

"No, that isn't right..."

The violin wouldn't cooperate with her. Lyra drew the bow over the strings again and again, boring holes into the instrument with her amber eyes, but the right notes wouldn't answer her. An octave higher? Lower?

"Agh! No no no!"

She tossed the instrument onto her bed, stared after it and rubbed the pounding in her skull. The light sneaking through closed blinds offered no relief, nor did the blank sheets looking back from her music stand for the fourth week in a row, or the crumpled papers littering the floor. Though she had stopped, tunes were still clashing in her head. The humming of strings, the beat of percussions, and the cool sounds of woodwinds exchanged notes and rhythms in her mind, but it sounded like mass chaos to the musician. She was ready to clamp her hooves over her ears and beg for it to stop when a temporary saving grace came.

Her stomach rumbled.

Taking the chance for a distraction, Lyra hopped off her chair, stumbling to her bedroom door before stepping into her personal warzone, once known as a kitchen. The counters were covered in days of old and opened canned foods, some that may have spawned their own little... civilizations.

"Ugh." Trudging through the stink, she reached her fridge and pulled the door open, only to find herself looking at empty milk jugs and condiment bottle of all kinds. As her eyes looked upon the stark scene, in the recesses of her brain, a little voice tried to tell her something she had too soon forgotten; she had been in the kitchen only an hour ago.

"What am I doing?"

There was a knock at the door.

She slammed shut her refrigerator and waded her way through the mess to the front door and pulled on the handle with her magic. Harsh and blinding sunlight poured into the dark and dank interior of her condo, causing her to cringe and shield her eyes with a foreleg. When they adjusted, she could see through the light was a grey earth pony she knew all too well looking back at her with furrowed brows

"Lyra, where were you today?" Octavia trotted in, kicking some trash to the side to clear a path. Lyra noticed she had on some saddlebags.

"Uhh, work, then I came home, why?"

“Why? *Why!*?” Octavia roared as she glared at the unicorn incredulously. “You missed *tryouts!*” Lyra flinched, drawing a step back as the grey mare continued. “How could you forget?! Becoming a part of my band was the reason you came to Canterlot in the first place.” Their eyes locked as her tone hastened. “You told me you’d be there yesterday, you said you were looking forward to it more than anything.”

“I was, it’s just...” Lyra found herself fumbling for words, looking up as if the answers were written in bold on the ceiling, and chewing on her bottom lip like she couldn’t get it to work. A few long seconds like this, and with the piercing stare of the other pony in the room, Lyra sighed deeply as she took a different approach. “Okay, yeah, fine, I messed up. Don’t need *you* making me feel even worse about it.”

“Don’t even try using some kind of reverse guilt trip on me, Lyra. You’ve been nothing but a wreck now for over a month.”

“No I haven’t!”

“Yes, you have!” Octavia pressed forward, using her authoritative posture to loom over Lyra as she stared her down. “And don’t try to tell me otherwise. Every time I’ve been over, your place is a total mess, you look like a total mess, and let’s be honest, you *are* a total mess.”

“Oh please. Plenty of pony’s places are mess *all the time*. Besides, I clean up good everytime I go out...”

“And the last time you’ve gone out in public is...?”

Lyra’s eyes drifted away from Octavia’s, shifting from left to right as she struggled to form words. “Well—”

“—Your job and groceries don’t count.”

Lyra didn’t answer.

“I thought so. I was fine with trying to give you space and let you get yourself back under control. But today was the last straw. *You. Need. Help.*” Octavia said through gritted teeth.

Lyra drew back a step and look away from Octavia, eyes still shifting around, as if trying to find something to avoid staring back at her accuser. A few long seconds passed before the mare suddenly shook her head. “I don’t need help. I don’t need to go anywhere anyway. Just leave me alone.” She bit back.

Octavia paused, noticing that her friend’s eyes were starting to tear up, and in a gentler

tone said, “No Lyra, I’m your friend. You’ve completely lost control of yourself, and that worries me to death.”

Lyra snarled, like she was hacking up something vile. “I don’t need this crap from you, Octavia. So why don’t you just see yourself out the door?”

“You know I won’t.”

“Ugh. Fine!” she yelled as she turned tail and trotted towards her bedroom.

