

Ghost in the Window

By Silent Rainboom



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	19

Chapter 1

It was the same every day. The white unicorn sighed and put down the gown she was sewing. She just couldn't bring herself to continue on the dress; countless times she had tried to go about her business, but this... interruption often startled her, causing her to tear several dresses over the course of the month. Eventually, Rarity realized that she was paying more in throwing away these dresses than it was worth.

She did try to at least reuse the cloth from the ruined dresses, but most of the time there was not enough to make it worthwhile. She couldn't simply repair the dresses she tore, as it would go against her desire to give her customers the best quality garments that she could possibly provide. She was the embodiment of generosity, after all, and generosity means giving her customers perfection.

But every time the unicorn tried to find something else to busy herself with, like picking up around the shop after a night of rampaging Cutie Mark Crusaders, the interruption would always come late. Rarity would get frustrated waiting around doing odd-jobs.

Often times, she could have finished the project she was working on as well as several others before her pet peeve showed up. There would be times when she would run out of things to do and, feeling like that day might be her lucky day, go back to her work only to have it immediately ruined.

"Back in the day, I would have blamed that zebra Zecora for putting a curse on me. I certainly know better now, though I can't help but note how fitting that explanation would be."

On the off days when there were no other tasks to accomplish, like today, Rarity found that the best solution was to wait patiently. Every day, at the same time of day, she would stop all of her work and sit down for a couple of minutes. Some days she would be graced with a customer and be able to forget all of this trouble, but today was not one of those days. It was as if this mare was planning all of this, to slowly drive Rarity mad. She couldn't say that it wasn't working. Rarity could only hope that she would be free to work again soon.

CRACK.

Right on cue, the door rattled against its hinges. Rarity got up from her stool and took a slow walk over to the door to calm herself down. "It's not her fault," Rarity repeated to herself, helping to release some of her anger. She composed herself, then opened up the door.

Prostrate in front of the door, eyes still bouncing around in her head from the impact, lay the pegasus mailmare, nicknamed "Derpy Hooves" by some of the less considerate ponies around town. And, of course, strewn about her was Rarity's mail. Rarity did try to clean up in front of the door to her boutique to keep her mail from getting too dirty, but on rainy days it could not be helped. Thankfully, today was bright and clear, meaning only a little dust to brush off.

"Oh, hello darling. I do hope you will be careful next time. It is simply dreadful that you run into my door all of the time, I don't want you to get hurt."

Ditzy Doo sat up, wobbling slightly on her fore hooves. "Sorry Miss Rarity, but you got a lot of mail today, an' I was all excited, an' I couldn't control myself!"

"Rarity picked up the letters one by one with her magic, shaking the dust off of them and neatly piling them together. "Why yes dear, I get a lot of mail every day. That is what happens when you run one of the best boutiques in Equestria. People from all over send me orders or information about the latest fashions. Or, of course, some special items that I order for myself every now and then. Speaking of which, it seems that my package from Manehattan hasn't come yet."

Rarity furrowed her brows in mild frustration, but she expected nothing less than a long wait.

The mailmare looked at her quizzically. "What's in that package? You keep asking me about it an' it's taking a long time to get here."

The unicorn gasped a bit as Ditzy struck a perfect harmony with what she wanted to talk about. "Why, only the most beautiful cloth in all of Equestria, *DRAGONSILK*!" The thought made Rarity squirm with joy.

She wrapped her arm around Ditzy and gestured in front of the both of them, to a scene that only she could see. She continued to rant to the pegasus, "Imagine wrapping yourself in a cloth that literally *glitters* as you walk! So light that it feels like only a soft breeze against your skin! It's so strong it's practically *indestructible* and it *cannot* be stained! And best of all, it reflects the colors around it, so it matches with *anypony* in *ANY* outfit!"

Rarity awoke from her fantasy, standing tall with one hoof pointed off into the distance and the other supporting her, planted firmly on Ditzzy's face. The unicorn laughed nervously and gave an apologetic smile as she backed off, patting the mare on the head. "My sincere apologies, I do get carried away sometimes. But *anypony* would after they've seen dragonsilk! It is sooo exquisite. You simply must see it when the package finally arrives!"

"I will Miss Rarity. It sounds cool!"

Rarity cringed a bit at the last word; "cool" is hardly a word that should be used to describe fashion. But Rarity dismissed the misstep, too engrossed in her thoughts of dragonsilk to care much.

"Well, I must be getting back to work. It was nice to be able to chat with you, Ditzzy."

"You too Miss Rarity," Ditzzy said. She took off with a quick, "See ya!"

"And do be careful about your landing tomorrow! You might put your head through my door one of these days!" Rarity called out after her, only half kidding.

It was hard to believe Ditzzy Doo had flown head-first into the door of her boutique for months. You would think that she would be discouraged by the pain, but apparently that pegasus had a very high tolerance for pain. With how clumsy she was, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why.

But Rarity's thoughts drifted back to dragonsilk. She wondered when her order would finally be delivered. She had purchased the cloth before the Running of the Leaves last autumn and now the Summer Sun Celebration was less than two months away. Manufacturers never came close to keeping up with the demand for dragonsilk, so buyers were forced to wait months for their orders to reach them, if they could even afford the cloth.

The cloth was *extremely* expensive. Creating the cloth required soaking scales from an adult dragon in a magical potion which removed the thin protective coating surrounding the chitin. Only the most pristine scales could be used, as any blemishes in the scales would mean holes in the fabric. Not only was it hard enough to find a dragon with flawless scales, but convincing the dragons to give up their perfect scales was not an easy task either. That usually involved bribes of gold and jewels, and lots of them. How else would dragons get such large beds of treasure to sleep

on? Expense was one of the reason why the cloth was not often seen, and why almost nopony had heard of it before.

But some fashions were worth the price. It had taken Rarity over a year of saving to afford just a small amount of the cloth, just enough to make a dress or two for herself.

