

Dear journal,

What remains when we are stripped of all that we hold dear? What is the essence of a pony when she's robbed of all the tools she once had available to her? Do we find bliss in that confusing darkness, or just endless sorrow?

I've lived long enough to find out, and still the truth is difficult to grasp. On one hoof, there is something that lies deep beneath the layers of wisdom and pretense: a pony's substance. Can ponies such as myself rise back from the depths to articulate the haunting discoveries we've made?

Perhaps not, but the key, I believe, is not to try so hard. When we focus on what's left us, when we meditate on what's missing from our life, it's easy to think that there's no life left to live.

I cannot believe that there is nothing. I refuse to believe that there is nothing. I've been to the foundations of oblivion, the deep, dark and lonesome roots of myself, and I've come back with one word that maintains my purpose in writing this journal, in persisting against annihilation, in fighting Princess Aria's damning song:

Fate.

The band played cheerful music while Caramel and Wind Whistler cut the first slice of cake. Under the flickering light of camera flashbulbs, they smiled. To the sound of blissful cheering, they blushed. Everypony in the large chamber surrounded the two newlyweds, applauding as they each broke free two morsels of white frosting, crossed forelimbs, and simultaneously gave each other a bite. Wind Whistler accomplished her task with a dainty nibble. Caramel was far less graceful, and several yellow crumbs of cake bread splattered across his trim black tuxedo. Laughter and whistles filled the room, to which Wind Whistler contributed with her melodious giggles. Bearing a flustered smile, Caramel nuzzled his bride while she brushed his expensive suit clean. The two shared yet another kiss, basking in the warmth of the eternal moment.

A few pony photographers reloaded their film while the reception frolicked into the next hour. After cake and a series of heartfelt toasts, the couple moved out onto the enormous dance floor. The whole interior of Ponyville Town Hall had been converted to a reception room. Equines from all local walks of life were seated at tables covered with snow white table cloths and ornate floral arrangements. Applejack was there with Big Mac, Granny Smith, Apple Fritter, Golden Delicious, and several other members of Caramel's enormous family. They smiled and unabashedly cheered with whooping and hollering. Rarity sat in the corner next to Fluttershy, both adorned in modest bridesmaid gowns. The fashionista had taken a break from admiring her frilly white hoofwork on the bride to drink in the moment. Her eyes watered as her face cracked a fragile smile, and the smiling mare beside her took the moment to give her close friend a comforting embrace. On the far edge of the town hall, several well-dressed pegasi were gathered: Thunderlane, Blossomforth, Cloudchaser and Flitter cheered, giving the dancing couple several encouraging winks.

Wind Whistler suppressed a foalish chuckle. She shut her eyes and leaned against Caramel's neck as the two nuzzled in the center of the floor. A touch of moonlight drifted in through the tall windows above, giving a glint to the polished hooflets on the couple's forelimbs. The music encompassed them in a gentle cloud; they

drifted like they were cast off from the fetters of time.

Watching from the sidelines was a giddy Pinkie Pie. Bedazzled by the moment, she bounced and bounced and bounced with bright blue eye. It took all her strength not to burst out into uproarious song. Instead, she leaned aside and nudged Rainbow Dash. Rainbow groaned, fidgeting with her pitifully simple dress and keeping her eyes locked on the clock that hung along the south wall of the room. Behind them, next to a group of adorably tiny tables with half-eaten plates of cake, a bunch of young fillies and colts were chasing each other. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Snips played tag with Dinky, giggling and hiding behind curtains of white table cloth. From the side, Derpy Hooves, Milky White, and Cheerilee stood in smiling conversation, their attention happily divided between the newlyweds and another dancing couple to their right.

A few feet away, Sweetie Belle and Rumble awkwardly mimicked the special moment that took place in the center of the reception. Sweetie Belle's flowerfilly dress and Rumble's intensely straight-laced little suit added to the tiny spectacle. Several mares chuckled and murmured sweet things from a table or two away, which only added to Rumble's nervous jitters. Sweetie Belle merely absorbed the situation and gently leaned her neck against the colt's shoulder, to which the young stallion-to-be bravely reciprocated.

At the table directly facing the center floor, the Mayor sat next to Dr. Hooves. The two talked about recent events, their eyes locked on the dancing couple. The Mayor smiled and murmured something to a young, red-maned mare seated beside her who chuckled and responded with a tranquil nod. A few seats down, Zecora sat with her mane braided fancifully to honor the occasion. She listened intently as Bon Bon and Carrot Top discussed plans for another upcoming celebration. Towards the far end of the table, where all was quiet and still, Ambrosia and Morning Dew sat. They stared intently at the dancing couple, their eyes soft and peaceful. Leaning against each other, the two joined hooves and shared a singular, warm breath.

The latest string of instrumentals ended. As the band at the far end of the reception paused, the entire town hall broke into applause. The Mayor stood up and said a few words to the gathered guests, motioning towards the floor. At her insistence, several ponies stood up from their tables and flocked towards the center of the reception in pairs. The music resumed, and the dance continued. This time, however, the newlyweds weren't alone. Ambrosia and Morning Dew slow danced a few paces away from them. Thunderlane and Blossomforth shared a warm embrace as their hooves shuffled across the floor.

Cheerilee was still chatting with Derpy and Milky White when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning around, she saw nothing but Big Mac. Upon receiving a silent invitation, she fidgeted and blushed until the other two mares practically shoved her into the stallion. Smiling nervously, Cheerilee shared the floor with Big Macintosh while Applejack trotted over to Derpy and Milky White, sharing whole-hearted chuckles. Pinkie Pie, beside herself with the euphoria of the moment, glanced every which way before settling for Rainbow Dash. The pegasus actually yelped in surprise as she was hoisted out onto the floor, forced to do the pony-pokey while that half of the town hall chuckled with merriment. She groaned and endured the moment for Pinkie's giggling sake.

It was around this time that Spike waddled past the refreshment table with a glass of punch in each hand. He gave Pinkie Pie one glance, Rainbow Dash two, and then looked ahead. "Yeesh. Now that I think about it, Ponyville could use a heck of a lot more stallions. It'd make dancing less awkward, don't you think?"

"Oh please, Spike." Twilight Sparkle's voice accompanied her lavender telekinesis as it lifted a glass out of his clawed grasp. She took a gentle sip, staring contentedly at the communal event. Her smile was as soft as her breaths, gentle and happy as she waded in the melodic waves that serenaded the pleasant evening. "Don't ruin the moment. Things haven't been this calm in a while."

"Calm?" Spike made a face, twitching in his top hat and whelpling-sized tuxedo. He downed his punch

with a single gulp, suppressed a burning belch, and muttered, “This is the craziest, most rushed, last second wedding I’ve ever been to!”

“Spike, it’s the *only* wedding you’ve ever been to!”

“Nuh uh!” He pointed with a smirk. “What about Mr. and Mrs. Fuzzhead?”

“Fluttershy’s pet otters don’t count.”

“Yeah, well...” Spike gazed down at his squirming toes. “I liked the party afterwards better than tonight’s.”

“Don’t be silly! This night is very, very special.”

“For them, sure...”

“For all of us, Spike!” Twilight turned to smile once more upon the couple in the center of the dance floor, surrounded by fellow ponies. “Just three weeks ago, the world almost came to an end. Discord’s return caught everypony by surprise, including the Princesses. We were just seconds away from losing all hope and suffering endless chaos...”

“But then you and the Elements of Harmony saved the day, yadda yadda yadda...” Spike shrugged. “Heard it before, Twilight. I know the deal.”

“Do you?” Twilight glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. “What happened on the Day of Discord corrupted everypony, Spike. Every living thing in Equestria saw their lives flash before their eyes. Personally, I don’t blame Caramel and Wind Whistler for deciding to marry sooner rather than later! If recent events have taught us anything, it’s that life is precious!”

“Yeah, well, Applejack says that things aren’t gonna be easy for her cousin,” Spike said. “I overheard her and Granny Smith talking about having to let the two ‘share-crack’ with them.”

“It’s ‘share-crop,’ Spike,” Twilight corrected. “And there’s nothing wrong with letting the two move into Sweet Apple Acres! That’s what family’s for, after all. When I was really young, my father and mother lent money to Moondancer’s mother Satine to help get her through tough times.”

“But Moondancer was your friend, not family!”

“You’re missing the point!” Twilight gazed again at the center of the reception. “There’s a beauty in harmony, something that goes beyond friendship and family and neighbors and community. It’s taken months and months of writing to the Princess, but I think I’m finally starting to figure it out.”

“Figure what out?”

“That harmony doesn’t make itself. Peace doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. It takes ponies like us to do brave and bold things to make harmony, well, harmonious!” She chuckled slightly, but her eyes were starting to water. “It’s just so *simple*, Spike. I wished I realized it long ago, but I guess that would make this moment less special. How many years did I spend locked up in my room, thinking that all I was or all I ever could be would happen through books?”

“Enough years to write your own book about living through books?”

“Yeah, well...” She sniffled and put on a brave smile. “Every day, I'm learning newer and more amazing truths. Someday, I hope to be just like Wind Whistler and Caramel.”

“You mean you wanna get hitched?”

“Heh... I don't know about that,” Twilight said in a humored voice, then breathed more evenly. “What I mean is, I hope to be in a place where I'll know what I need to do and just seize the opportunity without being afraid of where I am in life, because I'll be making that life for myself then and there.”

“I dunno, Twilight,” Spike said with a shrug, suddenly looking over her shoulder. “I think you have your life 'made' enough as it is.”

“Heh, perhaps, but nopony can know for certain what is or isn't missing until the holes show up,” Twilight said. A very cold hoof tapped on her back. She literally jumped. Spinning around, she froze in place, her eyes squinting. “Uhhh... Yes? Did you need something, Miss...?”

I stood there, shivering. My gray hoodie was like a homeless mare's funeral shroud in the middle of so many splendid dresses and suits. My mane hung loosely over my neck with frayed ends as I stared at her—eyes jittery and lips quivering while I fought to speak past my own panting breath.

“I know you,” I stammered.

Twilight Sparkle bit her lip. Spike nervously shifted from one foot to another, his eyes darting between us.

“Ma'am...?” Twilight remarked.

“I... know you,” I said, my eyes searching over her, through her, beyond her. I gulped dryly and ran a hoof through my disheveled hair. “The tone in your voice, the pitch, like... like a child, always discovering, always concerned, always innocent.” I gritted my teeth as a wave of cold doused me with invisible snow. The room was spinning and this unicorn was my anchor. “You want something more than anything. I want it too. It's what all ponies want, but not all ponies can say it. Someone... yes... I think someone was sobbing.” I shuddered and gazed up at the confusing starlight. “Books. Books and so much dust, yes... I think we've both been there, and every time I try to remember it, I feel like collapsing...”

Twilight took a step or two back, her face stuck in a grimace of confusion.

Spike was already looking towards where the Mayor stood. A pair of strong security stallions flanked her side, talking to one another while standing at attention.

Twilight's hoof rested on the whelping's shoulder before he could take one step away. She grabbed my attention as she leaned over and said, “Just calm down, miss. I think... I think you might be lost...”

I gazed at her. I felt my heart beating. When I spoke, it was like a star was burning out somewhere in my peripheral vision. “Yes. Yes, that's it. Lost.”

“Is there any way I can help you?”

I felt a weight in my saddlebag just then. It almost matched the lump in my throat. “There's... there's a melody,” I stammered, trying my best not to hyperventilate. I was on the crest of something sharp and steep, and I was so terribly afraid to peer over. Nevertheless, I took the plunge. “I know some of it, but there are several bars missing.” Without looking, I opened the saddlebag and lifted something out. I looked at it and was only half-surprised to see a tiny golden instrument with tinier platinum strings. “I feel like I should know all of it.” I took a deep breath, my brow furrowing. “I *need* to know all of it.”

“Twilight...” Spike inched over and tugged on the unicorn's shoulder. “This lady's starting to creep me out...”

“Shh!” Twilight hissed at him, her eyes remaining locked on me. She bravely said, “Ma'am, I'm no musician. I think you need help from another pony. If you follow me, I can show you to Ponyville Hospital—”

“No!” I barked, causing a few heads to turn my way. At the sight of Spike jolting, I took a deep breath, calmed myself, and leaned forward. “I need to know this melody. Everything will make sense then. I don't know how or why, but I just need to know it... as you know it!”

“But I said I'm no—”

“You're the only pony who can help me!”

Twilight bit her lip. Ultimately, she nodded and gestured towards me. “Very well, ma'am. Play me what you know, and I'll see what I can do.”

I gazed at her. Sitting down, I closed my eyes and concentrated. My face was tense as I plucked the first string, then the second, then the third. In slow procession, I telekinetically strummed all the notes that I knew, filling the air with a calm but solemn song, just as broken and fractured as I. When it was finished, I opened my bloodshot eyes, gazing steadily at her.

“It's... It's familiar,” she remarked in a muttering tone. “Like... Like something from the Royal Archives—”

“Do you know the rest?!”

“Well, I've only heard it a few times, so my memory is rusty—”

“Hum it!” I exclaimed hoarsely.

She blinked, then nodded. “Very well. Uhm... Here goes.” Taking an extraordinarily large breath, she did as I asked, hitting each note with as much grace as a scholar might dance her way around a flower garden. The sounds coming from her were fragmented and short, but it was nonetheless beautiful, for they came from a sincere heart. When the humming was done, and the semblance of a melody was played out to the air of the town hall, she looked towards me with a nervous smile. “Uhm... Does that help you any? I swear, I haven't heard that since I was first taken under Celestia's wing—”

I cut her off by strumming my lyre with vigor. The melody repeated, slowly yet with firm resonance. I felt my breaths rising as if I was soaring into a deep, deep canyon. Then, as the song played itself out under my magical rendition, an incalculably bright light burst from the abyss. I knew the song was “*Twilight's Requiem*” only because I had the capacity to recognize it once again. I felt my body catching fire, only to sense my hooves teetering dizzily on the town hall floor beneath the burning miasma. The colors in the room took shape, stabbing

my eyes, producing tears out the other side. With a deep gasp, I spun about and gaped at everypony.

Scotaloo was trotting up to share a hug with Milky White. Rumble was dancing with Sweetie Belle. Pinkie Pie giggled and bounced merry circles around a deathly bored Rainbow Dash. Applejack was laughing over a joke with Bon Bon and Derpy. Rarity and Fluttershy were closely admiring Zecora's exotic gown. Caramel and Wind Whistler shared a kiss in the middle of the warmth and music while Ambrosia and Morning Dew nuzzled and spoke sweet nothings into each other's ears.

