

~ *Act I: Scene III* ~

"In the preliminary practise sessions, our lead singer handed in her notice, claiming some nonsense about the place being haunted."

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

"Just what I needed..."

"... Phantom..."

"... Third time this month..."

Rarity raised a hoof and knocked on the door to Falsetto's office, hidden in the veritable rat's nest of corridors and walkways inside the Canterlot Opera House.

"Come in~!" The manager chimed, and Rarity opened the door with a flash of her horn. Floating behind her as she trotted in were some of the finished costumes, ready for inspection, as well as drawings and designs for more. She was still wearing her work glasses, balanced skilfully on her muzzle.

"Ah! Rarity, my dear! Oh, I say, are these the costumes for the chorus? Why, they're magnificent!" Falsetto gushed, rising from his seat and lifting the fabric to his eyes as Rarity set it down beside the desk.

"Indeed they are," Rarity answered, for both the question and the compliment. "I've been working closely with the singers, and they've all had their input in the final product." Rarity frowned, and spread out a design on the desk." ... But as for our mutual friend Miss Donna..."

"... This is... certainly a... uh, new style for you, my dear." Falsetto said, tactfully, looking over Rarity's shoulder at the drawing.

"It's not **mine**, darling, the *Signora* decided to grace me with a design of her own making. After systematically insulting and belittling mine, of course."

"I see." Falsetto grimaced as he inspected it. "... That's not real, is it?"

“Fluttershy would have a fit if it was.”

“Can’t have that.”

“Indeed not. And then there’s the…”

“... I **say**.”

“It simply will not do.”

“Well said. ... I’ll leave the matter entirely in your capable hooves, my dear.”

Rarity grinned, scrunching up the design and throwing it into a waste paper bin. Satisfied, she laid down her own drawings, allowing Falsetto to peruse them, and noticed that she had accidentally brushed a note to the floor. She floated it back up and, curiosity getting the better of her, lifted it to her eyes.

It was a simple parchment with a broken wax seal in the shape of a pony’s skull, hanging off a black ribbon. The parchment was bordered with a thick black line, and, peculiarly, was written in dark red ink.

It read:

“Dear Falsetto

Just a brief reminder, my monthly salary has not yet been paid.

Leave a cheque for 20,000 bits with Quick Step by the time of this week’s showing of “The Barber of Ponyville”. I shall watch the performance from my usual seat in Box Five, which is to be left unoccupied.

Our dear Prima Donna must be taught humility, so she shall be allocated the role of the servant. The role of the ward shall fall to your new prodigy. I am anxious to hear her perform.

I remain, sir, your obedient servant;

O. G.”

Rarity placed the letter back on the desk, Falsetto catching the movement out of the corner of his eye.

“Ah, you’ve found the note, I see.” He said, glaring at the piece of parchment.

"I couldn't help but notice... -" Rarity began.

Falsetto looked up at Rarity and frowned. "I know that look. That's the look that's about to give me an interrogation."

"Falsetto, darling, a lady does *not* 'interrogate'. ... I was merely going to ask you a series of probing questions to which I would expect gratifying answers."

Falsetto sighed dramatically and sat himself back behind his desk.

"Go on..." He said, waving his hoof in an exasperated gesture.

"Well... I **am** curious about this 'ghost' problem you seem to have. Back in Ponyville, you explained that your other singer, Miss Days, left after claiming she was being haunted by some ghost, and you laughed it off." She began pacing in a tight circle in front of Falsetto's desk.

"However, yesterday, after the accident, the stagehoof in the rafters... Mister Iron Knot, was it? He claimed he saw '**THE** Ghost', and seemed quite sure of it. You then reacted, not with shock or laughter, but rather a begrudging acceptance, as if you'd been expecting this. Not only that, but the dancers and orchestra seemed to be in on it, whispering among themselves like that."

She wheeled around to face the grey earth pony, who was staring at the wall with a scowl.

"There's something you haven't told Fluttershy and me, isn't there?"

Falsetto scowled at the wall for a few moments longer, then swivelled about in his chair, bringing himself face to face with Rarity, who was looking expectantly at him with a raised eyebrow.

He sighed again, with considerably less enthusiasm.

"Where to start? When I was given the royal appointment, I discovered it was because my predecessor had left 'for the good of his health'. After I met the *Signora* I thought I understood what he meant, but... then I received a note." He shot a glare at the offending missive.

"I dismissed it as a prank, but that same week, Prima Donna was involved in another 'accident' during rehearsals, much like the one you saw yesterday. Having put the note out of my mind, I thought nothing of it at the time, just a simple mistake by the stagehoofs.

Not so for my employees, however. Especially Iron Knot... He told wild tales of a ghost - a 'Phantom of the Opera' - that haunted the Canterlot Opera House and would take a shine to certain singers, then attempt to advance their career above others. Prima Donna, he said, was not one of these favoured few, and the 'accident' was a clear sign of the Ghost's disapproval.

