable unicorns ended up in the dust, coughing and soiled. The hungry rainbow had dissipated, leaving Antimony's coat and mane frazzled. She said nothing, breathing slowly and laboriously. Rarity, too, was on the ground. She pushed herself back onto her hooves for what felt like the hundredth time, saw the mostly splattered cupcake and fell onto her other side as she tried to pick it up.

For a long minute, the two unicorns lay there, not moving beyond taking their next breath. Rarity had one eye open and one closed, dirt staining the corner of her mouth. Time and again she had risen despite the odds against her. She groaned pitifully and focused her one eye on her opponent.

"Like I said," the dressmaker said between breaths. "Stubborn."

Antimony's chest heaved and a weak laugh escaped her lips. At some point she had bitten the inside of her mouth and blood leaked over her chin mixed with drool. Her normally frightful eyes were bloodshot and spent, the pink-white coat of her cheeks stained with tears. She moved a leg once, twice, but couldn't get back up.

Her eyes closed and she sighed, her breath blowing dirt away from her nostrils.

"You know," Rarity continued, finding it a little easier to talk than to try and fight. "I never imagined I'd see you like this. You're as dirty as I am..."

Antimony's brow crinkled at the words, the association with weakness and impending

disgrace and defeat.

"When you walked into my Boutique... I thought you were so beautiful. Like a fair lady from a story book. I'll admit I was a little intimidated, too." Rarity spent a few seconds just breathing, slowly, willing her body to recover. She opened her eye and saw Antimony staring at her. "But... but I don't really understand you. Why? Why can't you let this go? Even now? Can't you see how miserable you'll be if you do this?"

"You may as well kill me," the Baroness finally replied, and composed herself enough to close her mouth and keep from drooling blood into the dirt. "You want me to give up? This is my life. This is my... everything..."

Her eyes darted away, to her side of the courtyard, before closing in grief.

"When a pony can not tell where their reality ends and another reality begins," she whispered. "It becomes clear in their eyes. First confusion. Then fear. Then panic. Finally, anguish," she said the words almost by rote. "Anguish... is the pain of understanding and accepting that what we call 'reality' and what we call 'dreams' are not the same."

"I won't let you hit me with that cupcake!" the noblemare declared, a tiny bit of fire left in her eyes. "I'd rather die!" She snorted and shook her head. "Not that I understand you either. You spurn my offers time and time again. And for what? Love of Blueblood? Hatred and spite of me?"

Rarity, exhausted, gave a ragged sigh of her own. "I just..."

"Don't understand..." Antimony muttered.

"You," they said at the same time. Eyes wide, the two enemies stared each other down. Antimony began to move first, inching towards the fallen cupcake. Rarity grunted and did the same. It was like two fish out of water, weakened but still trying to get to the same tiny pool of water. Neither would give up. Neither would yield.

Rarity reached the cupcake first. Holding the base of it in her teeth, she stretched her neck

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And scraped part of the dirty frosting against Antimony's cheek.

"We formally recognize that the match has now ended!" a royal voice blared, shocking the two exhausted and beaten unicorns. "In favor of Rarity!"

A uproar met and even exceeded Princess Luna's legendary volume. Rarity could hear excited voices coming closer to the beat of galloping hooves. Her friends would be close, soon, running in to congratulate her. It was ironic. She didn't feel like celebrating, not like she imagined she would.

"Twas an honorable match," Luna announced, more quietly directing the words at the two exhausted duelists. "There is no shame in such a loss."

Rarity tried to rise, to thank the Princess for her kind words, but Luna gestured for her to remain still. She lowered her horn and a soft, healing magic gently embraced the two mares. Turning instead to her former opponent, Rarity saw her on the verge of tears, but somehow Antimony held it back at the last second. Stiffening her chin and trying, for a moment, to wipe the frosting off her cheek, the beaten Baroness eventually gave up. Instead she sucked in a deep breath and nodded, slowly.

"You have beaten me," she conceded, eyes closing as she drifted into unconsciousness. "This time, it seems... I was the one who made the mistake..."

- - -

Polished Jewel hit the stone floor, a gasp on her lips. Energy continued to whip and crackle off her light blue horn as oldest daughter and would-be heir of the Terre Rare dynasty struggled to stay conscious. Behind her, the front of her castle keep, done up in mock-Canterlot style, exploded. Pillars snapped like dry twigs and the upper level tumbled down with a thunderous crash. A cloud of dust billowed from the disaster, briefly obscuring the powder blue body of the fallen unicorn noblemare. Further from where she lay, a dozen other bodies were also groaning and in varying states of consciousness.

On the ground, Polished Jewel protectively clutched her bruised throat. The duel was over. Polished Jewel had to *know* that it was over, but she refused to yield out of pride. Stubborn, stupid pride. Antimony watched, impassive, as her eldest sister struggled just to breathe. *Close*. That had been close. She had almost died back there, but now Polished Jewel was finished.