“Oh, so now you’re going to hide in your room like a—”

Lyra took a hoof and swung the door as hard as she could, towards its destination, but the sound of the lock mechanism finding its place never came, instead, there was the sound of crunching aluminum. Looking down she saw that there was a soda can wedged between the door and the doorframe. She groaned, threw it away with her magic, and tried again.

“Like a foal...” Octavia muttered under her breath. “Lyra, come out of there.”

There was no reply, but she could hear Lyra cursing to herself.

“I’m not leaving.”

“I don’t give a buck!”

Octavia shook her head, *Time for plan B*. There *was* one way to get Lyra’s attention that she had planned for. She arched her head back to pull something out of her saddlebags, out of it came a green bottle with two red X’s on a golden label, she placed it in front of her door. A light tap and it hissed open.

Silence.

A click from behind the door.

And then it opened.

Octavia held a proud smile up to her glaring companion. “I knew you couldn’t resist.”

“Dos Equinis?” Lyra murmured, eyes glued to the beer’s label.

“Would I get you anything else?”

Lyra sighed, floating the bottle up to her nose to take in its familiar aroma and the

chilliness. "Fine." The unicorn trotted over to her black three-seater couch in the living room. "Want to talk? Let's talk." She levitated her things off the sofa to make room, setting them over in the corner.

Octavia took the opportunity to observe how filthy the place actually was. "You really need to clean this place up. Or hire somebody else to do it."

"I'll clean it... eventually." Lyra pounced onto her now-cleared couch as the cushion swallowed her a bit. She took a swig and felt herself sink into the cushion – deeper than she had in a long time. She felt cool; stretching out her limbs, two weeks of nothing but work made this moment heaven...

"Would you mind opening the blinds?"

Even if it only lasted one brief moment.

The shades fluttered open, and the light from outside attacked Lyra's eyes once again. But while Lyra cringe, a comfortable little smile ran across Octavia's countenance. "Swell. Now, let's get to the bottom of all of this."

"And where do you suppose we start, then?"

Octavia adjusted herself on the couch. "Easy, from the beginning."

Lyra shot the earth pony a sly grin. "So... time travel?"

"No, oh facetious one. I mean, something that happened a month ago must have been - for lack of better words - the catalyst to... this." She gestured to the entire room.

Lyra put a hoof to her forehead and tapped a few times, only to end up shrugging lazily. "Sorry, I'm drawing a blank."

"Really now?" Octavia raised an eyebrow. "Can you even try to think back to *when* it happened."

"Geez, I don't know." Lyra retracted, instinctively rubbing the back of her head as she did. "I mean, one moment I was ready to write a masterpiece, and the next moment I'm-" She stuck out her tongue- "*phbthbbbb...*"

The earth pony looked off to her right, chewing on her bottom lip a few times in thought. "Well... you've obviously been spending a lot of time with your instruments. Have you tried looking for inspiration?"

"A lot. Like, I picked up a book from the Canterlot library, but I had a hard time even staying focused on it. It's frustrating." Lyra looked at her bottle of beer as she said it, twirling it a bit and watching the dark liquid spin around inside.

"Hmm, what about going on walks? Maybe into the nicer parts of town."

"And you expect me to draw inspiration from a bunch of stuck-up snobs, too interested in money and fashion to even think about doing anything else with their lives?"

"Oh, like the disaster of an experience you refer to as *hiking*?" Octavia deadpanned.

The unicorn smirked, realizing what Octavia was getting at. "Hey, you're the one who always wants to go on urban exploration trips all around Equestria. We might as well go and see what nature has to offer while we're there."

"That'd be true *if*-" Octavia let the word hang for a moment- "you didn't go off the trail all the time just because some patch of forest off a ways reminded you of some place you read about in the *Trials of Valor* series."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Lyra dismissed. "And then we always get chased by some kind of hungry forest creature."

Octavia shot her a disbelieving look. "Lyra, you can hardly call a *chimera* a simple forest creature."

"C'mon, he wasn't *that* big."

"He was ten hooves tall. What about the mountain trolls?"

"All they had were some sticks."

"And by sticks, you mean *spiked clubs*?"

"...No comment."