Rarity sighed as she walked back into her home, glancing through the various letters to take her mind off of the nonexistent punctuality of her cloth. "Ooohh..." Rarity stopped to admire the dress on the front of the *Equestrian Fashion* magazine she had received. She took another quick glance through the magazine before returning to the other mail.

"Bill, hmm. From your 'secret admirer', written in a handwriting remarkably similar to Spike's." She giggled at the attention and mused to herself. She absolutely must show this to Twilight! Rarity was sure the bookworm would get a laugh out of Spike's innocent advances. It was flattering and downright adorable!

She put the letter aside for now, returning to the rest of the mail. Most of the letters were her normal mail, consisting of various magazines, catalogues, and orders with a few errant bills thrown in. But the last letter caught her attention. The envelope was a high-quality parchment paper with her name and address written in a very stylish calligraphy. The sender: Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Boutique.

"What's this?" Rarity wondered. "He paid off the rest of the gala dresses last week... Surely he couldn't have sent me more money by mistake?" She opened the letter to read:

Dear Miss Rarity of Ponyville,

Allow me to extend my congratulations yet again. The dresses of your design that were featured in our boutique this month have turned out to be even more popular than anypony could have imagined! All of those dresses sold out immediately after being put on display. Many ponies made an effort to personally seek me out so they could tell me how marvelous they were. It was hard to get them to notice any of the other dresses!

As it turns out, Canterlot has need for talent like yours. A position at our boutique has opened up; should you want the job, you will be one of our on-floor fashionistas, making dresses for the Equestrian royalty. We do sincerely hope that you accept such a generous opportunity as this and reply post-haste. After all, you are one of Equestria's finest designers and you deserve proper recognition for your abilities.

Kind regards,

Hoity Toity

Best of the Best Boutique

Official Dressmakers for the Equestrian Royalty

As Rarity read, the grin on her face slowly grew. If anypony had seen her face as she reached the end of the letter, they would have cringed at how much her face had contorted in sheer bliss. She could barely contain herself.

It had finally happened! Her dream had come true! To live in Canterlot, among the most glamorous and sophisticated ponies in all of Equestria! And not only that, but to be designing dresses for Princess Celestia!

The unicorn was shaking in excitement: so much joy could not be contained in one vessel. It wasn't long before it all spilled out-

“Wa-ha-HA-HA~!”

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“CONGRATULATIONS RARITY ON GOING AWAY TO BE THE BEST DRESS DESIGNER PONY IN ALL OF EQUESTRIA!”

Pinkie Pie certainly had the ability to take any simple concept and inflate it to a whole new level of randomness. She would not accept a banner with a shorter title, determined to give the white unicorn what she considered a proper goodbye. A simple “Farewell Rarity” would have sufficed, but Pinkie Pie had already made this monstrosity by the time the thought had crossed anypony else's mind to make a banner at all. So there it hung above Rarity's going away party, completely circumnavigating the entirety of the interior of the boutique and then some. As gaudy as it was, Rarity thought it was touching that her friends thought so highly of her.

Pinkie Pie had also insisted on giving her boutique proper decorations to make it a real Pinkie Pie-style party. There were confetti and balloons of all shapes and sizes strewn about the room, streamers hung all over the ceiling (what is with Pinkie's obsession over streamers anyway?), and tables filled with confectioneries of every imaginable kind. It was a major change from the usual tidy appearance of her shop, but the change was welcomed. After moving all of her seamstress equipment out of the

boutique so she could sell the place, her former shop was looking rather bare... and depressing.

Now, the boutique was once again filled with the residents of Ponyville as they all gathered to wish the seamstress goodbye. The room was so packed with ponies that many had moved outside for more leg room. It was hard for them to resist a traditional Pinkie Pie party, and many of them had known Rarity from being at her shop at one point or another. Needless to say, there were plenty of ponies that were more than sad to see her go. As Rarity made her way through the crowd, ponies would offer their well-wishes for the unicorn.

"Well ah'll be, Rarity, ah knew you had talent but ah never realized just how much talent you had." The blonde-maned orange earth pony approached her with the rainbow pegasus hovering close behind her, coming to a stop and landing beside the cowpony. "Why, goin' to Canterlot an' all? That sure is a big step up from little ol' Ponyville."

"Why thank you, Applejack. Of course it will be quite the change, but it will be a marvelous boost for my career going to work for Hoity Toity." Rarity absent-mindedly bounced her indigo mane up and down on her hoof, soaking in the compliment.

"How come you're going to work for him? Last I checked, he was fine with just *buying* the dresses from you." Applejack shot Rainbow Dash a disapproving sideward glance, but the pegasus was completely oblivious to her own effrontery.

Rarity met eyes with Rainbow Dash. "Oh Rainbow, it's not just about working for Hoity Toity. A pony also has got to get her name out in the fashion world. There is only so much recognition a pony can get designing in a small town like Ponyville. *All* of the famous ponies go to Hoity Toity's boutique. And besides, that is the only boutique which Princess Celestia herself buys from. The only way anypony can ever become truly famous is to design for royalty!"

"Well I think that's just dandy that you get a chance to strut your stuff, sugarcube. *Ain't that right, Dash?*" Applejack kept her eyes on the pegasus and elbowed her in the gut.

Rainbow Dash reeled back from Applejack's elbow a tad, but tried to act like it did not bother her. "Yeah, but I thought she was doing just fine here in Ponyville. I mean, it's not like she wasn't getting any business from famous ponies. Sapphire Shores was here, wasn't she?"

Applejack chuckled a bit and glanced at the unicorn. "Aw, shoot. Don't you listen to her, Rarity. She approves. Rainbow Dash is jus' gettin' a mite sentimental an' doesn't want to admit it!"

"Sentimental?! Who are you calling sentimental?!" Rainbow Dash was up in the air now, staring the farmhoof down and ready to fight. Applejack, though, stood there with a horseapple-eating grin spread wide across her face, clearly relishing toying with the pegasus.