"Jewel," she said, her voice and body still immature. Little more than a filly. Antimony's cutie mark stood out, bright and sharp on her flank proclaiming for all who could see it that she knew her purpose, her unbending ambition, in life. *Her reason for being*.

"You made a mistake," she explained, moving in to finish the job. "Thinking I'd be content to remain your little sister. The one who will rule this family one day... is **me**."

- - -

"Huuuuh? Are you serious? Confronting me here!" Alpha Brass sat on a resplendent lacquer throne in the open feasting hall, the roof still under construction. Four humorless female guards surrounded him in a defensive cordon, wearing plate armor and reflective magic shields strapped to their forelegs. Antimony's older brother leaned forward from his admittedly awkward sitting position, a sneer contorting the young stallion's features.

"You really are daddy's little girl!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "Not even a trace of fear or hesitation!"

"Brass. You made a mistake," Antimony informed him, trotting forward on ungainly teenage legs. "This was a contest between sisters. You shouldn't have gotten involved."

"Big words from a noisy brat!" Alpha Brass growled, and jumped out of his throne. "CHALICE!"

Antimony's body shook as the ground beneath her rumbled.

Turning, Antimony's violet-red eyes narrowed. Chalice, her middle sister, did not normally make for a very imposing sight. Her coat was a faded pink and her mane rusted brown and red. She was slim and small for a mare. What was rather more intimidating was the massive rift in space behind her. Twinkling stars began to spill out from the tear in the aether, forming into blasphemous shapes and outlines. Chalice winced but set herself in place, determined not to back down despite the pain of her summoning spell.

"I've got her, big brother!" Chalice declared. "Just leave it to me!"

"There are many kinds of strength in this world, Antimony!" Alpha Brass lectured, his gold coat decked with twinkling finery. Antimony had heard other mares describe her brother as 'devilishly handsome' - they had half of it right at least.

"As I'm sure your body has begun to realize," he gloated. "Tell me: how long do you have before the poison kicks in and you can't even keep those evil eyes of yours open?"

"I believe I have three or four minutes," she replied, face to face with her older sister. Chalice was already beginning to manifest: star sparkling, pitch black energy pooling all around her. "Plenty of time to show you what *true strength* is."

- - -

A hundred trees flanked the sides of the road, bathed in fallen flowers and leaves. All at once, they came to life.

"I warned you..."

- - -

The sky thundered as her opponent's bladed wings flapped.

"The one who will rule..."

- - -

Sand trickled down Antimony's face, space warping around her like a vice.

"The most worthy one...!"

- - -

Pushing through the torrential rainbow, the so called magic of friendship, Antimony looked into the face of her latest obstacle. There was no way - **no way** this little dressmaker had what it took to rule. There was no way she deserved to rule! The Grand Duchy of Canterlot! The forbidden secrets of Platinum! The destiny of the Terre Rare!

"Your friends... and family...!" Antimony roared, ready to deliver the finishing blow.
 "Even together, you're WEAKER THAN ME!"

- - -

Eye slowly opened, and with them, the agony of understanding.

"I lost," Antimony whispered, her chest rising and falling with every slow breath. She had lost. Not to Sand Dune, or to Ritterkreuz, or even to that lunatic Euporie. Not to her sisters Chalice or Polished Jewel, or even to her snake of a brother Alpha Brass. She lost... to a dressmaker from Ponyville.

"**Hey!** You're awake!"

Antimony quickly closed her eyes to avoid the all too loud color and exuberance of Rarity's crazy pink friend. Hers had been one of the many voices summoned to overwhelm her in that nightmarish rainbow of friendship. The noblemare tried to slip back into unconsciousness, even as her body shook from side to side. What was Pinkie doing, shaking her by the shoulders? For that matter, where was she? It didn't feel like the hard packed earth.

The world pitched and both mares tumbled off the cart and onto the ground.

That - *that* - felt like the ground.

"Why must you torment me?" Antimony asked, mustering just enough energy to partly open her eyes. Her rational mind calculated her magical reserves. They were still low enough that she didn't have to worry about her eyes inadvertently doing damage to anypony. She opened them a little wider.

"I'm not tormenting you, am I?" Pinkie inquired, cocking her head to the side and then ducking down to nudge the noblemare's ribs. "Come on! Get up! You can sleep after the party ends!"

"What in the name of the Princess makes you think I want to celebrate my own loss?" Antimony glared now at the party pony. Pushing Pinkie away, she noticed a piece of string tied around her hoof. It, in turn, was attached to a floating blue balloon.

"Somepony has to win and somepony has to lose, right?" Pinkie asked, adopting a strangely serious tone. One similar to her own, Antimony noticed. "Isn't that the nature of what we call 'reality'?"

The Baroness frowned and said one word: "Gewitter."

"Hey!"

