

~ Act I: Scene II ~

“Places, places everyone, please! Right, once more, from the top...”

A black coated and white maned unicorn pony raised his conductor’s baton and tapped it on the music stand before him until he was sure he had everypony’s attention. He took a final glance at the ponies gathered on stage, and those around him in the orchestra pit, and swung the baton.

The musicians took the cue and began playing a slow, melodic waltz as the ponies on stage quickly began stepping back and forth in time to the music and to each other, dancing elegantly across the wooden platform, their quick, light hoofsteps making hardly a sound.

A spotlight was turned on in the rafters and gangways above the stage, and spun down to illuminate a pegasus in the centre of the stage. Her coat was a warm peach, and her mane and tail a strong amaranth pink, styled in an elaborate twist, not totally unlike Rarity’s own.

In fact, as Rarity watched with Fluttershy from the sidelines, she unconsciously flicked her tail in irritation. Falsetto leant in between the two and whispered;

“That prancing pegasus in the centre there is the renowned singer, Prima Donna. The old manager was quite fond of her, and often gave her the star roles, but I’ve been trying to... phase her out. Ah, this is her number now. You’ll see what I mean.”

As the waltz began to pick up speed, Prima Donna unfurled her wings with a dramatic flair, and leapt into the air, hovering a few feet above the stage as the dancers whirled and pirouetted around her.

She raised a hoof to her chest and took a deep breath. Fluttershy noticed out of the corner of her eye that Falsetto was instinctively folding his ears against his head and cringing in anticipation.

Prima Donna’s first note rang out across the opera hall, as strong as a gale. She sang, loudly and with practised skill, sending her voice out to fill every nook and cranny of the auditorium. A brief flash from a unicorn’s horn bent the beam of the spotlight around the hovering pegasus, curling it about her like a cloak as she sang.

As the second verse began and the dancers joined her in chorus, Fluttershy almost forgot that this was merely a rehearsal, and the stalls stood empty before the stage. As Prima Donna sang of a lost love reunited by fateful chance at a masque ball, Fluttershy could picture the scene, seeing the lavish colours and vibrant banners decorating the ballroom, while masked and costumed ponies danced and spun around and around in an endless waltz.

The music built to a crescendo as Prima Donna's voice climbed higher and higher, each ascending note punctuated by a flap of her wings as she hung above the stage like an angel of music.

However, as she hit a high C, the illusion was shattered by the piercing noise. Fluttershy's own ears pressed against her head as she winced, and Rarity stumbled like she'd been struck. The chandelier jingled as the blasting note resonated through the theatre. The conductor pony calmly put out a hoof to steady the sheet music before him as it threatened to blow away. Fluttershy could barely make out the strangled notes of the strings section as their bows slipped from their hooves, or the squeak of the brass as they choked on their own breath. One or two of the dancers faltered, missing a step and crushing the hoof of their partner.

Finally, the ordeal ended, as Prima Donna finished her song and sank gently back to the stage, her coat of light fading away as the spotlight was extinguished.

The conductor pulled out an earplug.

"Thank you, Prima Donna... gentlecolts, fillies. I think that will do for now. When we reconvene we'll go over the ballet in Act Three." He stepped down, the sheet music floating up and following behind him as he trotted away.

Falsetto leant forward again, and Fluttershy found herself rooted in place.

"A marvellous voice, to be sure, but... What she lacks in *talent*, she makes up for in **volume**, you understand." He said, quietly. All Rarity and Fluttershy could do was nod.

As the yellow pegasus watched Prima Donna walk away, head held high, she suddenly understood the unspoken meaning in Falsetto's words.

"... Y-you brought me here to... to replace her?" She squeaked, staring at the older grey earth pony with wide eyes. Falsetto cringed at what he felt was more of an accusation than a question.

"Well... Not 'replace', no, that's an unnecessarily harsh way of putting it, my dear, it's just... Prima Donna is not... Well... She lacks that true talent, that *spark*, if you will... She's exceptionally well-trained, but her singing... It's methodical, cold." He explained, trying to avoid looking directly at Fluttershy.

