

Dear Journal,

What does it mean to be cursed? What does it truly mean? Does it mean that I've been robbed? Does it mean that I still possess things that have yet to be stolen from me? Have I experienced the worst that fate has to offer, or am I simply lying in wait for the darkest, cruelest punchline in life to come?

It's so very easy for me to feel sorry about myself. It's something that I cannot help but dwell upon each and every day. For a while, I've feared that I would let things like this get to my head, that I would resort to doing acts both desperate and pathetic that would only hurt the ghostly shades of friends I pretend to be surrounded by on a regular basis.

Then I met souls—amazing and inspiring souls—who each were born with a chance to shine, like I once was. Only, though they were never magically robbed of their ability to achieve greatness, I soon realized that they too were at a loss to encounter an opportunity to surpass the limits of themselves. After all, what is life if not a complex game with both winners and losers and not enough points to happily placate both?

The fact that I'm a pony with no perceivable future cannot be denied. Until I can somehow unlock the magical power of the elegies—the thick black borders of my invisible prison—I cannot hope to anticipate anything but a future of oblivion, obscurity, and emptiness.

What, though, can be said of those around me? As a matter of fact, ponies have always been cursed since the beginning of time—not by a frigid dome of amnesia, but by a transitive sphere of ignorance that constantly threatens our very dreams and aspirations from their genius conception to their desperate expression.

I, at least, have a hope that no pony else seems to have. As soon as I end this curse, I expect to immediately start existing again. However, it's been my experience that there are mares and stallions—gentle hearts, all of them—who may never exist, at least not as *brilliantly* as they would desire to, no matter how hard they struggle. What solution do they have to pick out of a hat? What silver bullet will slay the beast that consumes their artistry with as much ease as I can slay mine?

No. No, I am not cursed. I am simply less blessed, less polished, less shiny than those around me. With time, I have faith that I will enchant that which has been struck dead in my life. I will bring shine back to a dull existence. And yet, no matter what progress I may or may not make, I cannot stop hoping—I cannot stop dreaming—that those around me can become just as lucky too.

A dangling bell above the door shook as I entered. The lavish interior of the fashion shop rang

with a gentle melody. Soon, though, an eloquent voice surpassed even that heavenly jingle with a chirping tone of its own.

“Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where every garment is chic, unique, and magnifique.”

I couldn't help but smile. *Now that's a fabulous greeting if I ever heard one.*

“Excuse me...” I spoke as gently and politely as I could. Almost a week had passed since I performed the *Threnody* in full. Most of my nerves had recollecting, and I was happy to be in public once more. The eye-pleasing curtains and smell of clean fabric lulled my spirit as I marched into the luxurious establishment with my rough saddlebag and unassuming hoodie. “I was told that a mare by the name of Rarity works here. Is there a chance I might speak with her?”

Long ago, I had established for myself a simple rule when “greeting” ponies with whom I had become quite familiar. For the sake of simplicity, it seemed a good habit to feign ignorance. I didn't want to alarm any soul by immediately addressing them by name. For the longest time, I never second-guessed this “code” that I lived by.

“Oh, but darling, you *are* speaking to Rarity. The one and onlyyyy.” She was chiding me, like a princess correcting an uncouth servant. At the same time, her voice had a melodic edge to it, as if she was satirizing the very notion of such haughtiness. “Oh dear, do listen to me go on,” she exclaimed, stifling a giggle. “My apologies, ma'am. I swear, there's something to be said about working on a gorgeous dress when one feels good inside. It's like grocery shopping on an empty stomach. It's only asking for trouble, hmm? Hmm-hmm-hmm...”

It was a beautiful day outside, and I could already tell that much of the brilliance had seeped in through the ornate windows and walls of the place. The white unicorn in question was busy fiddling with a ballroom gown that was halfway through becoming a satin masterpiece. The tone in Rarity's voice matched the artistic whimsy of her present project. I almost felt like a criminal for interrupting it.

“Nothing to apologize for,” I said with a smile as I stood behind her. I craned my neck to squint over her figure, as if instantly drawn to the curious sight of her work. There are things in this world that are unexpectedly absorbing. The Carousel Boutique had an air of enchantment; I felt like I was in the birthplace of magical things. “I heard about your talents and craftponyship around town,” I exclaimed, fighting the shivers long enough to maintain normal composure. “I was wondering if you'd be willing to earn some extra bits.”

“Doing what, pray tell?” Rarity murmured without looking. She added another stream of blue ribbon along the edge of the blue gown's flaring skirt. She was one with her work; I was merely a curious satellite in orbit of her sacred project. “As much as I hate to sound dismissive of new and fantastic opportunities, I do happen to be overloaded with a most demanding list of requests at the moment. If you have indeed heard of me around town, no doubt you've become aware of my rather strict schedule of appointments as of late. Pay the front desk a visit, dear, and you'll find a very thorough list of guidelines by which I perform commissions.”

“Oh, it's not a dress that I want to have made,” I said with a nervous smile.

She yanked too hard on a length of ribbon, nearly ripping it loose from its fresh seams. I could sense her hard blinks without looking. “Oh?” her voice cracked slightly. The room dulled for the briefest of moments. “If not a dress, then what, if I may ask?”

I decided that it was best to be as direct as possible. “I heard that your special talent is in jewelcrafting.” My eyes danced briefly over her sapphiric cutie mark as I fiddled with my saddlebag. “Ponies have told me that you're good at locating and enchanting gems of absolute scarcity.”

“H-have they now?” Her tone was flat, resembling the unfinished lengths of her dress. She stood in place, as if gazing at a blank space beyond her work. “Well, those ponies were certainly being honest. What was it that you needed, Miss...?”

“**Lyra Heartstrings**. And I need to have some enchanting done,” I said. Feeling a chill in the air unrelated to my curse, I added with a smile. “And I didn't want to ask any other craftspony around town unless I had to. I heard you were the best, so why settle for less?”

“Hmmm...” She turned slowly to look at me and the smile on her face formed just as easily. “They said I was the *best*? Well, I do suppose that speaks for something.”

“But, I didn't realize just how busy you were,” I said, squirming slightly. I learned long ago that I will perpetually be a splinter in this town. No matter what I do or say, the situation is never as placid after I've arrived as it was before. “You're working on something really beautiful. Don't let me interrupt your concentration with such a trite request.”

“Oh, darling, perish the thought!” She immediately rushed towards me as if I was an infant foal teetering at the top of a staircase. I was suddenly the most important thing in her world. I wasn't quite expecting that, and it made my heart trip over itself. “Not to toot my horn, as it were, but I can enchant stones in my sleep. If anything, it only helps me focus my mind all the more, so you'd actually be doing my dress-making a favor! Now—ahem...” She smiled regally at me. There was a sparkle in her gaze that never went away. I suddenly knew where she got her eye for beauty. “Just how many gems are we talking about, Miss **Heartstrings**?”

I looked into my saddlebag. The four soundstones that Zecora had sold me days ago were completely drained of enchantment. If I had any hope of performing this new song stuck in my head—assuming I could build the courage to do so—I wouldn't make any progress whatsoever until I had all four rocks completely recharged with magical potency. The sooner I had them brought back to their original glory, the sooner I'd be in the cellar, performing the elegies, throwing my soul deep into a dark abyss of mystery, cold, and shadows...

“Just one gem,” I told her. I took a single dark crystal out of the saddlebag and floated it in front of the mare. “I'm working on some new music, and it helps to have a mana battery nearby to... to... well...”

“To get that special spark of inspiration?” Rarity immediately snatched the rock like it was hers since the beginning of time. She telekinetically spun it at multiple angles in front of her eyes, examining it with an expert gaze. “Tell me no more. I know the feeling quite well. A unicorn is all too often the sum of their surroundings. I almost feel bad for those not blessed to be connected with

the generous leylines of our supernatural world. You ever heard of Hoity Toity? Such a diamond in the rough of earth pony couture, he is. Popular legend says that he made his first line of successful outfits while working in a wooden shack outside of Las Pegasus. Hah! Can you believe that?"

"Uhhhh..."

"Hmmm... Oh my my my—I see why you had to come to the absolute best gem enchantress in town," she said with a playful wink tossed my way. "This poor thing has been through a lot! It's practically a doorstep! What-*ever* did you do with this, darling? Did you use it to summon a Windigo from the nether?"

I bit my lip. I struggled through a fresh wave of memories, and all of them laced with frost and shadows. "Let's just say that I'm not your average composer of music," I eventually murmured. My ears twitched as I tried to shake the tune in my head long enough to cast my voice evenly. "Sometimes I have to reach deep down—further than what history provides—in order to restore the most sacred ballads lost to us. I believe that there are songs that mean so much to ponydom that we no longer have the capacity to remember them, and the act of finding them saps more from me than just my talents. It takes a lot of... *uhm*... magic energy as well. Does... does that make any sense to you?" I winced openly. I was already planning to just ditch the Carousel and attempt to repeat this entire meeting the next day.

But something that would have been lost was immediately saved by Rarity's grace and her grace alone. "What's obvious to me, darling, is an artist in search of beauty, and that is something I can instantly respect." She smiled over the dull jewel at me. "I too have a deep admiration for classicism. If I could invent a time machine and go back to the period of Starswirl the Bearded..." She drew a hoof over her forehead and painted the rooftop of the Boutique with rolling eyes. "Ohhhh stars, so many fabulous designs, lost to the hungry moths and bitter decay of ages! If I could just bring back a single illustration to present day, I'd reintroduce modern Equestria to real taste and elegance. But, alas..." She focused once more on the dark gem and murmured lovingly, as if caressing a reflection hidden beneath the onyx surfaces. "What are we here for if not to invent, inspire, and illuminate?"

I gulped and smiled awkwardly. "I can't say I'm nearly as creative as you, Miss Rarity. I'm just a historian."

"Nonsense! Don't sell yourself short!" She smiled my way. "No pony is ever really just an appendix of the past. We all have the future to build—together—in our unique and special ways, don't you think?"

I turned my gaze from her. The walls were be-speckled in random places with shiny jewels and mirrors. I saw Rarity's white coat and purple mane reflected in a glittering kaleidoscope. My colors were nowhere to be seen.

"I don't hold too much stock in the future," I eventually muttered and glanced back at her. "Is it such a crime to live in the now?"

"It's my experience that saints and criminals often have the same things in common, so why stress it, hmm?" she remarked flippantly, then cleared her throat. "Now, darling, about..."

re-fabulousing your *once-fabulous* jewel...”

“Oh, uhm...” I shifted where I stood. “I know it doesn't look like much now, but it's a—”

“Ram-crafted sound stone. Trust me, dear, I know my rocks. I must say, this is a remarkable find. Where rams lack in aesthetics, they certainly make up for in substance. If this was produced by any other culture in Equestria, it'd be a loss cause to attempt re-enchanting it.”

“How much would be appropriate for such a service?”

“Hmmm...” Rarity murmured aloud as she trotted towards a nearby window, parting the curtains with telekinesis so that a brilliant beam of noonday sunlight poured directly into the heart of the boutique. “It has been a terribly long time since I provided enchanting services, come to think of it. But if I recall the rates I used to charge...” She paused for several seconds, to the point that I could only guess she was pretending to think for the sake of pretending. She soon tossed a tranquil glance my way. “Three bits, dear. Seems fitting, don't you think?”

I couldn't help it. My gaze was crooked as I blinked at her, and I fumbled a bit before answering, “Erm... Yes. That is... rather generous of you.”

“Hmmm... I do get that a lot, it would seem.” Her voice shook at the end of her utterance, like she had woken up that morning giggling and still couldn't stop. The air was alive with more than her sparkling telekinesis as she floated a metal stand over from a closet. She blew the dust off, coughed briefly, and positioned the tripod directly in front of the window. “Oh, how glad I am that this thing hasn't rusted. It would be doing my family a great disservice if I ever let this heirloom go to ruin.”

“If you don't mind my asking... uhm...” I trotted over towards her and the contraption. “What exactly is it?”

She gave an airy laugh. “You really *have* had your horn stuck in the history books, haven't you? I weep quietly inside whenever I meet a unicorn who hasn't experimented with more than one style of magic.” She cleared her throat and spoke while methodically floating over a glass lens and fixing it to the upper stalk of the metal device. “This, my dear, is a *celestial magnifier*. All things that stand to be enchanted in this world have one element that can almost always bring luster back to their magic without fail.”

I blinked and uttered, “Sunlight?”

“Mmmhmmm,” Rarity hummed as she tilted the lens and positioned it at just the right angle to focus a thin beam of magnified light through a ring of metal clamps at the top of the stand. “Her Majesty, Princess Celestia, gives us more than just the warmth and beauty of the day. She grants us the very essence of her being, something sacred that was hooped down by the Cosmic Matriarch herself. If we focus the energy of the sun just right, it's like grabbing magic from the air.” She tensed her facial features as she carefully, *carefully* floated the dull stone over and positioned it tightly within the polished ring of the metal clamps. “Aaaaaand... there! Ah... Tell me, have ponies been given anything more generous than the Princess' very own shine?”

I trotted over and stared closely at the gem with subtle, foalish fascination. Indeed, before our eyes, the dullness of the sound stone gave way, and I saw a glow emanating from the center of the dark crystal in direct response to the focused beam of light. It was dim at first, but soon the familiar emerald haze was coming to life underneath the glossy surface of the jewel.

“That... is indeed beautiful,” I remarked. “It's like capturing an alicorn's glory in a bottle!”

“Not yet it's not,” Rarity boldly said. She brushed me aside and approached the gem like it was an altar. “Ahem. This is where I come in, darling.” She winked, and it was then that I realized she was about to earn my bits. With great concentration, Rarity focused magical energy into her horn. A second glow filled that part of the Carousel, and soon she was encompassing the gem with a cascade of sparkles.

I realized that she was using her talents to plant a containment spell on the sound stone. It was something I could never imagine doing myself. After a year of studying every book on lunar magic in Twilight's Library, I've learned to perform many fantastic feats, and yet still I was in awe of Rarity's gifts.

“That's... That's amazing.” I looked from the gem to her and smiled. “And you make it look so easy.”