"You, yah blubberin' foal. Why, your eyes are shinin' like the mornin' dew!"

Rarity laughed to herself and watched them bicker for a bit. Those two caused quite a commotion; all of the surrounding ponies slowly inched away from the pair, hoping to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. Rarity was all but forgotten as the two went off on some tangent about who should have really been "Iron Pony" from their competition the previous year, a sore subject for the both of them.

She took her leave and went outside to enjoy the beautiful weather, looking for more of her friends. After not too long, she spied Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy talking to each other and approached them.

As the purple unicorn spotted Rarity, her eyes lit up. "Oh Rarity, I've been looking all over for you! Here, I have a gift for you." Twilight Sparkle levitated a wrapped package out of her saddlebags, magically handing it off to Rarity with a smile.

"Twilight, you didn't have to do that!" Rarity returned a big smile, welcoming the heartfelt gesture. She unwrapped the gift, taking care not to rip the wrapping paper. Even without knowing what kind of bookworm Twilight Sparkle was, it was way too obvious that the package contained a book.

"That's *1001 Places to Visit in Canterlot*. It's organized by district and the type of attraction, giving descriptions of all of them as well as maps and directions. I figured it would be helpful when you move to Canterlot!"

"Oh thank you Twilight! This is wonderful!" Rarity nuzzled her friend, thankful for the gift. "I know that my new apartment will be in the Trader's District, shall we see what this book has to say about the area?"

At the mention of the Trader's District, Twilight's eyes widened. "You're living in the Traders District? I loved that section of Canterlot! That's the best place to live apart from the castle itself, but you practically have to be a noblepony to get an apartment there! How in Equestria did you find somepony who would lease to you?"

“Oh, it wasn’t *that* hard...”

“It must cost a fortune!”

“Actually, the apartment I found barely costs more than Carousel Boutique did in rent. It is hardly expensive, especially with the salary I will have.”

At this point, Twilight practically had her jaw on the ground. “But... HOW?!”

Rarity grinned mischievously. “Twilight, a girl has to have her secrets!”

No need to tell her it was luck, she thought to herself, she would be furious. She would consider my choice reckless.

When she started her apartment hunting, Rarity was still on a high from Hoity Toity’s offer and too excited to really think things through. She simply looked for an inexpensive place near to Hoity Toity’s boutique, so she could have a refreshing but short walk to work each morning. This was the first apartment she had found, and she pounced on it.

She had been starting to regret her haste in picking the apartment without looking elsewhere, but now the purple mare’s surprise and excitement reaffirmed her confidence. Only Fluttershy was there when she was looking for apartments, for about five minutes at the spa. *Besides, everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?*

“Oh yes, I’m sure you had to use every trick you could to get that apartment!” Fluttershy sarcastically chimed in, giving Rarity a wink.

Rarity flipped through her new gift while Twilight looked back and forth between the two ponies, trying to discern what they knew that she did not. But before she could pry further, a loud greeting interrupted all of their thoughts.

“HIYA RARITY!”

Everypony jumped a bit at the suddenness of the greeting. Fluttershy accentuated the surprise with an “Eep!” before tripping and falling flat on her face.

“Sorry Fluttershy! I didn’t mean to scare you like that.” The offending pony offered a hoof to help her off the ground.

“Oh, that’s okay...” Fluttershy took the hoof and got up off her face. One look at that pony made her bleat like a goat and flop over again, legs and wings locked up.

“You okay there Fluttershy?” asked the pink earth pony, looking worried.

At least she was normally pink; today she had a curled indigo wig that sat awkwardly on her poofy, normally-pink mane and she was covered in white powder... was that flour? Tied to her now-white tail were more very fake indigo curls, and on her forehead she wore a party hat, painted white. On each of her flanks sat diamond-shaped pieces of rock candy, apparently held in place with white frosting.

Rarity gasped in horror. "Pinkie Pie, you look ridiculous!"

"Who, me? No way, I look FABULOUS." She struck a pose. "And besides, I'm not Pinkie Pie, I'm Rarity! Nice to meet you, Rarity!"

The Rarity-imposter grinned from ear to ear, showing far more teeth than anypony other than her could ever manage.

Twilight stepped in at this point, "Pinkie, why are you dressed up as Rarity?"

"Don't be silly, Twilight. I *am* Rarity!"

"Err, right. So, why *are* you Rarity?"

"Well, I was getting this party ready for Rarity, but I couldn't help but notice that it wasn't enough! And I had already put up as many balloons and streamers and confetti as I could, so I was thinking to myself, 'how can give Rarity a proper goodbye without putting up any more decorations?'

"And then I realized exactly what I needed to do! I could *be* Rarity, and that way she could know that she's so super awesome that ponies want to dress up as her and having two Rarities would allow her to experience *double* the party in one day! Neat, huh?"

No pony could argue with that logic. In fact, Twilight was so blown away that she face-hoofed.

"Aww, you don't have to beat yourself up over it just because I thought of it first. Not everypony can have all the great ideas all the time, even a smart smartypants like you Twilight!"

The purple unicorn's hoof came down off her face, her features contorting as she pieced together the earth pony's interpretation of her reaction.

"Wait, what? That's not... I'm not... Oh, just forget it." Twilight Sparkle rolled her eyes and huffed, looking mildly annoyed.

Rarity broke the lull in conversation by changing subjects. "Well Pinkie Pie, that was very thoughtful of you. And I must say, you certainly put an awful

lot of effort into putting together this soirée. You really know how to make a pony feel loved!”

The pink pony bounced around excitedly after hearing that her work was appreciated. “Thanks Rarity! I just couldn’t let you leave without getting a proper farewell party!”

At that thought, Pinkie Pie’s eyes shot open instantly and she let out a loud gasp. “How could I almost forget your cake?! Come on you guys, we have to go get it!” She turned to leave, but looked back. “Except you, Rarity. You’re not allowed to see it until it’s ready!”