He was flippant and jovial as he said it, and I dismissed it as nonsense. Then, the next week, another 'accident'. By that weekend, Miss Misty Days had handed in her notice, packed her bags, and fled. Poor thing always was a bit on the nervous side, so I gather. The other staff were of little help, they seemed quite convinced that the 'Opera Ghost' was real." Falsetto jabbed a hoof at the 'O. G.' signature on the parchment.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, it's been one thing after another since I took up my position here. After losing Misty Days and having to shell out a small fortune in bits to keep Prima Donna from walking out, I was beginning to wonder if the Princesses hadn't given me the position as a sort of punishment for something or other."

Rarity stood still for a moment, letting all this information sink in.

"... Why haven't you gone to the guard about it?" She asked, finally. Falsetto rolled his eyes.

"And be laughed out of Canterlot? My dear, if I went around the city saying there was a 'ghost' scaring away my singers and actors, it'd be the end of my career! No, I must deal with this 'in-house', as it were. Besides, beyond these notes, who could have been written by anyone, and rumour, I have nothing but blind conjecture!"

"So you don't believe in this 'Opera Ghost'?"

"Rarity, I'll bet a thousand bits that whoever is behind all this is as corporeal as we are. It's just a matter of finding who's responsible."

The white unicorn raised a hoof to her chin in thought. Her mouth slowly curled into a smirk. She rolled up her designs and made for the door.

"... What are you planning?" Falsetto called out after her, a hint of worry in his voice. Rarity looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

"I have all this work to do, darling! Not to mention, I should let you get back to yours. I'll see you for dinner~!"

"Wait-!" The door clicked shut behind her as she left.

Falsetto let out another sigh, rather more heartfelt.

"... There's no way this is going to end well." He muttered, to nopony in particular.

Fluttershy raised a wing to shield her eyes as the stagehoofs lit the spotlights above her and

swivelled them around. She was standing, centre-stage, with the many rows of seats stretching out before her, decked in red velvet and gold paint.

The only pony in her field of vision was the conductor, standing ready, as always, behind his music stand. He cleared his throat.

“Now, Miss Fluttershy, this will be your first practise session with me and the orchestra, so that we can get a feel for your voice, and how best to augment it with the music. I trust you are familiar with the aria from Wagon’s *‘The Pegasus’*?”

Fluttershy lowered her head and hid behind her long hair.

“... I see, well, maybe Verge’s *‘Violetta’*?”

Fluttershy shook her head, almost imperceptibly. The conductor sighed, a hint of exasperation coming through.

“Perhaps just the basics, then... We’ll be performing *‘The Barber of Ponyville’* at the end of the week, perhaps you’ve had time to look at the score?” He sounded almost pleading. Fluttershy guessed that, after a day of dealing with Prima Donna, the conductor’s patience was probably wearing thin.

Fortunately, she’d spent some time studying her copy of the *libretto* when Rarity was busy, or when she’d caught a spare moment between watching and familiarizing herself with the rehearsals. Although she wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about opera as a whole, *‘The Barber of Ponyville’* was well-known, especially in its namesake town, and relatively simple to perform. She imagined that was precisely why Falsetto had chosen it. She was able to look up and nod with a small smile.

“Excellent, excellent. I think we’ll try the aria in act one. That’s the part of Rose, the ward. I’ll begin the music, and then give you an indication of when I need you to begin singing. Is that clear?”

Fluttershy just nodded again. The conductor did the same, tapping on his stand with the baton to get his orchestra’s attention. There were a few squeaks and whistles as they quickly made some last-minute adjustments to their instruments, followed by anxious silence as they waited for the signal to begin.

With a wave of the baton, the strings section started to play a slow, sweeping melody, that progressed to a faster tempo, changing to a rapid staccato as they reached a small crescendo.

Just as Fluttershy was getting a feel for the music, they cut off, and she noticed the conductor pointing his baton at her. She panicked for a moment, trying to remember the start of the song

as the orchestra continued with softer strokes. Her brain caught up with her mouth by what should have been the second line of the verse, and she began singing, almost as quiet as the orchestra was trying to be.

The acoustics of the hall managed to at least make Fluttershy audible as she struggled to remember the words, singing at first haltingly, but soon growing stronger in voice as the tune began to play in her memory.

She felt a tingle in her throat, and suddenly her voice rang loud and clear around the theatre, so much to her surprise that she let out a loud 'Eep!' and immediately stopped singing. The conductor shot a glare up at the rafters to some unseen stagehoof, and shook his head.

"Apologies, Miss Fluttershy. Our sound technician was just casting a spell to amplify your voice. Normally he will do so before you begin, but he *missed his cue!*" The conductor yelled the last part of the sentence up at the technician. Fluttershy could hear a mumbled 'Sorry.' float down from above.

"Oh, uhm, it's quite alright." Fluttershy replied, cringing at her own volume. **"Too loud?"**

"No, that's just fine, miss. Now, perhaps we can start from the top... Be sure to watch for your cue." The conductor gave the orchestra a few moments to prepare, then gave the signal to begin. The melody slowly filled the air, and Fluttershy began to count in her head, waiting for her cue. The moment she saw the conductor point his baton at her, she broke into song, her voice amplified to fill the music hall.