"... Truth be told, I half-suspect my predecessor was either a 'friend' of hers, or in her family's pay, or perhaps both. Whilst I certainly have no intention of *replacing* her, I felt that perhaps she should settle for smaller parts... allow fresh, new talent a chance to shine!" Now he looked her straight in the eyes.

“Like yourself! I will help you shine all across Equestria!”

Fluttershy felt a cold dread creep over her..

Rarity knew Fluttershy well enough to read her body language like a book. For such a shy pony, she wore her heart on her sleeve. Sensing that the conversation was about to take a turn for the worse, she interrupted.

“Well, I can’t say I thought much of her mane. That style looked all wrong on her.” She bounced her own lightly on her hoof. “I’ll just have to see what I can do about **that.**” Satisfied the conversation was suitably derailed, she continued.

“Oh, Falsetto, I simply must show you my first designs... I’ve had a flood of new ideas since arriving here, and I want to make sure the finished articles are perfect!” She turned, letting Falsetto lead the way back off the stage, and gave Fluttershy a reassuring smile. She smiled back, grateful for Rarity’s tactful change of subject.

She watched the stagehands clear the props away as they prepared for the next scene, mulling over her own thoughts.

She still wasn’t sure how to feel about the whole affair. She liked singing, and she was forced to admit she liked singing for her friends. Pinkie Pie often turned to her for help when struggling with a new song, either because she felt the melody wasn’t quite right or the lyrics needed some work. Or once, as Fluttershy recalled, when the pink party pony was left speechless by a mischievous blue bloom.

In fact, after the group’s encounter with Poison Joke, she remembered Twilight Sparkle had been comparing the effects on herself and her friends, deducing that the plant somehow affected, through the plant’s own magic, the quality about themselves that a pony took the most delight in, or was most proud of.

When, one day over tea, Twilight had asked her directly why her voice was affected by the flower, she’d had to do some quick mental gymnastics to come up with a reasonable-sounding excuse: the deeper voice made her sound more intimidating, which meant she couldn’t help her animal friends.

Twilight had said no more about it, but Fluttershy knew herself that that wasn’t the whole reason. It was true that her animal friends had been a little taken aback by ‘Flutterguy’, but when she spoke gently and softly to them, they soon came around.

If she was being truly honest with herself, she loved her voice. Her ability to work with animals extended to all areas of their lives, and singing with the birds always boosted her confidence in

herself when she was feeling low.

So why was she feeling so nervous at the thought of singing professionally?

She was startled out of her introspection when a large elephant knocked her aside. She was about to instinctively apologize for being in its way, before it was swung aside, and she realised it was just a prop.

Feeling a little sheepish, she made her way down from the stage and wandered back towards her room.

A few hours and several practice sessions later, Fluttershy was standing back at the edge of the stage and watching as the stagehands set up the scene; a moonlit night over the open fields of Equestria. She smiled a little when she noticed that the wooden moon had been recently and hastily painted over to remove the famous Mare.

Rarity came to join her, looking flustered, a few strands of mane out of place.

“Oh! Rarity! Are you alright?” She asked, quickly showing concern. Rarity heaved a sigh and put on a smile.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, it’s just I’ve been working with that ‘diva’, Prima Donna, all afternoon. She’s arrogant, bossy, and downright rude. Not to mention ungrateful! I drew up a design that would’ve looked beautiful on her during the second act, but she took one look at it and threw it aside like... Like trash!” Rarity stopped to check herself, taking a deep breath to calm down. “‘Is no good for me’, she said; ‘I must look like the Celestia herself for my big number!’ I mean, the nerve of some ponies!” She stomped a hoof in emphasis, drawing some attention and whispered jokes from the stagehands. She glared at them as they laughed and went back to work.

“But what about you, darling? How are you finding it here?” She asked, ignoring them and turning to Fluttershy.

“Oh, well, uhm, it’s... nice.”

Rarity frowned. “I know what *that* means.”

She didn’t get a chance to press further, as the conductor tapped the music stand for attention.

“Now then, fillies and gentlecolts, I know this piece was originally intended to be sung by Miss Days, but now that she has left us, the part will instead be sung by...” He paused, his composure

momentarily shaken, and his voice cracked as he mentioned the name. "... *Signora* Prima Donna." He ran a hoof through his mane while the other dancers and singers shuffled about and looked down at their hooves.