A loud clatter filled my ears as my lyre fell to the floor. I collapsed onto my haunches, covering my mouth with a pair of hooves. I couldn't see the reception anymore; everything was fog and agony. The first sob came out of me like a gunshot, the second like the felling of a whole forest. I buried my face into my quivering forelimbs.

Through it all, I felt Twilight's hooves grasping me, embracing me. "Dear heavens! Ma'am, what's wrong?" she exclaimed, her voice so close and yet so far away. The simple fact that her gorgeous tonality now had a name to it was enough to make the sobs redouble. "What's the matter? I don't understand! Why are you so upset?"

I choked, hiccuped, and hissed to find an even breath. I blinked, and the world once again took hideous shape, bearing all the blissfully concrete signs that I was still alive. I fell into her embrace, wincing over her shoulder as a foalish voice squeaked out of me.

"He w-was right," I whimpered. "He was right. He was right. He was r-right. I wish—" I sharply inhaled and stared up at the accursed, cold gaps between the stars. "I wish that I could be turned to stone..."

"Huh?!" Twilight's face—of what I could see—was locked into a wretched grimace. The pity in her eyes was more painful than any wave of frost paralyzing me at that moment. "Who was right? I don't get it..."

"Please. Tell me." I gripped Twilight by the shoulders and stared at her, my eyes brimming with tears. "What day is it?"

"Huh?"

"What day?!" I ignored the dancing, the music, the laughter, all of the joys of the ceremony. "I have to know!"

"It's... It's October the Twenty-Ninth!" Twilight said, her lip quivering. "Don't you know that?"

I gasped sharply, holding a hoof over my mouth. "Blessed Celestia," I stammered. "The month is almost over. I could have sworn... I thought..."

"Ma'am, I think you need to see Nurse Redheart—"

"No..." I clenched my teeth and shook my head as the tears flowed even more. Seething, I uttered, "No, no, no, no... She can't help me. You can't help me. No pony can help me. Even the Princesses..." I gasped again. "Oh heavens! Celestia, Luna; I must find them. I must speak to them. They're a piece of **her**, a part of **Aria**, the forsaken twilight..."

Twilight's face paled. She looked at Spike. Spike merely shrugged.

“Can the *Requiem* work with them too?” I thought aloud, my body on the verge of hyperventilating. “Can it salvage them like it did Discord? Their power extends beyond the Firmaments. It could work. It has to work...”

“Discord?” Twilight remarked. Her face took on a soft expression, “Oh dear. Where were you when he returned, miss? I...” She raised a hoof to my shoulder. “I can understand if you still haven't recovered—”

“Recovered?!” I grasped her hoof tightly, looking deep into her eyes through panicked tears. “Nothing is recovered! All is buried! All is dead!” My face broke and I stumbled through more sobs. “Except me...” I breathed sharply. “There's n-nothing worse, Twilight, than being the only living thing to remember.”

“Remember what?”

I gulped and breathlessly uttered, “Everything.”

“I'm... I'm so confused. What do you mean—?”

“You were Celestia,” I murmured in a briefly steady breath. “Moondancer was Luna, and I was Starswirl. We spent our Canterlot days in laughter and music and doughnut sprinkles. Moondancer gave you a pink saddle for your cute-ceañera, and I bought you a book on griffon astrology. Your laughter was so joyful, like tiny bells ringing in the glitter of night. I was happy and proud to be the friend of a pony so gifted, so smart...” I added with a painful smile, “...and so very gentle.”

Twilight gazed at me, her eyes soft and perplexed. “I... have a book on griffon astrology. But... But I can't seem to remember how I... how I...”

“I remember,” I said. My face broke into another sob as I ran a hoof through my tangled hair. “For now. Just as I remember *Aria*.” I gulped and whimpered, “Just as I remember *him*.” I sniffled and clenched my eyes shut. “I remember him, and now it's just a matter of time until all of it is gone: both the pain and the peace. There are so many holes, Twilight, and I'm falling into every deep pit, losing parts of myself, being stripped of every layer like... like a tapestry ripped to tatters one thread at a time. Soon, I will be nothing but the melody itself, and the song still isn't strong enough to save me...”

“Save you?” Twilight remarked. “The song? But I thought it—”

“The *Requiem* has done all it will,” I said, gently stroking her hoof in mine. I sniffled and smiled. “But you can do more.”

“I can? Like what?”

“Listen to me,” I said, my breath reaching a calm pitch as my sobs slowed down. “Somepony needs to hear this. Somepony needs to know what I know, even if that knowledge will be gone in the next gasp, the next whimper. I need to tell it, to share it, for all that was once whole is withering away and it's all I have left to give.”

She nodded slowly, gazing at me with mixed sympathy and fear. “Alright,” she said, gulping. “I'm listening.”

My smile left me as I stared into the space beyond Twilight. “I first saw him walk into Ponyville thirteen days ago...”

His gray-streaked mane shone in the afternoon air. The stallion's amber coat matched the changing leaves of the season. Autumn collapsed around him, showering his figure like a celebratory parade as he marched down the steps of the train depot.

He wasn't alone; a mare—barely past her filly years—accompanied him. The earth pony had a blood-red mane and piercing blue eyes. Her face was locked in a permanent scowl, as if the last thing she ever wanted was to be there in Ponyville. She carried a camera around her neck, and was preoccupied with fidgeting over her loose saddlebag and staring at a watch affixed to her forelimb.

However, I paid the young mare no more than ten seconds of observation. It was the stallion I couldn't stop looking at: his haggard expression, his heavy jaw, his weathered muscles coiling and uncoiling beneath exhausted orange limbs. He carried a thick velvet bag full of blank canvases with him. He looked ready to draw a landscape, but was at a loss to find any sight joyful enough to warrant his brushstrokes.

The two were obviously from out of town. This wasn't so strange a thing; hundreds of ponies had been showing up daily at the train station that week. There was a pilgrimage of sorts taking place, and Ponyville had tripled in occupancy over the weekend. Still, I couldn't stop staring at these two in particular. As I watched them trot slowly across the village to find a hotel, I felt my heart beating heavily, threatening to burst through my chest. I wanted to scream, to sob, and to laugh all at once.

I couldn't do anything, for suddenly a feminine voice was chirping at me from behind. “Miss **Heartstrings**? Is there something wrong?”

I spun around and looked, blinking.

A mare stood before me, quite close, as if we were in deep conversation. Her indigo eyes narrowed behind a pair of bifocals as her green ascot fluttered in the fall breeze. “I'm sorry, was that the last question you had for me? You stopped mid-sentence.”

“I...” I squinted awkwardly at her. My eyes traveled across her features: from her gray mane to her pale coat to her cutie mark of a scroll tied with a blue ribbon. “I... was... asking you a question?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes. I believe you were.”

My jaw hung open. I stared at her blankly.

She brought a hoof to her mouth, cleared her throat, and smiled awkwardly. “You were wanting to ask something about Princess Celestia. Did... Did you wish to contribute to her monument in town?”

“Princess Celestia...” I murmured aloud, my breaths coming out in confused shudders.

“Did you wish to write a letter to the Royal Council? I fear the Princess is rather busy as of late. From



what the Council has told Ponyville, her royal highness is currently busy making trips throughout Equestria to assess any leftover damage caused by Discord.”

“Discord...” I gulped and stared at the village around me. Rustic buildings gleamed with golden-thatched roofs. Ponies were cantering about, embracing each other, sharing in joyful conversation and triumphant laughter. There was a treehouse in the center of the place, as well as a bright eatery with chimneys shaped like cupcakes. “Princess Aria...”

“Aria?” The mare made a face. “Are... Are you sure you're all right, Miss Heartstrings?” she said. “Do you feel ill? We have a very competent medical center just a few blocks down—”

“The princesses...” I muttered, reeling with a sudden dizziness. “Why would I want to see them?”

Her brow furrowed. “That's what I was hoping you would tell me. I figured you wanted to perform a special tune to honor the triumph of harmony over Discord. You are a musician, are you not?”

“I...” I glanced down at myself. I was wearing a stone gray hoodie. A saddlebag hung on my back. There was something heavy and metal inside. I felt the strings through the ley lines of my horn. “I... need to play music...” I was speaking, and yet there was no substance or passion or meaning. The longer I lingered, the more my mind hovered around the two strangers, the lethargic stallion, his gray-streaked mane...

A half-minute passed. Eventually, the mare's sigh broke the silence.

“Well, if you feel any better, you're welcome to track me down again. Though, I fear that I may be terribly busy for the rest of the day,” she said, adjusting the collar of her ascot and gazing towards a tall, cylindrical building in the center of town. “We're almost done setting up the celebratory welcome party.”

“Welcome... party...?”

“Why, for the Elements of Harmony, of course!” She beamed. “They're returning from the Canterlot Palace tomorrow night! Ponies from all over Equestria have flocked here to join in the triumphant festival! I figured that's how you arrived to our provincial town!” She briefly rubbed a hoof over her aching head. “Nnngh.. And then there's the communal photo shoot to prepare for, not to mention a wedding, then Nightmare Night. Good heavens! This year's Nightmare Night! I swear, my mane isn't gray enough...”

I gasped sharply. My face spun towards the center of town. I envisioned a dark alicorn with a midnight coat and a silver helm. Stars appeared from beyond, all laced with sobs and shadows. I realized how terribly cold I was, and my teeth began to chatter.

“I don't even *want* to *begin* thinking about the setup for Hearth's Warming this year! Especially after the Day of Discord, the celebration is going to bring the roof down!” She turned towards me. “So if you'll excuse me—” She blinked awkwardly. “...Miss?”

I was already galloping away. My breath came out in panicked little spurts. The stores and hotels blurred past me in the frigid air. Every time my eyes blinked, I saw the stallion and the red maned filly. I reached beyond that—whimpering—and tugged at a melody, a song that had been haunting me from the inside out. I couldn't think, couldn't rest. I had to get to the north of town. I didn't know why, but I had to rush there as swiftly as I could.

Ponies waved and greeted me as I burned by. They all melted into a pastel-colored blur, a sea of

strangers and sounds and confusion. The world was growing colder. I waded through the madness, flailing, drowning. I looked ahead for something—anything that was familiar. Through the bare vestibules of my mind, I found it. It stabbed me like a splinter to the brain: a tiny log cabin in a crook of the forested path. I flew into it. The door gave way without any incident, and I was suddenly inside some strange house with dozens of instruments and some furry thing padding up to rub its tail against my leg.

I shut the door and stumbled past the creature. I sat on the edge of the bed, hugged the lyre to my chest with shivering forelimbs, and reached deep into the magical leylines of my mind. I did not think of fear; I did not think of pain. My mind focused all its remaining energy on the song, and the song took shape between the walls of the tiny abode. I plucked the strings like a camper would start a fire. It took a few minutes, but the *Requiem* was reborn, and the cold split apart to make room for the flooding waves of memories.

I winced. My face actually stretched from the unavoidable grimace of weathering so many truths all at once. I fell back on the cot and curled up, biting my lip to hold the sputtering sobs in. I was in Ponyville. I had been in Ponyville for over a year. Discord had risen. I challenged him to a duel of wits. I won and lost, all at once, and the Elements of Harmony fatefully swooped by to finish him off. Now, days later, my mind was leaving me, and the only solution was to play the same song that gave [Alabaster](#) focus, that stripped the world of [Princess Aria's](#) illusion, and that humbled the lord of chaos into sparing the world.

When the melody faded and the malleable substance of my soul once again floated towards the surface, it was instantly scarred, ripped into porous holes: each of them shaped like the stallion with his gray-streaked hair. I hissed as if giving birth, allowing the image to rip through me. I thought I had no tears left. I thought that this blasted cold had paralyzed every nerve left in my body. I was wrong. All the song did was return me to the realm of knowing, and I couldn't have felt more naked and vulnerable.

Eventually, my sorrowful convulsions stopped. I gasped as if coming up from a deep, tempestuous dive. My eyes darted about the room, the lonely and all-too-familiar shadows of the place. There were so many musical instruments on the wall, so many mementos of a long year of introspection and discovery, so many details that I was too afraid to review or else I might discover that "*Twilight's Requiem*" had not salvaged all that had been lost... again...

"It's happening faster," I murmured. When I felt a tiny body hopping onto the bed, I realized who I was talking to. Al walked up to me, meowed, and rubbed his whiskery cheek against my face. I reached a trembling hoof up from the lyre and petted him softly. "I was gone for... for..." I glanced out the brightly-lit window. "Four hours? Five? I swear, it was morning when I left." Another tremble soared through my limbs. I shuddered and hugged the lyre again. "I thought I could just go to town to talk to the Mayor, but then... I got lost, didn't I? I walked into Ponyville, and I couldn't... I couldn't..."

My eyes twitched, for in another blink I had seen that damnable image yet again: a stallion and a young mare trotting down the steps of the Ponyville train depot, the sun glinting off their dull and bright coats. They didn't look at me, or at least I didn't see them glance my way. Perhaps that was why I ran?

"The Mayor..." I thought aloud, perhaps in an effort to distract myself. Al stepped to a cushiony spot beside me, twirled around once, and plopped down into a fuzzy little ball, licking himself. I looked at him as I murmured, "She told me that Celestia was busy as of late. Maybe she just hasn't checked all of her memos. The Mayor's had so much on her plate. Everypony has. I've never seen so many ponies in town like this before and... and..."

I gasped. The room was growing colder. I felt a chill flowing down from my horn to my tail. In my panic, a green light emanated through my leylines, and I heard the notes of the *Requiem* being played from the

lyre in my grasp.

“It's getting worse, Al,” I said, suppressing a sob beneath the haunting music. “I keep having to play it to remember... to remember...” I shuddered. “Anything.”

He turned to look tiredly at me. A low pur resonated.

I leaned over and nuzzled him, forcing the tears away. “I can't go into town without playing it anymore. I don't care if it looks silly for me to be playing the lyre in any random place. I'll invent excuses. I'll just grin and bear it. I need to have access to *'Twilight's Requiem'* at any given moment, or so help me Celestia...”

The cabin fell gravely silent.

