

~ Act I: Scene IV ~

A group of ponies, dancers, singers and stagehoofs were all gathered in a small room off the side of the main stage, sitting encircled around a unicorn as he spun wild tales.

“His coat... Well, if you can call it a coat, is grey like slate, patches of hair over a bare body, nothing more than skin stretched over a skeletal frame! His eyes are black pits sunken into the side of his skull, and a hole serves for a muzzle that never grew!”

Iron Knot grinned as he looked around at his enraptured audience. He stood in the centre of the small crowd, lit by a spotlight hovering above, and dressed in an old cloak that he swept around himself dramatically.

“And of course, you must always be on your guard... Or the Phantom will catch you in his magical lasso!” He swung a rope for emphasis, catching one of the dancers around her forelegs and pulling her over with a quick tug. She giggled helplessly as Iron Knot stood over her and growled affectionately.

“*‘Those who speak of what they do not know find too late that silence is wise.’*” Another voice spoke up from behind the crowd, making Iron Knot look up and frown.

The dancers shuffled aside hurriedly as their choreographer, Quick Step, moved into the spotlight. She circled Iron Knot, glaring at him while the roped dancer edged away. Quick Step snapped up the end of the rope in her teeth and wrapped it around Iron Knot’s neck, pulling it just tight enough that it became uncomfortable.

“Iron Knot... Hold your tongue.” She hit him with one of her forehooves.

“And the rest of you, get back to practice. No more talk of ghosts and phantoms, we have an opera to perform.” She scowled, looking around at the assembled ponies, who avoided her sweeping gaze. As one, they quietly walked away, leaving Iron Knot and Quick Step under the light.

She gave him another long look, before letting the rope fall from his neck. He said nothing, but stumbled away, his expression a mix of shock and embarrassment. Quick Step went out after her dancers, and the room was empty once more.

The light went out, cloaking the room in darkness, but for a single violet glow from atop the rafters.

Rarity carefully floated the spotlight back to the floor, smiling to herself.

“Angel! Come back here!” Fluttershy shouted into the darkness where her rabbit had disappeared, but no reply came.

“You come back here this instant, young man, or I’ll... uhm... I’ll be... Very upset!” Her voice echoed down the corridor.

Fluttershy strained to hear any sound of Angel’s footsteps, but all she could make out was the dripping of water against cold stone.

“... Please?”

She fell back on her haunches and chewed her lip nervously, wondering what to do.

“I... I-I could go get help, but I can’t leave Angel all alone in there...” She said out loud, using herself as a sounding board. “... I’ll just have to be more brave, like Rainbow Dash.”

She rose to her hooves and stared down the black tunnel that stretched away before her.

“... I-I faced down a dragon. I saved the girls from a cockatrice.” She gulped, scraping her hoof on the floor. She took a deep breath, and made a tentative step forward, repeating her words in her head.

Her wings stretched out to touch the walls on either side. The corridor was wide enough for two ponies to walk comfortably, side-by-side, and her wing-tips brushed against rusted sconces nailed to the damp, stone walls. The cold, clammy feel of the tunnel clung to her hide as she continued to walk. She could see nothing before her, and looking over her shoulder, even the light of her room seemed far, far away.

It was as she was glancing over her shoulder that she collided with a wall. After regaining her footing, she felt along the wall with her wings, still blind in the dark. A chill wind picked up to her right, and she could hear the distant sound of rushing water in that direction. Following her ears, she kept herself pressed against the wall, edging forward and making each step carefully.

She came to a flight of stairs that spiralled down into the mountain, and decided to take to flight in case she slipped on the wet stone. As she followed the walls, circling around and around in what seemed like an endless flight down into the depths, the sound of rushing water grew louder and louder.

Fluttershy descended the final few steps and was met by another long corridor. She could see a soft light at the other end, like the glow of a unicorn’s horn, at once both inviting and otherworldly. The sound of what she imagined to be a waterfall was now a loud roaring that echoed along the stone walls, drenched as they were in mist.

She emerged into a vast, natural cavern, the same underground lake that Rarity had told her rumours of. What she'd heard wasn't the half of it. The walls of the cavern, hewn from the rock of Canterlot Mountain by centuries, perhaps millennia of water rushing through them, were studded with rich amethyst gemstones, the source of the strange and almost unnatural light that permeated the entire cavern.

The gems stretched from floor to ceiling, creating a large dome, in which sat the lake itself, reflecting in its ripples the lights above, making them look almost like a starry night sky against the dark water. In the ceiling, a perfectly circular inlet had been cut, through which the waters from above poured into the lake. The mist created by the artificial waterfall was breathtakingly beautiful as it shone with the full spectrum of blues, violets, purples, indigos and reds, reflected and refracted from the crystalline theatre.