“Only because it is, dear. Mmm... for me, that is.” She murmured aside, all the while concentrating. “I don't mean to sound like a braggart. We all have our places in this world. I've met unicorns who could do something like this in half the time, and yet they charge three times as much. I've endeavored to not be like them. True talent is about earning more than just money, after all.”

“Well, you've earned my thanks, Miss Rarity.” I chuckled briefly and floated three golden coins out of my saddlebag. “As well as my bits.” After she graciously took the payment with her own telekinesis, I said, “Though, nothing I could pay you would come close to how golden this day appears to be.”

“Oh?”

“If I may be so bold, you seem to be in a fantastic mood. I wish all ponies had as sunny a disposition.”

“Is there any reason why they shouldn't?” She continued enchanting the stone while casting me a sideways glance. Her lips were curved, as if she was born with that smile. “Well, perhaps I'm one to talk. It so happens that I've been struck with a great deal of good fortune as of late. Do forgive me if it comes across as a little uncouth”

“Nothing uncouth about being happy, Miss Rarity. Dare I ask what's the occasion?”

“Tell me...” Rarity's melodic tone didn't falter for one instant. “Have you heard of Silver Seams?”

My eyes swam over the rich decorations of the boutique, and I was at a loss to form an answer.

“I can't say that I have. But then again... *heh*... what's in a name?”

Her reaction was rather explosive. “Why, everything, Miss **Heartstrings!**” For a second there, I thought she might accidentally knock over the stand atop which the gem was being enchanted. She glanced back at me, and her eyes were as hard as diamonds. “It's what defines a pony! A title is one's vessel for notoriety and purpose.”

I said nothing.

Thankfully, Rarity wasn't finished. “And Silver Seams' fame proceeds her! She is only the most prestigious dress designer in the Manehattan scene! She's made top-of-the-line gowns for every annual fashion exhibit in Fillydelphia and Trottingham over the last decade! She produces the luxurious costumes for the regular Hearth's Warming's Eve pageant at Canterlot, and she's even designed the latest uniforms worn by the Wonderbolts!”

“Wow, sounds like quite the career.”

“It is more than that. Silver Seams' impact on Equestrian culture is positively legendary! And I can't wait to speak with her face to face.”

“I bet you can't,” I said with a nod, then jolted as the realization hit me. I glanced at the sparkling-clean lengths of the boutique, the fancy dresses that were on exhibit, even Rarity's latest project. “Wait, so Silver Seams is coming **here?**”

“Squeee-*heeheehee*-Yes!” Rarity squirmed in place. It wouldn't have surprised me if she suddenly sprouted pegasus wings and performed laps around the ceiling. “It turns out she's making a trip to Trottingham and will be stopping by Ponyville along the way. Hoity Toity—with whom I have a good business acquaintance, *ahem*—had an opportunity to speak with her, and he personally suggested that she stop by my Boutique! Silver Seams! The divine queen of fashion! Stopping by *here!*” She seemed on the verge of fainting. A magical beam of light pulsed from deep within the soundstone, shaking her out of her felicitous spell. “Oh, but that is merely my own little life. I just feel so... so... *bubbly*, as Pinkie Pie would put it. Do forgive me for not being able to contain my excitement.”

“Sounds like you have every reason to be excited!” I said with a smile. She levitated the re-enchanted stone towards me and I gladly took it. “You have an obvious eye for beauty. No doubt Miss Seams would love having a look at your work.”

“What?!” Rarity gasped at me, her voice hoarse and mortified. She gave the lengths of her boutique a flippant wave of the hoof. “You mean these paltry attempts at day-to-day garb?”

I glanced at the rows of flowing, shiny dresses on display. “They seem very lovely and impressive to me—”

“That's just it!” She trotted limply past me, her voice orating towards the dull mannequins suddenly surrounding her. “If I wish to impress the likes of Silver Seams, then I need to be more than lovely and impressive! I need to be absolutely stellar! I need to eke supernatural feats of whimsy from the creative nodes in my mind!” I felt like I was suddenly privy to a dramatic one-mare-show, and it

was worth every golden bit. “She will be here in less than a week! I only have a few days to make this Boutique worth its weight in polish! I need to make a dress that will shock her, flabbergast her, and make her leave this town with my name engraved in her head as succinctly and righteously as her name is emblazoned into the heart of every self-respecting fashionista from here to Blue Valley!”

“Sounds like you've got your work cut out for you,” I said. I dropped the sound stone into my bag, zipped it shut, and smirked at her. “I have no doubt that you'll find the time to make something absolutely dazzling.”

“It's not so much a matter of time, dear. Inspiration is as spontaneous as it is divine. I've been toiling through my lists of paid projects in hopes that an idea would bloom from mundanity. Alas, it doesn't help that most if not all of my clients make... *eh*... rather plebeian requests at best. Celestia forbid that a pony would commission something with flare so that I could truly put my mind at work...”

“I guess I couldn't understand,” I murmured defeatedly. “I almost wish there was some way I could help.”

“Hmmm. You've helped me quite enough, darling. You let me ramble on right when I needed to.” She gave an aristocratic laugh, then turned to look me over. “Though...” She rubbed her chin in thought. “It would be only fair if I had the chance to help *you*.”

I blinked. “I don't understand.” Perhaps I was still dazed from tackling the *Threnody* a few days previous. Otherwise, I have very little reason to explain my obliviousness. “You've already helped me with the enchantment.”

“Never mind a glowing rock, darling. I suddenly can't help but notice your rather... *warm* looking choice of wear.”

Ah. But of course.

“What about it?” I gave her a sly glance. “Let me guess, it looks 'worn-in?’”

“Yes, to put it lightly.” She smiled and leaned in to me, raising a hoof just an inch from my forelimbs. “Uhm... If I may...”

“Sure...”

She fidgeted with the sleeves and hood and length of the stone-gray material as she trotted tightly around me. “Mmm... Yes, yes, yes. It's getting positively threadbare at the cuffs. And—*oh dear*—these patches! Aside from their unsightliness, the seams are starting to pop loose! Darling, I know you're only trying to keep warm in this thing, but with the way it's falling apart, I can't imagine that it's doing a very good job of living up to such a task!”

I merely shrugged. “It's worked well enough for me. Besides, when I get cold—*er*—when I get *really cold*, I have other ways of taking care of myself.”

“It's one thing to take care of your senses, but what of your presentation?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your coat's a rare color, a very fantastic one at that, Miss **Heartstrings**. And you keep your mane so well. You're obviously a unicorn with a soul of refined grace. What a shame it would be to constantly wrap such a pretty package in veritable rags.” She took a step back and tilted her horn upwards with authority. “I insist! You absolutely *must* let me make you something new that will do the same job and even better!”

“Oh, Miss Rarity.” I shook my head. “Seriously, it's fine...”

“All things dull and commonplace are fine, until we have the wherewithal to make them better. Please, I promise it will make you feel better.” Her teeth glinted with the enchanting sunlight wafting in through the window beside us. “I won't even charge you! If nothing else, this will be a way for me to flex my mental seamstress muscles and give you something worth wearing proudly all at once! What better a way to celebrate the arrival of Silver Seams than to celebrate fashion in mutual company of a graceful mare such as yourself?”

“Please...” I took a deep breath, clutching at the ends of my stone gray sleeves, feeling as if I was clinging to the edges of so many sacred, cold, yet altogether holy memories of solitude. “As much as I admire your generosity and willingness to do me a favor...” I shuddered briefly. I had gotten what I needed for the time being. There's only so much I can do to interfere with the lives of these beautiful and blissfully ignorant residents of Ponyville. Rarity had so much on her plate, and I didn't feel right in devouring the excessive byproduct of her current joy. So, I decided to tell her the truth, “But I couldn't part with this sweatjacket even if you, Hoity Toity, and Silver Seams all worked together on making me something new. I... I have something of an attachment to it. It was a gift that a very nice pony gave to me when I most needed it.”

“Hmmm... Very well then.” I was surprised with how easily that won my case. I felt a tiny bit disappointed, actually. “I can't force you to let me make you something, darling. Besides...” She winked as she strolled back towards the dress that she was working on when I had first arrived. “I know better than to undermine the power of a true gift. Sentimental value is like an extra pony sense. Without it, I doubt very much we'd remember what made us who we are today.”

I gulped and nodded towards the shadows of the place. “That's something I tell myself every sunrise.”

“But I'll be here, Miss **Heartstrings**, in case you ever decide to return and accept my offer.” She added more ribbons to the skirt of the dress she was making, her voice stretching as her mind went into a mode of deep focus. “I may look forward to impressing the likes of Silver Streams, but I'd hate myself forever if I forgot my own clientele, if even for a single moment.”

It took a mountain of effort to keep my smile alive, though I knew she couldn't see it at that moment. “Of that I have no doubt, Miss Rarity. I... I wish you a good afternoon.” I turned around, my hooves sounding loud and invasive as they scraped against the tile floor of the boutique. Without looking back, I made straight for the door.

The bell rang melodically throughout the lengths of the dress shop.

“Excuse me.” I trotted into the main foyer with my saddlebag in tow. “Is Miss Rarity around—?”

“Oh my stars!” She gasped. All four of Rarity's limbs flailed as she struggled to yank a dull black tarp over the body of a mannequin positioned atop the center stage of the Boutique. She panted heavily, as if having run a ten-mile marathon at the first sound of my voice. As she clung to the shrouded dress, I saw her surrounded by a veritable warzone of scattered pincushions, measuring tape, sewing needles, and all sorts of multi-colored fabrics. It had been nearly a week since I had seen Rarity last, and every single day hung like a weight from her features, pulling at the skin beneath her eyes, yanking at the frayed edges of her mane. A pair of working glasses reflected my blinking face as she gawked at me. “I... I-I thought I had locked that door!”

“I'm... I'm sorry!” I felt genuinely shocked. I always fear that something like this might happen with the nature of my curse. There are times when I wonder if I'm just as incorporeal as I am invisible. “You're supposed to be closed? I... I didn't see a sign or anything...”

“Ohhhhh where has my mind gone?!” Rarity rolled her eyes back as her voice took on a breathy growl. “I must have forgotten to lock the front entrance after returning from lunch! Nnnngh... I've just been so, so terribly busy. Ahem.” She stood tall and proud, brushed aside a few strands of purple hair, and brandished a polite smile. “I am exceedingly sorry, Miss...”

“Heartstrings.”

“Do forgive me, Miss Heartstrings, but the Boutique is—as a matter of fact—closed for business at the moment. I finished the last of my clients' current projects two days ago, and I won't be accepting any more requests until after the weekend. There's been... pressing business, as of late.”

“Pressing business?” I blinked, then brightened with a smile. “Oh, you mean that dress for Silver Seams that you were planning—?”

Rarity's face became paler, if that was even possible. “You... It... She...” Her lower left eyelid began twitching. For a moment there, I thought she was going to teeter backwards and collapse completely. “How did you know about Silver Seams' visit?!”

I winced immediately.

Whoops.

“Did... Did one of my friends talk?” She blinked, then her expression became a hard-edged sword. “Pinkie Pie. Somehow, she's always putting her tongue to improper use...”

“Uhm. No. It's n-nothing like that! I... uhm...” I fiddled desperately for an explanation. I still don't know why I do this at times. I very seriously doubt that whatever I say—fabrication or not—will be explicitly carried over past my visitation with a pony soul. What is there to cover for? I suppose I want each encounter I have with these Ponyvilleans to remain as sacred as I consider them to be. “I-I-I'm visiting from Las Pegasus, and I had attended a fashion show—”

“Las Pegasus?” The menace in Rarity's face immediately dissipated as soon as the word “fashion” bled from my lips. She even smiled for the briefest of moments. “Then you are familiar with the work of Hoity Toity!”

“Yes! Hoity Toity! And... uhm... supposedly he ran into Silver Seams and suggested that she stop by here...”

“And if you made the trip from Las Pegasus to Ponyville in such short time...” Rarity's gasped breathily as a thought of great enormity rocked her mind. “There's no telling when Silver Streams herself may have arrived! She could be checking into the downtown hotel right now as we speak!” She grimaced visibly and began pacing a panicked orbit around the tarp-covered dress. “Oh blessed Celestia, I'm not nearly finished! I've wasted enough time as it is! Oh, whatever shall I do?”

“Hey! It's okay! Just... uhm... Just relax!” I gestured at her with two hooves and gave a gentle smile. “Silver Seams is an affluent, well-to-do pony, yes?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

“Then, like all rich and famous mares, she's probably taking her sweet time.” I grinned and touched the tarp with a hoof for emphasis. “I'm sure you'll have every opportunity to finish this masterpiece—”

“No!” She blurred over and quite forcibly removed my hoof from the material that was obscuring the dress. “You mustn't look!” she hissed. “You mustn't!”

“Uhm... I wasn't about to, Miss Rarity. Not unless you wanted to share—”

“Out of the question!” she exclaimed, nearly snarling as she hugged the bulky item like a dying pet. “No way in Equestria could I let anypony see this now!”

“Oh, very well then.” I gulped and ran a hoof through my mane. I cast her a nervous glance. “Er... may I ask why?”

“Why?!” Her eyes turned into bright blue saucers. “Why?! *Because*, darling, a work of art is always pathetic and unseemly in its most primordial stages! I would be outright cursing the dress to defeating scrutiny if I allowed another pony to see the ugly building blocks of the final product before it even has a chance to shine! A self-respecting seamstress *never* exhibits a work until it is close to

completion!”

“Oh. Well, I guess that makes sense.” I should have just let the conversation end there, but something about seeing Rarity so nervous and disheveled put a bad taste in my mouth. *Why do I always make friends with ponies I can never afford to commune with?* “But... I'm not Silver Seams, am I?”

“Erm... Your point being?”

I glanced around the shadowy lengths of the Carousel Boutique. Half of the lights that were on last week were dimmed that afternoon, so that a single utilitarian spotlight was cast upon the dress Rarity was working on when I had shown up.

“I get the feeling that you've been holed up here for quite a while, working on this thing...”

“Why, but of course! Silver Seams is visiting and I must do all that's in my power to give her something worth writing home about! After all, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

“And in all that time, have you had any critical eyes other than your own to judge the work in progress?”

Rarity said nothing. She merely blinked.

I gazed past her expression. “Not even your friends?”