"Remember the rust monsters?"

"I thought they were just rock lobsters!"

Octavia rolled her eyes, "Rock lobsters are about one-seventieth their size, I don't even see how their size - rock lobster or otherwise - hadn't deterred you from approaching it like you were in a petting zoo. And don't even get me started on that beholder that chased us out of the forest near Dappleshore."

"That was hardly a beholder, more like a cousin to it."

"It was scary, floating, and firing deadly magic at us. That's close enough in my book."

Lyra crossed her forelegs. "I think you're just not looking on the positive side."

"There is nothing positive about being on the brink of death."

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her friend, and extended a hoof as if she had something physical to present as an argument. "How about the fact we've always made it out alive, I've always apologized, and it gave us some memories. Didn't think of that did you?"

"Yes, because simply saying sorry is always enough to redeem you for nearly getting me killed."

"*Nearly.*"

"Heh." Octavia took another drink, realizing her bottle was getting low. "But you're right about the memories part. I will *always* remember the times my good friend Lyra Heartstrings almost had me killed by ravenous beasts for the most pointless of reasons." She swooned, causing both of them to stifle a laugh. "And I thought I was the earth pony and you were the unicorn."

Lyra rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "Hehe, well, guess that's just my father's side of the family coming out."

"Speaking of the *Trials of Valor* though, have you tried thinking back on it and coming up with a tune about it?"

"Lots, it didn't work." Lyra slouched some more on her couch, being swallowed by the cushion.

"Bollocks... Well, I'd ask about other books, but I'm sure you covered that ground too?"

"Of course." Lyra finished off her bottle and tossed it over to the pile in the corner.

"Hmm, well I could be asking about drawing inspiration from other works of literature, art, or society at large all night. But let me ask you this-" she locked her gaze on the unicorn- "have you thought about going back to your roots?"

Lyra had a look on her face that, "What, you mean like go back to Ponyville? Hehe, *noooo* thanks, I'm tired of living with my sis and her attitude. And as long as I'm gone, Bon-Bon

will have to pay her therapist to listen to her whine.”

“Lyra.”

“What a sorry excuse for a sister. Seriously, she was always stealing my saddlebags because she’s too friggin cheap. Not to mention all the other times I had to ‘share’ my drinks to then watch her down the whole thing in front-”

“-Lyra!” Octavia just about shouted, finding that Lyra had stopped, she took a deep breath. “Not Ponyville. I’m referring to your career as a musician. I remember back when we met during Ponyville’s Harvest Day festival. You were performing on the street to a good crowd.”

Lyra thought back, smiling at the memory, “Hmm, yeah, guess I was.”

“You didn’t have a problem thinking about new songs back then did you?” Lyra shook her head. “Maybe your time in the stagnant environment of the restaurant scene has affected that somehow.”

Lyra rubbed her chin. “Maybe. But you’re not expecting I leave my job for street performing are you? I can’t afford to keep my condo if I do that.”

“Of course not, Lyra. But maybe, you could go out after work and just perform as a hobby, make a few extra bits on the side while you’re at it. Do *something* to get yourself off your haunches and out of your condo.” Octavia’s tone got cheerier the more she spoke..

“Hmm, yeah, that does sound like a good idea.” Lyra let out a breath. “I’ll probably do it tomorrow, after I get done with work.”

“Oh no you’re not,” Octavia jumped off the couch. “You’re going out, tonight.”

Lyra sat up on the couch in disbelief, “What?”

Without a word, the cellist walked into Lyra’s bedroom over to her chair and music stand where the violin was. She placed Lyra’s violin in its case before trotting back into the living room with it and dropping it next to its owner on the couch. “You heard me. The night is still young, and if you don’t go and do it now, then it’ll slip your mind. I won’t be having any of that. So, you go tonight.”

Lyra scavenged for an excuse, “But I’m hungry, and... and I got work tomorrow.”

“You can get something quick while you’re out. And it’s not like you haven’t stayed up late constantly on work days with me.” With a hoof, Octavia quickly swiped Lyra off the couch in a sweeping push. The unicorn - having not been prepared - landed face first on her carpet with

an 'eep'. When she collected herself and stood up, she felt Octavia throwing the strap to her violin case over her neck. This was then followed by Octavia shoving her towards the door by ramming her back end with her head.