She just floated in the air, staring at the sight and drinking in the beauty of it.

A brief flash of white out of the corner of her eye brought Fluttershy back to reality, remembering the reason she had ventured down here to begin with. She swept down and grabbed up Angel in her hooves, torn between chiding the small rabbit or just hugging him.

"Angel! I was so worried! Thank goodness you're alright..." Angel glowered at her. Fluttershy's smile turned into a frown as she glowered back. "And don't you *ever* run off like that again, young man, you hear me? Now, we're going to go back up and tell Rarity-" Angel cut her off with a frustrated shaking of the head, pointing out across the water to a smaller tunnel where the lake wound away further into the mountains. Fluttershy glanced between it and Angel.

"... You want to go on further?"

Angel nodded.

"Well, I suppos-..." Fluttershy trailed off, before she felt a sudden conviction about the matter. She placed Angel on the bank of the lake and looked him directly in the eyes.

"No. We're going to go back up to the opera house. We can come down here again later, with Rarity."

Angel folded his arms.

"Come on now, Angel..."

He shook his head.

"Angel."

He turned away.

“ANGEL.”

He held his head up and sniffed in the manner of a Canterlot aristocrat.

Fluttershy frowned, and jumped in front of him. The air around the two grew chill as she gave him the full force of The Stare.

Angel looked up at Fluttershy, and raised an eyebrow. He held her gaze, a bulwark of defiance against the ocular onslaught. Sweat beaded on Fluttershy's forehead as the two engaged in mental conflict, Stare against Stare.

She blinked first. Angel smiled smugly and waited expectantly for the pegasus to concede. Fluttershy sighed, extending a hoof for him to climb on her back. He leapt up and grabbed a lock of her hair like reins, jabbing her in the shoulder with his foot, pointing dramatically towards the tunnel on the far side of the lake. Fluttershy shot him one final glare and took off, flying low above the surface of the water.

She could see flashes of silver as fish darted through the dark water, the light of the gemstones reflected off their scales. A few swam to the surface to nip at her hooves as she flew, winding over the lake, avoiding the waterfall and the great clouds of mist at its base. As she approached the tunnel, she could see that the amethyst covering of the walls ended a short distance in, plunging into darkness once more. However, she could just make out a dim light at the far end of the tunnel, that looked to be the more familiar light of a torch or lamp.

Flying slowly towards it, keeping her head low to avoid hitting the cavern ceiling, she passed worn masonry and rusted sconces. From what she could make out in the low light, they were a similar design and cut to the tunnels that connected the lake to the opera house above, but must've been constructed quite some time ago considering their current state.

She came to the end of the tunnel, and peered around the corner. Before her lay a sort of small harbour, lit by candelabras that stood in the water. A small boat was docked at the foot of a flight of stone steps, leading up away from the harbour to a ledge above. From where she was, Fluttershy could see curtains hung from the stone ceiling, obscuring much of her view of the ledge.

Suddenly, a loud note echoed in the cave, the sound of a hoof striking a pipe organ, deliberately discordant. The noise so startled Fluttershy that her wings immediately locked to her sides, and she fell into the water below with a cry. The music ceased instantly, and as she fought for the surface, she could hear the echoing clops of somepony running towards down the steps towards her.

She felt strong hooves slip under her wings, and she was pulled from the water, coughing and spluttering. Angel hopped to the stone steps, looking particularly bedraggled. Fluttershy was placed beside the rabbit by her rescuer, who looked at her with some concern.

“Are you alright?” He asked. His voice was deep, the voice of a stallion of some years, but it carried a melodic and soothing quality. It was the voice of a trained singer, an artist, or perhaps a noble. The sort of voice Prince Blueblood could only wish to imitate.

Fluttershy opened her eyes, staring up at the face of her rescuer. Or rather, the mask that obscured it. A pristine white half-mask ran from the stallion’s forehead down over his left eye, along his muzzle, and curved down around his mouth and along his cheek. In the dim candlelight, she could make out nothing more of his features, beyond the slate-grey of his coat, a black mane and unusually long ears. He was also dressed in formal opera wear, although he had discarded his cloak and waistcoat before running in after Fluttershy.

She blinked at him, her own wet mane plastered across one eye in a mimic of the stallion’s mask.

“I-I’m fine, thank you.” She squeaked. Angel hopped onto her chest, standing between her and the stallion, brandishing the rose with its (now soaked) black ribbon that he had taken from Fluttershy’s room. The stallion’s eyes widened in recognition.