I repeated, this time in a foalish tone. “So help me, Celestia. What can either of Princess Aria's sisters do?” I stood up, and on numb limbs I stumbled to the fireplace. “Before Discord banished me from his presence, he said that in order to send me to Aria he would have to 'hijack the song' that joined her to her sisters. What do you suppose he meant by that?” I lifted a few logs into place and lit them. A crackling warmth was born in the center of the room. “The *'Nocturne of the Firmaments'* separates Aria from the mortal realm. And yet, could she still have a connection to her siblings, in spite of that block?”

Slowly, I shuffled across the cabin to where a bag of cat food was lying. With gentle magic, I refilled Al's eating dish. Instantly, the feline hopped off the bed and waited patiently beside the rattling container.

“The *Nocturne* is a smaller, more recent piece of the Cosmic Matriarch's song,” I said out loud as I finished with my task. I placed the bag down and stared into space. “It's older than the Elements of Harmony, and more powerful.” My brow furrowed as I began pacing across the cabin. “But it's also *younger* than Celestia and most of Creation. The essence of the alicorn daughters is an older song than the *Nocturne*. Even though the *Nocturne* keeps the alicorns from knowing about Aria, it doesn't sever their connection. The song still keeps the sisters attached, and there *must* be a way to traverse that junction and reach Aria within her throne room of the *unsung* realm. But, if that's true, then how come I haven't gotten it to work with Celestia before? I know I met her once, but the *parasprites* happened. Nnngh... What actually took place on that day? I just wish... I just wish I could remember what I *want* to remember...”

I froze in place, for the room had become darker. I looked out the window. A breath escaped my lips.

There was nothing but starlight.

My ears flicked. I spun about and looked into the fireplace. The logs had burned out; all was ash and fading embers.

I heard a meowing sound. I glanced at the bed and Al was looking up at me curiously, standing tall and at attention. I didn't want to, but I looked at his food dish on the floor. It was utterly empty.

I started to hyperventilate. Rather than collapse on my knees, I crawled over to the bed and held Al close. He rested contentedly in my forelimbs, purring with pure innocence as I nuzzled him closely and fought the shivers away. The silence outside the cabin was deafening, bringing with it the stinging memories of a stallion sporting a gray-streaked mane. I fought them away too.

“I can't do this, Alabaster. I can't stand to lose my m-mind. It's the b-best tool I've ever had. It's the only thing that can k-keep me afloat.” I sniffled and clenched my moist eyes shut as I whispered to the collapsing

shadows. “If I had known what happened to you would strike m-me so quickly, I would have pr-prepared for it. I would have studied harder. I would have figured out the symphony s-sooner. I... I...”

I felt a tickling array of whiskers against my tear-stained face, followed by a gentle trilling noise.

I calmed slightly, surrendering to exhaustion. I had been to the **unsung** realm. I had endured the torture of a chaotic draconequus. I had come too far to fade away that easily. **Alabaster** hadn't let a thousand years of imprisonment shatter him; why should I allow less than two years of battling this curse defeat me?

“I have to speak with the Mayor again,” I murmured past Al's flicking ears. “I have to find out when the Princesses are visiting Ponyville next. I don't care what blows up this time. If there's a catastrophe, I will fix it. If a part of the song breaks, I will piece it together. I must see **Aria**, and the only way at this point is if another piece of the Matriarch's music sends me to her.”

I gently kissed Al on the forehead and surrendered to the folds of my blanket. I closed my eyes and hummed the *Requiem*, interjecting desperate lyrics in between the notes as the remaining strength of my breath wavered thinly.

“I will remember everything in the morning. I will remember my name, my friends, and my quest. I will remember. I will remember.”

The stars faded. The forest collapsed. The shadows swallowed the universe in its entirety.

“I will remember... I will remember... I will...”

A lonely, confused pony looked at me. My forehead tensed, and I saw her squinting. A breath escaped my lips, and I saw her mouth twitching. When I leaned my head to the side, she gave me a quizzical look.

For some reason, my heart began beating swiftly. I heard lyrics repeating in my head. I thought of a melody stuck in the back of my mind. Insinctually, I reached into my saddlebag and produced an ordinary lyre. The pony gazed at me strangely. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. I realized what I had to do. With professional grace, I performed the melody that was straying from the corners of my brain.

“*Twilight's Requiem*” materialized in the autumn winds. I glanced ahead to see a frightened expression on the pony's face. Suddenly, her eyes flickered to a bright amber. Her horn shimmered with mint-green energy as a cyan mane billowed behind her twitching neck. I stumbled back from the storefront window, desperate to catch my breath. I jerked my body and glanced around.

It was morning, or maybe afternoon. The sun was directly overhead; east and west were still foggy concepts. Ponyville materialized around me, complete with sounds and shapes and lights and laughter. I couldn't think of a more cheerful place to be my hell. Then again, I just couldn't *think*.

I was out in public to go somewhere—no—to *meet somepony*. The cylindrical shape of Town Hall formed in my mind, like a goal. I thought of indigo eyes, a gray mane, a green ascot.

“The Mayor...” I spoke aloud, gulping hard. I glanced at the flowers beneath the windowsill. I saw tulips and thought of ocean blue eyes. A knot formed in my stomach as I jerked my head aside. I saw roses and thought of red irises floating inside chaotic yellow circles. My body froze within itself, sending shivers through my spine. I ran a hoof over my face and took several breaths as the memories took bitter root. “Celestia and Luna...” I seethed and turned from the storefront altogether. “I must find out if they're coming to Ponyville soon. Must speak to them. I know more of the *Nocturne* now. Things will be different. They have to be different...”

In between breaths, a stallion with a gray-streaked mane descended the steps of a train depot. In a blink, he was gone, and I had to trot forward just to keep from stumbling.

I stumbled through town like a frozen phantom. The sun shimmered brightly overhead, and yet every inch of me was freezing. I tugged at the sleeves of my hoodie to give me more insulation. Did I always live with this? How could I have kept sane over fifteen months of such madness?

I heard sounds to my left and right. I glanced up to see Thunderlane chatting it up with a bunch of pegasi. On the other side, three fillies and a colt were riding across town on a red wagon. A mailmare flew overhead, and my ears twitched from the haunting resonance of flute music in my mind. I tried to burst past such fractured thoughts, but could only hear the shouting voices of Twilight Sparkle and Moondancer across a tiny eatery. My heart skipped a beat, because I had a two-by-four levitating above Straight Edge's body. Somewhere, a mare was sobbing.

My breath hissed through my teeth. My trot slowed even further as I clenched my eyes shut, took several deep breaths, and limped forward. My eyes traced the blades of grass below as I murmured in a low tone to myself, “My name is **Lyra Heartstrings**. I was born in Canterlot. I went to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, studying history and music theory...”

A zebra trotted past me, waving and engaging in a cheerful conversation with an earth pony in a hard hat. Their names were on the tip of my tongue. I sliced them off the fringes of my mind and trotted towards my goal.

“My n-name is **Lyra Hearstrings**. I was b-born in... in Canterlot. I went to Celestia's... to Celestia's...”

Several clumps of dark clouds swarmed overhead. I squinted up in the daylight to see a winged mare with a rainbow colored mane hair leading a pack of weather fliers. There was a series of bright chirping sounds to my left. I glanced over to see a yellow pegasus conducting a choir of songbirds. Was there some special event taking place? Was this how these ponies lived their every passing day? Did... Did I know this? Did I celebrate it with them? Were any of these equines my friends, my family, my lovers?

I had one place to go, one pony to speak to. I just needed to get to Town Hall. I just needed to talk to the Mayor. The *Requiem* could wait until then. I was afraid of playing the forsaken music until the magic was stretched too thin. There was a unicorn who suffered worse than me for experimenting too much. What was his name? Did I ever meet him? Did he ever find his... his... his special thing that he had lost, that he had forgotten, that had forgotten... had forgotten...

“My name is... is **Lyra Heartstrings**,” I stammered. “I... I was born...” I wheezed for breath, the air around me filling with translucent vapors. “I was... born...”

I heard a giggling voice beside me. I glanced over. A pink earth pony was bouncing alongside an elegant mare who was boasting airily about some fabulous wedding gown she was working on. Beside them, several bags full of ivory colored silk and frills hovered as the mares made for an elaborate building constructed to resemble a gem-encrusted carousel.

I froze in place. The temptation was too great, the fear even greater. I lifted the lyre out of my saddlebag. For the briefest of moments I panicked, horrified that I may not remember how to play. With a calm breath, I relaxed and allowed myself to function by base instinct alone. I heard a tune lifting into the air, becoming more and more familiar with each passing chord.

When it finished, and the weight of reality came crashing into my skull through an aching horn, I shuddered as if slammed in the face by a pie pan. My eyelids shut, and I saw Pinkie Pie galloping circles around Sugarcube Corner, a toothless alligator biting tightly to her fluffy tail. She baked doughnuts and spun them on the end of her nose, pretending to be a circus performer. She was such a child, such a buffoon, such a joy.

When my eyes opened, I could barely see, for my face had contorted too heavily from uproarious laughter. I dropped the lyre and clutched myself, doubling over in cackles and chortles. In the pitch of my voice, I heard Pinkie Pie laughing, singing, celebrating life. There was such a fantastic art to her dance, and then the industry crushed it in a single wave of cold.

I gasped, my eyelids twitching from the sudden shadows collecting in the far corner of Rarity's boutique. She had rows upon rows of dresses, and nopony was wearing them because nopony cared. All of her life she fought so hard to get noticed, to become famous, to contribute her two bits to the collective consciousness of a fickle culture. Her entire career had amounted to a tiny pebble splashing in a grand ocean of artistic indifference, and it tore her up inside. And yet, every day, she hid her frustrations beneath a façade of eloquence as well as the selfless pursuit of generosity. It was so inspiring, and yet so sad. She never cried, and so I cried for her.

I wept just as quickly as I had laughed, collapsing in the middle of the street and covering my clenched eyelids with shivering hooves. Rarity fought a constant, uphill battle, and yet she wasn't the only one. Rainbow Dash was deathly afraid of being alone. Twilight Sparkle worked hard every day to not be forgotten. One stream of thoughts led to another, and soon everything was flooding, flowing through me, fountaining in my eyes: Morning Dew's failed career as a guardpony, Caramel's financial woes, Scootaloo's poor, precious wings.

Through it all, silent as a grim steward, Discord sat in stone, guarding an untold song of mourning to a love that would never die. Was he a coward, or was he a genius? Why did he send me away? If he knew that it was going to be this bad, this painful, why didn't he take me with him? What do I have left to do here? What do I have to salvage? What—

“Scarlet, I wish you would eat something,” a deep voice said from a few paces behind me, freezing me to my core.

“How can I eat?” a feminine breath replied. “My stomach’s full of butterflies as it is. Doesn’t this town freak you out? What with all the magic hijinks and tomfoolery?”

“I would think you’d be used to them, Scarlet. Heh... considering this is your home town.”

“Correction, it *was* my hometown. Just because I was foaled here doesn’t mean I owe it any more than a passing glance. Nnngh... I really wish that I didn’t have to come here...”

Shivering, I looked behind me. I immediately jerked aside and hid my body behind the wooden post of a

restaurant's front veranda. Just a whisper's distance from me, the red-maned mare and the aged stallion were seated at a table, engaged in a passive conversation. The mare was fiddling with a camera in her young hooves. The old pony was putting the finishing touches on a landscape portrait of Ponyville.

"You could have told the *Enquirer* that you wished to cover Stalliongrad's recovery instead," I heard the stallion's voice exclaim. "From what I understand, there're plenty of sights to take photographs of in that city. The ponies there took a huge blow; what, with Discord turning their giant wall into a huge block of cheese."

"Yes, but then I would be visiting the city alone."

"Is something wrong with that?"

"You know I enjoy traveling exclusively with you!" the young mare exclaimed.

"Heh heh... That must obviously be the case, since you chose to come here with me after all."

"Just... why *did* you take up this assignment in Ponyville?"

"Let's just say I thought a trip to the country would do me good, and you too."

"Hmph. You're crazy, old stallion." With a shuffling of her chair legs, the young mare got up. "While I'm here, I might as well go visit family."

"I do hope we are talking about the living..."

"You know me too well. You should also know not to press my buttons..."

"Scarlet," he said in a low, sympathetic tone. "I do very much enjoy our travels; I would enjoy them a great deal more if I knew my good friend was at peace with herself."

"Peace is boring. I'm a photographer, remember?"

"Life is built on simpler excuses, and many of them just as painful."

"Ugh. Could you paint more and talk less?"

"Guilty as charged, I suppose."

"Whatever. You know where to meet me later."

"Absolutely. Goddess-speed."

By this point, I had made a desperate attempt to shuffle away from the scene without attracting attention. I was almost successful, and the voices of the two ponies had become like the faint rustling of leaves. However, just as I prepared to gallop into the street, a huge bulky wagon full of rattling cooking utensils rolled right before me. With a gasp, I fell back, collapsing with a hard *thump* in the middle of the road. I dropped my lyre, and my ears echoed with the resounding vibrations of the upset strings. Just as the shivers of my curse rebounded...

"Ma'am? Are you okay?"

I opened my eyes, glancing up to see a young mare leaning down to look at me. She had deep indigo eyes, a fair coat, and a blood-red mane.

I must have been convulsing, for the mare gasped. “Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you! That is to say...” She smiled awkwardly. “You look like you've just seen a ghost.” She glanced at my disheveled mane and wrinkled hoodie. “Is everything okay? Did... Did you wish to talk about it?”

I stood up and telekinetically lifted my lyre from the ground. I gave it a few shakes to toss loose the dirt and grass blades sticking to its surface. All the while, I sniffled, trying to even my breaths and compose my jittery nerves.

“My name is *Lyra Hearstrings*,” I said without thinking. I glanced at the restaurant veranda through my peripheral vision. The stallion was gone; I breathed easier. “Er, I mean, I'm fine. I just... I just have a lot on my mind...”

“I would guess as much,” she said with a gentle tone in her voice. A camera hung from her neck, and the shadows under her eyes suggested that she hadn't been getting much sleep lately. Undoubtedly this pony was a very busy mare, and yet she had taken such a bizarre moment in time to speak to me, a perfect stranger... a perfectly nervous basket case of a stranger. “My name is Scarlet Breeze,” she said. “I was born here.”

I cleared my throat and stood up straight, attempting to look surprised by that confession. “Were you?”