Without another word, the mare disappeared in a cloud of white powder.

Rarity’s friends all looked at her, seeking approval to part. Rarity took the hint, dismissing her friends. “Go ahead, girls, we can chit-chat more later.”

She watched them leave before looking around for more ponies that she had yet to talk to. It wasn’t long before she spied Roseluck wandering around some distance away, along the edge of the crowd.

Now there’s a pony I haven’t talked to in a long while. She and I have quite a bit of catching up to do.

Rarity carefully balanced her new book on her back and started her trot over to the gardener pony, stopping to avoid being flattened a frustrated orange filly flying by on a scooter that was muttering to herself about finding Rainbow Dash. Not too long after that, Rarity was held up again.

“Congratulations Rarity!”

“Oh, thank you Spike! I’m glad to see Twilight let you get out of doing chores for a while so you could come!”

The purple dragonling snorted and crossed his arms, looking unhappy. “I still had to do chores today, though. Too many, if you ask me. I mean seriously, who is going to go to the library when there’s a Pinkie Pie party going on?” He shrugged. “For a while, I thought I had so many things to do that I wouldn’t be able to show up at all!”

“My goodness! How did you finish them all?”

“I didn’t. I just couldn’t get them done in time.”

“Oh my. Won’t Twilight be upset with you?”

He shrugged again. “She’ll get over it. And besides, I couldn’t miss your farewell party.”

Rarity smiled at the young dragon. He really did try his best to please her, and she respected that. Even if his affections were a bit childish. As she watched him, she could see the gears in his head grinding away. She waited for him to say what he wanted to say.

After a couple of seconds, he broke the silence. "And Rarity?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm going to miss you..."

He kicked the ground, hands clenched behind his back and avoiding her eyes.

"Aww, Spike, I will miss you too."

"Will I ever see you again?" He looked up at her now, eyes glazed over.

She hated that look; it was nearly impossible to resist picking him up and hugging him. "Don't be sad Spike. Of course you will. You and Twilight are welcome to visit me whenever you please."

At that, Spike looked a bit happier. He smiled and sniffled. "You really mean that?"

"Of course I do. Now, if you're not too busy, could I ask a favor of you? I need you to take this book upstairs for me and put it with my other boxes. I have an awful lot of ponies to converse with and time is running short." She handed him the book that Twilight had given her.

He took the book and saluted, shouting "Yes Ma'am!" before taking off as fast as his tiny legs could carry him.

However, Rarity didn't even move a single step before being interrupted. Sweetie Belle had approached Rarity while she was talking to Spike.

"Hey sis, have you seen Rainbow Dash?"

Rarity thought back. "Last time I saw her she was inside the boutique, not to long ago. What would you need to see her for?"

The filly shrugged. "Scootaloo wanted help finding Rainbow Dash. She said it was really important, so Apple Bloom and I are helping out."

"Well I will keep an eye out for her then. And as soon as I find her, I'll be sure to let one of you know."

"Thanks Rarity." Sweetie Belle ran up and surprised Rarity with a hug. "It's not going to be the same without you here."

“Oh Sweetie Belle... You'll just have to spend more time at Mum and Dad's house, that's all.”

Sweetie Belle shook her head in protest. “They never let me have Scootaloo and Apple Bloom over to visit! They said we're too loud and we break stuff!”

“Maybe you should try asking again darling, and be polite about it. Then when your friends do come over, tell them it is in their interest to stay on their best behavior. You know that mum and dad are busy and they would be most appreciative if you girls could stay out of trouble.”

Sweetie Belle pouted. “Okay...”

Apple Bloom jumped out from between two ponies, satisfied that she found the filly she was looking for. “C'mon Sweetie Belle, we gotta help out Pinkie Pie with the cake!”

Sweetie Belle looked confused. “But what about Scootaloo?”

“She said she'd catch up with us after she found Rainbow Dash.”

“Oh, okay. I'll see you later sis!” Sweetie Belle waved to Rarity as she took off after her friend.

Rarity turned back to the direction that she had seen Roseluck earlier, eager to find her old friend. However, she had seemingly moved on and was nowhere to be found. *Drat. Where did that pony go? She couldn't have gone far.* Rarity walked off in the direction she had seen Roseluck last, trying to determine where she ran off to.

As she reached the edge of the crowd of ponies, Rarity bounced off of her front hooves a bit, trying to see over the crowd. *No luck*, she told herself. As the unicorn was about to leave though, she heard something behind her.

PSST.

She turned around to look, and found a wonderful array of garbage cans.

“*Rarity*,” the voice said.

Out of one of the garbage cans, a pair of eyes watched her. Rarity squinted, trying to make out who was talking to her from a garbage can.

“Rainbow, is that you?”

Rainbow Dash popped her head out of the garbage can, looking angry.

“Keep your voice down! I'm hiding.”

"In a garbage can? Why would you choose to hide there, of all places?" Rarity was exasperated. She could not hide her disgust, keeping her distance from the pegasus.

"I didn't have time to look around." Rainbow Dash was scanning the crowd nervously as she spoke.

Rarity frowned. "If you say so. Just wash up before going back into the boutique. And who are you hiding from?"

"Scootaloo. She wants to see me do tricks on her scooter."

Oh, this again. Rainbow Dash had been playing cat and mouse with the filly all week. Every time Scootaloo saw her idol, she ran off to get her scooter and Rainbow Dash had mysteriously disappeared by the time she got back.

"You know that she had the other crusaders looking for you too, don't you?"

The pegasus choked a bit. "I have to watch out for them too?!"

"Pinkie Pie is keeping the other two preoccupied for now. But why don't you just show Scootaloo a few tricks then and get it over with?"

Rainbow Dash hesitated for a second before stating "I haven't figured out which tricks I'm going to show her yet."

Rarity saw the pause. *In other words, you don't know how to ride a scooter,* she thought to herself. But she didn't press the issue.