The burly pegasus mare leaned over, rudely pushing Pinkie away. The sight of her brought a silent sigh of relief to the noblemare. Gewitter was still here. She had not left. Even

though her Baroness had lost.

It was... something.

"Do I really sound that condescending all the time?" Antimony asked, rolling onto her side and then standing up. Pinkie Pie was still close by and she ducked her head a little.

"I'm sorry you lost," she said, still held back by Gewitter. "But it isn't the end of the world! There's still a party or two to enjoy! *Then* the world can end!"

Antimony, for some reason, had to avoid the urge to meet Pinkie's stupidly silly smile with a timid, painful grin of her own. If she didn't know better, she would chalk it up to some kind of mind altering magic. Then again: mind altering magic *did* exist. Could a simple earth pony...?

No. No, probably not.

Instead, she turned around and found the far side of the courtyard where the end of the duel had taken place. It was the sight of her first serious defeat. There had been setbacks, at times, this was true. When her future had been on the line, though, she had always seized victory. Victory - merit - was the one virtue her father prized. Those who were skilled, those who strengthened the family and the family lands, were given position. Those unworthy were cast down and cast out.

The far side of the courtyard was empty. Father was gone. His mage guards were gone.

Antimony fought back tears.

"So," she whispered. "He did leave? He knew I would lose, so he left."

Around them, ponies were celebrating despite the late hour. This was the foalish tailgate party the Element of Laughter had organized. There were inane games, of which Antimony was a little shocked to see Princess Luna taking part, and upbeat -- and totally inappropriate - music playing from a gramophone. Some ponies were drinking and eating and others were fighting sleep, and everywhere they wore those damnable unicorn masks. This was not the sort of thing she had expected to accompany her one, brutal loss.

"Hey, Monee! Are you ok?" Pinkie asked, nudging her again, this time with her shoulder. "That was a pretty amazing duel, you know! I didn't get to see most of it, but there was a bit BOOM! and ZOW! And smashy-crash from the castle! And Applejack was like: 'we gotta go and make sure Rarity's ok!' And Twilight was all 'absolutely not! You'll disqualify her!' and I thought, gee, if only I'd brought the hot air balloon! Then we could have play by play commentary! Wouldn't that be neat?!"

"Didn't I explain that this is supposed to be a solemn event?" Antimony asked, deadpan.

"This *IS* a solemn event for me," Pinkie explained, also deadpan. Her bright expression remained, but darkened slightly as she remembered something else. "You know, you broke your Pinkie promise. Monee."

"Did I?" Antimony asked, and nodded as she realized she had. "I suppose that's true. I did."

"Are you sorry?" Pinkie asked, slipping out of Gewitter's hooves with bizarre ease.

"Perhaps a little," the noblemare replied.

Pinkie shook her head, her lips pursed into an unhappy moue.

"You and Rarity both broke your Pinkie promises!" she whined.

Antimony raised an eyebrow. "Both of us?"

"I had Rarity promise not to hurt you, too!" Pinkie explained, back to her bubbly self.

"But - why?" Antimony asked, utterly perplexed. "Why would you?"

"Why? That's a silly question, Monee!" Pinkie bounced over and rested her hooves on Antimony's shoulders, knocking her onto her rump and looking her in the eye. "I don't want to see my friends hurt each other!"

The noblemare could only blink in confusion.

"We're friends, aren't we?" Pinkie Pie asked. "Monee?"

"I... I don't know," she replied. "You have Rarity. You don't need me as a friend."

Pinkie just giggled, as if she Baroness had made some off-color joke.

"I don't care about stuff like that!" she said and winked, none-too-subtly. "But if you really need to do something to feel like somepony's friend, then I know just the thing! I've been *waiting* all night for my hot dog eating contest partner! Let's go unpack our tuxedos!"

"Gewitter."

Seeing her bodyguard tackle the pink terror did alleviate her spirits somewhat. What an odd pony she was, with a head full of odd ideas. Still, as Antimony scanned the crowd of ponies, she knew there was unfinished business. In fact, there was a great deal of unfinished business in Ponyville. It would be interesting to see if Lady Rarity was up to the task.

'We're friends, aren't we? Monee?'

"Crazy," she muttered to herself. These ponies were crazy.

- - -

The worst part of the evening came almost the moment Rarity reunited with her friends.

Rushing past them, none other than Mayor Mare hurried to take her hoof and shake it with all the energetic and carefully forecasted vigor of a career politician. Still dazed by her apparent victory, announced by Princess Luna at ear-splittingly close range, Rarity could only stare mutely and dumbly as the older pony fired off a stream of congratulations. She heard words like 'credit to Ponyville' and 'Ponyville's first citizen' and then the words 'our future Duchess!'

Followed, disturbingly, by Mayor Mare bowing deeply and reverently. Rarity blinked, confused, a moment away from asking her to stop - only to see other ponies follow their leader's example. More than a dozen heads bowed, and Rarity realized what she was seeing: they were bowing to the unicorn they expected to be their Duchess. They were bowing to *her*.