“Yeah. And if there's anything I remember about Ponyville”—she said in a bittersweet tone as her face took on a dry smile—“it's that ponies here are always tranquil all of the time. So, you kind of struck a weird chord. Heh, if you don't mind the pun.”

“I... don't mind,” I said softly, gazing at the ground between us. I had most of my wits collected, and she had calmed me enough that I didn't fear forgetting about the Mayor anytime soon. “You have to be careful with memories, though. They're not always happy.”

To that, she nodded somberly. “Don't I know it.” Her eyes narrowed. “Would you... like to talk about some of yours?”

I chuckled bitterly, then smiled at her for politeness' sake. “No. I mean, thanks... but it wouldn't make a difference. I'm pleased by your generosity. Are...” I thought of the train depot, of the scowl that had been on her face when she first arrived in town. “Are you visiting for nostalgia's sake?”

“Visiting?” She raised an eyebrow. “Hmmm... No, this is all strictly business.”

“Business?”

She motioned towards the camera hanging around her neck. “The *Fillydelphia Enquirer* wants me to make a collage of photos documenting the 'rustic aesthetics' of the town where Discord was defeated. Heh... You should see what it's like in the big cities right now. Everypony is flipping their gaskets over the end of the world having been averted at the last second. A wave of 'miracle fever' is swarming across Equestria. There's been a total media frenzy.”

“I... I had no idea,” I said, my eyes lingering on the distant sight of Town Hall. “I don't exactly get out much.”



“No crime in that,” she said. “So long as you're content.”

“Right...”

She gave me another worrisome gaze. “Are you sure you don't want to talk about what's bothering you Miss... [Heartstrings](#), was it?”

I looked at her. She seemed to be a decent pony, albeit a potentially complex one. I saw layers of pain and lethargy etched into her face. She was far too young—I felt—to have dealt with so many convoluted emotions. In another life, I would very easily have made friends with her in an instant, just as I would with Rarity and Pinkie Pie... just as I wish I still could with Twilight.

“I-I'm feeling better now, thank you.” I gave her a sweet smile. “Sometimes, what a pony needs the most is to see the world still standing tall and healthy around her.”

“Well, we can always afford that outlook now, can't we?” Scarlet remarked. “I mean, now that Discord's gone. Heheh.”

I almost responded to that, but I looked to the center of town and recalled something that I had blissfully forgotten. Discord had sat on his throne, being bombarded by the Elements of Harmony. As the prismatic beams enveloped him, I could only think of one pony responsible for putting him there in the first place. As he turned to stone, there were screams, and they did not all belong to him.

“Well, I need to be off,” Scarlet said. “I'm in town for another week. If you wish to talk about something or get stuff off your chest, just look for the burning red hair,” she said with a girlish chuckle. “Remember, the name's 'Scarlet Breeze.’”

“I will... try to remember,” I murmured. Looking up, I saw her trotting past me towards the desolate edge of Ponyville. “Where are you headed to?”

“The cemetery,” she responded in a swift, cold tone.

I blinked. “Ponyville's letting you take photos there? What for?”

She chuckled dryly, and gave me the thinnest of smiles before trotting off. “Oh no. This? This is hardly business...”

And she was gone.

With a swivel of my legs, I trotted towards my destination. I hummed a tune under my breath and enveloped myself in the melody like a comfort blanket until I was gone too.

The *Requiem* played for the tenth time that hour. I sat on a plush sofa, strumming the lyre with a mix of dexterous hooves and precise telekinesis. I faintly remember the song being a beautiful instrumental when I first discovered it, but that didn't last forever. The first thing “*Twilight's Requiem*” ever did for me was make me remember my trips to the **unsung** realm. The second thing it did was open my mind to the haunting madness of **Alabaster's** journals. It was a beautiful tune, and yet it would be the last thing I'd ever choose to listen to over and over again in a desperate attempt to salvage my mind.

Why had I suddenly become so dependant on that particular instrumental? I had lost memories before, memories that required the performance of the *Requiem* to rediscover. But they had always been pertinent to **parasprites** or my trips to the realm beyond the firmaments. Something had changed, had decayed overnight, had reduced my spirit to a tattered flag clinging to the *Nocturne* in a tempest of shifting realities.

Was it all because of Discord? Did performing the *Requiem* for the lord of chaos have a negative effect on me? I thought of **Alabaster**, of the madness that had swiftly consumed him. Perhaps this was something that was always bound to happen to me as well. Just as **Aria's** song had robbed all of reality from recognizing me, **her** curse was starting to spread into my soul and destroy my recollection of myself. Maybe my experience with Discord had simply accelerated something that was inevitable. Was that something he knew would happen? Did Discord try to warn me, or did he think that this dementia, this utter breakdown of comprehension, would somehow translate into freedom from turmoil?

I heard a throat clearing from across the room. I paused in performing “*Twilight's Requiem*” and looked across the way.

A secretary sat at a desk, her mane a bit frazzled as she struggled to give me a fake smile. I could see the annoyance clinging to the frayed edges of her expression. I realized that I was inside a luxurious receptionist office. A pair of oak-paneled doors stood on the far wall, flanked by photos of a gray-maned mare shaking hooves with dignitaries from all over Equestria.

“I'm...” I spoke aloud, awkwardly eying the corners of the spotless interior. “I'm in Town Hall, waiting to speak with the Mayor...”

The secretary nodded with a plastic grin. “That you are...” She resumed slapping her hooves over a large typewriter.

I blinked. “How long have I been here?”

She paused. She pivoted her head over and gave me an even faker smile, her eyes twitching. “About ten symphonies ago.”

I blinked. I glanced at the lyre in my grasp and slid it into my saddlebag with a blushing expression. “I'm sorry. I just needed to... uh... relax...”

“Uh huh...”

“And I guess that must have been really annoying to you. Ahem. I'm sorry—”

Just then the doors swung open. Caramel and Wind Whistler were trotting backwards, bowing and curtsying before the Mayor with bright smiles.

“Thank you, ma'am!” Caramel exclaimed. “You have no idea what this means to us!”

“Oh, I think I can imagine!” the Mayor exclaimed, trotting after them while speaking in a singsong voice. “I was blessed to have a similar ceremony in this same building decades ago! My husband was so overwhelmed with joy, he nearly fainted! Good thing he slid the hooflet on me first.” She winked and chuckled merrily. “Matriarch rest his soul...”

Wind Whistler hugged Caramel and smiled the elder pony's way. “Seriously, Mayor. We're absolutely honored to have this opportunity.”

“You've had so much to deal with lately,” Caramel said. “If we had known you'd take the time to lend us the meeting hall—”

“Hey! Ponyville stands in one piece!” the Mayor exclaimed, resting a hoof on each of the young ponies' shoulders. “Equestria is under the glory of harmony, not the chaos lord's shroud! This is a time of rapture and jubilation! I'm more than happy to let you celebrate your wedding under this roof! Consider it one of several declarations of life in this new and exciting age we have to live.” She winked. “As well as your children!”

Caramel and Wind Whistler exchanged blinking, blushing glances. “Eh heh heh...” They bashfully toyed with the carpet and avoided her gaze. “One thing at a time, Mayor, ma'am...”

“Heheheh... I'm just teasing!”

Caramel glanced her way. “Unless, of course, you were going to lend us the lakehouse on the east side of town for the honeymoon?”

Wind Whistler batted him over the head with a hissing sound.

Caramel flinched. “Okay! Gotta go!” he waved and trotted out of the room with a giggling pegasus. “Wedding plans!”

“Try not to stress yourselves out too much!” the Mayor exclaimed, smiling and waving at them. Once they were gone, she exhaled slowly, her face locked in a soft grin. “Oh, how I do love second chances.” She glanced at the receptionist. “Hello, Miss Amberwind. What's next on my itinerary?”

The receptionist pointed a bored hoof in my direction. “You've got a unicorn musician who'd like to have a quick word with you. A Miss...”

“**Heartstrings**,” I stood up, gazing earnestly at the Mayor. “**Lyra Heartstrings**.”

“**Heartstrings**! Such a beautiful name!” The Mayor reached forward and shook my hoof. Her eyes lit up as she said, “I thought I heard music earlier. Was that you, darling?”

“Erm... Yes.” I winced. “I'm sorry. This is your office and all, and I didn't mean to—”

“Nonsense! I found it rather soothing.” The Mayor winked and looked at her secretary. “What about you, Miss Amberwind?”

“You still have that meeting with Filthy Rich at four o'clock, Mayor.”

“Oh dear...” The Mayor's face contorted in a grimace. Sweating, she smiled awkwardly my way. “Here's

hoping I contract the pony pox by then.” Brightening once more, she motioned for me to follow her into her office. “Come right in, Miss **Heartstrings**! My door's always open, so long as you're not asking for more land to slap down future Barnyard Bargain depots!”

“Erm... Right...” I shuffled weakly into her office. The place was luxuriously furnished, with wooden ornaments of historically famous earth ponies flanking tall antique bookcases. Her desk was a spacious work of art. I feared that I would have to raise my voice to speak across it. Sitting down in a plush chair, I hugged my saddlebag to my chest and gazed—shivering—into the tabletop. “This... this is a nice office.”

“I inherited it like this; I swear.” She sat down and instantly gave my quivering form a worried glance. “My my, you look freezing! Would you like a blanket?”

“It won't matter...”

“Huh?”

“I mean, thank you, but I... I have something of a condition,” I said. “Uhm, it's not infectious or anything, but trust me when I say that I'm quite fine...”

“Ah, well, if you insist.” The Mayor leaned back in her seat. “That explains the jacket, I suppose. So then, Miss **Heartstrings**, you're a musician?”

I slowly nodded.

“Do you perform locally?”

“I... guess you could say that.”

“How fantastic!” She smiled and adjusted her bifocals. “I must hear you play sometime!” She rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Outside of my office, I mean. The acoustics here are horrible. I know; because I've yelled at several tax forms in this room before. Heh heh heh...”

“Eh heh...” I smiled nervously, my eyes travelling across her wide desk. I saw several pictures of the Mayor, each portrait growing progressively younger. One particular photograph—worn and faded—showed her with a pink mane as she posed next to a black-coated earth pony and a little redheaded foal. All three had become dull, smiling shadows, much like my thoughts. “I've somewhat hit a dry spell as of late...”

“Oh?”

“But.. But I'm wanting to make a comeback,” I said, thinking aloud. “However, I'm not just planning just any normal venue. I was hoping to treat the greatest audience possible, which is what brings me here—”

“Do you write your own music?”

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Are you a writer as well as a songstress?” the Mayor asked, pointing daintily my way while smiling. “I've always admired the talent of ponies to produce melody out of thin air. Unicorns especially: your kind are always so good at your craft.”

“Well, I've been... *uhm*... doing a lot of covers as of late,” I said with a slight wince. “To put it lightly...”

“I used to dream of playing musical instruments when I was a young filly,” the Mayor said. “Heavens, that was ages ago...” She slumped back in her seat and eyed the ceiling. “Funny how the things we used to dream of doing stay in the mind longer than memories of what we actually do. I suppose you're too young to relate...”

“Oh, no.” I shook my head, speaking softly, “I understand. Believe me.” I gulped. “What we wish to do, what we desire to be, means a lot, for they are immortal feelings. I'm certain that...” I hesitated, glancing at the window as flakes of dust danced in the sunlight. “I'm sure of only one thing, and it's all I'll ever have to lean on when worst comes to worst.”

The Mayor leaned her head to the side curiously. “What's that, Miss **Heartstrings**?”

I swallowed hard and hugged my saddlebag tighter, feeling the shape of my lyre inside. “My love of music,” I muttered. “In the end, that's what defines me. Everything else is just an extension of that one thing.” I glanced at her. “I'm sure there's still a dreamer alive in all that you do, Mayor, as much as there is a doer.”

She smiled calmly at me. “I'm intrigued to hear a young mare speaking with such wisdom. You don't look like you've lost too many years of your life, Miss **Heartstrings**.”

“Years are just numbers,” I replied instantly. “Dreams and desires are the substance of a pony's soul. I think it's best to focus on that and that alone, beyond the veil of memories, for in the end... memories are all that's left you.”

She gazed at me steadily for a while. I wasn't certain whether she was about to reply or kick me out of her office. Eventually she smiled with a steady nod. “A very interesting way of looking at things.” She chuckled lightly. “Well, as much as I'd love to sit here and talk philosophy with an artist”—she leaned back in her seat and gestured across the desk towards me—“I do believe you had something you wished to discuss with me.”

I gulped hard and uttered, “The Princesses.”

She blinked awkwardly. “What, you mean of Equestria?”

I held my tongue; then was not a good time to be snarky. “Yes,” I said solidly. “Princess Celestia and Luna. Are... are they scheduled to be visiting Ponyville anytime soon?”

She adjusted her bifocals and leaned forward. “This is about a musical performance, is it?”

“No. I mean yes! I mean...” I winced and tried to compose myself. It would have been far too awkward to remove the lyre from my saddlebag and perform the *Requiem* in front of her. I had to stay calm through sheer meditation. “I was hoping to be in town at the same time as either one of them,” I said. “So that my music might reach their ears, and I could show them as... uh.. artistically as I can how happy I am that harmony has once more defeated the evils of chaos.”

“That's a poetic way of putting it,” the Mayor said, smiling politely. “However, darling, even if I did know when they were arriving next, it's beyond my ability to arrange any meetings with them.”

I ignored the heavy beating of my heart to lean forward and exclaim, “That's perfectly fine! I... I really don't expect you to curry any favors or make magical appointments happen! I was just hoping you would at least *know* when the Princesses are scheduled to be in Ponyville again! We have many events coming up, don't we?”

“Well...”

“Nightmare Night!” I said with an awkward smile. “The Running of the Leaves! Hearth's Warming! Boxing Day!” I leaned back and breathed easier. “You see, I've... uhm... I've asked everypony in town that I can and none of them seem to have a clue. I figured you, the Mayor of this village, would know more than any other pony about the royal sisters' upcoming whereabouts.”

“I'm very sorry to say, Miss **Heartstrings**, but there is nothing scheduled for the next four months at least!”

I felt my heart collapsing through my chest. The room had gotten colder, and I wanted more than anything to play the *Requiem* so that the memories of far warmer things would drown out the frigid truth I was hearing. “Four m-months...?”

“Mmmhmmm...” The Mayor nodded solemnly. Her eyebrows rose. “And I'm a pony who faithfully checks her schedule every morning.”