"Listen Rarity, about earlier. Applejack was right, I guess I'm just a bit upset that you're leaving."

"Don't worry, Rainbow, your secret is safe with me."

Rainbow Dash smiled. "Heh, thanks. You're going to come back and visit, right?"

"Of course I am." Rarity thought for a second, then told her, "Well, I still owe you for saving my life at the Best Young Fliers competition. Maybe sometime you could come visit me in Canterlot and I'll get you tickets to see the Wonderbolts?"

At the mention of her favorite stunt team, Rainbow Dash brightened up considerably. She burst out of the trash can, yelling "Heck yeah!"

"RAINBOW DASH!"

Both Rarity and Rainbow Dash looked to the side, spotting Scootaloo standing on her scooter with a giant, fanatical grin on her face. Rainbow

Dash looked aghast, squeezing out a “Ponyfeathers” as her crazed fanfilly approached.

“You wanna show me some awesome stunts on my scooter, Rainbow Dash?” Scootaloo could not stop fidgeting with excitement.

“Eh, yeah... Sure thing kid.” Rainbow Dash nervously grinned at Rarity, who shrugged back.

As the two pegasi turned to leave, Spike broke through the crowd. “Hey Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie just sent me to get you two. It’s time for cake!”

“Well, looks like we’re going to have to put off our scooter session again, pipsqueak.” Rainbow Dash gave Scootaloo a noogie and trotted off after Spike, along with Rarity.

Scootaloo pushed after them. “Aww, can’t you just show me one trick first?”

“Sorry, duty calls. Maybe next time.”

“How about after cake?” Scootaloo looked at her eagerly, hoping she didn’t get this close and lose her opportunity.

“... What the hay. Alright, sure.” Rainbow Dash grinned at her.

“Awesome! I’ll see you later Dash!” The filly turned around and zoomed off.

Rainbow Dash made an audible sigh of relief and relaxed considerably.

“That was close,” Rarity remarked to her.

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you actually going to go through with it?”

“Yeah. Like you said, might as well get it over with. Maybe then she’ll stop bugging me about it.”

They both chuckled a bit. *Rainbow Dash may be a bit slow on the uptake, but she really is a sweetheart on the inside*, Rarity mused to herself.

As they followed Spike toward the boutique, Rarity noticed that the crowd was now gathered around something, and more ponies joined that crowd every second as they filed out of the boutique. She caught sight of wood as she approached.

“How long has this stage been here?” the unicorn asked.

Rarity was not sure whether to be confused or impressed by Pinkie Pie’s industriousness. She had no idea how the pony had managed to put

together an entire stage in what must have been ten minutes. Rainbow looked like she was experiencing a similar reaction, shrugging in response.

Just then, Rarity-Pie jumped up on stage wielding a microphone. "Thanks for coming everypony! Now, where did that super-designer pony-of-the-year Rarity go?"

"Coming!" Rarity called out. The ponies around her made way and she and Rainbow Dash traversed the remainder of the distance to the stage with ease.

Rarity-Pie continued as the unicorn made her way up on stage. "As you all know, we're here to congratulate Rarity on her super-terrific job offer in Canterlot! She's going to be making dresses for Princess Celestia!" There were a couple of "ooh"s from the audience and a few excited murmurs. "Now, before I talk your ears off, it's time for Rarity's speech!"

The crowd started applauding, but Rarity didn't make a move for the microphone right away. Instead, her eyes opened up wide as she asked the earth pony "Whatever do you mean, Pinkie Pie? What speech?"

Rarity-Pie's smile disappeared, replaced by a look of confusion. "What, you mean you don't have a speech ready? I thought every pony made a speech when they were going away."

Rarity laughed nervously, looking over the crowd. Spike broke the ensuing silence with "Go ahead Rarity, give your speech!"

She smiled and politely cleared her throat. "Umm, good afternoon everypony! I'm so glad you could all make it here today. I, uhh... I do thank you all for your compliments and your business, and... I hope that you will all come visit me at Canterlot!"

She sighed as the ponies responded with more applause. Apparently that was enough to appease them.

Rarity-Pie burst in to take over the microphone again. "And not a moment too soon, here comes the cake!"

Oh my. Rarity was once again impressed by Pinkie Pie. The cake that she had baked for the occasion was much larger than a traditional wedding cake, having six stacks of cakes. The frosting was done up in the white and indigo of Rarity's coat and mane, and was covered in enough candles to rival one of the eternal sisters' birthday cakes.

It took a team effort to bring the cake up on stage; the cake balanced precariously on Applejack's back, with Twilight's magic ensuring that it

stayed there and Fluttershy there as a back up. As they got up to where everyone could see, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom brought and set up a folding table. The table sagged under the weight as the cake was transferred over, Applejack giving off a sigh of relief.

“Three cheers for Rarity!” Rarity-Pie called into the microphone.

The crowd responded with a deafening *“Hip hip hooray!”*

Sweetie Belle cut in, saying “I can’t believe my big sis is going to be famous!”

“Just don’t forget us little ponies when you do!” Fluttershy added.

Rarity responded with a huge grin. She loved all of them: all of her friends, her little sister, even the everyday ponies in Ponyville. She wouldn’t have gotten to where she was without them.

“Hip hip hooray!”

And her friends loved her back just the same. Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie; they each had their own unique way of expressing themselves. And Rarity would not ask for it any other way.

Rarity’s imposter nudged her. “Go ahead and blow out the candles!”

Apple Bloom interjected with “And don’t forget to make a wish!”

“Of course I will, darling,” Rarity responded. She thought for a second about what she wanted most.

“Hip hip HOORAY!”

I wish that nothing will ever sever the friendships that I have with these ponies.

She blew out the candles.

Chapter 2

“Here we are, miss.”

Rarity had not even noticed the carriage stopping because she had been so engrossed with her surroundings. Now she knew why Twilight Sparkle was so surprised by Rarity’s claim for having an apartment in the Trader’s District, and especially Farrier Way.