"Octavia, can we talk about this?"

"No." Octavia had moved off for a second to open the front door. "Now, either you trot out on your own accord, or I push you all the way to Main street. Decide for yourself."

The unicorn groaned, rolled her eyes, and trotted past her friend who most definitely had the biggest grin she had ever seen on her face.

Octavia made one final comment. "Good, I'll wait here for a little bit to make sure you actually go through with it, see you tomorrow." She then closed the door, removing any chance of extra unnecessary conversation.

Lyra sighed yet again, "I hate it when she kicks me out of my own house."

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Trotting down the streets of Canterlot on such a lovely afternoon wasn't so terrible as Lyra had originally thought. There were groups of friends looking to hit the clubs early, children in the parks finishing up games they played, and plenty of happy couples of all ages having drinks at cafés all around. Lyra smiled as she trotted by them, but made sure that her gaze didn't linger.

*Focus Lyra. Tonight, just get your inspiration back.* Lyra craned her head back to stare at her violin. Though she would've preferred her lyre, the violin had always been the crowd favorite.

Facing the street again, she considered her strategy. As she recalled, the best spot to perform on the street was always where it was the busiest in town. Sure, that seemed like obvious information, but she had seen many street performers pick spots they *thought* were busy, then ending up having to relocate less than five minutes later.

Her best bet would be Main street, but one would always have to consider personal respect for other performers who had arrived there first. Thing was, *every* street performer could be found on Main street, for obvious reasons.

*It never hurts to try though,* she reasoned to herself as she picked up the pace.

Arriving at Main street, she could see that it was in fact bustling with ponies. And to compliment the amount of pedestrians was a street performer here and there playing all sorts of

instruments. They seemed to have every space covered.

She wouldn't allow that to damage her resolve. Lyra Heartstrings was still very much on the prowl. Even if she didn't really want to do this, stubbornness - as it always had - got the best of her. So she began to trot up the road in hopes that she would find an opening in this wall of musicians.

But after twenty minutes of having traversed both ways of Main street, her efforts bore no fruit. *Time to rethink the plan*, she suggested to herself. *Maybe I could just watch one for a little while - a good one - and try to pick up what they're doing. If I can.*

Lyra set her sights on a fellow unicorn with a large green mop of a mane, greenish-white coat, turquoise eyes and glasses, with a cutie mark of cross drumsticks. The stallion worked the drumsticks like clockwork. He operated two with his hooves using hoof-gloves, while controlling a third with his magic. The beats were catchy, and Lyra realized her hood was already tapped to it.

She dropped a bit into his change jar as she sat back to watch him for a little while. But as she watched, she noticed something odd about his behavior. He kept stealing glances at her. They weren't in the 'wow she's hot' kind of way either, they were furious. Had she done something wrong? Was she looking at him back peculiarly? Of all the ways to assess that, she took a hoof to her face and felt her countenance around. No cringing of the eyes or anything as far as she could tell. So what was his deal?

Suddenly, the drummer cut his music and glared right at her. "Look, if you're waiting for me to give up this spot, it ain't gonna happen." He hardly kept his tone civil.

Lyra flinched, confused to what the guy was going on about, then it hit her. "Oh, I won't be street performing, I'm just picking up on your style."

He laughed bitterly, "That's a load of crap, I've seen ponies do this time and time again. And I've seen you trotting up and down the street earlier looking for a spot. So why don't you cut the act and go bother somebody else?"

"I'm being serious!" Lyra barked back. "I'm just trying to find a way to get past a composer's block I'm having, and I thought recalling what it was like to be a street performer would help."

His demeanor didn't soften, "Oh, so now you're mocking me? Thinking back to the lowly days of street performing?"

Lyra facehoofed hard enough to inflict herself pain. "You're not worth the effort." She picked up her violin and trotted off, the other unicorn continued to hurl insults that she did her

best to ignore.

Five minutes and a few blocks down, Lyra came across a rather interesting musician: a guitarist pegasus with a deep blue coat, a blackish-brown mane with a purple streak in it, lime green eyes, and a white quarter note for a cutie mark. She paid her respect and dropped a bit in his jar before watching him go to work. He strummed the guitar hard, and his portable amp delivered the sound. He was extremely talented. and Lyra could see the passion for the music in his eyes as he looked to his small crowd of three ponies.