“Oh...” I gazed down at the desk with a heavy slump to my shoulders.

“I'm so very sorry, darling. Surely I can do what's in my power to help you perform for some of our upcoming festivals, though!” She grinned brightly. “I just got done arranging a wedding to take place in this very building! Several of Ponyville's most beloved citizens are likely to attend, including Twilight Sparkle, the very apprentice to Princess Celestia! That should be promising, at least!”

“I... I will consider it, ma'am,” I said in a dull yet polite voice. “I appreciate it. Truly, I do.”

“Still, I have to wonder...” She chuckled lightly. “Were you too shy to perform for Her Majesty, Princess Celestia, two days ago?”

I blinked, my heart stopping. I slowly gazed up at her, my mouth hanging open. “Two... t-two days ago?”

“Why yes, Miss **Heartstrings**. She was here for the better part of an evening. Everypony was ecstatic about it. It was the first time she had arrived since before the rise and fall of Discord.”

“How...” My brow furrowed as I stood up from my chair. “When? What for?! What brought Celestia here?!”

The Mayor leaned back, blinking worriedly at my passionate reaction. “Surely you jest! Were you out of town for it?”

“No! I wasn't!” I exclaimed, starting to pant in a cold sweat. “Please. I must know what happened!”

The Mayor's indigo eyes narrowed. “She came to undo the spell...”

“What spell?”

“The one that caused a huge riot on the northeast side of town, of course!” The Mayor blushed slightly. “The one that had reduced even me to a common ruffian, attacking her fair citizens over a meaningless little doll.” She shivered from a haunting chill before putting on a brave smile. “I almost thought Discord had

somehow resurfaced. It turns out that it was just a magic spell gone awry. Hah! I do admire you unicorns for your art, but sometimes your science could use a little bit of polish! Heh heh heh..."

"I... I don't get it!" I exclaimed. "How could that be? I..." My eyes twitched. I looked at her. "What day is it?"

"Why, Tuesday, of course," she replied.

A foalish squeak escaped my throat. I thought of my cabin, of the fireplace, of starlight shining off of Al's slumbering body. Then, in a blink, I saw two ponies marching down the steps from the train depot, and I was further stabbed to recall that having been a Thursday.

"Four days..." I shuddered and ran a hoof over my face. "It's been four days. Blessed alicorns... how could I let something like that slip?" I gulped and slumped back down into my chair, hugging myself. "Celestia was here..." I whimpered. "Celestia was here and I didn't even know it..."

"Hey, don't look so down in the mouth!" The Mayor gave me a sympathetic look. "It was all for the best! She cleared the enchantment away in a blink, and everything returned to normal. We live in the shadow of Canterlot, Miss [Heartstrings](#). I know that nothing is currently scheduled, but our beloved Princess is bound to show her face again sooner than later—"

Just then, the double doors to the office swung open. The secretary stood, twitching slightly with frayed nerves. "Ahem. Mayor...?"

"Amberwind!" The Mayor frowned. "Can't you see that I'm in the middle of—"

"I'm so terribly sorry," the receptionist droned. "But, she insisted. I swear, she was going to tear all of Town Hall down if I didn't tell you that she was here—" Just as she said this, an earth pony strolled into the room with a blood red mane and a camera hanging over her neck. Scarlet Breeze came to a stop and glared with dull indigo eyes across the room.

The matching color in the Mayor's gaze twitched. She stood up, utterly breathless. It took her a few seconds to stammer forth, "Scarlet, darling..."

"Mayor..." Scarlet uttered with a terse nod.

I blinked at the distance between the two. The room had gotten incredibly colder, and it wasn't my curse. I felt my heart beating as my gaze fell to the table, to the old photograph, to the red-haired foal squatting in the lap of a younger city official with a pink mane.

"Uhm..." The Mayor was fidgeting at this point. She glanced at me with a fractured grin. "Miss [Heartstrings](#). I don't suppose—?"

"I think I got what I came for," I said in a neutral tone. I stood up on my own and trotted gently for the door. "I thank you so very much for your time, Mayor. I'll... uh... I'll think about your offer concerning the wedding reception."

I strolled slowly past Scarlet. I glanced at her face, and I saw the same scowl that had dominated her expression when she first strolled into town the day before—*no*—four days previous. Gone was the sweet, sympathetic, and smiling stranger that had greeted me a few hours ago when I collapsed dizzily in the middle of

Ponyville. She trotted past me and stood before the Mayor's desk like a war general might approach a cliff overlooking a battlefield. I wasn't sure what possessed me, but I closed the door for the sake of the two. When the oaken panels were shut, I leaned against them, feeling the steady pulse of my heartbeat. I clenched my eyes shut, and a stallion with gray-streaked hair burned his way across my vision. I felt like sobbing. I felt—

“Brrrrr...” the secretary exclaimed. I glanced over in time to see a cloud of vapors lifting in the air above her desk. She rubbed her forelimbs, shivered, and sat before her typewriter again. “Ugh, I really hate the fall...” She was completely ignoring me. I realized it was because I didn't exist.

Blinking, I glanced at the shut door, at a dim hallway flanking the receptionist office, and then at the secretary. Since her attention was elsewhere, I side-stepped and ducked into the dark passageway. I snuck past the Ponyville town archives, another office or two, and threaded my way towards a utility closet. Tapping the air with translucent threads of emerald magic, I sensed that the closet was attached to the far end of the Mayor's room.

While nopony was looking, I slipped my invisible self through the door and closed it behind me. Assaulted by the smells of cardboard and disinfectants, I snuck to the far side of the tiny compartment. A thin door rested between me and the Mayor's office. Certainly, it had to have been locked, but opening it was not my concern at the moment. Quiet as a feather, I leaned over and pressed my ear to the surface of the door, listening in on a decidedly heated conversation transpiring on the other side:

“I know I didn't announce my visit. That's because this isn't personal; it's strictly about business.”

“Isn't personal?! Scarlet, it's been over six years! You waltz into my office like we last met only yesterday and you expect me to think that this isn't personal?!”

“I'm working for the *Fillydelphia Enquirer*. They want me to take photographs to memorialize Ponyville, the location of Discord's defeat. To do this, I must be permitted access to several town landmarks. With your permission, Mayor, I'd like to have access to the following places...”

“Mayor?!”

“Ahem. The clock tower. The Ponyville Library. The Celestia Statue. The old Windmill on the edge of town—”

“Scarlet, I'm your mother, for Celestia's sake! You don't have to call me 'Mayor' like just any other pony.”

“Why not? It's your job.”

“There's more to me than just my job...”

“I doubt that very much.”

“Scarlet, what is the real reason for you being here? Just listen to yourself! Everything you say is so bitter and cold—”

“Like I said, I'm only here for business.”

“Then why be so personal about it? Why talk to me to my face like this?! You know how it hurts me to



listen to that tone in your voice, to see that infernal expression! It always hurts me..."

"I'm only in town for a short time, Mayor. I wanted to get this meeting over with as swiftly as possible so I could make my rounds."

"So that's what everything has come to? You just wish to brush me out of your life now that you've come home for the first time in years."

"Fillydelphia is my home. This place means nothing to me."

"Then why don't you leave already?!"

"I wish I could. I wish that the *Enquirer* had sent me elsewhere. But if there's anything you've taught me, Mayor, it's that a pony is the substance of her hard work and professionalism."

Silence.

Scarlet's voice rose again, "So do I have permission to access the landmarks I mentioned?"

"You have my blessing..."

"I did not ask for your 'blessing.' I asked for your permission, Mayor—"

"Oh, just be gone already! I don't want to entertain this nonsense any longer than you do!"

Another bout of silence.

"Very well. I'm glad we could have that settled." Scarlet's hoofsteps sounded across the room. "Good luck on your next election."

"Scarlet..." The elder's voice stammered. "Scarlet, darling, please. I'm sorry. Don't—"

The doors opened and shut just as quickly. Everything was still, until a sound emanated softly from beyond the wall. It resembled a pony who had collapsed in her cot four days earlier.

The cold of the world doubled. I felt my teeth shattering, and the urge to play the *Requiem* gnawed at my threadbare mind. I couldn't do it there where I was hiding. So, I left as stealthily as I could to avoid making a scene. I suppose it was a good enough excuse at the time.

I trotted in circles for the next few hours. I was beyond distraught. Not only were neither of the Princesses planning on showing up in Ponyville anytime soon, but I had missed a golden opportunity to meet up with Celestia. If only my curse hadn't gotten worse that month, that very week, then I might have been able to

put my evolved knowledge of the *Nocturne* to the test. I could have experimented to see what the *Requiem* was capable of doing to a holy alicorn. I could have been connected to [Aria](#) through the sisters' song. Now what chance did I have?

As horrible as this new revelation was, it amazingly wasn't at the forefront of my mind. I trotted beneath the edges of the Everfree Forest, wincing as the shadows of trees passed overhead. I scaled the emerald lengths of Ponyville's park, my mind repeating the bitter conversation between the Mayor and her daughter, Scarlet. By sunset, I had approached the fringes of town, chilled by the cold breeze of Autumn and even more assaulted by the palpitations of my heart.

How could a mother and daughter who had so many pure recollections of one another choose to live at such a frigid distance? They had no curse, no magical affliction, no supernatural reason to be such total strangers to one another. Were the mistakes of the past so grand that they had to block one another's affections? I saw the scowl on Scarlet's face; I heard the muted sobs of the Mayor. These were ponies who were capable of feeling, capable of hurting, capable of hating. Life was so precious and fragile, and I couldn't think of something that proved this more than our quaint little near-apocalypse, the recent debacle of Discord.

I tried telling myself that I didn't have the power to know and understand everything. Just because I was a pariah didn't give me license to criticize the lives of those warm, living ponies around me. A ghost is good at haunting and not much else; so why was I so obsessed with the turmoil of the mother and daughter when I really should have been thinking about... when I should have been focusing on... on...

I was starting to lose grip of my mind once again. I stopped in my tracks, panting, for the world around me had once more become an indecipherable blur. I dropped to my haunches and pulled out my lyre. Taking several steady breaths, I played "*Twilight's Requiem*" as carefully as I could, gripping the golden instrument in trembling hooves. When the music played its course, I opened my misty eyes and saw several solid shapes around me. I blinked, and found myself in the middle of Ponyville's cemetery, the golden glow of the sunset parting through the granite slabs in dancing bands.

Leaves fluttered over my head as an October wind kicked up and died down. All was silent, making a bed of stillness upon which my memories collapsed all around me, as lonely and abandoned as the soft mounds of earth. I levitated the lyre and strolled limply ahead, drifting from stone to stone, wondering if all these strange names died with their heads intact as much as their hearts. I couldn't imagine a world so hopeless and cold to think that there were more ponies besides me and [Alabaster](#), spirits that couldn't be silenced by [her song](#), ghosts that were bound to wander the world in endless confusion until they themselves became flimsy melodies clinging to the holy weight of the Nightbringer.

I slowed my steps, thinking about the holy instrument that rested in a hidden compartment beneath the floor of my cabin. In a world where there was nopony to bury me, I realized that I had nevertheless built myself a monument, one that would never bear my name.

My hooves shuffled to a stop, for something had caught my eye. One gravestone was actually recognizable. I squinted at it, trotting over on light limbs. I stood before the slab, reading the engravings over and over again. I must not have played the *Requiem* accurately enough, because though I saw two words at the top of the stone, it took me a long time to actually discern it as a name.

"A very peaceful evening, isn't it?"

I gasped, instantly hugging the lyre. My eyes twitched upon hearing the voice behind me.

“There aren't many places like this in the big cities,” he continued. “It's quite a shame. More ponies like these fine souls deserve their rest.”

I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes. I didn't turn around. I didn't want to turn around. I simply waited and waited and...

“Oh, I'm terribly sorry. You're paying your respects. How rude of me.”

My heart was beating swiftly. I wanted to sob, to scream, to do anything but sit there as still as one of the many stones.

“I shall leave you be, Miss. I wish you a good evening.”

His hoofsteps drew further away, crunching leaves, echoing in my ears like chains beyond the firmaments. I felt like whimpering.

Instead, I said, “Wait.” Every part of me stung from the weak utterance.

His hooves stopped. After a beat of silence, I heard him shuffling around. “Hmmm?”

I took a deep, meditative breath. I turned around and looked at him like a foal would peer into a cavern full of flame. “You're not rude at all. Don't... don't feel bad, please...”

He gazed at me, levitating a bouquet of flowers a foot before his glowing horn. The wind kicked at his gray-streaked mane as he squinted against the sunlight with tired eyes. “I really didn't mean to disturb anypony. I'm... not from around here. As a matter of fact, I'm paying respects for the father of a dear friend of mine.”

I nodded slowly. “You don't say?” It took all my strength not to shiver. “Your friend has a father buried here?”

“Yes.” He was neither smiling nor frowning. It was like most of the life had been drained from his figure, and yet there hung a deep well of wisdom beneath the surface of his graying features. “I doubt she has the capacity to fathom it, but her family's lucky.” He glanced across the many stones. “This is a beautiful plot of land. Tranquil, undisturbed...”

I bit my lip. He sounded so cold, and yet so capable of feeling, still. “This... this place is almost as old as the town itself.”

“Is it?”

I nodded quietly. “Many important ponies who helped found Ponyville are buried here.”

He pointed with his hoof towards the stone before me. “Including your relations?”

I fidgeted and gave a sideways glance to the slab, my eyes tripping once more over the two words at the top. “Yes... I, suspect he was also very important.”

“What did he do while he was alive?”

I gulped. “He was a father, soldier, and businessstallion, apparently.”

"I see." His lips performed a slight curve, and it stole my breath away. "I won't pry."

"Do... do you need help finding your friend's loved one?"

"I'm quite sure I'll succeed if I'm persistent enough," he said, his low bass voice drifting against the ghostly breeze. He scanned the nearby horizon, and his jaded eyes briefly lit up. "Ah. But of course." He strolled ahead two rows until he approached a large, rectangular stone that had been adorned recently with a similar bouquet of fresh lilies. "She was here earlier, after all. We live such busy lives that we couldn't afford to be here together. It's a shame, really."

As he lay his floral respects down before the grave, I stood up. I should have galloped immediately away. I should have buried the lyre somewhere and succumbed to the shadows of night, allowing the curse to make me forget that this moment ever happened. But, instead, I trotted over and stood beside him. He was incredibly tall, and the amber tone of his coat resembled a mountain in the setting sunlight. I tried my best not to look at him, affixing my eyes to the stone instead. I found something just as somber: a name. "Salty Breeze."