The street was made of cobblestone, yet so expertly crafted that the carriage barely jostled as it rolled over the polished stones. Carts and carriages made their way up and down the street, yet it still gave the appearance that there was plenty of space to go around. All up and down the generously-sized sidewalks which flanked the street, vendors had set up stands to sell various goods. Beyond those stands, more stores in buildings made up the solid boundaries of the street, above which sat apartments. Rarity marvelled at the modern, yet still gothic appearance of the surrounding buildings. Canterlot truly did have the best architects in Equestria.

But one detail stood out above all else: the eternal sisters’ castle. The street had been specifically lined up to frame the castle and the hill upon which it stood. One could not help but feel like the street was guiding the eyes up to its ivory-colored centerpiece accented with waterfalls. It was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful masterpieces of architectural planning Rarity had ever set eyes on.

The unicorn could only imagine that the street looked just as majestic from the castle. Rarity was surprised that she had not noticed when she had gone to the Grand Galloping Gala previously and made a mental note to look if she ever did grace the castle with her presence again.

Rarity took the driver’s hoof, letting him help her out of the carriage. She had the urge to take off and start exploring immediately, so giddy she was, but rationality got the best of her. *Not yet*, she told herself, *there will be plenty of time for that when I am more presentable.*

Although it was a short trip, Rarity couldn’t help but feel... icky. It was only proper that she wash up a bit before she met with someone she might run into again. After all, first impressions are the most important and she didn’t want someone to meet her for the first time when she was not at her finest.

She could at least wash her hair and fur before going to the spa to get a proper treatment.

Her apartment complex was situated above a series of quaint little shops on the quieter end of Farrier Way, closer to the outskirts of North Canterlot. The stairs leading up to her apartment sat between two shops. One was a candy shop, with a herd of foals mulling about the rainbow assortment of delicious sweets as their parents conversed daintily outside. The other bore a finished wooden sign hanging from the front of the store, with the likeness of a champagne glass carved into it. It was clearly not as bustling as the candy shop and there was no indication of the name of the store or what it sold. Rarity took note and decided that she would go see what it was all about as soon as she freshened up a bit.

She took the stairs up to the second floor, finding a small lobby with a hallway leading away in both directions. Directly behind the stairs was an office where a young stallion was sitting behind a desk. As he saw Rarity, he rushed out and introduced himself as the landlord, quickly and efficiently guiding her through the motions of getting the proper paperwork done.

It wasn't long before he showed her to her room and took his leave, smiling and bowing. She smiled back, noticing how well he handled himself for being in her presence. *Most stallions of his age would be tripping over their hooves at the sight of me. He must have quite a bit of experience with the mares.* As much as she liked how the stallions admired her when she passed, it was nice to have one who could keep his cool every so often.

She entered her room and was amazed to find out just how large it was. She had expected it to be a bit crowded, but was pleased to find that the apartment was almost as large as the boutique at home was. The boxes with her belongings had been delivered earlier in the week, making up a neat pile along the wall.

As Rarity shut the door behind her, Opalescence hopped off of her back and went to make herself at home. Rarity had barely even noticed her presence the entire time. Especially now; her mind was at work deciding how best to make her home more welcoming.

I suppose exploring the town will have to wait. This just simply will not do. If this is to be my home, it must be appropriately organized and decorated.

"Well Opal, it looks like I have some work to do. Now, where should I begin?" Her mind overflowed with ideas as she decided what kind of fabric to make her new curtains out of, pulling open boxes with her magic.

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By the time she had finished arranging and decorating her apartment, many of the shops had already closed. She had decided to wait until the following day to explore, before she had to show up at Hoity Toity's boutique. But that was not much better for her luck.

A scheduled storm was in effect, dousing the entirety of Canterlot in a moderate, steady rain. She had hoped that the weather ponies would be done with their work before long, but it became clear that that was not going to happen. It was a bit disappointing, but she would have plenty of time to explore later. After all, her lease was for an entire year, so she would not be leaving anytime soon.

Rarity quickly traversed the distance along Farrier Way from her new apartment to the boutique, hoping to get out of the rain as soon as possible. Although her umbrella helped keep her mane and coat dry, her hooves were still getting wet, much to her dismay. She finally found the boutique, recognizing the sign with Hoity Toity's distinctive fan cutie mark. The boutique was smaller than most of the buildings on Farrier street, only two stories as opposed to the usual five, but Rarity did not get a good look at the building otherwise. The unicorn opened the door with her magic so that she could make her way inside without stopping in the rain.

"Greetings!"

"Welcome to The Best of the Best Boutique!"

"How may we be of service to you?"

The two unicorns startled Rarity, and she visibly jumped. She did not see them as she trotted in the door, but they were there offering to take her umbrella and saddlebags as she walked in the door. Rarity let them take her umbrella, but opted to keep her saddlebags for now.

One of the unicorns was an off-white color, with amber eyes, a flowing, deep gold mane and tail and a spool of equally golden thread for a cutie mark. The other had striking violet eyes, a red coat and a darker red mane highlighted with black. Her tail was cut short, and the unicorn's cutie mark was a pair of crossed needles. They both beamed at Rarity, looking delighted to see her. Apparently, there was not much business today due to the rain.

“Oh, hello! My name is Rarity, and...”

The smiles on their faces instantly vanished. “Oh, you must be the new mare,” the red unicorn said before Rarity could finish. The golden-maned unicorn turned around and walked away, apparently not caring anymore.

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes I...”

“HOITY!” The red unicorn interrupted her again, calling out loudly as she turned around. Rarity was left standing there awkwardly as the two unicorns sat down behind sewing machines at two of the three tables in the shop, ignoring her.

Well, that was quite rude, Rarity thought to herself. She kept herself in check though; maybe there was some reason for their actions? Maybe they were swamped with orders to fill.