*Hmm, I might have to be here a whi-*

Then he started screaming.

*Moving on...*

Lyra continued her excursion with as much enthusiasm she could muster; unfortunately, that enthusiasm began to run thin. Some musicians were like the incredibly rude drummer she encountered; others were actually rather bad at their instruments. There were also some that were good, yet felt this odd need to sing when they really shouldn't - and couldn't. On top of all of that, some were occupying spaces to show off their breakdancing, and that didn't do Lyra any favors either.

It had been little over an hour now. The sun was painting the skies in late sunset. She couldn't remember the last time she had walked this much. Her muscles felt strained and sore from a month without activity. Failure after failure of finding a good musician had also caused some mental strain that could be compared to being stuck on a crossword puzzle containing only the longest and most obscure words located in the deep dark crevices of the Equestrian language.

On top of that, her stomach grumbled, reminding her she still hadn't eaten anything all afternoon. *Throw in the towel. There really isn't any point in sticking around.* She made up her mind as she trotted down Main street, back in the direction of her condo. All the while she passed the musicians that had let her down, not even knowing they had.

In front of her, there were roughly six ponies listening to another musician occupying her path that she would have to either walk around or weave through. She was far too sour right now to consider walking around and deny the chance to disrupt the performer's audiences.

Her path was blocked by a pegasus with a white coat and silvery-blue mane.

"Pardon me." The patron began to move when the unicorn realized something. The music coming from the street performer was an instrument she hadn't heard all night, it sounded like a rather high-pitched airy woodwind instrument.

*Is that... a flute?*

She suddenly had a change of heart, and turned to watch the musician.

Normally in the case of a flute player, one would expect a unicorn to be playing the instrument. After all, the flute was created by the deerfolk, of whom everyone had accessibility to magic through their antlers rendering the instrument usable by all. But this was no unicorn before her now, and it certainly wasn't a deer. It was an earth pony, a stallion almost old enough to be a sire, with a brace around his neck that extended out to hold the flute while his hooves moved fast and delicately over all of the instrument's buttons and knobs. He had a faded crimson red coat, pure-as-sugar white mane, brown eyes, and a cutie mark of four white sixteenth notes at different heights.

The older stallion was carrying quite the tune. While it wasn't by any means fast, it was surely beautiful, if not entrancing. As he played more, Lyra began to realize the tune sounded familiar, very familiar. She closed her eyes, doing her best to hone in on the individual notes that conjured up the tune.

*That's... Ancient Stones. Yeah, Ancient Stones by Fair Soul.* She opened her eyes and watched him play. *Celestia, I love his work.* A warm little smile began to grow across her face as she listened to the melodic tune. She could almost hear the other instruments in the symphony playing along with him. And as the song came to a close, she felt herself clapping as if she had no other choice, not that she minded by any means.

"That was an amazing rendition of Fair Soul's work." Lyra praised as she continued to clap.

The earth pony looked at her with a knowing look in his eyes. "A fellow lover of his music, eh?"

"Of course." Lyra put her hooves back down as she clarified. "I've been to many of his concerts with the Hoofshire Symphony Orchestra. And personally, I think you're playing from his best album."

He smiled, "Yes, *A Winter's Tale* is surely an amazing compilation. With that - and the violin strapped to your back - in mind, I assume you would know how to play the songs?"

Lyra nodded.

The earth pony then looked to his small crowd. "Then how would everybody like to see this lovely young mare with the violin join me for the next song?"

Eyes turned towards Lyra as the ponies cheered her on, all very much liking the prospect of another instrument adding to the flute. Lyra - who was not thinking at all that she was basically just volunteered - hung her jaw. "You really want me to play with you?"

The stallion chuckled heartily, "Of course my dear. I can tell you're eager to play, and to be honest, pulling off *The City Gates* with one instrument would prove to be difficult, would it not?"

Lyra recalled *The City Gates*, it was one of those tunes that undoubtedly required more than one instrument. She giggled into a hoof. "I believe it would."