She - was going to be Duchess. Grand Duchess, even.

The thought made her feel faint, and not with joy. Even now, she had little idea what being Duchess of Canterlot actually involved. Her story books and novels, her magazines and papers, none of them ever went into much detail about what nobility really did. In his more introspective moments, Blueblood occasionally painted a picture of feeling powerless in his own position as Prince, but ever since the Gala he never seemed to lack for business to see to and affairs of state to arrange.

Rarity doubted she was the type to (as Antimony had described to Cheerilee's class) decide on weighty matters of provincial trade and she certainly had no impulse to command a legion of guardponies. All she really wanted was to be happy with the stallion behind the Prince she had dreamed of for so long. A degree of recognition and respect was only natural for a mare of refinement and taste, true enough, but an actual title and actual authority was, if anything, unwanted baggage.

Luckily Twilight and Applejack were soon by her side, helping her up.

Of course, a moment after that -

"All-right Rarity!!" A cascade of water drenched the poor unicorn from horn to hoof, courtesy of two pegasi: one accomplice and one instigator. Not even enchanted water she could repulse, just regular, cold water. Rarity sniffed and licked a drop of it from her lip. Great: make that *flavored water*.

"That was pretty awesome!" Rainbow Dash flew low enough to identify, tossing the empty water barrel away. She made a few frantic punching moves with her front legs. "I just wish I could've seen the fighting in the building! Hey, what was that spell you used at the end? It was like: Blazing Meteor Rainbow Uppercut! And then some pony popped up and said 'toasty!' and I was like 'Finish Her!' I thought you were in trouble back there, but you really kicked her flank! So cool!"

"It *was* pretty amazing," Fluttershy chimed in, landing nearby. "I didn't know you could do that, Rarity."

Twilight floated over a towel, helping the other unicorn to dry off.

"It looked like a rainbow," she observed, wincing at the mess - now the sticky, wet mess - that was Rarity's precious mane. "Didn't it?"

Rarity watched her friend and trainer, silent as her head rolled back and forth, her mane under the tender ministrations of Twilight's towel. She didn't even have enough magic to help, so instead she closed her eyes and waited, patiently. Her friends' voices surrounded her, and she even heard her parents talking a short distance away. No doubt Sweetie Belle wanted to run up to her. The little filly would probably bowl her right over with how her sister could barely muster the energy to stand.

Sighing, she finally stole a look. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were acting out the end of the duel, speculating what they had seen. Fluttershy had started helping Twilight to dry her off and Pinkie Pie was bouncing around all five of them listing off the rest of the fun she had planned for the evening. She then saw her parents... and the two unicorns talking with her parents. She nearly collapsed at the bemused expression on Fancypants's face given the rather bourgeois company of her father.

She also looked for her fallen opponent, and saw her being carried on her bodyguard's back. The huge mare was giving orders to the other red-coated guards that had escorted the crowd from Ponyville. Pointedly absent were the Terre Rare mage guards. They had promptly disappeared.

"Twilight," Rarity began, facing her friend. "I won't ask how much of this you thought would happen, but... could you please see to Lady Antimony for me?"

"I will," she promised, magically wringing out the formerly white towel, currently stained by dirt and berry flavored water.

"What I did to her, it - it wasn't bad, was it?" Rarity asked, worried.

"Impossible to tell," Twilight's response didn't fill her with confidence. "Not right away, anyway."

"Come on, sugarcube, you're dry enough!" Applejack interrupted, holding out a ripe red apple. "Let's get some food in you!"

Trying weakly to grab the apple with her magic, and failing, Rarity had little choice but to take it in her hoof. Her currently fragile state also meant she had no way to neatly cut the apple into fine slices, much less any ability to peel the skin away. Well - if she was going to be Grand Duchess, then perhaps she could afford a little impropriety when it came to Sweet Apple Acres' finest. Popping the whole thing in her mouth, she bit down.

"So," Applejack asked, as Rarity chewed. "Is it over then? I mean, ya did win, right?"

- - -

"I hate to say it, but... I don't like the way some ponies are looking at me now."

A little food and time spent off her hooves had done a great deal to restore vigor to Rarity's rather abused and overworked body. Even her magic had returned after a half hour or so, making it easier to drink and mingle. The effort was also what allowed her to realize that Mayor Mare's show of respect had begun to spread and take root in many other ponies. It was clearly one thing for her to be a local item, even a minor celebrity, and another for everypony in the crowd to know she had dueled with and defeated a Baroness for the right to be Canterlot's Duchess.

Fancypants, she hoped, would understand her situation. As much as she loved her friends, there was no way they could grasp quite what Rarity saw her situation spiraling towards. She didn't even want to think about what she would be doing in the long term as a result of what had happened tonight.