"Scarlet's father..." I murmured.

He flashed me a look of surprise. "You've met Scarlet?"

I winced. "Uhm..." I took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. I... I ran into her earlier. She was... very nice to me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Was she, now?" A dry chuckle escaped his lips as he looked at the stone. "Well, that's certainly good to know. I'm comforted by the thought that she isn't all business and sighs."

"I... don't quite understand."

"Oh, it's nothing for you to be concerned about," he said in a dull voice, his eyes scanning the fiery western horizon beyond the cemetery. "Scarlet used to tell me plenty of stories about Ponyville, about how 'insidiously cheerful' the ponies are who live here. Now that I've arrived myself, I must admit, she's right about the 'cheerful' part. Honestly though, I chalk up the 'insidiousness' to her own cynicism."

"We get along as well as we manage to," I said, gulping hard after each phrase I uttered. With each second that limped by in the presence of him, I felt like collapsing. I spoke simply to stay strong, to stay conscious. "This is the harmony capital of the world, after all."

"So I've been told..." he said in a voice that sounded as lethargic as mine.

I took note of that. I also took note of the thinness of his eyes as I looked his way and said, "So she was here earlier? To pay respects to her father?"

"Yes," he said with a nod. "He passed away when she was very young; apparently there was a very terrible accident. According to Scarlet, everypony was very hush-hush about it, considering Salty was married to the Mayor at the time and all. They didn't want the publicity of the tragedy to turn into something horribly melodramatic. It seemed like a good idea for the village at the time, but I think Scarlet took it to heart, and in all the most painful ways. This week marks her first time in Ponyville in years. I find that hard to believe, but she is a very strong mare for her age."

I looked at him. After a few soft seconds, I remarked, “You care a lot for Miss Breeze, don't you?”

His lips curved as a slight chuckle escaped his lips. “To a fault. I understand a great deal of her sorrow, but not so much her bitterness.” He glanced at me. “We're both artists, you see. She's a photographer for the *Fillydelphia Enquirer* and other periodicals. Me? I'm a painter. I've been sketching landscapes and portraits for as long as I can remember. The two of us met at an Equestrian Media Convention in Baltimore last year. I saw in her a young filly with a great deal of talent, but a severe lack of focus. So... I guess I took her under my wing. I couldn't help it. She's always struck me as lost: a foal who needed to find her way home.”

“She's done that now, hasn't she?” I asked.

“Hmmm... Hardly.” He gazed once more at the stone. “I suppose it's good that she's gotten to see her father's grave for the first time in years, but that's hardly a cheerful reunion. When we both got assigned to pay Ponyville a visit after Discord's defeat, she was furious. She was *this close* to quitting her job at the *Enquirer* and moving out to Los Pegasus.”

“What changed her mind?”

“I did,” he said. “I thought”—he bit his lip—“I *felt* that a trip back to the place of her foaling would help her. I was hoping she would get a chance to talk with her mother again. The poor Mayor's lived here alone for so long, without having a chance to see her daughter again. I doubt even Scarlet knows how much she's hurt her with her distance.”

“What's the reason for their bitterness, do you think?”

“I've never asked her enough questions to find out,” he admitted. “But I suspect I know enough. A mare as young as Scarlet can easily confuse bitterness and pain for strength. She's not at the age to realize that those emotions will only bite her in the end, turning her life into a prison. One of these days, she will have to come to terms with all the memories that make her what she is, for better or for worse. At this rate, I fear she'll miss so many opportunities to make better memories for herself. That is, if this distance doesn't destroy what remains of her and her mother.”

I ran a hoof through my windblown mane and shudderingly said, “The only thing Scarlet is missing, I think, is how lucky she is to have a friend like you.” I gave a painful smile. “If only she knew how much you cared for her well-being, for her future...”

He took a deep breath and slowly nodded. “If there's anything life's taught me, it's that we're on this earth for a reason. Scarlet's relaxed so much since we met. Once upon a time, she did nothing but snap other ponies' heads off. Now, she actually smiles and says kind things to those around her.” He nodded my way. “Your little testament of having met her is blissfully solid proof of that.”

“All of us are capable of kindness if we put our hearts to it.”

“Yes, well, my heart would feel a lot less heavy if I knew she could see the light in her life once more,” he muttered. “It's been a long, long time since I ever contributed to somepony's happiness. I'm not sure if you can relate to the feeling of... of being useful...”

I gazed at him. When I spoke, my voice was cracking. “I truly can.”

He glanced at me, then smiled. I felt like my heart would fracture, especially when he said, “You don't

need to stay here any longer, darling. Thanks for listening to an old stallion ramble.”

“It... it was my pl-pleasure,” I said, my lip quivering. I turned around before he could see and began briskly trotting away.

And then I heard him say, “My name is Nebulous, by the way.”

I turned and looked at him. I smiled and found the strength to say, “That's a very handsome name, sir.”

He glanced at me, blinked once or twice, and merely nodded. “I wish you a good evening.” He turned back towards the stone and bowed his head.

And I was gone.

The next day came in a blink. I hadn't slept. I hadn't done anything but play the *Requiem* over and over again, remembering the stallion's voice, remembering his name. It was torture, a constant and unceasing laceration of my heart. But I kept playing the instrumental regardless, seated frozen in my cabin, preserving my thoughts in a sacred sarcophagus of purpose, until daylight rose once more upon the autumnal landscape.

After feeding Al, I bolted out the door. I didn't even bother with my slipping into hoodie; my desperation was enough to melt the frost from my shoulders. I scoured the lengths of Ponyville, searching each alleyway and corner of the village. Gravestones were facsimiles of precious thoughts. The only things worth grasping, worth savoring and hanging onto, were the things that couldn't be put into words, the things that were so fleeting that I had to fight for them with music and misery and mirth, all in one single shout of righteous fury. To live is to persist against the dissipating cloud of substance, and for one fractured week of confusion since the Day of Discord, I had been too busy marinating in inane sorrow to bother with what I was still anchored to, what I would forever be buried under. When all the colors of my life have left me, and I'm stripped of everything I've pretended to understand, all that will remain is the part of me that feels, the same precious shred that Nebulous was clinging to—in spite of his age and weariness, and in spite of the souls he had tried so hard and so long to bless, only to come up short.

He had all the inspiration that I once did, but none of the ghostly talents. He had saved Scarlet long ago, he just didn't have a vessel through which to deliver the salvation. For the first time in days, I once again knew what I was there in Ponyville to do. As the daylight wore on, I searched with furious vigor. I didn't even have to play the *Requiem* again.

Finally, I found her. Scarlet was outside the antique windmill on the outskirts of Ponyville. She stood before the round stone entrance of the building, photographing a bed of flowers that had sprouted up beneath an abandoned wooden wagon chock-full of rusted metal farm tools. She looked so peaceful in the midst of her lonesome task. There wasn't a frown to be seen on her face. Still, even from a distance, I could have sworn I saw a grayish tug to her lips, an expression I had seen on the likes of the Mayor and Nebulous, the very same look I had spotted in the mirror on more forlorn occasions than I could count.

Hiding behind a woodshed, I watched her, shivering, pondering how a ghost can exorcise a spirit of bitterness from a mare half a decade younger than myself. I wasn't Nebulous; I wasn't the Mayor. I was, at best, a messenger, cursed to have all of her words of wisdom and heartfelt emotion torn to bits by the accursed frost of [Aria's song](#).

It was then that I gasped with a startling realization: I was capable of delivering more than words. I thought this the very moment I saw Scarlet abandoning the flowers and instead turning towards the heart of the windmill. Slowly, unassumingly, she trotted deep into the echoing interior of the structure. A pair of wooden doors hung loosely on their hinges behind her.

I blinked. I turned towards the village. Giving the windmill one final look, I spun and galloped swiftly into the heart of Ponyville.

“The harvest of pumpkins is ready to deliver in three days!” Carrot Top exclaimed proudly on the east edge of the village marketplace. “We'll be donating ten percent to the town, of course.” She giggled. “They're really plump this year. The foals and their families will love 'em!”

“Well, that's magnificent!” the Mayor replied with a wide grin. “I've already rounded up volunteers to carve some fine ghoulish designs into them! Not only that, but Miss Applejack has quite a few exciting games lined up for the evening!”

“Oh, she never fails to deliver!”

“Everything is coming together so fantastically,” the Mayor said. “This is undoubtedly going to be the best Nightmare Night ever.”

Carrot Top leaned forward with an earnest expression. “Is it true that Zecora is going to be this year's storyteller?”

“Hmmm... Yes.” The Mayor chuckled merrily, adjusting her bifocals. “It will be an utter delight to hear her rendition of the Nightmare Moon story. I always felt that the tale could use a bit of poetic flare, and our local Zebrahara shaman is bound to deliver.”

“I can't wait!” Carrot Top waved and began to trot away. “Well, I'd best be heading back to the farm before sundown! If you need anything else, Mayor, feel free to stop by the ranch and holler!”

“Sure thing!” The Mayor nodded and laughingly said, “I'll be sure to bring my bullhorn! Heh heh heh...” She shook her head and happily breathed in the crisp, autumn air. “Princess Celestia has it all right. This certainly is the best time of the year.” She turned around and got a face full of me.

“Mayor! Quick!” I exclaimed in a panicked voice. “You must come with me!”

“Huh?” She jumped back, quite visibly startled. “What on earth is the meaning of this? Who are you—?”

“There's no time!” I said, glancing around me in a mock show of paranoia. “He may be listening right now as we speak, disguised as a merchant's tent or a shopping counter or even a bed of roses!”

“Huh? Who?!”

I gulped and whispered hoarsely, “Discord, of course.”

The Mayor's indigo eyes twitched in fright. “D-Discord? You... You mean he's back?!”

“Shhh!” I nodded and leaned in to murmur into her ear, “Twilight Sparkle has assembled all of the Elements of Harmony to deal with the situation. They don't know where he's hiding; only that he's returned already and Princess Celestia is powerless to stop him. The reason you've never seen me before is because I'm a specially hired agent of Canterlot sent on Twilight's behalf to deliver this message to you without any local villagers recognizing me and instantly falling into a panic. Discord's back, and it's a matter of *minutes* before he starts sowing chaos across this gorgeous landscape of yours once again!”

“But... B-but how can this be?!” She was shivering at this point, her every limb quivering as she nervously scoured the rooftops with a sweating expression. “He was defeated! Just two weeks ago! The Elements of Harmony—”

“—had barely assembled within an hour of zapping Discord with their rainbow energy... thingy,” I said, wincing from my brief fumbling of words. “*Ahem*. You must understand, Mayor, that they were not in the same stable frame of mind as when they so expertly vanquished the spirit of Nightmare Moon. However, they've assembled now and are ready to silence Discord for good.”

“Then... th-then why do they need *me*?”

“Discord won't come close to being dug out of his hiding place unless Twilight and her friends get the firm cooperation from a pony who knows the streets of Ponyville inside and out.” I pointed. “That's you, Mayor! Now, please, I must escort you to the Elements of Harmony at once.”

“Alright, *alright!*” she hissed, trying to control her shivers. She leaned in, her face pale and vulnerable. “But where are they? Where's Twilight Sparkle?”

I took a deep breath, turned around, and began galloping. “Follow me. I'll show you...”

“Quickly, Mayor!” I shouted behind me, my green coat glinting in the setting sunlight as we bounded over the grassy hill. The windmill loomed on the emerald crest, its wooden gears grinding and translucent blades



rotating slowly. “Time is of the essence!”

“Just slow down a bit!” she limped after me, huffing and puffing. Her collar had begun to droop from sweat and exhaustion as she adjusted her crooked bifocals and fought to catch up. “I’m not a young filly like you! I want to save Ponyville from Discord as much as the Elements, but I won’t be of any use if I collapse before I get there—”

“Well fret no more,” I said, turning towards her as I pointed at the open doorway of the windmill. “For we’re here!”

She looked around, her ears twitching in the chilling wind atop the hill. “Where’s Twilight? Where’re the destined defenders of Equestria?”

“Inside, Mayor! Quick! Go inside! I’ll be right behind you!”

“Okay!” she exclaimed, trying not to pant with fear. Shuffling on tired hooves, she dashed through the stone doorway and stood upon the wooden floorboards. “I’m here, Twilight! Your messenger told me all about Discord! Now how can I help—?” She froze, blinking.

Scarlet blinked back, stuck in the middle of photographing a dancing spiderweb in the afternoon light. Her indigo eyes narrowed as she muttered, “What in the hay are you doing here?”

The Mayor’s mouth was agape. “You’re... not Twilight Sparkle.”

“Uhhhh, you think?”

The elder blinked. With a frowning expression, she spun around. “Lady, what is the meaning of this—?”

The interior of the windmill darkened with a loud thud. I stood before the closed wooden doors. Latching them shut, I spun and faced them both calmly.

“What?!” the Mayor sputtered.

Scarlet stood at her side, glaring at me. “Hey! What’s going on here?! Who do you think—?”

A golden shape reflected off their angry eyes as I pulled my lyre from my saddlebag. Without hesitating, I played a haunting melody in the center of the cacophonous building of spinning axles and grinding gears. I closed my eyes, anticipating the ethereal shroud to come. They, however, weren’t prepared for what happened next. When I finished the “*Darkness Sonata*,” I calmly weathered the blindness with paced breathing. They, on the other hoof...

“Oh dear Celestia! I’m... I’m blind!”

“Just stay calm, Scarlet! There must be a reasonable explanation for this—”

“Augh! I-I can’t see my own hooves! What in the hay did she do to us?!”

“It must be Discord’s work! He’s assumed a unicorn’s image to curse us with some chaotic enchantment!”

“I don't like this! Uggh! Why did I even come back to this stupid town?!”

“Will you stop complaining for just one second?! I have to think!”

“What good is that going to do?! I'm blind!”

“You're not the only one, darling—”

“Stop calling me 'darling!' I'm not a little... little...”

The two mares grew silent as a dastardly cold overwhelmed them. Wincing, they collapsed into each other's embrace, their breaths exhaling flimsy clouds of vapor. I noticed all of this... because my sight had returned. While they had stumbled about in confusion, I had carefully scaled my way up the wooden steps lining the cylindrical wall of the windmill's interior. Hiding in the shadows of the third story, I gazed silently down at them as their sight returned, which was the least I could say about their memories.