"Well then, I would be ever so delighted and appreciative if you would play it along with me. So, what do you say?"

Without a reply, Lyra walked to the left of him and drew out her violin. She sat down on the little blanket he had laid out and floated her violin and bow into position. She took the bow in hoof, applying a touch of magic so she could guide it easily.

"Would you like to start us off? The opening notes are built for the violin after all." He offered. He waited for her brisk nod, and then watched her for a moment after she closed her eyes.

Lyra felt her hoof drift the bow across the strings, and soon the low notes came out strong and measured, just like they were on the vinyl. She heard his flute join in as it took up the main chorus, she then switched to high notes as she strung in short quick notes to provide the backup he was referring to needed for such a song.

The unicorn closed her eyes as her movements fell into rhythm. The song played out harmoniously between the two of them, and in her head, it sounded like the very thing she heard at concerts. It was the song that whisked her away to the far corners of her imagination where her mind created images of beautiful cities with old stone walls. And beyond the great gates were wooden houses with thatched roofs, market stalls, the whole works.

Though she had been waiting for over an hour to have her chance to perform tonight on the street, Lyra didn't feel some kind of dawning revelation washing over her. Sure, the crowd was smiling, the desire to play and play well was there, those little things that added to the sense of uncertainty - and thereby exciting - were all accounted for. But by no means was this a resurge in her endeavor to compose.

But that didn't matter at the moment, for now it was time to play. Ponies of all shapes and sizes were coming to watch them. Their audience had easily doubled in size, and they hadn't even gotten to the flute solo yet.

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There was little in the world that pleased Lyra more than seeing a crowd of happy ponies trot away satisfied with their performance. She hadn't seen ponies in the longest time give her a genuine smile as they watched her play. Not that the ponies in question were rude by any means, it was just that being the restaurant's source of music wasn't intended to be a prominent part of the dinner experience. That kind of attention fell to the food.

*Food, oh I could go for some.* Her thoughts drifted to her stomach as she considered her options nearby. *Well the Bleeding Waffle isn't far from here I suppose, nor is the Savannah.* She considered her choices. *Then again, there's good reason as to why I haven't had Zebrican food in a while.*

Lyra snapped out of her thoughts and noticed the considerably older musician seemed to be dumping the bits that had been collected in his flute case into an open bit bag, some scattered and fell onto the sidewalk. Lyra sighed at the struggle before offering her assistance, she enveloped every bit with her magic and sent them floating into his bag.

He turned to her, looking rather surprised, "I'm sorry, but I had no intention of taking all of these bits for myself." He nudged the bag towards her with a hoof, "You obviously deserve some compensation."

Lyra dismissed the prospect with a flick of her hoof. "Please, it's not a big deal. I make plenty as it is at my job." She smiled to him, "Besides, I'm still surprised to see how you managed a flute. It has to be difficult with just hooves, even with that brace."

"Heh, yes, though the thought never occurred to me that I would have a difficult time playing it."

"Really?"

He placed his flute and brace in their case. "Of course. I just set to it. Didn't really think about the prospect of difficulty all that much. I just knew that I wanted to play the flute and I would have to be fast and accurate with my hooves." He slung his flute case over his back, tightening the strap that went across his shoulder with his teeth. He then scooped up his blanket with a hoof and began stuffing it into his messenger bag he had with him. "Well, I'll be blunt here in saying that you're making me feel awful taking all the bits for tonight. I feel compelled to do *something* in return."

Lyra giggled slightly. "You're very kind, but there isn't really anything I need." But her timing for such a phrase couldn't have been worse. Just then, her stomach grumbled.

The stallion grinned, "Really? Because I can't shake the feeling that you are hungry." He

laughed heartily like an old sire would, leaving Lyra to blush.

*Oh just go with it, you know he's got more than enough bits to cover it.* "Alright, I give. What'd you have in mind?"

He tossed the bulging bag of bits into his satchel before throwing that over his back. "The Bleeding Waffle always makes my favorite cup of coffee. Though I would have no quarrel should you choose elsewhere."

She shook her head, "Actually I was just thinking the same thing. I could really go for some dark chocolate chip waffles and tea." She held back the urge to lick her lips at the thought.