"You can't say it comes as a complete surprise," Fancypants told her, sipping punch from a paper cup without a hint of shame. "My dear, it must be just sinking in: you have now both the right and the desire to marry Lord Blueblood. Should you both wish it, of course. The Duchess of Canterlot is a first among equals. There is reason why Blueblood himself is both Duke and Prince."

"You would be Princess, if not... you know, for the Princesses," Fleur added with a small, amused grin. "Duchess actually makes one sound a little old, doesn't it, Fancy?"

"It has an air of age and dignity," he agreed, in a roundabout way.

"His way of saying the title makes one sound *old*," Fleur playfully draped a leg on his back, leaning on the large stallion like a giant pillow. "Foreigners are lucky to still have the Princess title in circulation. Here, Celestia and Luna have such a monopoly! It hardly seems fair to the rest of us non-alicorns, and then there's that *Cadence* mare--"

"Nonetheless," Fancypants interrupted, forestalling a potential tangent to the conversation. "Rarity, you may well be Duchess within the year. If other ponies have begun to defer to you, it is because they realize that you will stand among the most powerful and influential of Equestrian nobility."

"Aren't you a little excited by that fact?" Fleur asked, blinking her bright amethyst eyes. "Or at least curious?"

"I actually have little idea of what I will do as Duchess," Rarity admitted. "Blueblood never seemed to become involved in local affairs in Ponyville."

"Nor in Canterlot," Fancypants answered, knowing it was on the tip of her tongue. "It is arguable whether this is a good thing or not; some nobles dally too much in the goings-on of their realm. Others too little. Canterlot survived on trade and... frankly, cultural export. Blueblood has been good for the latter, but the former has suffered somewhat. Only in the last few months has something energized him. You, I assume?"

"I wish I could claim credit," Rarity shook her head. "If it has come about as something I said or did, I can't imagine what it is."

"As for what a Duchess must do?" Fleur winked playfully at the other mare. "An heir is usually involved!"

Rarity blushed at the idea - of course the model and minor noble was right. That was perhaps the most obvious bit of business she had to deal with. *If* she took title. For a moment, she recalled Antimony's offer for her to be Blueblood's mistress. Marriage was a very specific social contract among courtly circles, one with very clear end products.

"Preferably a daughter," Fancypants added, to her surprise.

"Fancy!" Fleur gave her stallion a reproachful little poke in the side with her hoof.

"I was speaking practically," the mogul and well-to-do stallion explained. "Nothing more. The Stable of Lords has always been quicker to recognize female heirs."

"And yet we have had two straight generations of male Bluebloods!" Fleur objected, waving a hoof at Rarity. "Don't listen to this silly colt when it comes to politics."

"Well, aside from... that," Rarity tried to press on. "You two must have some idea of what I will be called to do."

"Defend the realm!" Fleur spoke first, gesticulating dramatically. "Command the guard!"

"I am confident His Grace has that well and covered," Fancypants replied with far less enthusiasm. His shoulders tensed, but Fleur still hung onto him like a huge throw pillow. "What you must do, Lady Rarity, is to defend the honor of your station and to safeguard the secrets of your new house."

Rarity thought about that for a moment. "I do believe I can handle honoring my station."

"You have the grace and poise already," Fancypants agreed.

"And the dueling skill," Fleur chimed in.

"But what do you mean: safeguard the secrets of my new house?"

"It varies from family to family," Fancypants gestured back at his clingy wife. "The mare is traditionally the head of the household. Among some unicorn families, the old ones that is, that means she is also responsible for keeping records of certain spells and artifacts. The Bluebloods are the oldest of all Equestria's families, predating even the Princesses. I could hardly begin to speculate on the sorts of magics they have access to."

"My own family's great and secret spells are truly to be feared!" Fleur could almost have been taken seriously, had she not been wagging her hooves in mock fright.

"Not that she'll tell even me what those spells actually are," her husband countered. "Isn't that right, dear?"

Fleur responded by rolling her eyes. "You don't need to know what they are, so why bother asking?"

"You see? She makes light of it, but still keeps quiet."

"If you had married *into* my family, like I wanted, then maybe I could tell you."

Rarity looked from one to the other. Fancypants and Fleur were... an odd couple. "So I simply must keep these spells of his, *of ours*, secret?"

"That would be most of it, aside from the simple things: functions, organizing social events, finding some cause or another - that is always quite fashionable," he hesitated as he came to the end of his sentence. Fancypants expression changed, growing a little worried. At the urging of Fleur's less-than-subtle pointing behind her, Rarity turned around.

Lady Antimony had paused, waiting, a polite distance away.

Seeing she had been identified, she took it as her cue to close in. Fleur notably dismounted her famous husband to stand on all fours, even going so far as to straighten up her posture and fix her mane. Rarity found her sudden rigidity actually rather amusing: Fleur was excessively and flamboyantly casual in her appearance, a fact she got away with in part by being a gorgeous supermodel. Fancypants, too, quickly assumed a stiff and proper appearance. His cup dipped low, as if he was tempted to throw it away, if only for a moment.