She bit her lip to the bleeding point.

I smiled gently. “What I'm trying to say, Miss Rarity, is that maybe it wouldn't hurt to get an opinion about it this early on.” I smiled and turned my flank aside so she could see my cutie mark. “Experience with writing music has taught me that the final composition is always a heck of a lot more spectacular if I've had some other pony other than myself be a critic through the creation process.”

“Mmmm... Yes.” She breathed slightly easier. It appeared as though the wrinkles in her mane were smoothing away magically as she ingested my words. “Yes, I do believe that is a very... intelligent observation.”

“So then...” I turned to face her straight-on. “What's the harm in heading outside, seeing some sunlight, and fetching one of your closest acquaintances to provide you a critical eye?”

“Mmm. No. N-No, we can't be having that.”

I blinked. “We can't?”

“The girls—*erm*—my friends, they are a darling bunch, but so many of them are prone to exaggeration for the sake of placating me.” She paced slightly about the Boutique. “There are times when I enjoy such bias, even moments when I need it.” Her jaw clenched tightly as a fire burned in her blue eyes. “But this is **not** one of those times.” After a pause, she tilted her face back up with a bright

expression. She glanced at me. “Miss—[Heartstrings](#), was it?”

“Err... Yeah?”

“Would you be willing to tell me what you think?” Her eyes were sparkling as she asked me this.

I wish I could have said the same about mine. “Uhm... Eheheh...” I shifted nervously where I stood and waved my left forelimb so that she could get a good look at a patch on my “worn-in” hoodie sleeve. “Honestly, Miss Rarity, do I *look* like I'm qualified to say what is or isn't acceptable in fashion?”

“You're a perfect stranger; that's qualification enough!” She smiled with the rising layers of hope emanating from her being, making it increasingly difficult to deny her with each passing breath. “What's more, you're obviously a refined unicorn who's both blunt and eloquent. Please, would you do me this favor? I'm sorry to bother you with it, but I am at my wit's end at the moment!”

“But I thought it was practically criminal to look at a dress before it's completed!”

“Thankfully, dear, you've just convinced me otherwise!”

“Ehh... yeah...”

“Just what were you coming here for in the first place, if I may ask?”

“Uhm...” I opened my saddlebag and produced the second dark crystal. “There's this stone I need enchanting and—”

“Ah! I can do enchanting in my sleep! Let's consider it an even exchange, hmm?” She practically grabbed the rock from my grasp with a pair of hooves and shoved me towards the dress. “Please. Be a dear and look at what I've crafted so far. I'll be ever so grateful!” That said, she aimed her horn and effortlessly slid the tarp off of the forbidden work of dressmaking.

For a moment there, I thought all the lamps that were previously dormant in the Boutique had suddenly been switched on. It took me a few seconds to realize that it was actually the shiny, alabaster material of the silken dress reflecting the meager light from all the windows around us, positively magnifying it. The gown's upper collar was a shimmering array of ivory beads. The sash about the middle of the dress was also studded with glittering spheres. The hem of the skirt—obviously unfinished—was nonetheless remarkable at this stage, with several layers of laced edges accentuating the weight of the fabric.

I suppose, as fillies go, I've never held much stock in fashion. Like Twilight, I often had my young nose stuck in history books more than dress catalogues. It was Moondancer who was the little princess of the foalish trio, and no doubt she would have been beside herself to see such an amazing gown propped before her. And yet, I couldn't help but feel my breath taken away. This work of Rarity's was something befitting royalty. I was afraid that I'd go to sleep depressed that night after staring for so long, because nothing I'd see for the rest of that afternoon could possibly match the

beauty of what stood before me. A real critic would have written an essay about this. All I had to say was...

“It's beautiful.”

“Just that?” Rarity, as it turns out, was directly beside me. I nearly jumped in fright. “Simply 'beautiful'?”

“I... Uhm...”

“You barely looked at it for ten seconds! Please, I implore you!” Her body hung low to the ground, as if the aristocratic fashionista was willing to beg. “Take your time! Get a good look at it! A real *close* look and then tell me what you think!”

Okay then...

Taking a deep breath, I approached the dress like a polite dancing partner. I squinted at the thing. I poured my eyes over the length of the skirt. I marched in circles around it. I stalked it like a lion hunts its prey. I made sure that my eyes covered every silken inch until I had enough sufficient details to sputter forth.

“It's still beautiful.”

I briefly feared that Rarity was going to explode.

Swiftly, I followed that up with, “I-I just realized...” I pointed at the glittering spheres along the middle of the dress. “These... These are all pearls?”

“Mmmhmmm. Yes. Natural as oxygen. Straight from the river basins of Blue Valley!” She smiled wide. I could see the pools of her eyes quivering with each anxious heartbeat. “Spared no expense! I stored them for a rainy day—*eheheh*—as it were. Aren't they splendid?”

“And they're making up the collar,” I pointed out.

“And... And-And-And—” She scampered around and stood next to me as she pointed out the many layers of the skirt. “And there're more to be applied! Each of the final three seams shall be accentuated with them! That makes a total of five layers of pearls!”

“That's... That's **bold**...” I nodded, rubbing a hoof along my chin. “Extravagant, yes. But... It just *shouts* confidence and beauty... a *natural* beauty.”

“Yes! Yes! Heehee—Ahem.” She calmed herself and spoke in a duller voice. “Remind you of anypony?”

I blinked. I looked at her, then at the dress. “Uhm... Wouldn't you have put more blue gems into the design if you meant it to represent—?”

“Hmmm?” She squinted awkwardly, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, bah!” She chuckled airily. “I would never think to be so narcissistic! Erm, at least not in *this* scenario. Ahem. Think harder...”

“Uhm...” I scratched my skull through my mane. “Is it for Silver Seams herself to wear? I’m... Not entirely familiar with the color of her coat. Does it match?”

Rarity gawked at me as if I was committing some blatant crime. “You... You mean you don't see it? You don't see what I've done?”

I gazed at the dress, frantically searching for a clue. Everything was white, brilliant, pearlescent, and magnificent. What else was there to say?

“Is it not the tenth of August in two days' time?” Rarity finally clued me in.

I glanced at her. I wracked my brain for a connection. “August Tenth... August Tenth...”

Rarity paced around me, orating with authority, “Not only is it when I'm expecting Miss Seams to visit, but it's none other than the birthday of the legendary Princess Platinum of Unicornia!”

“Oh...” I blinked. “Oh!” I blinked harder, the dress suddenly coming into greater focus. “One of the three founders of Equestria!”

“Aaaaaand...” She leaned towards me with a proud grin. “...the first royal family member to have united the five tribes of unicorns into solidarity!”

I stared back at her. Seconds ticked into breaths. Her resounding sigh felt like a cannonball to my chest.

“Oh, darling, *do* remember your roots!” She said as she sashayed back towards the dress and pointed at the many rows of pearls. “What was Princess Platinum's gift to the founding matriarchs of the five tribes?”

“Uhm...” I thought out loud, and grinned as the realization came to me. “But of course! She gave them pearls excavated from the long lost Sapphire Lake of Dream Valley!”

Rarity grinned at me, like a teacher congratulating a learning foal. “And as she gave them these pearls—the symbol of her grace and generosity—she declared a new era for unicorns, when they would invest all of their magical energies in guiding the path of the Sun and Moon for generations to come.” She pointed at the obvious layers on the dress where the pearls would go. “Five tribes, five layers, a whole ensemble of beauty, grace, and promise.” She stood up straight and tall. “Silver Seams is one of the most prominent members of Manehattan elite, and as all ponies know, Manehattan was formerly Neigh Amsterdam, the central capital of Old Unicornia!”

“And she's arriving close to the birthday of Princess Platinum herself. How old would that make the monarch anyways?” I glanced at her with a curious grin. “Two Thousand Years? Her reign began almost a millennium before the fall of Luna.”

“Don't you get it?”

“Absolutely, Miss Rarity. I just...” I gulped. “I guess my head wasn't in the right place. But Silver Seams?” I winked at her. “It seems like you know your audience. This is all... *well...* this is all positively dazzling!”

“Do you really think so?!” Rarity almost giggled like a foal, but once more covered it with an air of restraint. “Ahem—But I did not ask for your observation to simply gush over my own labors. Tell me, do you think the message is too obvious, now that you know the appropriate angle and all?”

“Rarity, it seems to me that you put a lot of thought and effort into this work. Not only do I think that the message will hit Silver Seams close to home, but I think it will impress her greatly that you were capable of thinking of something so fantastic on such short notice.”

“Yes, funny that you should say that. I only had a week to work on it.” She gulped and gazed at the dress with a rediscovered pensiveness. “Still, it's not been enough. I have so little time left, and so many pearls to apply. I fear as though I've embellished too much on the front half of the dress as it is. I don't know what I'd do with myself if I ran out halfway through the last layer.”

“Surely you've taken the right measurements...”

“Hmmm. Yes. But I won't know how much to apply until the dress has been worn, so that the fabric has been truly flexed to allow for a proper estimate...” Her words trailed off as she attempted to think up a solution halfway through uttering them.

“Have you tried it on yourself?” I asked. “The dress that is.”

“Hmmmph! Don't be so absurd! A proper dressmaker could never do her work while wearing it—” She stopped. She looked at me.

I looked back. “Uhm... What are you...?” I felt my cheeks burning suddenly. “Oh no. Seriously, Miss Rarity. There's no way I could do that.”

Thirty minutes later, I was doing that.

The sound stone was resting atop the metal stand before the window, glowing slowly with enchantment while Rarity focused on another “magical” situation altogether. I stood atop the stage as she trotted and hovered all around me, forcing my limbs apart so as to get proper access to all the layers of the dress she had left to apply the pearls.

“You have no idea what this means to me, Miss... Heartstrings, was it?”

“Yes.”

“Erm—Yes. My apologies. It's simply horrible to get a mare's name wrong.”

“I wouldn't be offended.” I tried to breathe evenly. “Trust me.”

“I'm just so beside myself right now!” She giggled nervously before proceeding with the task, her eyes squinting earnestly from behind her spectacles. “If you hadn't come out of the blue—unlocked door and all—I'd be at a loss for time! Oh, thank Celestia! I swear, you're like a guardian angel!”

“An... angel?” I gazed off towards the windows. I thought of Morning Dew. A warm toastiness spread through me that made the awkward situation instantly bearable. I imagined wearing this fabulous dress for another occasion altogether, and I couldn't help but smile and sigh. “Generous ponies are as generous ponies do.”

“Hmmm...” Rarity smiled as she floated needle and thread between us, fastening the pearls one at a time to the seams of the skirt. “Some of the things that you say, Miss Heartstrings: they're quite poignant. I'm tempted to ask if you've heard more about me than my gifts in sewing and enchanting.”

“Oh. Uhm. Not much more than... er... they say around town.”

“Yes?” Rarity paced around me and squinted hard at her work. “And just what do they say about me around town?”

I bit my lip. There are times when it's not so bad being backed up into a wall. I'd have expected not to be wearing a fragile, expensive dress at such moments. “Well, ponies say that you're a good seamstress and very dedicated to your work.”

“Oh.” Her voice had a dead tone to it. She threaded the needle with far less enthusiasm, suddenly. “Is that all? Why am I not surprised...”

“B-but I'm not exactly from around here!” I tried to make up for it.

“Visiting from Las Pegasus, right?”

Was that what I said? Dear Celestia, I should have been better at this. “I'm sure that if I had stayed around here longer, I would have heard more about you. But, honestly, I try not to stake too much claim in gossip.” That, at least, was true. I relaxed with a gentle breath and allowed her more room to work around me. “Besides, being popular has never exactly been my schtick.” I gulped. “Especially as of late.”

“And why would you say such a thing, darling?” Rarity's voice became melodic once more. My attention was instantly grabbed. “You're a pretty, elegant, intelligent young mare—if I may be so bold. I'm sure you're the object of stallions' desire and the target of fillies' envy wherever you go!”

I chuckled at that. “I think your friends' tendency to placate has rubbed off on you, Miss Rarity.”

“Oh please! A good compliment is just like any other gift! Why shoot it down so?”

“I'm...” I fidgeted. “I'm sorry.”

“And none of that! There's a thing to be said about excessive humility. But, just like with my good friend Fluttershy, it can be a tad bit grating at times.”

“Do you lavish this 'Fluttershy' with compliments as well?”

Rarity's lips curved. “As I do with all kindly ponies who deserve it.”

“All I've done is help you with your dress.”

“Oh, but it's more than that.”

“Like what?”

“Why, the little things, darling. Such as you asking for me by name when you first marched in here.”

I stared down at her. “You... You really appreciate that, huh?”

“Oh, don't let me get started!” She briefly paused in sewing to roll her gorgeous blue eyes. “If I had a shiny red apple for each time a pony marched in under that doorbell and failed to recognize me or my lifelong work, I swear, I would put Sweet Apple Acres out of business with my bounty! Hmph!” She smiled. “That's why I'm so proud to have had a perfect stranger like you come in asking to see me, even if I was... *erm*... h-hardly welcoming when you first entered. Eh heh heh...”

I was gazing off towards the corner of the place. I've never liked thinking about it, but for a solid year I've always been the first pony to say my own name in a given situation. I'm not sure a year's worth of journal entries is enough to explain just what that feels like. There are times when—I swear—I forget I was ever once called “[Lyra](#).” Those are dismal gray mornings, waking up to my own fears and regrets, the casual detritus of an indefinable curse.

“It's a wonderful thing to be recognized,” I found myself saying out loud. “But that's as far as I could ever hope to dream. I like my name. I just wouldn't care for it being waved around like a flag.”

“Are you afraid of the spotlight, dear?”

“The what?”

“The spotlight.” She smiled at me while a few glittering pins floated before her. “It is my belief that we're destined to experience it at some point or another, whether we ask for it or not. I've

endeavored all my life to be prepared for it.”

“You say that as if being popular was what a pony was made for.”

“Isn't it?”

“I...” I chewed on my lip briefly. “Maybe once I believed that. Nowadays, though...” I felt a wave of cold, but did my best not to shiver while wearing Rarity's unfinished masterpiece. “It's my hope that when my time on this world is done, I'll leave everything behind while remaining perfectly content with myself.”