She still found herself drawn to look at her hooves as she sang, not looking up at the conductor or the seats where the audience would be sitting and watching her. The conductor cleared his throat loudly, clearly heard over the orchestra and her own voice. She looked up at him, and then out into the empty stands that stretched out into the unlit darkness before her.

In her mind's eye she saw them filled with hundreds of ponies, looking at her critically as they silently judged every note, every tremble in her voice, every squeak as she nearly missed a note. Her eyes widened, and she faltered, missing a word in the line. She dropped her gaze back to her hooves, trying to pick up the song, but it was too late. She could feel a thousand imaginary pairs of eyes glaring directly at her, and could hear the sounds of them murmuring their disapproval.

She felt her knees go stiff. Her wings snapped shut by her sides. Her voice just stopped, and she stared, wide-eyed, at the varnished stage beneath her.

The orchestra, realising she'd stopped singing, soon came to a halt themselves. The conductor let out a clearly exasperated, and somewhat dramatic sigh.

"What *now?*" He snapped.

Fluttershy couldn't move. She couldn't speak. She was rooted in place from sheer stage fright. The thought of all those ponies watching, listening, judging her, waiting for a chance to tear her apart. She'd felt the same every time she was thrown out onto a catwalk during her time with Photo Finish, but this time there was nopony to give her a nudge forward or break that invisible grip of fear.

She wished she could be somewhere, anywhere, other than right here, in the centre stage, lights shining down on her, highlighting her for all the world to see.

The conductor raised his eyes and hooves to the heavens and threw down his baton, storming out of the orchestra pit, muttering to himself.

The orchestra just looked at each other and Fluttershy, not sure what to do or how to break the awkward silence that had descended on the stage. Finally, the cellist, a grey mare with a dark mane and pink bow, stepped up on stage and nudged Fluttershy in the shoulder.

"You alright?" She asked, compassion, concern and understanding showing in her violet eyes.

Fluttershy felt herself being drawn back to reality as the imaginary crowd of critics vanished, leaving only empty seats and darkness behind. She turned to the cellist, slowly calming down.

"Y-yes, I'm, uhm, I'm fine. ... Sorry for ruining the rehearsal.... I just... I just got..." She stuttered. The cellist laid a hoof on her shoulder in sympathy.

"Stage fright. It's fine, everyone does from time to time. Don't mind Maestro, he's just had a hard day of it with Prima Donna and our tenors." The cellist replied, nodding towards the door where the conductor had just left. "I'm Octavia, by the way, the principal cellist here."

Fluttershy nodded, then recognition suddenly hit. "Oh! Goodness, you're the cellist from the Grand Galloping Gala! ... I'm sorry that we, uhm..."

"Ah! That's where I've seen you before! You're the one who had a bit of a crazy moment and brought all the animals in!"

Fluttershy cringed.

"Oh, don't worry, no harm done." Octavia smiled. "In fact, thanks to your pink friend interrupting us, Princess Celestia asked me and the others to attend at next year's Gala. We probably wouldn't have got the privilege two years running if it wasn't for you all, so I should be thanking you!"

"I'm glad it worked out for you. Hopefully next year it'll be smoother." Fluttershy said, smiling at

Octavia.

“Well, it couldn’t be worse.” The grey earth pony grinned. “Anyway, it’ll probably be a while before Maestro feels up for another set of rehearsals, so we all might as well go stretch our legs in the meantime. Think I might take a stroll into the city, actually. Join me?”

“Oh, thank you, but I think I’ll just go back to my room for now. Angel’s probably expecting me.” Fluttershy replied, nodding in thanks to Octavia.

“Angel? Coltfriend?” Octavia asked, tilting her head slightly.

“C-coltfriend? Oh, no, no, Angel’s just a bunny. I look after him. Or... Well, sometimes he looks after **me**, but...” Fluttershy trailed off. “... I’ll see you at dinner?”

Octavia nodded, and turned to go. Fluttershy followed suit, heading back through the labyrinthine tunnels of the Opera House to her dressing room. She could hear Rarity muttering to herself through the thin partitions as she worked on a costume in the next room. She nudged the door open with her hoof, looking down to see Angel standing there, waiting, and holding a rose tied with a black ribbon.

“Oh! Is that for me, Angel? Aww, how sweet of you! Thank you!” Fluttershy said, taking the rose from the little rabbit. Angel shook his head and frowned, pointing at the mirror.

Fluttershy looked up at the mirror, uncertain of what the rabbit was trying to say. She walked over, and felt a cold draft against her body as she passed one side of the full-length mirror. She took a step back, peering at the edge where she could feel the draft coming from. Carefully, she stuck out a hoof and pushed against it, jumping back in surprise with wings extended as it slid aside effortlessly, revealing a stone corridor that stretched away into the dark.

Angel nodded to himself in satisfaction, and quickly leapt down the corridor, wasting no time. Fluttershy shook herself out of the shock and noticed Angel’s white bobtail disappearing into the murky gloom.

“Angel! Wait, come back!”

<<- [Act I: Scene II](#) ~ [Act I: Scene IV](#) ->>