“Ah! How did... Nevermind. We must get you dried off. Come, let me show you my humble abode.” He said, rising from his knees and trotting back up the stairs, pausing to pick up his cloak and throw it over his shoulders with a practised flourish. Angel glared after him. Fluttershy looked at the rose the little rabbit held in his paw, then to the retreating figure of the stallion, suddenly understanding.

“... Was that what this was about? You were jealous!” She smiled, hugging the rabbit between her hooves, and placing him back on the stone so she could get up. “Still...” she continued, half to herself, “He seems friendly, and it would be rude to leave now...”

Angel frowned, but hopped up the steps, Fluttershy following close behind. She stepped through a curtain at the top of the flight to find what looked like a finely furnished cave. Part of the original tunnels had given way at some point in the past, and water had gouged an overhang into the rock walls, now turned into a homely cavern by the masked pony. Richly woven rugs were strewn across the floor, upon which sat desks and tables of every size, shape and grain, decorated with candelabras, theatre props, sheet music, instruments, paintings, drawings and designs. Against one wall where the stonework had survived sat a great pipe organ, its ivory keys yellowing from age and use, stoppers missing and pipes fractured.

It was chaotic and disorganized. Finished works of art shared space with half-complete

sketches, half-obscured by curtains of many different materials and hues draped as makeshift partitions. Everywhere Fluttershy looked she found something to occupy her attention.

She heard the clatter of cups and saucers away behind one of the curtains, and guessed that her host had decided to prepare a drink. She walked up to the pipe organ, glancing at the pages and pages of sheet music scattered across it. Some bore staves of music angrily crossed out, half-formed melodies discarded in favour of others. Atop the stand sat a musical score, its worn cover tied with string to protect the sheets inside. On the cover, in fine, gold lettering, read:

“Don Libertad Triumphant”.

“My *magnum opus*.” Fluttershy jumped as she heard the voice of the stallion behind her. “My apologies, I did not mean to startle you. Here.” He took a cup from a tray on his back and placed it in front of Fluttershy on a small square of free space on the organ. She mumbled her thanks.

“And one for you, little guardian. I trust you enjoy tea.” The stallion continued, placing a smaller cup at Angel’s feet as he stood next to Fluttershy. He seemed a little startled at this display of generosity, but continued to glare at the strange pony nonetheless.

Fluttershy could see now, in the better light from the many candles around, that the stallion was an Earth Pony. She guessed he was maybe half a hand shorter than Big Mac, but of a similar build. His left eye was mostly obscured by the mask, but his right eye was a dark brown, almost black. He wore full formal evening wear; a white shirt buttoned to the collar, with a black overcoat and extravagant silk opera cloak that obscured his cutie mark.

“I hope my gift didn’t offend you.” He said to Fluttershy, indicating the rose. The pegasus blinked again.

“Oh, uhm, n-no, it was... Very nice of you.” She replied. “Thank you. F-for helping me just now, I mean. And the rose too.”

“I shouldn’t have gone through your room to put it there, but I prefer to remain unseen, you understand.” He continued, in that same soothing voice. “I admit I was somewhat startled when your little protector awoke and confronted me, and I suppose that, in my haste, I forgot to secure the mirror behind me. I hope you can forgive me.”

Fluttershy just nodded, unsure of what to say.

“Fluttershy, isn’t it? The new singer from Ponyville.” The stallion asked.

“Y-yes, I’m Fluttershy.” She replied.

“Fitting name.” He smiled. “You can call me O. G. This is my domain, here, beneath the city. Here I live, I work, I dream and I create.” He said, waving a hoof at the surroundings. “You could say I’m a *connoisseur* of the opera, and I watch the goings on above me with great interest. You, in particular, have a talent I have rarely seen in recent years.”

Fluttershy could feel herself blushing. She felt both uncomfortable at being praised, but also put at ease by O. G.’s polite manner and hospitality.

“Well... I, uhm, I like singing. ... I’m not very good with crowds, though...” She said, thinking back to her practise session a few hours ago. O. G. smiled again.

“Ah, well, I think I may be able to help you with that. I have trained a number of promising singers over the years. I can give you lessons to improve your confidence in singing, if you wish.”

Fluttershy pondered the offer. She thought of Prima Donna’s snide remarks and insults towards her, both during practise and off-stage, when the diva thought Fluttershy couldn’t hear. She thought of Falsetto and Rarity’s enthusiasm for her, and above all, the enjoyment she brought herself and her friends when she sang.

“Oh, yes, please, that would be wonderful!” She replied, smiling happily at the stallion. Angel looked on, still glaring at the interloper.

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