She used the time to look around the shop, noticing the tables at which the unicorns worked covered in various sewing needles of different sizes and shapes, tools, and a sewing machine. A third table sat there which matched the others, although the various objects on the table were untouched. Ponniquins were present all around the shop, showing off various dresses and suits made to match anypony’s taste. There were a set of changing rooms off to one side of the room and a doorway behind the two mares, out of which an immaculately dressed earth pony stallion appeared.

“Oh, Rarity! Come in, come in!” Hoity Toity beckoned her over, to which she obliged. “Welcome! I hope you found your way here without an incident.”

Rarity nodded. “Oh yes, your boutique is so simple to find. It wasn’t a trouble at all!”

“How delightful! And your apartment...?”

“Could not be better!” Rarity grinned at him. She was elated. Everything was working out as she had always dreamed!

“Excellent! Now, for introductions. Fillies, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Rarity. She is the unicorn who designed and made those gala dresses that were such excellent sellers less than a month ago.

“Rarity, may I introduce you to Top Stitch,” he pointed to the golden-haired unicorn at the middle desk who was now watching her, “and Needlepoint.” He switched to point at the red unicorn. Needlepoint seemed to be in the middle of an extremely delicate part of the sewing, too busy to look up at her.

“You will be working here.” He pointed to the third desk, farthest from the dressing rooms. “I hope you find the sewing machine and tools sufficient to suit your needs. If you have any questions at all about your work when you start, please talk to Top Stitch about your inquiries.”

Hoity Toity brought her into the back of the shop, where rows upon rows of pony fashion were being kept on hangers. He explained the organization scheme of the back room, going over various details about what her tasks would be as they came up. Eventually, Rarity was walked into a room with shelves filled to the brim with bolts of cloth of every fabric and color. Spools of thread made up another section of the room.

“Here we have the supply room. Should I ask you to fill out any orders of dresses, you will find everything you need here.”

As Hoity Toity turned to leave, a glint caught Rarity’s eye. Upon inspection, she recognized the glitter for what it was and took a sharp breath. “Is this... dragonsilk?”

He looked back at the shelf she was pointing to. “Oh yes. We do have a small quantity of dragonsilk. There was a large demand for the cloth a few years ago, but after a few orders ponies tired of the cloth. And a good thing too, dragonsilk looks downright awful and is extremely overpriced. It is a travesty that it *ever* was the center of attention.”

Maybe to you. Rarity swallowed her pride though. If Hoity Toity said it was awful, who was she to say that it was not? After all, *he* was the one designing for the princess, not her. The white unicorn took another long glance before following the earth pony out of the supply room.

Thoughts of the cloth lingered in her mind though. She had counted the bolts... Eighteen of them! The price was staggering, those eighteen bolts cost more than the rest of the supplies in the shop. No, more than the entire building itself – and that was not cheap real estate.

The two ponies crossed the storage room to a set of stairs. The top of the stairway left them before a comfortable room with windows both to the hallway and looking out over Farrier Way. In the room sat a number of tools and supplies used to make clothing, similar to the tables that appeared downstairs in the entrance room. Two older stallions in the room looked on to a board of pictures, one of them wearing a fancy and extremely expensive-looking suit. They turned to glance at Rarity, but instantly returned to their debate, the less-dressed of the two pulling out a pen and adding detail to a drawing.

“This is the design room. This is where most of the boutique’s fashion genius sprouts forth. Right now, Chic is making a custom order for one of our valued customers, I am afraid I must wait to introduce you to him. But no matter, let us continue. Shall we?”

He led her on down the hallway to another office, neatly organized except for a wall plastered with designs. An elaborately crafted window overlooked the street. “This is my office. Should you need me, you can find me here. But I trust you will talk to the girls first if you have any questions, as they will be more readily available. Now, do you have any questions while we are here?”

Rarity pulled open her saddlebags, procuring a stack of papers. “Well, I do not have any questions about the work. But I do have some designs which I think you will find to your liking!” She held out a few of the drawings for him to see.

But the papers only seemed to be an annoyance. Hoity Toity waved them off, trying to get them out of his face. “My dear, I said you would be *making* the dresses, not *designing* them. We already have a team of designers with *years* of experience being at the top of the fashion world. If this really is your passion, then you will have to earn your way there.”

“Oh.” Rarity stacked her papers and put them away neatly, feeling a bit let down. Rarity reassured herself though. *With my talent, I’m sure it will take no time at all to convince Hoity Toity to look at my designs. After all, he saw how well my gala dresses sold.*

Hoity Toity smiled at her, sensing her hesitation. It was as if he read her mind. He told her, “Do not worry, Rarity. I assure you the wait will pass in no time at all! Now, off with you. You can start work tomorrow morning, I shall have Top Stitch get you acquainted with how business is handled around here.”

She nodded and departed from his office, taking care to say goodbye as she passed her new coworkers. Rarity smiled to herself as she left the boutique, umbrella above her head. *Like Hoity Toity said, no time at all. Before I know it, I’ll be designing for the princess.*

As she made her way down the sidewalk, the rain slowed to a stop. She pulled the umbrella away from her and looked up, seeing a team of pegasi preparing to clear away the clouds. *See? All these rainclouds in my life are getting blown away. Everything is coming up Rarity!*

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Rarity spent most of the next morning with Top Stitch. She memorized the prices of various dresses and services and spent some time being instructed on various stitching methods that she was already very familiar with. Although Rarity tried to tell Top Stitch that she knew everything she was being taught, Top Stitch insisted on going ahead with the instruction anyway.

It proved to be a long morning, since Top Stitch turned out to be an extremely monotone pony when not dealing with customers. And even her liveliness when dealing with customers was a ruse – anypony could see that after a few hours of being with her. She was way too quiet for a real-life pony, even more quiet than Fluttershy. It was almost as though she only had her heart in sewing and yet somehow still found no solace there.

But time sped up for Rarity when Top Stitch had her practicing with a few customers that came in. This was something Rarity had been doing for years, so much of it was second nature to her. She was able to handle all of the requests no problem, fixing up a hem for one mare, fitting another into a dress, and even consoling a customer with a complaint about a defect.