"Gentleponies," the Baroness spoke in her usual smooth, dignified voice. "How nice to see you all."

It was, of course, an empty compliment. Rarity well remembered Antimony calling the stallion present an 'effete bauble peddler' or something of the sort. The noblewoman may not have been a great fan of the merchant classes in private, or perhaps she had some problem with Fancypants specifically?

"My Lady," Fancypants bowed his head.

"Your Ladyship," Fleur followed a second later, bowing with practiced grace.

Antimony inclined her head at the show of respect, responding to it with one of her own. "I would share words with Lady Rarity, if you please."

"Of course," Fancypants quickly agreed. "If that is alright with you, Lady Rarity? We can continue this later."

"I'll find you two soon," the Element of Generosity promised.

As the two left, she wondered - a little belatedly - why she didn't feel nervous standing next to the mare she had dueled so viciously just an hour ago? This same mare who had trapped her in cruel illusions, used enchanted rocks to batter her and pin her to a wall. This same mare who had chased her through the abandoned castle nearby, taunting her and hunting her. Despite

her exhaustion in both their bodies, she was still Rarity, and Antimony... was still Antimony.

Something still seemed different. Was it just confidence? No: it didn't feel like that either.

Antimony opened her mouth to speak, closed it, and gathered her bearing. Rarity noticed her glance down at the balloon still tied to her right front leg. She took that moment to see if the noblemare was as injured as she had seemed before. Truth be told, neither of them would be winning beauty contests anytime soon: Rarity's mane was now unfashionably short - despite her attempts to style it herself - and she had ugly bruises on her legs. Antimony's mane was intact, but she had no styling magic and no way to fix how ragged and unkempt it appeared. The white coats of both mares were dirty.

"You have beaten me, and I should congratulate you for it," the Baroness finally spoke up, giving voice to her thoughts. "The duel was honorably fought and I shall not hold grudge because of it."

"If I had lost, I'm not sure I would say the same," Rarity admitted, keeping her voice low enough that the conversation could be mostly private.

"I had thought, in passing, that this 'friendship magic' of yours was a cheat. That you had stolen victory from me." Antimony's half lidded eyes betrayed just a tiny flash of anger, but then she shook her head sadly and put it aside. "But after dwelling on it more, I can not accept that as anything other than a pitiful and desperate excuse. I refuse to sink so low, so... I shall not plot or move against you, should you move to become Duchess."

"So we may part on good terms?" Rarity asked, and cautiously smiled. She held out a hoof.

"Make no mistake, you have set to ruin some twenty years of my life," Antimony stated, somehow without a trace of a growl. "Since I was your little sister's age, I have strived towards only one goal: to take for myself the Platinum Crown of Canterlot. To realize the dreams of Lady Arsenic. To punish the Bluebloods who stole our legacy. Tonight, my dream turns to ash. Even my own father, who acknowledged only me as worthy daughter and heir, has forsaken me."

Rarity lowered her offered hoof, disappointed. "I... see... perhaps it was a bit too much to ask, so suddenly?"

Before it touched the ground, Antimony reached out and took it, her hoof, in her own.

Rarity looked up in surprise.

"Until such time as I can claim it for myself," Antimony told her, shaking one firm shake. "I will be content to see That Crown on your head. You can keep it safe for me."

"Is that so?" Rarity asked, her smile cracking into a grin as she repressed a laugh. "As I said: stubborn."

"I would and I have said the same of you," the noblemare replied. "In this world, a true

Lady must be stubborn to realize her dreams; as you may come to realize yours. *Lady. Rarity.*"

Antimony bowed her head in respect, and Rarity did the same, their horns briefly touching. This, she realized, was the real end of the duel. Not when one of them had beaten the other. Not when she had touched that cupcake to Antimony's cheek. The duel *ended* when the feud *ended*. Whatever else Antimony was, she would honor the way of life she knew. Rarity believed her when she said she would not plot or move against her, at least until she took the crown.

This... at last, was the victory she had been waiting for.

"I was once told: to fill a cup with anything pure, it must first be emptied. Fighting you, at the end there," Antimony's voice cracked and she paused to exhale, steadying herself. "I felt like an empty cup. Instead of being full and pure, I felt empty. I felt like the cup that was my life had been upended and broken."

"But maybe... a broken cup doesn't have to be full and what's in it doesn't have to be pure. The friendship of magic, was it?" Antimony shook her head, rueful but accepting. "I'll remember the feeling."

She smirked and gave Rarity's hoof one last shake.

"In the meantime, should you survive the year, I pray you enjoy the fruits of your labor!"

"Well, thank you, but - waa? What? Hold up a moment...!" Rarity raised a leg in confusion. "What do you mean: if I survive the year?"