“Good heavens,” she almost grunted. “That's remarkably grim, don't you think?”

“I-I like to think it's an affirmative perspective.” I gave her a reassuring smile. “I at least believe that it's *possible* to end things happily. Just how does popularity fill that niche?”

“Well, I can't presume to lecture a pony on philosophy,” Rarity sewed another pearl in and paused altogether, her eyes swimming in the alabaster fabric of the half-finished dress before her. “But I firmly believe that a pony's essence is not only defined by her notoriety—it is, in fact, *improved* by it. It's not half as shallow as many are prone to think, though I don't blame them. It all deals with what we are, and what we were made to be.”

I admit: that definitely got my attention. I gazed earnestly at her. “Oh really?”

“Mmmhmm...” She stood before me and rested on her hind legs with a tranquil grin. “Being popular means more than having fame or fortune or good standing with the citizenry of ponydom.” She fluffed her mane elegantly with her hoof, all the while casting a glance towards the sound stone being enchanted across from us. “Ponies, after all, are social things, finely crafted jewels of Creation that are all meant to shine together. When a strange pony walks into my store and has the good grace to know my name, a part of me feels reborn. It means that something that I've done, something that I've contributed to the canvas of this world has captured their attention, and our hearts have been connected.” She gazed back at me, and her face was as bright as the painting she was attempting to illustrate in my mind's eye. “We are all artists deep down, Miss **Heartstrings**, every single one of us, and we make our mark on this world with the brushstrokes of our indomitable spirits. I have only ever sought to paint a masterpiece that can inspire others, for why else do we exist than to do so remarkably?”

As she spoke, the haunting chords of the eighth elegy were returning to my mind. But instead of drowning her out, they were highlighting every word that came out of her mouth, as if she had been designated the lunar instrumental's choir since the dawn of time. I remembered ever so briefly what it meant to compose music before the curse drowned me. Making music was something to be *shared*, along with every glorious facet of existence.

No, I could never judge Rarity for wanting to be bigger than life itself. A generous soul deserves to rest on the highest pedestal. How else was she to shower the rest of the world with gifts? Like the gift she was giving me right then, a most precious gift that would be done with far sooner than I had the desire to believe, only the good wisdom to expect.

“I wish I could be as remarkable as you, Miss Rarity,” I solemnly said, though my smile was joyful. “But, I think some of us were born to shine, and others simply to twinkle.”

I don't know if she understood what I said, but her coy wink told me that there was something else I hadn't gathered until then. “That's the biggest misconception about popularity, darling. It is not a competition. Much rather, I like to see it as a marathon.” She trotted back over to my side and resumed work on the gown's skirt. “One of these days, Miss **Heartstrings**, you are going to break into a full gallop, and I sincerely envy the ponies who will be there to witness your shining moment in the spotlight.”

Rarity's words filled my mind, generating an awe that was as numbing as it was felicitous to my spirit. It was distracting to the point that I couldn't focus on the eighth elegy. As a matter of fact, I lost track of time, so that I hadn't counted the days between helping her with the dress and returning to the Boutique with the third stone.

All I could think about was making her day, hopefully in some fraction of the manner in which she had once made mine. So when I stepped through the door and heard the ringing bell announcing my entrance, I immediately chirped forth into the domain of fabric and sparkles, “Hello, Miss Rarity? My name's **Lyra Heartstrings**, and I heard lots about you. So long as you're not busy with something at the moment, I was wondering if I could borrow your infamous talents in enchanting this gemstone that I've—”

I froze in my tracks.

A tall, brown-coated mare with a gray mane stared haughtily down at me over the crest of her thick-framed, dark spectacles. She was dressed in a black blouse and matching slacks with room for her flaring tail to poke through. Nothing about her straight-laced outfit succeeded in hiding the thin and rigid frame that encompassed her being.

“Huh...” I blinked.

“Hmmm...” Was all she uttered at first. Her eyes narrowed on me. When she next spoke, I wasn't entirely sure whom she was addressing until I heard scampering hooves in the distance. “A regular of yours, I gather?”

“Oh! Uhm... Eheheh!” Rarity—a frazzled and sweating mess—dashed over between me and this angular stranger. “It's the middle of the day! I'm bound to have clientele visiting as they see fit!”

“I could have sworn that you were going to close regular business for my visit...”

“Ah! Yes! Hah! Funny, I did say that, didn't I?!” Rarity spun to face her, all but bowing to kiss the deadpan mare's hooves. “Heheheh—Absent mind of a genius! Our words go places but our hooves seldom follow them!” She turned to face me. “Uhm... Can I help you? Erm—that is to say—” She shook her head, blurredly, then exclaimed, “I would ever so like to help you, but at the moment I'm afraid that I am predisposed. Still, if you leave a brief description of what it is that you require, I am certain to leave for myself a detailed note so that I can properly serve you first thing tomorrow morning, as I am prompt and diligent to pay heed to all of my loyal, well-paying customers! Eheheheh...”

“Uhm...” I glanced forlornly at the mare standing behind her, above us, like a grand looming shadow. “It... It's not important,” I eventually murmured, backing out of the store with my saddlebag and shivers. “Really. I can come another time.”

“Oh, but please! Let me know what it is that you want so that I can help you tomorrow!” Rarity's pleading eyes briefly broke the walls of sheer panic. “Yes, I'm closed for business, but I would hate myself for sending away a pony in need without finding a way to get back to her...”

“Undoubtedly she's in need of new winter wear,” the mare said, and my attention was drawn to her bored gaze being aimed at my hoodie. “Or else a severe alteration.” She glanced lethargically at Rarity. “From what Mr. Toity said, I had assumed all of your fellow residents wore the Canterlot line you sewed for him a year ago.”

Rarity gulped, then glanced aside at me. “Well, yes. I do seem to... erm... have quite the following in Canterlot. Hereabouts, however... erm...” She gnawed briefly on her hoof and tried to cover it with a smile. “Well, this *is* farm country, Miss Seams. And you know how earth ponies are. They rely a great deal on hoof-me-downs...”

“And your establishment...” Silver Seams paced across the boutique. “It's been here for the better part of five years?”

“Erm. Yes. I graduated with a minor in business, and my mother's an entrepreneur, so—”

“That's a long enough time to make an impact on the local fashion, wouldn't you think?”

“Erm. Yes. I suppose that—”

“Well, I came here to be thrilled.” The first thing that resembled a smile graced Silver's lips, but even that was something of a stretch, like trying to carve a thin line out of black granite. “So, here's your chance, Rarity dear. Thrill me.”

Rarity was in an entirely different world, and I was obviously not part of it. “Oh! Absolutely! I have just the thing that I've been dying to show you!” A chill ran through the room, but I already knew the real reason why I was invisible. The young unicorn trotted eagerly over to Silver Seams' side. After a great deal of dramatic narration over the details of Princess Platinum's legacy, Rarity yanked at a cord, and a pair of curtains unfurled, revealing the completed dress on the center stage of

the Boutique in all its majesty. Rarity went over every detail, highlighting each of the five rows of pearls with magical blue luminescence, all the while lavishing Silver's ears with the timeless tale of Unicornia's unification before joining the Equestrian herd. "And as she gave a gift to her fellow unicorns, I present you this gift for your eyes! Doesn't it positively shimmer with Platinum's eternal spirit?"

"Mmmm. Yes. It is quite beautiful. I can see you put a great deal of time and effort into it."

"Oh, absolutely! Though, I must have been incredibly inspired, for the entire fabrication went by in a delightful blur. I swear, it's as if the last five days flew by on wings of inspiration—!"

"But, if you would, I'd like to be shown the floor models of your Canterlot lineup."

"My... C-Canterlot lineup?"

"Yes, the ones you supplied to Hoity Toity's marvelous boutique. He's the top supplier in the upper district, or so I've been told."

"Oh.. Oh! Uhm... Y-Yes!" Rarity gulped and side-stepped away from her detailed work as I gazed from afar. "I... I do believe I still have some of those... *erm*... year-old models lying around. Give me just a moment and I'll get them properly displayed—"

"You mean that you don't have a showcase on hoof already? I'd imagined that your customers would like to see your finest work on a day-to-day basis."

"Oh, they are hardly my finest work. Heheheh—I've sold so many of them that they are practically commonplace in the streets of Canterlot by now—"

"Yes, yes. And from Hoity Toity's profitable sales, I imagine that means something. So where are they, darling? My time here in Ponyville is short, after all."

"Uhm—R-Right this way, Miss Seams! I promise you. Eheheh—You won't be disappointedddd!"

As the two trotted out of view, I stood forgotten as always in the shadows. The pearlescent dress in honor of Princess Platinum shimmered brilliantly in the spotlight, but for the first time in nearly a year, I couldn't conceive of a lonelier image than what I saw right then. I longed for the words of Rarity, but whatever could have floated across the lengths of the Boutique were instantly drowned out by Silver's absorbing presence. I trotted slowly out of the shop. The bell was a dull and heartless noise. I did somepony a favor of switching the sign in the front window to "closed" on the way out.

The next morning, I entered slowly, saying nothing. The Boutique was open early for business and all of the lanterns hanging from the ceiling were lit. Two things shone in the center of the shop. One was the dress of pearls, untouched and unmoved from where I had last seen it. The other thing was Rarity's snow-white coat, reflecting sunlight like a precious diamond.

Her brilliance, however, was drowned out by a dull expression as she unemotionally fiddled with a scarf that she was sewing telekinetically in front of her. The skin was weighted under her eyes, so that I was afraid to find out what—besides sleep—had tugged at her spirit.

Bravely, I cleared my throat, and asked, “Miss Rarity?”

In a flash, the artist's eyes lit up at the sound of her name, as if a torch was ignited deep inside her. Rarity turned to gaze at me, her expression bright—but blank—like an untouched canvas. “Oh! Why, hello.” It was her turn to clear her throat. She straightened her legs so as to no longer appear so stooped. “Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where every garment is chic, unique, and magnifique.”

I smiled genuinely, hoping that it would be infectious. It wasn't. I nevertheless spoke, “I'm visiting from out of town—” I paused. I started over. “My name's **Lyra Heartstrings**, and while I was visiting, I was wondering if I could pay you for some services, Miss Rarity.”

“Hmm. Yes. I would be more than happy to help you,” she said, though her voice hardly matched the enthusiasm her words had meant to convey. It's always a tragic thing when a song is sucked from a pony's throat. “Though I must apologize in advance. I have this scarf to finish for another client of mine, and I promised them that I would do it first thing when business hours began.”

I glanced back at the door, then at her once again. “You're open earlier than the sign outside says. I couldn't help but notice that while I was strolling by for a morning walk.”

“Well, I did not get all that much sleep last night, so I didn't see the purpose in waiting another two hours.”

“I'm so sorry to hear that, Miss Rarity.” I gulped and backtrotted slightly. “If it helps, I can just come another day—”

“No! Absolutely not! I forbid it!” she said with a slight growl. Then, after blinking at herself, she sighed and ran a hoof over her forehead. “Oh, I do apologize. I know that sounded awfully forward of me.”

“I've heard ponies say worse,” I said with a gentle smile.

“I've never turned a pony away for services. I don't want you to be the first, Miss **Heartstrings**.” She took a deep breath, her gaze locked onto nothing in particular beyond the nearby window frame. “**Heartstrings**.” She smiled. “Now that's a delightful name that deserves to be famous.”

My heart skipped a beat. At first, I thought it was because a part of me actually, foolishly

thought she had remembered it. I then realized that I was simply being overwhelmed by a sinking feeling, and every time I tried to rationalize it, all that my mind's eye could come up with was Silver Seams' dark, emotionless stare. It's times like this when I do something impulsive and desperate to shake the stupor that's overcome me. Perhaps it wasn't an accident that I did such a thing in Rarity's presence.

"I heard that you got a visit yesterday," I blurted. "From Silver Seams, no less." I then attempted to rationalize what had to have been no less than a kick to the gut. "That's one reason why I came here." I tried to give a playful grin. "If Silver Seams shops at Carousel Boutique, then that must make this a place of high class!"

My rather awkward compliment had no effect on Rarity. I should have known better, but I was just so desperate to get her to cheer up. I only wished she was nearly as desperate herself. "Hmmm, the jury is still out on that, I'm afraid," she ultimately said.

I gulped. "Why... uhm... Why do you say that? I imagine a seamstress would be excited to have somepony like Silver Seams pay her a personal visit."

"If you can call it a visit," she murmured aloud, struggling to fix the scarf with a sudden frustration. "Nnngh... Oh bother, who am I kidding?" Her lips curved slightly. "It was a delightful encounter. Truly, it was. Silver Seams is an amazing mare, and she is an utterly bedazzling conversationalist. Why, I spent two hours, mesmerized, as I heard her tell about her designing exploits in the grim streets of Stalliongrad. A pony of her age and grandeur is remarkable. Truly remarkable." Rarity's nostrils flared briefly as her eyes lost themselves in the sea of fabric she was shaping into being. "A pony like that has truly *earned* her fame."

I fidgeted, standing behind her, like the shadow to something that once shone inside that place. With a cheerful voice, I boldly asked, "And did you tell her anything at all about *yourself*? It sounds like Silver Seams travels around a lot. I'm sure she'd like to know more about the Ponyville scene."

"I'm afraid our conversation never took such a turn," Rarity swiftly replied. "She had to take leave for a meeting with one of her agents. Right now, she's likely having breakfast in bed, waiting for the afternoon train to take her off to Trottingham, and onwards to another season of lavish fashion shows. Hmmm. I will always admire the swift pace and courageous restlessness of the working elite. Though, I suspect, it will forever be from afar."

I didn't know how else to get her to say more than to utter, "I... I don't understand."

"What's there to understand?" she retorted coldly, so that I wondered if she was even talking to me anymore. There was a cold tap-tap-tap of her floating needles coming into hard contact with one another, almost snapping loose the thread that she was knitting into place. "That I set myself for yet another fall? I only have myself to blame, of course, putting so much weight into a single moment, a single glance, a single blasted opportunity, as if the entirety of one's life is determined in a blink. I don't know what's more foolish, the fact that I had stooped to relying on something so desperate or the fact that this wasn't my first time doing so!"