“Unnngh...” Scarlet stirred, shaking her head dizzily. “What happened? Everything's all foggy... What?” She looked up.

The Mayor was opening her eyes. She blinked at the sight of her own daughter in her forelimbs.

Scarlet twitched. Instantly, she frowned, and yanked herself out of the elder's grasp. “What's going on here?! What are you doing?!”

“I... I...” The Mayor gulped and glanced at the grinding sights of the windmill above her. “I have no idea!”

“What do you mean you have no idea?!” Scarlet grunted. “You always know everything! Were you spying on me or something?!”

“Honey, I've no clue. I just woke up here myself—”

“I don't believe you!” Scarlet frowned. She trudged angrily towards the door and pushed against it with her entire weight. “This is some sick little game! I wouldn't expect any less!”

“How many times do I have to tell you?!” the Mayor barked, shrugging with her pale forelimbs. “I don't know how I got here or what knocked both of us out?”

“Nnnngh!” Scarlet hissed, fiddling with the latch until it loosened. Still, no matter how hard she pressed against the doors, they refused to budge. “The heck?! Ugh! Stupid door! What gives?!”

I took a deep breath and leaned my head towards the thin, slitted windows of the windmill. With expert telekinesis, perfected from months of exercise under Twilight's amnesiac tutelage, I finished rolling the wooden wagon full of metal junk in the direct path of the windmill's doors. It would take the combined strength of six non-magical ponies to force the entrance open, and I knew it.

However, those two didn't.

“Piece of junk Windmill!” Scarlet Breeze grunted, her face flushing to match the furious crimson of her mane. “I swear to the Matriarch, you should have had this ugly place razed to the ground years ago!”

“You know very well that I couldn't do that!” the Mayor retorted, leaning against a stone wall to catch her heavy breaths. “This place is a landmark! Though I wouldn't expect you to understand that—”

“The only thing I understand is how pathetically you fall in love with useless things that have to do with your job!” She stumbled back from the door, panting. “I can't believe this crap. *Somepony!*” Scarlet shouted, tilting her head up towards the rafters of the echoing interior. “*Somepony! Anypony!*”

“Mmmph...” The Mayor face-hoofed, groaning. “Scarlet, please...”

“*Get us out of here! We're trapped!*”

“We're too far from the center of town for anypony to hear us!” she said, yelling above the young mare's voice. “You'll wear your throat out with all that infernal hollering!”

Scarlet glared at her. “Well, one of us has got to do something useful, Mayor!”

“In Celestia's name!” the elder snapped explosively, her indigo eyes flaring. “Will you stop calling me that?! I am your mother, dammit! I foaled you into this world! Don't you think that took a little bit more than a bit of scheduling and intense paperwork?!”

“You would have been more proud of my birth if it did!”

The Mayor glared.

Scarlet frowned back.

Silence washed over the pair. Several seconds passed, until Scarlet's hoofsteps passed beneath the grinding wooden gears as she shuffled over towards the far wall and plopped herself down beside her camera. She slumped on her haunches, hugging herself and glaring into the ground.

“This sucks,” she said.

The Mayor fumed, staring off into the cobwebs. “I'm not entirely fond of it myself.”

“Hmmmph,” Scarlet managed with a bitter smirk. “You were never all that fond of me.”

The Mayor's shoulders rose as she weathered a deep breath. “That's not true.”

“Oh please, spare me—”

“It's your attitude I was never fond of!” the Mayor said, flashing her an angry look, a look that melted with the trailing seconds as her gaze fell to the floor before her daughter. “I could never stand seeing your unloving face, hearing the cold tone in your voice whenever we passed each other like shadows in the house.”

“Why not?” Scarlet gulped and maintained her furious frown. “It's what you wanted, wasn't it?”

“Scarlet, what I wanted was for you to be strong.”

“What, like you?” Scarlet hissed. “That's not strength, *Mayor*, that's workaholism.”

“All I've ever done in my professional career”—the Mayor said, pointing a stiff hoof at herself—“I did to protect Ponyville, to protect the citizens, to protect *you*.”

“It wasn't enough to protect dad, was it?” Scarlet said in a venomous murmur. “Face it. A part of you died with him.”

The Mayor's face stretched in a vulnerable grimace. “When I see the way you look at me—right now as I do in my memories—it makes me wish that more of me had died.”

At that, Scarlet's scowl buckled. She bit her lip and avoided the Mayor's gaze as her eyes softened.

The Mayor sighed and ran a hoof over her face. Swallowing a lump down her throat, she began pacing for several seconds. Those seconds bled into minutes, morphing into the shadows that hung over the interior as the setting sun burned past the edge of the windmill's slim windows.

Finally, the elder murmured, “I've been Mayor of this town for nearly three decades. I've seen Ponyville prosper in that time. I've witnessed magical things: the return of Nightmare Moon, harmonious heroes rising to the occasion, the power of friendship defeating pure apocalyptic chaos...”

“Tell me something I don't know,” Scarlet said bluntly.

Her mother looked at her, hugging her left front forelimb with her right. Her lip quivered as she said, “They were all amazing, glorious thing. But none of them were what I truly, dearly wanted to see again.”

Scarlet's nostrils flared. Without looking, she muttered, “The last time I was here, you told me that I was a slacker. You said that I had no business being a photographer, that I had so much more potential as a businesspony and I was only wasting my life away.”

“Scarlet...”

“You said that if dad were still alive, he'd be ashamed of me,” Scarlet growled.

“Please, Scarlet—”

The young mare snapped, “Why the heck should I think you'd give a crap about who or what I've become since then?!”

“Scarlet, I'm sorry!” the Mayor shrieked, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Scarlet blinked awkwardly at that, an eyebrow raising in confusion.

The Mayor sniffled and ran a hoof across her face. Shuddering, she said, “I'm sorry, and... and I want to make it up to you. But you need to show me how, because... because I've made mistakes. Several horrible, horrible mistakes and... and I've lost so much already. I feel like... like I'm a shadow left behind, because the light of my life is gone, and I want her back. I-I want my darling daughter back...”

Scarlet was merely squinting at her. Her breath was hot and scathing, but nevertheless she whispered, “How could you possibly expect me to believe you? You've...” She gulped and hissed, “You've *never* apologized for anything before!”

The Mayor sighed and hung her gray head. “I know...”

“You've always been too strong for that! Too stubborn and... and too *you* for that—”

“I know, *I know!*” The Mayor seethed and fought through her tears to look at Scarlet dead-on. “But that was before I had the very land beneath me cast under hideous shadow not once—but *twice*. Equestria is changing, Scarlet. There is magic happening in this land—both dark and majestic—that hasn't been around for centuries. I've seen things that I never thought would happen in my lifetime. I've brushed elbows with the horrors of a living apocalypse. I... I had my body put under a spell, so that I lost touch with the fibres of my being and when it all came back, I couldn't believe just how... how...” She winced. “How empty I was.” She gulped hard and said in a steadier breath, “And I realize that it's because I was the one who emptied myself, who robbed myself of everything that was important. Including you.”

Scarlet gazed at her, her mouth agape.

The Mayor strolled slowly towards her, waiting for Scarlet to flinch. She didn't, and the elder eventually stood over the young mare. “Scarlet, when your father died, I never thought I'd experience something so painful. I didn't want to feel something that horrible again, and I didn't want it for you. I... I thought that I could protect you. That's why I raised you the way I did. That's why I made you put all of your effort into studies, into course work, into pursuing a business career. I... I wanted you to be strong, and that was what I thought was the answer.” She shuddered. “I-I was wrong. And... and it's my fault that you can't bring yourself to call me 'mother' today. I planted that seed inside you, and I regret the weeds that have grown in place of a life that should be full of blossoming happiness.”

“I am strong,” Scarlet said, albeit in a wavering voice. “But only because I had to be, because you didn't give me any other outlet.”

“Yes. Yes, I know...”

“And now I'm supposed to believe that you've changed?” Scarlet squinted at her suspiciously. “Do you even know what you're supposed to be in the first place?!”

“I'm trying to figure it out, darling. I-I'm trying and...” She lingered in mid-speech, her eyes rising as if catching a vaporous cloud of frigid thought. She gulped hard and said, “The substance of a pony's soul...”

I raised an eyebrow at that.

Scarlet was merely confused. “Huh?”

The Mayor looked at her. “My greatest mistake, I now think, is trying so hard to sculpt you into a doer... when you were always a dreamer, and a delightful one at that.” She smiled painfully as her eyes teared once more. “Just like your f-father...”

Scarlet gazed in breathless silence.

“What am I supposed to be, Scarlet?” The Mayor spoke in a brave voice. “Strip me of all my memories, my pride, and my mistakes, and what substance do I have? I'm a pony who loves her daughter, Scarlet, who loves you and m-misses you and wants you back in my life.” She knelt down on trembling knees and reached a hoof out to the young mare's shoulder. “I don't want you to be another piece of forgotten memories, of all the

things that have left me.”

A shuddering breath left Scarlet's lips. Her face stretched painfully as she murmured in a foalish breath, “You *have* changed.”

“No...” The Mayor shook her head with a tearful smile. “I've changed *back*. And I ask you, beg you, my beautiful Scarlet, to change back too. Let us save ourselves, while we're both in the same room, while we have the chance to avoid drifting into bitter shades of our pasts.”

Scarlet stared at her. Slowly, she bowed her head and began shaking.

The Mayor tilted her face to the side, awash with concern. “Scarlet...?”

“I'm so angry... Just so angry at you...”

The elder nodded, sniffled and said, “It's okay to be. I've... I've not been a good example to you...”

“No. It's not that.” Scarlet's voice was cracking. She brought two shivering hooves to her face and spoke in a muffled voice, “All this time, you've made it so hard... so dang hard, and now you give me an open invitation?”

The Mayor's moist eyes curved in brief confusion. “I don't understand. What invitation?”

Scarlet looked up, and her face glinted in the dimming sunlight. “To c-call you 'Mommy' once again.”

She smiled back at her and caressed the filly's face. “I promise, I'll live up to it. But I'm going to need your help. Can you do that, Scarlet? Can you forgive me... and help me? So that I can help you?”

Scarlet grasped the Mayor's hoof, nuzzled it, and whimpered, “Of course, Mommy.” She gave a torturous smile, her eyes brimming with tears. “Of course...”

“Oh Scarlet...” The Mayor scooped her up in her forelimbs.

She clung to her, sobbing into her shoulder, having finally returned home.

The Mayor refused to let go. “We can fix this. I know we can. We have time... all the time in the world...”

“I'm so s-sorry,” Scarlet sobbed. “All these years, all the things I did... all the things I d-didn't do...”

“Shhhh. No more apologizing. Please, let me just hold you...”

She did, into the golden bands of evening and the cool shadows of night. Hours rolled by. Once their tears had dried and their sobs had turned into chuckles, they discovered the door to the windmill hanging ajar. The wagon had rolled away as if under its own volition. Neither of them were about to complain. When they left the windmill, it was at a leisurely pace. It wouldn't be until midnight that I made my own exit, bathing in the pale glow of a harvest moon, going so far as to donate it a smile to shine on.

“Pinkie Pie, darling, do stand still!” Rarity exclaimed the next day. “You’re posing for a photograph, not preparing for a party!”

“Oh, don’t be too hard on her,” Scarlet Breeze remarked calmly. The Town Hall building loomed above a large group of ponies in the noonday sun. The sky was bright and cloudless, casting a perfect light upon the scene as over half of the population of Ponyville lined up in front a camera on a tripod with a wide-angled lens. Behind the device, Scarlet stood, expertly preparing the perfect shot. “If anything, she’s practicing her smile. I want all of you ponies to look happy for when I bring these back to Fillydelphia.”

“Including yourself?” Twilight Sparkle spoke over Spike’s head as she stood next to Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash. She smiled and added, “You were born here, after all. Shouldn’t you belong in the shot?”

Several other ponies nodded and cheered enthusiastically.

“Heh... That’s a nice sentiment,” Scarlet replied. “But it wouldn’t be very professional of me...”

“Since when did that stop anypony?” Remarked a cheerful voice. The Mayor marched into view, standing beside Twilight Sparkle and Spike. “I, for one, think she should be immortalized along with the rest of us. After all, she *is* family.”

Several ponies cheered and goaded Scarlet on. The earth ponies stomped their hooves while the pegasi whooped and whistled.

Blushing, Scarlet relented, waving her forelimbs. “Alright, *alright!* If you insist.”

“Yeeeha!” Applejack added, motioning the pony forward. “Come and join us, sugarcube!”

“But it’s not enough that I just set up the shot! This camera doesn’t have a timer,” Scarlet said with a concerned look on her face. “Somepony has to be out of frame to take the photo!”

The villagers exchanged curious, thoughtful glances. They murmured amongst themselves, fidgeting.

“I’ll do it.”

The crowd looked in one direction. I happened be standing in the path of their gaze. I smiled and lowered the hood from over my horn.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. Looks like you got some sort of group photo taking place.”

“Uhhh...” Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “You think?”

“Who are those two unicorns?” Derpy asked from the far end of the group.

Dinky leaned up to her. “It’s only one, mother...”

Derpy closed one eye and smiled brightly. “Oh! Hi there! Just passing through?”

I took a deep breath, smiling. “You could say that. How can I help?”

“Well, if you're up to it...” Scarlet pointed at the camera. “See that button? I need you to press it when I tell you to. We need more than one shot, though, so it might take more than a few minutes.” She smiled nervously. “Is... is that too much to ask?”

“Don't fret.” I waved a hoof and trotted over, shrugging off the cold from my shoulders. “I'd be more than happy to.”

“Great!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. “Come and join us, Scar-Scar!”

Scarlet groaned and trotted over in a slump. “I really, *really* hope that ponies don't start calling me that permanently.”

“Why not?” The Mayor smiled and draped a hoof over the younger mare's shoulder. “It's endearing.”

“It's silly and stupid...”

“Hmmm... Welcome back to Ponyville.” She winked through her bifocals. “Would you rather be called 'the Mayor's Daughter' for as long as you exist?”

Scarlet blushed slightly. She shook her head. “Nah. I can live with what I have to live with.”

“Sounds like an adventure already.” The Mayor glanced up and nodded at me. “We're ready!”

“You hear that, everypony?” Twilight stood tall and proud as dozens of her friends and neighbors copied her posture beside her. “This is it!”