"Well, that settles it." He nodded his head and smiled. "Lead the way."

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The two of them sat on opposite sides of a comfy booth with red cushiony seats. Lyra had her tea and dark chocolate chip waffles in front of her, while her friend-in-the-making had his coffee and double stack of pancakes.

Lyra lifted her cup and downed the soothing liquid, letting it eat away the nighttime chill that had gotten to her outside. She gazed across to the earth pony and oddly enough found him cringing.

"Something wrong?"

He stared at his coffee. "They made a bad batch."

"You could ask for another."

He waved a dismissive hoof. "That's alright, it's too late for caffeine anyway," he said with a grin, pushing his cup aside to make room for the hotcakes – buttered, cut and topped with syrup to perfection. The grin on his countenance said it all to Lyra, he looked like he was in love. He rubbed his hooves together menacingly before diving in.

Lyra chuckled at the scene before she stared down at her own plate. She brought a cut of the waffle to her mouth and tried to savor the flavor. But her hopes of downing her plate diminished as her stomach churned unpleasantly, making its intentions clear. *Darn it stomach, of all times...* her thoughts drifted as she held up her head with a hoof under her chin as she stared out the window, recalling the events of today.

*Well I got my chance to perform, found a fellow fan of Fair Soul who's also a great at playing the flute with just his hooves. And I got free food right in front of me, waiting to be eaten.*

She licked her lips. *Delicious food I might add. And yet, I didn't get back my inspiration.* She couldn't be too upset about it. Maybe it was foolish to think that just by performing on the street one time in a little over two years would do the trick. *Now the question is, how long will it truly take?* She sighed. *If it ever comes back at all...*

"Is something wrong?"

She was snapped out of her train of thought, noticing the older stallion across from her had a rather worried look about him.

"Sorry, I'm just thinking about stuff."

"Haha, I could see that. The question is, what were you thinking about?"

Lyra took a quick sip of her tea while she gathered her thoughts. She pushed off her mug to the side. "Nothing, really. I don't mean to bother you about my problems."

He tapped a hoof on the table. "Problems don't sound like nothing. Feel free to tell me about them."

Lyra cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure? I really don't mean to come off whiny or anything."

He rolled his eyes in cheery kind of way as he laughed under his breath. "Please, I'm an old colt, I've been around long enough to know that sometimes, ponies need somebody else to listen to their troubles. I insist - no - I *implore* that you tell me all about it ."

Lyra felt a little smile tug at the corners of her mouth. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

She began with the past month: her music troubles, her best friend circling over her like a hawk. Sure, Lyra could admit missing the tryouts was her fault and—alright—maybe she wasn't in the best of shape, but she explained how it'd gotten her here.

He listened as intently as any good friend would, grimacing as she recanted Octavia's reaction, laughing (at Lyra's expense) when she kicked her out of her own home— but when she finished, he just smiled back, and in his understanding tone he said, "I appreciate you telling me. It takes a bit of courage to admit you're in a rut."

Lyra took in a deep breath and grinned sheepishly. "It's nice to get it off my chest."

His tone turned cheery. "Well, If there's anything I've learned in all my years, it's that these instances never last. Something is going to change soon. And before you know it, you'll

overcome this and be back to composing.”

She frowned and folded her forelegs. "How're *you* so sure?"

Rather than just give her a straight reply, he picked himself up from his booth seat and leaned across the middle of a table, lifting his right hoof up almost touching Lyra's forehead. "Believe me Lyra-" he poked her on the forehead as he said- "Your inspiration will come." He spoke with the utmost confidence in his voice, as if it would - without a doubt - happen. "And you need this more than I do." The bag of bits clattered onto the table. "Good luck." And before she could gather her thoughts, his seat was empty. His flute case and messenger bag had been pulled over his back, disappearing out the cafe door into the night crowds.

Lyra just sat there, watching as he walked out, feeling a mix of emotions. Shock from the stallion just leaving her a bunch of money, to her frustration with his shortness in his reply, as well as the lingering confusion as to how he seemed so certain it would all pan out in the end. All the while through her train of thought, something else unmentioned was lingering in the unicorn's head. Something really important.

Then it hit her.

She had never even got his name.