I gulped and said, "The way I see it, it's not so much that we learn from the mistakes in life, but

that we learn to encounter future mistakes with greater tenacity.”

“Well maybe mistakes are the problem in and of themselves!” Rarity finally grunted, all but slapping the knitting materials to the floor as she flashed a very familiar dress the angriest of glances. “Maybe genius shouldn't have room for stupid errors, or else it isn't actually genius in the first place!”

The room was silent, save for the pistoning sounds of her enraged lungs. Slowly, the elegant unicorn composed herself. The voice that came out of her next was still embroiled, but collected.

“Miss **Heartstrings**, whoever you are, I can only guess that you are a musician, and a talented one at that. Am I correct?”

I swallowed and gently nodded. “Yes. At least, I'm inclined to agree with you on that. Talent, however, is relative—”

“But it is **real**,” she said, her eyes briefly hot as she glared back at me. “Or else, why would you even subscribe to that name?”

“Er... It was the name I was born with.”

“Was it?” she asked sharply.

I blinked at her. “Well, *yes*, for your information.”

“And does it define you? Does it convey to other ponies who and what you are when they say it out loud? Does your name fill their mind with delight and joy just to think of it, because they have utmost confidence in what you mean to them, and what you provide to this beautiful world of ours?”

I took a deep breath, and my gaze fell defeatedly toward my hooves. “I... I couldn't say...”

“Well, allow me to be so bold, but I hear your name, and I see your cutie mark, and I am instantly proud of you, even if I don't know who you are,” she said. Her face was too tight to express a smile, too proud to grimace. She continued, “Because if there's one thing I believe in, it's that we're all here for a purpose. We're placed on this earth to shine. Some of us do so better than others, but that's not the argument I'm trying to make. In order to be successful, Miss **Heartstrings**, to be popular, to make our mark in society, two things have to happen. We have to be sure of ourselves, and the gifts that we have. Secondly, we have to meet others who share that vision, so that they may properly channel the contributions we have to make in the world of expression.” She sighed and looked towards the brilliant dress once more. “With each passing day, I feel as though there are fewer and fewer ponies in existence who know how to properly keep those channels open. Complacency has taken the place of creativity. At least, I hope that's the case, as horrible as that may sound. Because if I'm wrong, and it's all just me...” Rarity's breath came out ragged. She ran a hoof over her face, muffling her next utterance. “Then, dear Celestia, how far have I fallen...?”

I pretended to follow her gaze, just so that I could have an excuse to make mention of the beautiful masterpiece in the room. “I have to say, though. I can't stop staring at that gown since I walked in here. Did you get a chance to show it to Silver Seams while she was around?”

For a moment, Rarity was without words.

So I continued. “I think it's absolutely gorgeous. But, it's more than that.” I opened my mouth to continue, but a very tender part of me hesitated. The moment was too thin. After a quiet struggle I dared to say it anyways. “Funny that you would choose a pearl motif, considering it's a day after the anniversary of the legendary Princess Platinum's birth.”

Rarity immediately flashed me a glance, one that was frozen for a few pale seconds. Her face broke into something that was halfway between a chuckle and a sob. I was briefly mortified to hear her snuffle. Soon, however, she composed herself in time to smile and murmur, “You really do live up to your name, Miss **Heartstrings**. I only wonder where your sentiment was yesterday, when the legacy of Unicornia utterly failed me.”

I bit my lip. “I'm starting to wonder too.”

“To think, she carries the name 'Silver' like it's a copyright, and yet she dares to dress all in black.”

“I'm sorry?”

Rarity looked at me. “I'm guessing one of my friends directed you here, or one of the more high-standing members of Ponyville? Hmmm?”

“I-I came here only to do business! I promise.” It was the truth. Most of it, at least. “I think you're more famous around town than you give yourself credit for, Miss Rarity.”

“Correction, darling. I'm a utility.”

“You're what-now?”

“A household name,” she said with a smile that obscured the layers of disappointment pouring out of her gaze. “A common noun. I'm the local seamstress that a pony sends a friend to when they need a seam realigned or a hem fixed or a cuff mended. Undoubtedly they say my name a lot, just like anypony in Equestria would say 'Silver Seams.' But do they think twice about it? Do they have the vision—the innate desire—to look even further, in expectation that there are ponies that bury treasure deeply enough to reward souls who look for it? I'll have you know that I wasn't born with the name that you've heard villagers call me by. I wasn't always Rarity.”

I blinked. I hadn't expected that at all. “You weren't?”

“No, darling,” she shook her head slowly. “As a matter of fact, I was born under the name 'Sapphire Sight.' I come from a long family of jewelcrafters and enchanters. It's only fitting that they expected me to fall in line with what is undeniably a biological tradition. Sure enough, the day I discovered my cutie mark, it was in the act of finding a miraculous repository of natural gemstones. But while my talent may have been determined by fate, I had no intention whatsoever of letting it determine my lot in life. My horn owed its talent to precious rocks, but my heart belonged to my

dreams and what future they could provide me. That's why—at a very young age, even before finishing elementary school—I changed my name to 'Rarity'.”

“Why?” I asked her. “Why 'Rarity?’”

She stared deeply at me as she said, “Because I wanted a name that I could live up to.” She looked sadly at the dress. “And, furthermore—with time and effort—to surpass. I wanted to be special. I wanted to be famous. I wanted to be the pony that everypony would know, not just for the sound that her name entailed, but for the hidden and deeper meanings held within, like a multi-layered diamond would offer. Precious rocks aren't meant to be just mined. They exist to be put on display, to fill the world with glittering wonder because—after all—there are things born in this world that are granted the gift to see and admire that which stands out among us. Long ago, I stopped being 'Sapphire Sight,' and chose to be 'Rarity.' How else was I to aspire to greatness? What other choice did I have? Would I follow the hoofsteps of my family and remain a mere blemish in their shadow? The most I would ever accomplish was being a grain of salt in the steep well of tradition, or else a mere cog in some unimaginative industry.”

“Industry?” I remarked, an eyebrow raised.

“That is what everything becomes, sadly,” Rarity murmured. “Given enough time. Given enough ritual. You go through the motions until the motions become you, and then what is life beyond the utter necessity of the mechanization? Yesterday, I had an entire afternoon to look into the eyes of Silver Seams, to hear her voice, to bask in her aura. And when the whole encounter was said and done, and after I had finished digesting all of her words for whatever palatable merit there was left to savor, I realized that I could have gotten as much of a catharsis from a machine. And do you know why? Because Silver Seams has become part of the industry, a process born from art yet blind to it. She was once an aspiring daredevil of Manehattan couture. Today, she's an old and jaded mare who designs with her hooves, but they're no longer attached to her heart and soul. All that matters is the profit behind the process, something that is measured in money and not in magic. I would almost feel sorry for her... if it wasn't for one thing...”

“Yes?” I leaned forward, curious. “What's that?”

Rarity gulped hard. She seemed to be dealing with her own brand of shivers by the time she eventually said, “That she's the one mare in Equestria who has it *right*. That everything today is nothing but industry, for what is commonplace is not only accepted, but worshipped on high, because everypony is afraid to think, to challenge, to find things that are new... that are special... that are *rare*.” She exhaled long and hard. “And all awhile, I'm wasting my time looking for ways to stand out, saving all of my pearls to make one beautiful dress when I should be making dozens that will earn me a proper spot, even if it is just another part of some grand, bland machine.”

I was listening to her, but somepony's words were rising to the surface, and that pony was me. I thought of my journal entries—so many identical to this one that I'm writing right now. If I wasn't writing for myself, what kind of exposure could I actually hope to achieve, assuming that a pony had the blessed sight to see what I had enscribed? Would it be a deep and thoughtful critique, or an errant flip through the pages before those same hooves tossed the text back into a dusty pile of all of yesterday's tragedies? Even a song can move a soul only so far ahead until a different tune shoves that

spirit in the other direction like a gale force wind. How, then, does a pony build a proper sail to navigate the storms of this saturated world?

“Maybe...” I spoke. “Maybe... you're still just waiting for proper exposure.” I glanced up at her. “It's a long wait, sure, but that doesn't mean it won't come to you, Miss Rarity. Perhaps the day will come when you will rise up—like Silver Seams has—only you won't settle for being commonplace. You won't make the same mistakes she did.”

“Hmmm... Mistakes?” Rarity smiled. “Miss Seams has achieved everything I've ever wished I could, and did she get there by making mistakes? If that's true, then I obviously need to make such transgressions myself.” She took a deep breath. “But I have never, *ever* worked that way. Nor would I wish to.”

I said, “I'm guessing life is cruel to perfectionists.”

“I've never blamed *life* for the world's cruelty,” Rarity muttered. “Only ignorance.” She smiled painfully my way. “And I would hate to be such a transgressor, especially before a mercifully patient and gracious mare such as yourself. Please, do forgive my self-absorbed ramblings, Miss **Heartstrings**, and tell me how I may be of service to you today.”

My heart immediately fell down to the bottommost part of my gut. “Oh. *Oh*... Uhm...” My saddlebag weighed as though it was full of cemetery gravestones. “You know what? We had a delightful conversation. I think I got exactly what I needed from this visit—”

“Come now, do not let my passionate goings-ons frighten you away, dear,” she said softly. “My best friends have occasionally labeled me a 'drama queen,' and they would more than occasionally be correct. Please, tell me what you came here for. You have my full and undivided attention. You've earned it.”

I gulped, shifting guiltily like a young colt who had just killed a bird with a slingshot. I fiddled telekinetically with my saddlebag and avoided her gaze as I stammered forth, “I came here... I-I came here because... uhm... I heard that you were good with enchanting gemstones.” I should have given her the last two stones. Instead, something sincere inside me only produced one. “And I very desperately need to have this imbued with magic once again. I... uhm... I've been told that you're the best in town. I didn't want to settle for less.”

Rarity's response was a sincere breath and a nod of her head. “No pony should ever settle for less, darling.”

I immediately winced. “But. But you're busy with the scarf and I'm sure you've got other dresses to make and—”

“Miss **Heartstrings**.”

“I'll understand if you're just not up to it—”

“Miss **Heartstrings**.” She grabbed the rock with a forced charge of telekinesis. Standing up

straight, she gave me a placid grin as she trotted towards the necessary equipment beside the window. “Enchanting gemstones is just one of many ways I make a living. Ever since I came to Ponyville, I've done just that—living. But that doesn't mean I can't do it gracefully, and proudly. Please, let me be of service to you.”

I reached a hoof towards her from afar, but it was as if she was slipping away from me. What broke my heart was that I realized she had no other place to slip away to. This was her home as much as it was mine. She was as much a prisoner, and yet she wasn't cursed. Or was she?

Just what pony isn't cursed, come to think of it? I hadn't put that much philosophical thought into the idea until then, until I saw Rarity going through the motions, being reborn as “Sapphire Sight,” setting the lens up before the window and capturing the sunlight like a piston would be powered by steam. In the end, I would give her three golden bits and she would give me a smile, but I suddenly no longer knew which was more jaded.

Once I had left Rarity's presence, she would forget that I ever existed. But she would not forget her troubles. Her concerns were as real as oxygen, and she depended on them just as desperately. What place was it of mine to try and convince her otherwise, even if I had the power to do so? Fame means nothing to me, but that is simply my curse. How much worse is it to have an opportunity that is never realized, though the potential is always there?

Was she making a mountain out of a molehill? Did society think of her as just any other contributing part of the machine, assuming it thought of her at all? I wondered if there was any pony qualified to do proper, unbiased research on a soul's notoriety, and then I realized that such a proper pony was me.

“Rarity? Yeah, I know her. She's the pony who operates the carousel besides the Ponyville fairgrounds, right? Wait—Huh? You mean to tell me it's not an actual carousel? Yeesh. What's with all the flippin' tents around that side of town, then?”

“Hmmm... Miss Rarity... Miss Rarity... Oh! I remember her! White coat? Bluish mane? I

listened to her perform once at a dance party in Town Hall last Summer Sun Celebration. What's her call sign again? 'DJ-P0N3?'"

"She's a tailor, right? She puts together dresses and stuff? Or is that the unicorn with the streak in her hair? Whatever. One of them lives in a tree. Can I go now? I'm late for a lunch in downtown."

"I vaguely remember something about a unicorn who nearly died at the Best Young Fliers Competition in Cloudsdale. Hey, did you hear what our neighborhood weather flier Rainbow Dash did on that day? She produced a brilliant sonic rainboom—right in front of Princess Celestia! *Swoosh!* ***Kablaam!*** Yeah! She saved—like—three entire members of the Wonderbolts at the same time too! Talk about your fifteen minutes of awesome! Heh!"

"Isn't that the mare who sounds like a vampire and visits Aloe and Lotus' Day Spa twice a week?"

"Why, I go to Carousel Boutique all the time! You're telling me that she owns the place? My

goodness, I always thought she was just an intern. I mean, what unicorn at that young age doesn't *inherit* a business like that? Do you get what I'm saying?"

"I know that there's a white unicorn who's one of the rumored Elements of Harmony. Y'know—cuz supposedly the Elements are no longer sacred objects like in olden times, but they've instead been fused with the spirits of living ponies. All I know is that one of them is Loyalty and she's a white unicorn. Or maybe it was the Element of Beauty. Hmm... Why're you asking me this again?"

"Scram, lady. I'm trying to eat my sandwich here."

"Come to think of it, we had a fashion show here in Ponyville once. It was almost a year ago. Some fancy schmancy art critic from Canterlot came for the whole event. Wouldn't you know it? It was all just some practical joke on the poor schmuck. It had to have been! The dresses that were on display were gaudy as all get-out! I swear, I've never seen a posh know-it-all get so enraged. Heh—Wait, what? Why does this come to mind? Cuz the whole dang prank was this 'Rarity's' idea, wasn't it? I mean, that's why you're asking around about her, right? It's about time karma caught up with the mare."

“Ew—like—why would I go shopping at some overpriced hole-in-the-wall place on the far east side of town? I totally—like—do all my shopping at Rich's Threads. After all, that's where all the popular fillies go. Leave Carousel Boutique to the upstart snobs who run the place!”

“How dare you!”