"Oh? You must not know?" Antimony wondered, and explained with a dark chuckle, "You see, all the mares I defeated to earn the right to pursue my engagement with the Prince... they lost to me, *not* to the mare who defeats me. You have only replaced one enemy with a dozen! I do hope you are ready."

Rarity did not miss the irony in what her former opponent said next:

"From this point on, you will be the pony everypony wishes to lay low."

- - -

Home.

It was so, so good to be home.

To Rarity's very personal and very private relief, she and the rest of the Tailgate Partiers had arrived back in Ponyville by the afternoon of the next day. Guardponies, from both Antimony's retinue and from Luna's Night Guard, had taken shifts watching the revelers as they began to turn in. There were no real sleeping arrangements: ponies just slept on the grass or on rolled up lawn blankets that had been packed onto a cart. Rarity had spent the night curled up next to her friends and family, basking in the company and companionship. Only one warm body was

missing, but she supposed that couldn't be helped.

They were all back in Ponyville now, and the streets were bustling with activity. Ponies were chatting in whispers, and sometimes in loud voices, about the duel and what they had seen. Fancypants and Fleur had left in the morning after 'camping out' and enjoying what they thought to be a 'rustic excursion.' No doubt Fleur would be spreading word of Antimony's unlikely defeat as fast as her limbs could strike appropriate poses to describe the occasion.

There would be no disguising the details of this duel from the public. For better or for worse.

Rarity was only moments away from opening the door to her Boutique when her body tensed and she spun around, blocking an incoming -

Tennis ball.

"Honestly, Twilight-darling, you must be more careful." Rarity flicked the ball back the way it came with a tiny application of magic. Twilight Sparkle caught it with a raised hoof.

"The Princess once told me: the study of magic and the training to use it, it only ends when you want it to. I always thought she was telling me that 'life is study.'" She levitated the tennis ball back to Rarity, more slowly this time. The other balls followed, in their rainbow of colors. "Are you planning on stopping?"

"I only did all that to beat Antimony," Rarity explained, but enveloped the six magical tennis balls in a field of her own.

Twilight smiled in understanding. "And you did."

"I did," Rarity replied.

"You aren't happy about it?"

"I am," Rarity objected. "I think I'm just a little worn out. The last week has been an absolute roller-coaster. I just need more time to process it all..." She saw her friend about to turn and leave, and asked, "Twilight!"

The other unicorn stopped, looking back in curiosity.

"Twilight," Rarity asked again, "What would you do if you were in my place? Would you want... you know? Would you want to become Duchess?"

The studious bookworm answered with an anxious laugh.

"Well, I don't exactly know Prince Blueblood very well-"

"Twilight, you know what I mean."

Twilight Sparkle's smile faded as she replied, more seriously. "It sounds like a huge responsibility. Canterlot has secrets, Rarity. Places most ponies aren't allowed to go. Things they aren't supposed to know or see."

Twilight sighed, not liking her own train of thought much.

"It'll just be you, Blueblood, and the Princesses going to those places and knowing those things," she said, sounding sorry for her friend. "Lady Antimony thought she was ready for that. That was all she wanted."

"And you?" Rarity asked, point-blank. "Is that something you would want, Twilight?"

"I don't know," the other unicorn replied, shaking her head. "I just don't know. How many ponies knew Discord wasn't just a statue in a garden? Probably only three... and all three spent their lives living right next to him. Wouldn't it be hard to sleep at night living like that?"

Rarity's own thoughts were eerily similar to those expressed by her friend. Her ears folded back and her head dropped down as she imagined all the other things that lay in her future. Then there was the other warning Antimony had passed on to her.

"Rarity," Twilight said, walking closer, close enough to reach out and touch her friend's shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll always be there to help, and you know everypony else will be there, too."

"Thank you again, Twilight. For everything over the last few days." Rarity quickly hugged her former trainer, close friend and fellow Element of Harmony.

The parted and Twilight trotted off to check on her library.

"Any time!" she called back over her shoulder. "Drop by if you want to help with studying that torc! ...Now where did Spike go? I swear he's always wandering off..."

Waving one last time, Rarity returned to her Boutique. Talking with somepony always helped, at least a little, even with literally the weight of Canterlot and Ponyville on her mind. The door clicked open, and she entered the darkened shop. The silhouettes of mannequines and dresses, both finished and unfinished, stood out against the faint light trickling in from outside. Rarity began to summon up the magic to draw the Boutique curtains wide.

"Hold that thought, would you?"

Rarity's magic caught mid-cast, pooling around her horn. The inadvertent illumination pushed back the shadows with a faint blue tint. It was enough to reveal one of her larger mannequines shifting as it moved, jumping down off a stand and into the light. It craned its neck, and the horn glowed revealing a face: white coat and a blond mane.

"Blueblood?" Rarity moved to gallop forward only to hesitate. "It... is you, isn't it?"