Scarlet nodded my way. “Thank you so much for all your help, Miss...”

“Hey...” I shrugged and rested my hoof over the button. “What's in a name? Preserve your memories.” Clearing my throat, I leaned forward and squinted through the viewfinder, capturing the whole of Ponyville like a tiny crowd on a dusty stage. “Now say cheese!”

***“Cheeeeeese!”***

The camera's shutter resounded with a ghostly click.

His amber hooves flipped through one dried canvas, then another, then yet another. His neck craned up



and down, his eyes squinting as he compared each colorful landscape to the physical sight of Ponyville lingering in the afternoon glow just beyond the crest of the hill. To his satisfaction, each brushstroke was even and each slathering of color was accurate. With a deep breath, he lined the canvases up and slid them neatly into a velvet container.

“They're very beautiful,” I said.

Nebulous blinked. The aged stallion turned around and looked at me. The October wind blew at his gray-streaked mane with as much vigor as the emerald blades of grass around us. He smiled into the crisp breeze, nodding. “Yes, well, it's a beautiful town.”

“I'm rather fond of it,” I said, clinging to my hoodie as the whipping winds blew at us, cold and sporadic. I felt like a tiny porcelain figure in the shadow of him. I tried hard not to stare at his weathered features. “I wish it was the reason for why I stay here, but I'm not complaining.”

“Neither would I, but that's not a luxury I'm about to enjoy,” he said. “I'm catching a train within the hour.”

I took a deep breath. Somehow, I knew that already. I should have just left him alone; I should have just gone straight home after the photo shoot. But as soon as I saw Nebulous standing here like a dull flame on the hilltop, I had to do this. I had to be here. “Ponyville isn't beautiful enough to make you stay longer?”

He chuckled. “It's remarkable how everypony here is so kind and approachable, even perfect strangers.”

I merely looked at him.

Nebulous cleared his throat and finished zipping the velvet containers shut. The sunlight bounced off him at an angle, reducing his muscles to dark shadow, like the polished surface of a granite slab. “I've done what I've come here to Ponyville to do, and aside from a bizarre incident involving an enchanted doll and some inexplicable stampede, I'd say it was a rather relaxing visit.” He glanced my way with a nod. “I can see how this tiny little town got its reputation.”

I smiled weakly. “I do hope it's a good reputation.”

“Oh, good enough, certainly.” He took a deep breath. “My only regret is that my travels will be rather lonely for a while.”

Biting my lip, I gazed down the hillside towards the golden rooftops below. “Lonely?” I murmured to the wind. “Why's that?”

“When I came here, I had a fellow artist with me. Turns out she's staying in town. Her mother's here, after all. They... had a reunion of sorts.”

“Well, I'm sorry that you lost a friend—”

“Hah! Lost? Oh, hardly,” Nebulous said with a handsome smile. “It's hard to mourn the parting of company when one's companion has rediscovered herself, and done so in such a blissful manner.” He looked at me. “She held a grudge against her mother for the longest time. But now they've suddenly decided to make amends. I can't describe how joyous a sight it is to see her smile. It's like day and night; she's an entirely different pony, only... she's the same friend I made in my travels. She's just shrugged off a lot of weight from her

shoulders.” With a contented sigh, he added, “And so have I.”

I breathed a bit more evenly, my cheeks warm as I smiled his way. “Sounds like visiting Ponyville has worked in your favor.”

“Only because it's worked in hers,” he said. “After years of wandering Equestria on her lonesome, she's finally home... and with family. I can rest well knowing that.”

“That's good to know.” I weathered the heaviest breath of my life and murmured, “And... and what of your home?”

Nebulous' face became long, the shadows doubling across his jawline. “Hmmm... Well, that's a different thing altogether. The road is my home.”

I twitched. Bravely, I stared at him. “You don't say...?”

“Yes. What was once her prison is still my journey.” He shook the velvet satchel for emphasis. “She had to come here to find herself. Me? I'm still on the path to self-discovery. That's why I could never help her, not like her mother finally did in this town.” He chuckled dryly. “If I sound a bit envious, that's probably because I am. Childish, I know, but when you get my age, you feel rather protective of others. It's as if... as if...”

“Something's missing from your life,” I said. “And you want to fill the void, even if you don't know what belongs in that empty space.” I glanced at my hooves. “I know a thing or two about that. You see, being in Ponyville has changed me too. I couldn't imagine myself in any other place...”

Nebulous nodded, shifting his weight across his hooves. “I once had a home like you,” he eventually said, gazing into the wind.

I glanced up at him. My lips trembled. “Oh? D-do tell.”

“Not much worth to tell,” he said. “I was in Canterlot for many years. I was even married. But, as the years wore on, I found that my life wasn't changing for the better. My wife and I? We just... didn't see eye to eye, I suppose. She was a politician and historian. And me? I wanted to paint, to draw, to find the substance of my dreams and share it with others. So... one thing led to another, and we separated about a year ago. Since then, I've been travelling abroad, hoping to discover myself before it's too late. And until I've found that substance, I can never rest easy.” He glanced over with a soft smile. “I don't suppose somepony your age can... relate...”

I was not smiling. It took all my strength to keep my tears in. I gazed at the waving grass, shivering, until I ran a hoof over my lips and bravely tilted my head up. “I can... I c-can relate...”

He gazed at me curiously.

“It's... it's been so long, so very long since I've seen my family,” I said. “My p-parents, I mean.” I stared into the burning horizon, trying to keep the lump down in my throat. “We separated not that long ago, but... but it feels like ages...”

“Did you not see eye to eye either?” he asked.

“Heh... No. Uhm...” I cleared my throat and fought to maintain a steady voice. “Fate—I guess you could say—divided us. At this point, I really don't think I'll ever have a chance to reunite with them.”

The stallion's face turned a sympathetic, pale shade. "I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Hmmm..." I smiled painfully, my eyes locked on the landscape behind him. "Sorry? Heh. Their memory lives on. It lives on in me. It lives on in the respect that they taught me, the philosophy they instilled in my mind, the love of music that they made a part of my being. I only ever found my talent, my calling, and my passion because of my parents." I inhaled sharply, then said, "Still, there isn't a day that goes by where I don't think about them. Every morning, I dream of seeing my mother again. And I long for the moment to meet my father once more, and look him in the face and say..."

Slowly, I pivoted until my gaze was upon him. I wanted to control the trembling of my lip. I failed.

"...to s-say that I love you, Daddy, and I miss you more than music itself."

He stared at me, and his eyes moistened, matching the silver streak to his mane. With a blink, he composed himself with a strong smile. I only wished that he could give me more, and then he did: "I know that I'm going on in my years," he managed in a soft voice. "But I hope someday to have a daughter as wonderful and thoughtful as you."

I smiled painfully, and my voice cracked. "You deserve no less," I whispered.

The space between us was still, like a blank void between firmaments.

With a frigid gust, the October breeze returned. Nebulous winced, and gave the watch on his forelimb a nervous glance. He almost sighed as he uttered, "Well, the train is coming soon. I must be going if I wish to return these landscapes safely to Fillydelphia."

I nodded, my cheeks hurting. "Go on. I wish you luck in your discoveries."

"Heh. I think I've got enough luck as it is. About time I answered to fate." He levitated his baggage and began strolling downhill, as if sliding away into the shadows of the evening. "By the way." He lingered, making my heart jump one final time. "I didn't catch your name."

I shouldn't have, but I did anyways. "[Lyra. Lyra Heartstrings.](#)"

He nodded, as if in approval. "It's quite a beautiful name."

I gave him a lasting smile as my vision clouded. "It was a good choice."

"Indeed." And he was lost in the fog. I was lost too.

The first hour without him passed by, and I descended slowly to the earth, an icy collapse, like I was just one of the many shadows of the windy evening. More hours limped by, slipping away from me like so many warm breaths. When night fell and my shivers made the stars shake...

“...I was still there. I don't remember when I arrived home at my cabin,” I said before Twilight at the edge of the wedding reception. “Nor do I remember staying there long. Maybe I fed my cat once or twice, or perhaps a dozen times. The only thing I know is that I didn't play the song. I couldn't; I refused to. The *Requiem* was my seal, my personal **unsung** barrier between today and yesterday. For the first time ever, I wanted that bliss of forgetfulness. I wanted to be an amnesiac, like everypony around me. And why not? It was comfortable. It was joyous. It was even... liberating.”

Spike had a blank expression. Nervously, he glanced up at Twilight.

Twilight's eyes were misty. Holding back a choking sound in the back of her throat, she looked me deeply in the eyes. “Then wh-what changed? Why did you come to me?” She sniffled and almost whimpered, “Why, after all of that, did you ask me to help you play the song and remember everything?”

I stared at her, breathing steadily. Navigating a wincing expression, I summoned the strength to say, “Because when all my memories have left me, I have to know that the pony who remains is made of greater substance than cowardice. I still have a quest to complete. I still have a curse to undo. And everything I've gone through will be worth the pain and anguish if it means I have the capacity to learn from it and be something greater than I once was. You see, Twilight? I refuse to believe that life is nothing but loss and decay. Someway, somehow, I am growing. And I just have one last hurdle to cross.”

She nodded, composing herself as her face took on the challenge in my eyes. “We must get you to see the Princesses. Performing the *Requiem* in front of them must be the solution!”

“But there's no proof that the endeavor can be anything more than pure danger—”

“It's a risk that must be taken!” Twilight said in earnest. “For your sake!” She spun towards her whelping companion. “Spike!”

“Gah! What?!” he exclaimed, jumping.

“Head towards the library and prepare a letter! We must get the attention of the Princesses at once!”

I sighed, shuddering all over as I ran an exhausted hoof through my frazzled mane. “Twilight, I'm sorry. But... But you've done all you could. There's no way to summon the Princesses, no way to get a message through—”

“We have to try!” Twilight exclaimed. “If you managed to affect Discord, there must be a way to reach them as well!”

“Twilight—”

“It's worth the effort! Spike, what are you standing around for?!”

“But it's way past sundown! You want me to reopen the library now?!”

“Didn't you hear what I said?!” Twilight pointed at me. “Didn't you hear what *she* said?”

“Hey, it's a pretty intense sob story if you ask me. But come on!” Spike shrugged. “Do you really believe all that about everypony forgetting her?! Or that bit with the Mayor and her daughter at the windmill?! Or... Or...”

“Spike, please! Trust me on this!”

“She just came off the street, Twilight!” Spike shrugged in his tuxedo. “I don't care if she's polite or if she has a swell hoo—... a swell hoo—” He started to lurch and hyperventilate.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Spike...?”

Suddenly, his head flung forward and he belched. A plume of furiously hot emerald flame billowed outward, engulfing half the refreshment table. A tiny scroll plopped down to the ground, but Twilight was far less concerned about that than she was the wreath of flowers that had just caught ablaze.

“Spike!” Twilight shrieked, recoiling in horror, almost tripping over her gown.

“It wasn't m-my fault!” Spike jumped in place, wincing at the climbing flames. “How was I supposed to know there'd be a royal letter this late at night?!”

“You should have aimed straight up or something! Ugh!” Twilight rolled her eyes and lifted the burning wreath in her telekinesis. “Help me take care of this!”

“Yeah! Uh... sure thing! Just one second...” The baby dragon bent over to pick up the scroll.

“Spike! Now!”

“But don't you want to read the—?!”

“Doesn't it look like we have a greater emergency here?!” Twilight said, frowning. “Come on!”

“Ugh...” Spike ditched the scroll and waddled hurriedly over to the unicorn's side. “Okay, let's put this out!”

“Look, I'm so, *so* sorry!” Twilight exclaimed over her shoulder at me. “This will only take a minute!” She and Spike hurried four steps away towards the middle of the table. “Quick! Spike, grab the punch bowl!”

“Ewww, seriously, Twilight? The punch bowl?! Isn't there—like—a perfectly large trough full of water just outside?”

“Do you want the entire town hall to go up in smoke?!”

“Fine! The punch bowl it is! Let me just get a claw hold...”

“Steady... Steady...”

I turned away from their panicked struggle with the blaze. As they splashed brightly colored liquid over the mess, filling the ceiling above with smoke, I weathered a cold chill. Hugging myself, I glanced down at the floor until my eyes settled upon the scroll.

My eyes blinked hard.

The parchment had a lunar seal on it.

Fidgeting, I glanced at Twilight and Spike, then back at the scroll. Nervously, I knelt down and scooped it up in my telekinetic grip. Without saying a word, I unrolled the thing and scanned the elaborately written calligraphy. A few seconds later, I was gasping, my body shivering doubly now, but not from the cold.

I stood up, my heart beating heavily. I glanced at the unrolled parchment in my grasp, then glanced at the rest of the wedding. The flame was almost out, and the smoke was starting to dissipate. Twilight and Spike still had their backs to me.

When the time came that they turned around, I couldn't see them, for I had fled from the warm interior of the Town Hall.

And I had taken the scroll with me.

Hours later, as dawn rose over the horizon, I sat on the edge of my cot, staring across the space of my cabin. Pinned to the wall, flanked by dozens upon dozens of instruments was the royal letter. I had the most important instrument in my grasp. Rhythmically, I played "*Twilight's Requiem*" on the Nightbringer over and over again, wishing to the Cosmic Matriarch's holy heavens that the ancient instrument would buff my mind for the insomniac fever I was about to endure.

"She's coming, [Alabaster](#)," I murmured to the air. A feline figure was snuggled up against me. He didn't wake; he didn't need to. I relished his warmth, as well as the harmonic chords of the *Requiem* that were suddenly and inexplicably soothing to my ears once more. "She's coming to Ponyville. In two days, she'll be here..."

The unrolled parchment flickered from the golden sheen of the ancient instrument. My eyes were locked on a series of numbers: the beautifully clear date of Nightmare Night.

"And I'll be there too," I murmured, a tear rolling down my cheek as I struggled and shivered to stay awake. "I'll be there. So help me, [Alabaster](#). We'll both be there. And we'll remember together. We'll remember together." I gulped and whimpered, "We will remember..."

If memories are all that's left me, I'll gladly welcome whatever falls in their place.

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# Background Pony

## XVII - “All That's Left You”

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by [shortskirtsandexplosions](#)

Special thanks to: [Props](#), [Warden](#), [RazgrizS57](#), [theBrianJ](#), [theworstwriter](#), and [fascism](#)

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