I glanced over from where I stood inside Sugarcube Corner, interviewing a pair of young mares with pastel, permed manes. The two gazed in the same direction, looking bored beyond all measure.

The author of the last exclamation immediately wilted upon our combined glance. “Uhm... Not that I have anything against you as ponies... but...” Fluttershy took a deep breath and summoned the same frown that had empowered her voice just seconds ago. “But Rarity is *not* an upstart snob! She's a talented pony with a gift for making beautiful dresses and she most definitely does *not* overcharge her customers! What's more, she's my friend, and she deserves more respect than that!”

“Heh... Schyeeaaah...” One of the fillies rolled her painted eyes. “So—like—if that was true, then how come I never knew her name until now?”

“Yeah...” The other joined in, glaring Fluttershy's way. “If she's so great, shouldn't she be hanging out in Trottingham and not hickville-central?”

“Only figures you're defending her cuz you're her friend.” The first one scoffed once more. “Heh—Lemme guess. She *totally* gives you discounts just to say nice things about her.”

“I... I...” Fluttershy's blue eyes quivered. “That's not true! Rarity—” She gulped. “She just—”

“Heh. Just what I thought.” The two fillies marched off, their bright tails swishing in unison. “Come on, let's ditch these lame-o's. The smoothies totally stink here anyways.”

“Like—omigoddes—I was about to say the same exact thing!”

“No way! We should sooooo take notes about it!”

The two left, along with their perfume. I glanced crookedly at their absence, cleared my throat, and pivoted slowly to face Fluttershy. “So... You say that Rarity is a talented pony and deserves respect?”

“Mmmm...” Fluttershy was obviously still reeling from the duo's heartless words. She hid behind a satiny lock of pink hair and turned to walk towards the far end of the semi-crowded eatery. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. It was rude of me to have interrupted.”

“But what if I wanted to hear more of what you had to say?”

She merely walked away, slowly, like a rain drop sliding downhill.

I shrugged, adjusting the sleeves of my hoodie. “Oh well, then. I guess I've learned all I needed to know about that upstart snob at the Carousel Boutique.”

“Nnnnng—” I saw the tiniest hint of gnashing teeth, and soon she was aiming an angelic frown at me once more. “You take that back right now!” A blink, a fluttering of her lashes, then a deep blush: “Erm... if you don't mind, that is...”

I smiled her way. “So now you want to defend her again?”

“I...” She shuddered and brushed away a few bright bangs from before her blue eyes. “I never thought that I would have to. Rarity has always had a good reputation. At least I've always thought so.” She glanced up at me, and the smile that came from her was as soft and gentle as her voice, and twice as sincere. “Just like anypony, you have to get to know her to understand her. She's the most generous, elegant, thoughtful, and giving mare that I know.”

“The question that's on my mind...” I leaned against a counter of glass-cased desserts as I gazed at Fluttershy. “Is whether or not Rarity is satisfied with that?”

“Uhm... Satisfied with what?”

“With somepony having to get to know her before she can understand her. Rarity's an artist, yes?”

“Oh. Most definitely...”

“You say that just because you're her friend—?”

“N-no!” Fluttershy exclaimed, her wings flexing in time with her exhalation. “Her works speak for themselves! She's designed hundreds of dresses for all kinds of ponies, from local celebrities to visiting diplomats to close acquaintances!”

“So then...” I glanced towards the exit through which our two “companions” had just exited. “How is it that most ponies I ask know very little about her?”

Fluttershy chewed on her bottom lip and looked away shamefully.

I gave her a curious glance. “Have I struck a bad chord? I'm a musician. So be honest with me, cuz I really hate doing that.”

“Why... do you want to know so much about her?” Fluttershy gulped. “About my dear friend Rarity?”

I scratched my neck and weathered a wave of chills. “What's your name?” I asked just to hear her say it herself.

“Um... Fl-Fluttershy.”

“Do you know your mother's name?”

“Erm. Yes. Why is that important?”

“Humor me, if you will.”

“My mom's name is Windflicker. She was born in Stratopolis.”

“And your grandmother's name. What about hers?”

“Fluttersky. I was... m-more or less named after her.”

“Her mother had a name too, yes? Your great grandmother?”

“Uhm...” Fluttershy had to think about that for a second. “Silvercloud... I think. Oh dear, I feel terrible for not remembering immediately...”

“And...” I leaned forward slightly. “What of your great-great grandmother? Do you know her name?”

Fluttershy drew a blank. Her cheeks were rosy as she fidgeted before the unexpected inquisition.

“If you must know, I don't remember my great-great grandmother's name either,” I murmured. Then gulped. “Nor do I recall my great grandmother's. So you're one point above me, Miss Fluttershy, if it's of any consolation.”

“What... uhm... What are you attempting to prove with this?”

“Rarity is **here**. Unlike your ancestors and mine, she's **alive**. She lives among us, barely a few walls away from where other ponies dwell. Why is it that so few of them know her name, even when she does so much to establish a reputation for herself?” I adjusted the collar of my hoodie and murmured towards the walls. “And just how many generations will it take to forget she ever had a name to begin with?”

“To be honest, I've never thought of it in that detail.”

I nodded slowly. “Neither have I. Not until lately. I have long... taken such things for granted. Now I can't afford to do anything but obsess over it. Only, I believe, Miss Rarity has made it the focus of her whole entire life, and just what has it earned her?”

“You obviously care about her to have analyzed the matter this much,” Fluttershy said woefully. “I only wish I was as considerate.”

I gave her a curious glance. “Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you her *friend*? What could make you think that way about yourself?”

“Because...” Fluttershy struggled to push the words out. “Because when I should have been there for her in the past, I failed. And I wasn't the only one. All the ponies she depended on failed her as well.”

“I don't see how that could be.”

“It's true,” Fluttershy murmured. “For this year's Grand Galloping Gala, Rarity and myself and five others were all invited to attend the royal ceremony. In honor of the occasion, Rarity took it upon herself to make us all dresses, free of charge. I've never seen a pony do something so generous before or since. But after she had put so much time and effort into the gowns, we... uhm... we didn't show any gratitude.”

“No?”

“Mmmm... no.” She guiltily shook her head. “Not at first, at least. We had our own ideas of what our gowns should have looked like. Any self-respecting seamstress would have quit on us all right there and then. But not Rarity. Her desire to make us happy was bigger than her desire to express herself, which she had every right to do. She sewed the dresses we wanted to have made, but they were simply horrible. We were just too blind and selfish to realize it. And then... mmnng...” She winced as if a wave of nausea was passing through her frail body. “There was this fashion show, and those terrible dresses were put on display for the likes of Canterlot's own Hoity Toity. It was Rarity's one chance for the spotlight, a moment she had always dreamed of, and we had ruined it for her.”

“That...” I bit my lip and helplessly nodded. “That sounds horrible.”

“It was. She was devastated. But we all tried to make it up for her. We finished the dress that she was making for herself to wear at the Gala. Then, after grabbing Hoity Toity's attention, we were able to perform a second fashion show—a private one—and he got to see all of Rarity's marvelous designs for the first time. He was impressed, and he ended up paying her a great deal to have her line of fashion sold in his boutique at Canterlot.”

“Huh...” I smiled warmly. “Well, there ya go. Friends to the end. Sounds like you paid her back proper.”

“Paid her back?” Fluttershy gave me a sad, wilted expression. “Oh, if only that were true. Don't you see? The damage was done. Even if Hoity Toity was impressed, did that really mean anything for Rarity's fashion career?” She gulped hard and shut her eyes shamefully. “Yes, she earned a lot of bits from the private show. But what had happened in town ruined any chance she had of coming public in this part of Equestria. She's sold hundreds of dresses in her line of work throughout Canterlot, but right here—in her *home*—where her reputation matters the most, she's had her chance to be in the spotlight... and it's gone. Gone forever.”

I stared around the lengths of Sugarcube Corner, entrenched in thought. Finally, I couldn't help but ask, “Then why does she stay here, if her opportunity had come and gone for her elsewhere?”

“I wish I knew. I'm only glad that she's around because she's my friend and it fills me with joy

to be in her presence.” Fluttershy smiled painfully. “Especially since it wouldn't be the last time we... erm, that is *I* put a dent in her dreams.”

“How... H-how so?”

“Something like that happened again,” Fluttershy once more avoided my gaze. “A famous photographer named Photo Finish came to town. Rarity had an opportunity to show off her fashion, and she needed a model. She chose me. I was so honored, but then something unexpected happened. Photo Finish focused entirely on me. She paid no attention to Rarity's beautiful outfits whatsoever. It was because of Rarity that any attention was paid to me in the first place. I wasn't a huge fan of it, and it didn't last for long, but I was somewhat famous in modeling for a while.”

“And in all that time, Rarity didn't receive an ounce of fame...”

Fluttershy's voice was shaking somewhat as she spoke, “All that sweet mare wants to do in life is make her name known. She wants to make beautiful things and have other ponies share in it. And at least twice already, fame has passed her over. You can even say *three times*, if you count her connections with Princess Celestia's star pupil.”

“Twilight Sparkle...”

“That's a name that is bound to go down in history,” Fluttershy remarked. “And I know Twilight. Just like myself, fame is not important to her, and to Rarity—our mutual friend—it means everything. And she has *given* everything, over and over again, with a generous heart that amazes me each and every day.”

I took a deep breath and laid a gentle hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. “I envy you, in a lot of ways.”

“Me?” Fluttershy blinked awkwardly. “Why?”

I smiled. “Because you're close friends with a living fountain of blessings such as Rarity.”

“I know that. But then there's one thing that I can't understand.” She entreated me with soft eyes, as if begging for an answer to an impossible question. “Why is it, in this world, that a fountain of blessings seems to be so terribly cursed?”

I didn't know either.

But I was almost willing to ask Rarity herself.

“Hello,” I spoke under the resonating tone of the Carousel Boutique's entrance bell the next day. “My name's [Lyra Heartstrings](#), and I was wondering...” I froze in place, blinking, as several flailing bits of fabric flew past me like silken comets. “Uhm... Is something wrong?”

“Oh, what ever could be wrong?!” Rarity grumbled. She was a purple-capped volcano waiting to burst, or else she had burst several hours ago. Her voice was as hot as her bloodshot eyes as she fiercely rummaged through the messy sea of sewing materials that the center of the Boutique had become. “Could it be wrong that I don't have the lace I need to finish a dress order that I should have tackled a week ago?! Could it be wrong that I've put my trivial problems ahead of everything else in life, such as my duty to my clients? Could it be that I swore I bought some yellow lace just three days ago, and now it seems to have grown hooves and galloped away?!”

“Er...” I gulped nervously and stood still as an iceberg as she darted all around me. “Would you... Would you like some help with—?”

“With what?! I put myself into this situation! I should be the one to pull myself out of it! As if I haven't allowed myself enough distractions already.” She paused briefly, knee-deep in a hill of fabric, to sigh and groan my way. “Ma'am, I am exceedingly sorry for this immature show I seem to be putting on, but I'm afraid you've caught me at a bad time. I'm behind with several projects, and though I'm willing to take orders, I doubt very much that I can make my services available to you anytime soon.”

“And I c-completely understand!” I said, shoving a smile past my chills in an attempt to solace her. “I just heard about your work around town, Rarity, and I wanted to see—”

“Oh! I'm surprised the local gossip had a breath to spare about me!” She smiled bitterly as she dug through another messy mountain of unkempt materials. “They do seem to be all too eagerly enthralled in covering every inch that the genius hooves of Silver Seams have covered!”

“Silver Seams?” I leaned precariously on the edge of multiple responses, before deciding to play blissful ignorance. “You mean to say that she was here? In Ponyville?”

I had forgotten how much Rarity hated ignorance. “Hah! But of course, she no longer is! But that's not enough to silence the sound of her name in the air! At least not enough to hide the fact that she didn't leave for her trip to Trottingham empty-hoofed!”

“She...” I blinked awkwardly. It was obvious that Rarity's ire was steering this whole conversation. I was merely the rudder. “She didn't?”

“Why? Haven't you heard?” Rarity spun to face me, slapping her hooves onto the tile floor as deadly parentheses to her next exclamation. “She bought an entire wardrobe of fall clothing from Rich's Threads before boarding the train heading east! She even paid the store owner a generous commission!” Her eyes lit up like twin meteors of murderous blue. “Here's something nopony has likely heard! She paid the Carousel Boutique a visit too! What did she have to donate me? Only a purse full of yawns and two hours of autobiographical anecdotes that I couldn't possibly write a book

about! She barely even *glanced* at my work, even the dresses that she pretended to be interested in! And now she's leaving Trottingham with half of the inventory from Rich's Threads! Bah! I swear, all that was holy and decent in this world went into the grave with Starswirl the Bearded!"

"I... uhm..." I shifted nervously. "That sounds rather... odd." I cleared my throat and braved a glance at her. "I've never been to Rich's Threads. Is the fashion establishment anything to shake a stick at?"

"Fashion Establishment? Snkkt—" Rarity all but spat her tongue out. "*Fashion Establishment?!*" She marched halfway towards me and pointed a vicious hoof. "Darling, let me tell you something about the stallion who owns that place. Filthy Rich and his entire family became rich by selling *apples*—apples that they didn't even *grow*! He's an accountant attached to a gallon of hair gel—albeit a good one, but nothing more! He knows about as much concerning fashion as a minotaur would recognize a can of potpourri! He'd sooner dedicate a department of his store to dresses as he would to apples or to bear traps or... or... *Celestia-knows-what-else!*"

Rarity seethed and strangled an invisible neck in front of her grinding teeth.

"And.. Silver... **Seams**... *Nnnngh*..." She clenched her eyes tightly shut and exhaled hard. "No doubt she dredged him of all his feminine attire just so she can haul the gargantuan bounty all the way to Trottingham, disassemble the gowns to their base materials, and have the means to lazily slap together some uninspired, gaudy, but altogether *successful* line of autumnal pish-posh! Because, after all, that's what the art of the dress is anymore! A heterogenous assortment of scraps that we have the divine authority to pilfer and reintroduce into the world as new, though it's painted with all the vomitous colors of yesterday's garbage!"

At the end of such a tirade, she indeed looked close to retching, so she sat herself on the edge of the stage beneath a familiar white dress in order to collect her breaths.