Prima Donna strode into centre stage and stood proudly, wings extended and head held high. Without looking in his direction, she waved a (beautifully pedicured) hoof at the conductor.

"Whenever you are ready, *maestro*."

The conductor resigned himself and raised the baton.

What happened next was a blur.

No sooner had Prima Donna opened her mouth, than there was a barely audible 'twang' from somewhere in the rafters above the stage. The wooden moon swung low as one of the ropes holding it aloft fell away, cut clean through, the other soon following suit.

It dropped from above almost as if Luna herself guided it, and before any of the unicorn technicians had time to react, it crashed squarely onto Prima Donna below. A mixed gasp of shock and relief went up from all present, and the stagehoofs rushed to help the singer from the heap of wood.

Falsetto strode onto the stage, glaring up at the rafters.

"Iron Knot! What happened up there?" He yelled to a pony staring wide-eyed at nothing, seemingly rooted to the spot in fear. He managed to find voice, and stuttered:

"G-ghost! I saw him! I saw the Ghost! He c-cut the ropes!"

The ponies on the stage and in the orchestra pit murmured amongst each other, shooting frightened glances around the empty theatre. Falsetto grimaced. "Just what I needed..."

Prima Donna was pulled, battered and ruffled, from the wreckage, fury written across her features and splinters in her mane.

"Ghost? Pfah! Is your ploy to get rid of me, eh? You arrange this!" She pointed an accusing hoof at Falsetto, who backed up a step.

"S-signora, I assure you, there's no 'ploy'! These things happen! The rope was probably frayed!"

"*'These things do 'appen!'*" Prima Donna sang back, mockingly. "This is the third time *'these things do 'appen'* in a month! And if *'these things'* **do** 'appen, then **this** thing does **not** 'appen!"

She yelled back, gesturing to herself as she hovered above the stage. “Enough! I go now! Bye-bye! You get your little canary to replace me!” She turned to Fluttershy, glaring at her in anger. “Maybe **she** sing better for you and appease your ‘ghosts’, eh?”

She flew across the theatre and out the double-doors of the auditorium. An awkward silence descended in the wake of her departure, and Fluttershy could feel everypony looking at her.

She felt like she wanted to cry.

The conductor looked at Falsetto, breaking the silence by clearing his throat.

Falsetto looked to the conductor, and gave a resigned sigh.

“**Signora!**” He yelled, running out after her. As the double-doors swung shut once more, the ponies gathered inside the theatre whispered to one another about what had just happened. Fluttershy caught snatches of sentences as they echoed around the auditorium.

“... *Phantom...*”

“... *Third time this month...*”

“... *look on her face!*”

“... *‘course she’ll be back...*”

“... *yellow one over there...*”

“... *Miss Day’s replacement?*”

Rarity leant over to Fluttershy, keeping her own voice to a whisper.

“That didn’t look like an accident to me... Look at the ropes, they’ve been cut through! And not only that, but I’d swear someone placed that moon there deliberately. I saw them practising this scene yesterday, and it was at the back of the stage, not the centre.” She frowned at the pile of what was now little more than firewood.

Fluttershy looked at it, trying to ignore the glances in her direction. She could see the dangling end of rope in the rafters above, and it did seem strange to hang it over the centre stage, especially since it was a background piece. She trusted Rarity’s judgement on such matters, at least.

But if it **wasn’t** an accident, the bigger question remained: who?

"I can see that *harpy* is not well-liked." Rarity cut in, referring to the mythical group of griffons that tormented ponies with their harsh voices and sharp claws. "Perfectly understandable, of course. I'm surprised she has any supporters at all, the way she treats other ponies. And what was all that about a ghost?" She frowned again, raising a hoof to her chin.

"Falsetto mentioned in Ponyville that his last singer left because of a 'ghost'... Oh, this won't do. I shall simply have to do some digging!"

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow at her.

"... Metaphorically speaking, darling, of course."

<<- *Act I: Scene I* ~ *Act I: Scene III* ->>