"You kick me when you sleep," the stallion stated, rattling off the fact without a care.

"I do, do I?" Rarity stalked up to him. "At least I don't roll around and smother ponies with my bulk."

"And I do?" he asked.

"My kicking you is a self defense mechanism."

"My rolling is to pre-empt your kicking."

"Well," Rarity said, now face to face with her intruder. Blueblood, as he rarely did, wore nothing, not even a vest or neckcloth. He looked tired and a little worn, but then Rarity couldn't help but point out she didn't look much better.

"You do seem to be you," she decided.

"Rarity," he began, his tone of voice losing it's characteristic arrogance and confidence. "I... I'm sorry I - "

She cut him off, lifting her head up to lean in, her lips catching his mid-explanation. She heard him sigh in defeat and lean in himself, sharing the kiss in the privacy of her closed shop. It felt like ages since they had been together and alone, and the emotional highs and lows of the week condensed and amplified by the duel weighted heavily on her mind. Blueblood had a lot to explain, a lot to share that he should have shared weeks or months ago, and probably a story to tell as to how and why he was lying in wait like this. She knew he did, but all that could wait.

Their lips parted, and she smiled.

"Now that's real," she said, and sauntered past him.

"You'll have to explain that one," he remarked, turning to follow her.

"No one knows you're here?" she asked instead, making for the stairs to the second floor.

"That was rather the point of my sneaking in."

"Good. We can share explanations later."

"Are you sure?"

Rarity paused to glance back over her shoulder. Her mane was an atrocious mess. Her legs still hurt from all the walking and running and jumping and, yes, the being battered by rocks didn't help either. Her tail probably had little thorns in it, to say nothing of dust and bits of Everfree spiderweb. Her coat still smelt faintly of the flavored water Rainbow Dash had dumped on her. She had just spent the longest night of her life fighting the second most powerful, and certainly the first most terrifying, pony she had ever met.

"Ah. You're sure, then," Blueblood realized.

"Good boy," she said, leading him back to her room.

- - -

"A new Baroness?"

A long lane of blooming cherry trees stretched along the sides of a wide decomposed granite paved road. Against a backdrop of distant mountains, a single castle loomed at the end of the picturesque roadway rising up from the terraced farmland like a small vertical mountain itself. A single blossom fell from one of the hundred trees, caught in the wind and drifted upwards... until finally the pink petal fluttered to land on the steaming surface of a cup of tea.

Green eyes glanced down at the cherry blossom that had fallen in her cup.

The cup in turn rested on a saucer, itself on top of more cherry blossoms. Like a pink cloud, it hovered in the air, suspended but always shifting. A pony sat calmly on top of the floating mass. A cherry blossom petal falling into her cup, despite flying above the trees?

"How lucky."

- - -

A Wonderbolt uniform hung in the cloud-form closet tucked between a pair of decorative pillars. An arching dome overhead, also made of solidified cloud, depicted scenes of pegasi and chariots and storms. More uniforms hung from the walls in places of honor. The Wonderbolts mare's locker-room was alive with chatter, but one mare had little to say to her comrades.

A cadet-gray leg snagged the uniform and slammed the locker shut. Tossing it over her shoulder, a pegaus with a jagged green-yellow mane laughed as she headed to practice. Passing by a wastebasket, one wing snapped out, discarding the remains of a pink letter.

"Fun. This'll be fun."

- - -

Birds chirped and flew around the glass solarium and aviary: little brightly colored birds flying from brand to branch, to one of a half dozen hidden feeders or to marble and iron baths cleaned and refilled daily. It was bright and sunny out, the rays of light filling the open solarium with life and energy. It was a wonderful new day.

A brush moved slowly, oil painting on canvas recreating the plumage of a bright red cardinal spreading wings and taking to the air. The artist did not use magic to paint. A golden ring circled the base of her horn.

"Chalice."

The brush paused, almost slipping.

"Yes, big brother?" The middle daughter of the Terre Rare main house turned to see her brother standing outside the gilded cage.

"Ready yourself," Alpha Brass said, smirking. "We have a meeting with Father."

"Antimony?"

"She's out of the picture. Isn't that nice?" The handsome golden stallion's smirk broadened into a vicious grin. "You don't want to squander this chance."

- - -

A delicate hoof held the small, bright pink slip of paper. It was a most curious sort of invitation. The letterhead and font were floral but the flanks were bedecked in stylistic balloons, each bearing a different heraldic icon. It was almost as if someone had taken a normal, proper invitation and passed it through the hooves of a hyperactive filly on a sugar-high for proof-reading... and scribbling.

"Ponyville, hmm?"

A peach colored bubble of magic, sparkling with grains of sand, slipped the signed invitation back into its envelope.

"Ponyville it is."

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<https://docs.google.com/document/d/19Qvv2yrDU9EAVfTgEK1jYb-8wIK3q2vEC48BsPYr-Ck/e/dit>

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