"Nnnngh... It just maddens me so." She fanned herself with a dainty hoof as she mumbled. "All it is anymore is a process, a factory proceeding of mundane proportions. We have it within ourselves to do better... to *be* better. What is the point in expression when what is popular is expressionless?" She gulped and gazed down at the floor, her mane bordering either side of her face in frazzled, purple tributaries. "I always wanted to make a difference. With this shop, with my trade, I wanted to share my inspiration with all of Equestria. Then somepony like Silver Seams comes along, and yet again I encounter a soul who has risen as far as I want to rise, and just what does that make her? What does that make what I desire to be?" She closed her eyes and ran two hooves over her face. "Mmmmmff... I swear, I wonder if there's any point in trying. All of this... this taste. I am sick to death of this taste..."

I stood in the silence that followed, afraid to break it, as if the shattering was something neither of us would have been able to withstand. I realized that it was my place to say something, where it was no pony else's. My voice was something that would only be forgotten. I've come to expect my echoes, however, to be something immaculate.

"Perhaps what matters, Miss Rarity, is that you have a taste of your own?" I said as I marched over and gently brushed a length of the pearlescent dress' skirt. I smiled softly and spoke, "In a bland

world, somepony is bound to be attracted to your sweetness.”

“Hmmm... a noble dream,” she murmured, then lowered her hooves. She gave a frown to the same dress that I was smiling at. “But how long must I dream it, too afraid to wake up?” She gazed up at me. “Would I find myself turning into an old mare by the time my ambitions finally paid me back? I shudder to imagine my genius then, a soul with all of its inspiration sapped from me, and so that I would walk in the shadow of those like Silver Seams and Hoity Toity because I too will have become too sensitive to brilliance.”

“I... I wouldn't know about that...”

“Neither can I pretend to.” She stood up and gazed dismissively down at the dress like a gray-maned creature I had once seen. “I tell myself that I think of the future, but dreaming of it is not the same thing. I only have so many years of my youth left. It's time that I decided to make the best of them. For too long have I chased the flighty streams of an enchanted filly. The likes of Hoity Toity and Filthy Rich have found their successful places in this industry.” She gulped in resolution. “It is high time that I found mine.”

“But Rarity...” I gazed at her. “This dress! It's... It's *beautiful!* It's full of love and devotion and... and...” I took a deep breath and gazed at a fleeting color bouncing off the multiple rings of pearls. “It deserves more than to be forgotten.”

“And, indeed, it will find its place in somepony's memories forever.” Rarity's nostrils flared. “For the right price. After all, it's the way of things.” She turned towards me, a deadpan ghost of somepony that had once giggled like a songbird. “Might I, perchance, assist you in such a purchase, today? I assure you, my dear, that though I may be a tempestuous personality, I am nothing but a perfectionist in my services.”

“I... I...” I gazed at her, at the dress, then at my saddlebag. I choked on something briefly, then murmured towards the walls. “Actually, I wasn't wanting to buy or order anything...”

“Oh?”

“Uhm... As a matter of fact...” I gazed at the dress. Something within me bubbled, something that had—on occasion—deeply desired to mimic the crackling blazes of the fireplace back at my cabin. I needed to know that there were things in this world capable of rising from the ashes. The only thing real about “defeat” is the letters comprised in making up that word. “I was... I was sent to deliver a message?”

“A message?”

“Yes.” I gulped, trembling with the realization of what I was suddenly planning to do. “From some pegasus I met in Sugarcube Corner, a very sweet mare with butterflies for a cutie mark.”

“Fluttershy?” Part of Rarity's face inescapably brightened. Her eyes blinked. “What could be so important that she was incapable of informing me face-to-face?”

“She says that she... That she needs a sweater made for her pet hedgehog back at her house... uhm... because the poor thing is sick.”

“Pet hedgehog...?” Rarity scrunched her face. She scratched her chin in deep thought. “Odd. I wasn't aware that she was in possession of a hedgehog.”

“Uhm. She said that she found it just this morning. The thing must have fallen into the river overnight, and she thinks it's suffering pneumonia. If she doesn't have a sweater or blanket made for it soon—”

“Say no more.” Rarity waved a hoof, sighed, then gave a tired smile. “The poor darling must be sick with worry. I'm more worried about her than the little animal, truth be told. Everything else can wait for as much as I'm concerned. Thank you for delivering the message, Miss...”

“**Heartstrings**. And... uhm... my pleasure.” I gulped and smiled nervously at her. “I don't suppose you have the makings for knitting a sweater in all this mess?”

“Ugh!” Rarity tossed her head and marched towards the far end of the room. “Don't remind me! I'm struggling with a dress order involving a great deal of satin and lace. If I just calmed down and opened my eyes, I'm sure I'd find what I'm missing. No doubt your selflessness in listening to me helped with that some.” She next marched completely out of view, her voice trailing from a deep closet adjacent to the main foyer. “Now... please, Celestia, tell me I'm not missing my knitting materials either! Bah! This whole Silver Seams business has me all flank over elbows, I swear!”

As she rambled on, I bit my lip and inched towards the dress of pearls. Only when I was satisfied that she wasn't immediately trotting back, I opened the lid to my saddlebag...

That afternoon, I expected Rarity's expression to be full of anger the first moment I saw it. Instead, it was full of shock—immense, numbing shock. That's how I knew that I had achieved what I wanted.

It was hard to see her face at first, not so much that she was so far away, but because of all the other sensory details I was too busy juggling at that very moment. As she trotted across the center of downtown Ponyville towards where I stood, I drew my attention away from her pale gaze, away from the bright crimson sunset casting a spotlight on me, away from the chorus of crickets accompanying my strings into the edge of night, and finally away from the dozens upon dozens of awestruck pony faces forming a solid ring around me. I telekinetically plucked each of my lyre strings in precision, grabbing the delightful melodies of the past and repainting the living present with them, in an attempt to form something that was twice as inspiring as it was graceful.

Beneath the chords, I heard my audience, and I reveled in their sound—for they were Rarity's audience too.

“Have you ever heard anything so beautiful?”

“She's playing '*Platinum's Ode to Union*,' I do believe, but I've never heard it performed so delicately before!”

“When was the last time you heard something like this in Ponyville?”

“Shhh—Please! I want to listen!”

“I can *hardly* listen! I'm too amazed by that dress she's wearing! *Where did she find such a regal garment?*”

“Are those *real* pearls? Those are remarkable!”

“Oh, how fitting! It was Princess Platinum's royal birthday only a few days ago...”

“And here I thought you could only witness the likes of this in Canterlot!”

“Brilliant. Simply brilliant, I tell you.”

“And that dress! Did she have that *tailored?*”

“Don't be absurd! That gown must belong to royalty!”

“Who is that mare?”

“I've no idea! She just trotted out into the open here and started playing!”

“I must ask her where she got that marvelous dress! I swear, it's made my whole evening...”

From the corner of my vision, I could see Rarity's purple mane bouncing as she tossed her gaze left and right, her jaw dropping further and further towards the ground with each subsequent murmur of awe from the crowd. As she tried to scrounge an explanation from her stupor, a soft yellow shape trotted up and stood beside her.

“Oh! My goodness, Rarity! Isn't that—?”

“Yes, Fluttershy. It's... It's the dress that went missing a few hours ago! I was on my way to the police station to report a theft, but now...” She gulped. “My stars...”

“Do you think that unicorn must have stolen—?”

“Shh! Fluttershy, dear! Will you listen to that?”

“Huh? Oh. It is very nice music. *'Platinum's Ode to Union,'* I think...”

“No no no—To the ponies!” Rarity hissed. “Do you hear them?”

Both friends leaned into the crowd, their ears pricking to the murmurs that continued to form a backdrop to my relentless symphony.

“I swear, it's as though that dress was crafted out of the sea foam of Blue Valley's shores!”

“Could it be a seapony import?”

“Are you daft? They're a myth!”

“That gown is too gorgeous to be real, if you ask me.”

“It fits the performance so well. It's like Hearth's Warming's come early.”

“Heeheehe...”

“Tell me, does this unicorn take bits?”

“Or her dressmaker for that matter...?”

I inhaled every word I could hear. I stood with my eyes shut, smiling meditatively, as I finished the last few notes of the song. Only when I was finished did I open my eyes, and when I did, my gaze was locked on Rarity's. I gave her my full attention, all the while the crowd's applause broke the crisp advent of night. I let my teeth show through my curved lips before giving a graceful curtsy, then resting the lyre down beside my saddlebag.

“Bravo! Bravo!”

“Magnificent performance, young lady!”

“It's been a long, long time since I heard the *'Ode to Union'* in its entirety, and that was by far the best solo I've heard!”

“Tell us, please, are you from Canterlot? Are you representing one of the noble houses?”

“Before you answer that, tell us—where did you get that marvelous dress?”

The crowd laughed from the sheer joy electrifying the air. I let my giggles join the chorus, then bowed my head.

“I may be dressed royally, but that's only because royal attention was given to the making of this outfit.” I stared across the crowd and pointed with a hoof. “Why... there the seamstress is! None other than Carousel Boutique's own Rarity! It was she who made this gown. After all, was there any

doubt?”

The entire crowd spun in two halves to gawk at her, as if they had melted down the center from the sheer path of my gesture. Rarity nearly stumbled back, stunned by the forest of bright eyes suddenly assaulting her. Fluttershy blushed beet red and immediately marched away as a fresh throng of ecstatic ponies surrounded her fashionista friend.

“Rarity! I should have known!”

“A pony with your taste wouldn't have settled for less!”

“Good to know that you're putting your heart and soul into your crafting still.”

“Yes, Ponyville could sure use more of that—All of Equestria, for that matter!”

“Oh, please! Please tell me that you have more pearls left in your shop!”

“We absolutely need to have matching dresses like that for the Trottingham Garden Party!”

“Oh! And Nightmare Night! I've always wanted to dress as Princess Platinum! Surely you have it within you to make something just as beautiful as this marvelous ensemble before us!”

“How appropriate to showcase your work with a performance of *'Ode to Union'*. It makes me feel as though we've gone back in time.”

“Yes. Such beautiful music to go along with a beautiful dress!”

“Please—tell us—are you accepting commissions?”

“Do you and this musician work together, Miss Rarity?”

She bit her lip and slowly spun to meet all of the entranced faces. Her body was trembling noticeably, but there was an undeniable sparkle in her eyes. “I... erm... Eeh... That is to say... uhm...” She glanced over the many heads and manes until her vision locked with mine. “I'm... just as surprised at this as you all are.” She gulped. “It's... funny how *spontaneous* inspiration can be, yes?”

The group chuckled. Fluttershy smiled with pride. And I...

I was alive.

“Seriously! I had no idea that he had stolen the gown!” I exclaimed. It was an hour later and we were both trotting into her Boutique, alone. The world outside the windows had grown dim and purple. I knew I had very little time left to “wrap things up,” but I was convinced that I had done all that I needed to do. “Do forgive my naivete, Miss Rarity,” I disrobed from the dress slowly, careful not to add so much as a wrinkle to its unblemished lengths. “I get carried away sometimes while I'm on vacation like I am now. When a pony offers me a dress this gorgeous for such a generous price, I'm usually wise enough to think twice on the matter. Unfortunately, I'm a long ways from Canterlot, and I think I left my good sense back there. Heeheehee!”

“Oh, I understand the feeling quite well, Miss... **Heartstrings**, was it?”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“On my first trip to Appleloosa, I nearly engorged myself on the general store's supply of cactus nectar toffee. It's something that my friends and I seldom wish to recollect.”

“Heeheehee—Yeah!” I gracefully finished disentangling myself from the garment and hoofed it to her. “I can only imagine.”

She gently took the dress, levitating upwards in translucent telekinesis. Her face was calm and unemotional as she hummed and asked, “Could you describe this stallion again? The ruffian you claim to have peddled this to you in the streets behind town hall?”

“Mmmmm...” I pretended to think hard, my eyes scanning the ceiling of the shop. “He was short, stubby. A pegasus, I think. One of his wings was molting. Yellow coat, I believe. A sickly color.”

“It can be, on occasion,” Rarity flippantly droned. She hung the dress neatly over the body of a mannequin. She spoke without facing me, “And just how many bits did he take from you?”

“Oh, you won't believe this, but—three hundred bits! Isn't that *insane*?” I rolled my eyes and gestured dramatically. “Dear Luna, if my parents knew, they'd *kill me*! Ahem. I'm just sorry that it all turned out to be the result of a pathetic robbery. The stallion said that he bought this gown from 'Lady Rarity's Boutique, in the east side of town.' Nowhere did he even *bother* telling the truth: that he outright *stole* the thing.”

“He must be a rather fastidious robber,” Rarity said. “We both owe him for keeping the dress in good shape, at least.” She finally glanced my way. “No doubt you'll wish to pursue a means of retrieving your bits back.”

“Eh...” I waved my hoof and made a face. “My parents have blown their noses on twice as much as three hundred bits before. Teehee—How else did you think I got through Canterlot music school?”

“And quite a remarkable talent you have there, Miss **Heartstrings**.”

“Eh, it's a hobby.” I then grinned widely at her. “But, hey! It worked out for us both in the end, didn't it?”

“I'm afraid you're going to have to be more obvious, dear.”

“Why, that crowd I gathered!” I gestured out the door with a drunken grin. “To be honest, I was just wanting to show off the dress I just got...”

“Did you now...?”

“But I had no idea that I'd get nearly three dozen ponies willing to listen to my performance! I'm telling you what, Miss Rarity, your dress is something else! I've never gotten that much attention before!”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. It felt like cheating in a way. Seriously! I owe it all to you and your dress.”

“Hmm-hmm-hmm...” She chuckled breathily, trotted around to face me, and planted a pair of hooves on my shoulders. “Miss [Heartstrings](#), sit with me, if you would, darling.”

I blinked at her, my mouth frozen in the middle of trying to reply. I felt my heart beating oddly, as if I was missing a chord for the first time that evening. Nervously, I did as she was told. I felt like I was having time-out with my mother.

As Rarity spoke, I soon found out I wasn't that off. “My dear, no robber with any form of self-respect would steal a work of art like mine and sell it for anything less than two thousand bits.”

I gulped, and resumed smiling as plastically as before. “Well, uhm, maybe he was... uh... d-desperate! Yeah! That's why we have criminals in the first place, right? Some ponies are in such need for money right away, that they'll sell just about anything!”

“It would have been far easier for such a thug to have broken through the window of a grocery store overnight and grabbed himself a bite to eat.” She glanced out the window. “As a matter of fact, Ponyville is farm country. My friend Applejack tells me that she has her fruit nabbed off her very own orchards all the time.”

“But... Maybe...” I gnawed on my lip. I was losing grip of this situation at a frightening plummet; my brain just wasn't ready to accept it. “Maybe he wasn't all that bright—”

“It would have to be quite the mental affliction for somepony to ignore the value of so many natural pearls lying in his possession. If such a pony was expert enough to grab that dress from my store, he... or *she* would have made a year's worth of profit by placing the outfit on the Manehattan black market.”

I tried to say something else, but my mouth was dry. It was hours after I had done the unthinkable, and only *then* was I starting to feel the initial waves of horrid guilt.

Thankfully, Rarity's gentle voice lulled my throbbing pulse into a tranquil stream. "You strike me as quite a resourceful, intelligent unicorn, Miss **Heartstrings**. This afternoon, I came into this very room after searching for something. What it was that I was looking for, I can no longer recall. All I know is that my latest dress was suddenly missing, and I had no proper explanation for where it could have gone or who could have taken it... until now."

I gazed down at the floor between us. I kneaded my hooves against the tile as I felt the first waves of chills hit me that night. "Miss Rarity, I won't judge you for any of the action you're about to take. But stop for a moment. Stop for a moment and think about what happened out in the center of town."

Even without looking, I could tell she was making a strange face. "What about the center of town?"

I looked back into her gaze. I couldn't tell if her eyes were glossy, or just my reflection. "The ponies you live with, Rarity! They *love* your dress! They love the quality of it! The meaning behind it! The expert craft and work that went into it!"

"Correction, darling." She smiled painfully. "They adored your *performance*. It just happened to have been painted in the colors that I had once made."

"But... But it's one in the same!"

"No." She shook her head, gently exhaling. "No it isn't."

"You... You just needed a way to get attention!" I exclaimed, my breath becoming ragged as I too was becoming witness to my own desperation. "Your dress is fantastic, Rarity! All it needed was its time in the spotlight and... and..."

"Shhh..." She gently caressed my shoulder with her hooves, staring positively into my soul as her words came out. "I don't know who you are, Miss **Heartstrings**. I don't know how you've heard of me, or what you presume to know about my artistry. All I know is that you're a perfect stranger. However, in spite of this, I do believe that there is one thing that we both have in common, and that's the knowledge of the fact that there is nothing left in that dress that I believe in anymore, save for a lesson on how to drive my talents down brighter, wider roads."

"But..." I tried my best not to whimper. I felt like a little foal as I sat before her. I avoided her gaze, absorbing myself in the sight of the dress, as if trying to scoop the pearls up with my tears. "But you deserve to be remembered, Miss Rarity. You're such a talented, hard-working unicorn. You deserve attention—"

"It's never a matter of what we deserve, darling." She leaned towards me, stealing my gaze. "It's a matter of what we *earn*. Has anypony ever told you that I'm a living piece of the Elements of Harmony?" She leaned back and spoke sagely. "Destiny, for whatever reason, has designated me as the Element of Generosity. I was instrumental in the exorcism of Nightmare Moon's taint from Princess Luna. Ever since then, I've been privileged and blessed to be tied to the hip of Twilight

Sparkle, the only unicorn in five long centuries who's been made the personal protege to Princess Celestia herself. Don't you think that if I wanted to take advantage of my connections—and sealed myself a high seat in the Canterlot fashion scene—I would have easily done so by now?”

I reflected quietly on that, a sore lump forming in my throat.

“Hmmm...” She smiled at a warm thought. “I would be lying if I said that I wasn't tempted in the past to do something so pathetic and shallow, but I like to think that I've become a better mare since then.” She gazed sideways at me, her gaze gentle but piercing. “There are many things in this world that I want. Fame is one of them—even my closest friends will tell you that. What they *don't know*, but should be obvious to everypony, is that a soul such as my own greatly desires to better herself as a lady and an artist, more than any other dream of mine that I pretend to call supreme. You see, Miss **Heartstrings**, if I don't earn my place in this world, then the most I'll ever become is the queen of hollow victories. No such matriarch of mundanity would ever deserve a tiara—*heeheehee*—no matter how sparkling.”

I took a shuddering breath and gazed out the windows, at the darkening approach of night. “I have that desire too, Rarity. But... But I learned long ago that I can't pursue them so easily anymore.” I sniffled and put on a brave face, albeit a deadpan one. “I just wish I could help those around me shine where I can't.”

“We're all born with the ability to shine, Miss **Heartstrings**. But we can't force the spotlight on each other. Otherwise, we'd just be dancing to an old, boring tune, conceived only once, but never allowed to blossom on its own. And if there's anything I can't stand, it's a performance that doesn't earn itself an encore.”

I gave the dress one last, forlorn glance. It was a chuckle that escaped my lips, instead of a sob, as I painfully let forth, “I suppose some things in life can't stand to be re-enchanted.”

“That's why I live to invent newer and prettier things.” Rarity smiled. “And so should you.” I watched as she stood above me and paced across the way. “I hate refusing gifts, especially ones so sincerely and passionately donated.” She telekinetically picked up a black tarp and carried it back over to where the gown of pearls was residing. “What you did today... what you *tried to do* today was daring, brash, yet altogether generous. Which is why I'm not about to press charges for a theft that lasted the entirety of what would otherwise have been a boring afternoon.” She hung the canvas material over the dress. The room grew dimmer, so that her bright features suddenly stood out like polished ivory. “I very much envy your talents, dear. A dress is dazzling for an evening or two. But music... *gorgeous* music... It lasts forever. Oh, how I wish I could start over sometimes, and engage myself in an art that was... far more immortal.”

I swallowed hard and tilted my head away so she couldn't see the tear rolling down my left cheek. In my mind, I saw the smiling faces of listening ponies all around me, and they once again mimicked the dying ashes of a cabin fireplace. “Don't envy too much, Miss Rarity, or else you'll find yourself doing nothing but st-starting over...”

“Hmmm...” She smiled softly my way. “I shall remember that.”

I dried my face and nodded. “Somehow, I think you will...”

We spoke of a few things as night fell. We talked about gossip. We talked about popular celebrities. She told me the names of a few famous musicians she had met, and I once again cursed the stars for never having a chance to meet the legendary Octavia up close. As the stars began to form, I decided to take my leave, or else risk the moon curtailing what had become a most gracious visit.

“It's just as well. I really do need to get to work,” Rarity said. She had finished cleaning up the mess that an angry doppelganger of herself had left in the center of the Boutique hours earlier. “This one dress I'm working on won't finish itself, after all.”

I watched her trotting up to the half-made dress in question. Lingered in the doorframe to the Boutique's exit, I exhaled the first wisps of vapor from my lips. “Will you ever be done working, Miss Rarity? Will you ever finish?”

“That's up to the industry to decide,” she said. The tone in her voice was threadbare, like so many materials gathering dust in the far corners of the place. Perhaps she was talking to nopony all along. “Hmmm... What does this one need?” Her voice rang in the direction of the gown. “It's got lace. It's got emerald.” There rose a sigh across the room, colored with the pale kiss of moonlight. “More ribbon...”

The ringing bell above the door was deafening.

It had been three weeks. I felt like an archaeologist stumbling upon a sacred temple left abandoned for ages. My heart actually sunk—instead of danced—when her singing voice spun across the morning light to welcome me.

“Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where every garment is chic, unique, and magnifique.”

“Hello, I'm...” I bit my lip, hesitated, and exhaled. “I'm just visiting in town. I'm not looking for anything special. But...” I marched stiffly into the center of the place, already digging into my saddlebag. I produced the last stone, raising the dull thing up like it was an errant piece of lint. My head wouldn't stop hurting with the eighth elegy, but that morning I was too tired to cry. “I was wondering if you were skilled in the arts of gem enchantment. As you can see... uhm... this needs a lot of work.”

“Here, let me take a look at it, dear.” Rarity sashayed over from a jacket she was working on and took the gem from my grasp. She adjusted the spectacles on her eyes and hummed to herself. “Hmmm... Yes, it does seem as though this has been through quite a lot. It's rather unusual that I get

requests to re-enchanted old rocks, but the day I can no longer bring luster back to a jewel is the day I retire. Eh-heheheh...”

“I... uhm... I'm sure you have plenty of more important things to be working on.”

“Oh, nonsense! It's a slow week.” She rolled her eyes. “Nothing to do but fiddle with a few drab sheets of wool and see if I can outdo the latest craze mailed in from Canterlot. Ahem. Honestly.” She gave me the sweetest of smiles, and no less elegant. “You are the absolute highlight of my morning. Care to have a seat while I work?”

“It depends. How much do you think I have to give up?”

“Why, when you put it like that, dear, I'm tempted to ask for a lock of your first-born's mane! Eh-heh-heh-heh-*Ehhhhh* I don't know how Pinkie does it.” She cleared her throat and marched over towards the metal brace positioned by the window. “In all seriousness, about three bits will do. This will only take but a moment.”

“Much appreciated...”

“Though I must say, I wish you would let me give you more time.” She gazed up from where she was fixing the gem into place and focusing the sunlight through her containment field. Her eyelashes battled like those of a fairy tale filly as she chirped forth, “You have a very utilitarian outfit there, darling. But I must say it looks positively worn-in! I have the good mind to fix you a new sweater, one that could warm the eyes of others while it warms you... if you catch my meaning.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. You're very generous, but I...” I stopped immediately. The dryness in my throat left me as I saw the jacket that Rarity had been working on. I saw the fine seams woven intricately in floral designs across the pockets. I saw the layers upon layers of fabric forming a mesh of beatific color blend. It occurred to me—like a spontaneous burst of inspiration—that a pony with nothing to lose has everything to give. It may not have been my destined time in the spotlight, but I wasn't about to back down from an idea so beautiful that I immediately knew it deserved an encore. “Yes, please.”

“Hmm?” Rarity glanced up—somewhat surprised—from the menial task she was doing for me. “I beg your pardon?”

I looked towards her, smiling gently. “Yes. I would like it if you made me something new to wear. Something warm... and fabulous.”

Rarity blinked. When her eyes reopened, they not only shined, they positively sparkled. “Oh. Oh, yes! But of course!” Her breaths were like cosmic bursts that carried her—skipping foalishly my way. “Oh, it's been ages since I've made something for a mare with a green coat, especially one as bright and shiny as yours! Hmmm—What about a new sweaterjacket, this time with a shiny gold seam running down the sides? Or perhaps a fancy yellow scarf—Ooh! But of course! A gorgeous red sweater with amber bands to match your eyes! It positively *screams* 'Hearth's Warming!' Heeheehe—” She suddenly clamped a pair of hooves over her lips. “Oh! My heavens, listen to me go on! You... uhm... must have your own idea in mind, of course.”

“No...” I breathed, slowly shaking my head. “I couldn't possibly think up something as marvelous as you could. Design whatever you want.”

She gasped sharply, her features illuminating like the sun itself. “Really? Do you truly, truly mean it?”

I grinned wide at her. “Thrill me.”

“—so I carried on and on quite melodramatically, insisting that the brazen canines had attempted comparing me to a mule. I put up quite the show, if I do say so myself. If it wasn't the act of deep horror that I was portraying, then perhaps it was the sheer volume of my whining voice that finally broke their brutish resolve. They ceased their attempts to enslave me into jewel-finding, and by the time my dear friends had arrived to save the day, I had just about freed myself from those terrestrial ruffians' clutches. Ahem—How do the sleeves feel? Are they too tight?”

“No, Miss Rarity,” I replied, sitting on a pedestal as she circled around me. A sea of sewing utensils levitated all around her latest work of art, a bright and colorful sweater adorning my turquoise limbs. “They're just perfect. You got the measurements down right.”

“Are you certain of that, darling?” She tilted my forelimbs up and down, closely eyeing when and where the material of the sleeves grew taut. “You haven't stopped shivering since I began. Is the sweater not giving you enough insulation? If so, I should fix that from the start before I let myself go with the aesthetics—”

“Trust me.” I smiled up at her as soon as her face moved into my peripheral vision. “I'm going to be absolutely fine. I'm loving this sweater already.”

“Hmm... Well, that makes the both of us!” She stifled a tiny squeal and began tightening the cuffs at the end of one sleeve. “I haven't had a chance to work my talents this freely in ages! I do apologize that it's taking so long. Perfection and genius seldom tango when they can instead waltz.”

“Take as much time as you need, Miss Rarity,” I said. “You were going on about Diamond Dogs?”

“Oh! Yes. Would you like to know a secret?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Heeheehee—I told all my friends that I simply relied on the refined talents of a lady in dissuading those brutes' demands. As a matter of fact, that's only partially true. It so happens that my family has dealt with Diamond Dogs before, and I knew well in advance how to take advantage of—oh, how should I put this—ah yes, their pathetic simple-mindedness.”

I giggled. “You don't say.”

“Oh, but I do!” She fiddled and worked and painted a linen canvas all around me. “As a matter of fact, it was the poor fortune of my great-great grandmother, an aristocratic mare named Ruby Joy, to have stumbled on an entire colony of those digging mutts! However, she was a very calm and intelligent lady, and soon she not only had all of the dogs eating out of her hoof, but she got them to fetch a gigantic node of diamonds and carry them home to my ancestors' dwelling in Chicacolt. Hmm-hmm-hmmm... just where do you think my family's affinity for rare rocks got its start? Heeheehee...”

I smiled. I listened to her. I modeled for her. And for a blissful afternoon, I didn't think one bit about my future. After all, it takes a curse to make generosity truly, truly delicious. The things that I've grown most thankful for in life are the things that come at me by surprise, like a spotlight from out of nowhere.

Who's to know how much opportunity we'll have to truly shine in this life?

But so long as we can help it, we must never let ourselves become dull.

Background Pony

V - “Industry”

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