After what seemed like only an hour of helping customers, Hoity Toity showed up and stopped Rarity, complimenting her on her performance in the morning. He then instructed her on the general nature of her main tasks – tailoring for and selling dresses to customers when they were present, and making dresses for mail orders when they were not – and sent her on lunch break.

She used her lunch break to explore around Farrier Way, doing a good deal of window shopping. She even went into a few shops to browse their wares in more detail. After a bit, she stopped at a small bakery, purchased a few apple turnovers, and ate them on a bench in a greener part of Farrier Street. Rarity returned to the boutique with only a few minutes to spare, finally getting her first good glimpse of the shop. She stopped in front to admire the building.

The Best of the Best Boutique looked more alluring and efficient than most of the other buildings. Rather than building up and putting apartments above the shop, it was only as tall as the shop inside was. It had a flashy sign with Hoity Toity's fan cutie mark centered over the door and "Best of

the Best” written beneath it in a distinctive font. Rather unlike most of the surrounding buildings, the boutique had an appearance of modernity; it shone with polished metal décor trimming the plentiful windows, which invited the passerby to sneak a glance inside and draw them in with the displays.

As Rarity’s eyes adjusted to the glare on the windows from the sunlight streaming down, she saw a shape in the second-story window. She squinted to make it out. It looked like a stallion... No, a mare. A mare with a grey mane and tail and a bone-white coat. An old, wrinkly mare that was staring straight back at her. As Rarity came to realize that she was being watched, she grew extremely uncomfortable, looking around quickly before hurriedly traversing the short distance to the door.

As she passed through the doorway, Top Stitch and Needlepoint both kept up their work without a word. Rarity was frazzled though. That mare... Rarity could not tell for sure, as it might have been the lighting. But that mare was missing a cutie mark. Something about her was... disturbing.

Her curiosity got the best of her.

“Is there a customer upstairs now?” Rarity asked, hoping that she could put the thought to rest.

Needlepoint looked up from the dress she was working on, seeming slightly perturbed by the interruption. “No.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that there was another pony upstairs whom I have never met before. I have had the chance to meet Chic, but is there a mare who does designing as well? Perhaps one with a white coat?”

The red mare thought for a minute. “Well Azure Dreams is...” A look of understanding suddenly spread across her face. “Oh. You must have seen the ghost!”

Rarity winced a bit at the word. “Ghost?” *So much for putting my curiosity to rest.*

“Yes, dear. There is a ghost that haunts the boutique. She came when the boutique was built. Apparently, she lived in the house that was here long ago. But that was torn down to put in the shop.” She finished what she was doing and started threading her sewing machine, getting it ready for her next task.

Rarity stood there, struck by Needlepoint’s words. She had seen a ghost? If anypony asked her before today, she would have said she did not believe

that ghosts existed. She looked at Top Stitch, in some way hoping that the off-white unicorn would tell her it was all a joke. But Top Stitch was not paying attention to her; she had her eyes focused on Needlepoint, at least for a couple of seconds. She started sewing again not long after that.

Rarity tried to reason with herself. *There must be some explanation. Maybe it was just a reflection? Yes, that must have been it.* She sat herself down at her desk, satisfied with her conclusion. She did not like the thought of ghosts. It wasn't like she was scared of ghosts or anything. Of course not, that would be silly. She was downright terrified of them.

The white unicorn tried to push the thought out of her mind, instead focusing on getting her sewing done. She had been given several dresses to make by the end of the day; simple dresses, but distracting nonetheless. She gathered the cloth and thread she needed, listening to the pattering of her coworkers' machines. But through it all, her thoughts drifted again. Back to their discussion. Back to the ghost. And... Azure Dreams? Had one of the most famous designers in history been mentioned?

Curiosity killed the cat again.

"Earlier, did you say that Azure Dreams works here?"

Needlepoint responded with a quick "Yup," which was echoed by Top Stitch's nodding head.

It only made sense that Azure Dreams would work for Hoity Toity. After all, she was the designer who made Princess Celestia's dress for the last two Leap Year Summer Sun celebrations, the only occasion on which the princess would forego her usual regalia for even more elegant threads. But it had been several years since "The Blue Mare" had been in the media for anything, and Rarity could have sworn that she had retired.

Azure Dreams, *The Blue Mare*... That nickname never really did make sense to Rarity. She knew it was a joke, but the nuances of the meaning escaped her. After all, she had seen Azure Dreams once long ago, and she actually was a blue mare.

Rarity continued to probe for information. "I thought she had retired years ago?"

Top Stitch answered her. "She has not been active recently, but she hasn't officially retired yet. She'll be leaving soon though, in just over a week."

Needlepoint butted in, "And that means that Top Stitch will be getting promoted, and she'll be designing Princess Celestia's dress for the

Summer Sun Celebration this year!" Top Stitch responded to that with a nod.

"How wonderful!" Rarity said the words, but she could not put her whole heart behind them. Part of her was jealous of Top Stitch. *That should be me designing for the princess!* But it was too soon for her to be promoted. She reminded herself, *Hoity Toity said I had to earn my right to be a designer, and I will do just that.*

"If you do not mind me asking, how long did it take you to get this promotion?"

"Eight years."

Rarity gasped. "Eight... years?"

"Fashionistas get promoted to designers based on seniority," Needlepoint filled in, "so Top Stitch will replace Azure Dreams, I will replace Chic, and you will replace one of us."

Rarity swallowed. Top Stitch waited *eight years* for her promotion? And she had to wait for one of those two to retire before she could become a designer? That would be at least several more years, maybe even a decade. And that would mean that before she became a designer she would be... *old*. She hated that thought. But Hoity Toity said that it would take no time at all.

Right?

Rarity did not have time to mull it over. Business was picking up after the lunchtime lull in customers, and many ponies were coming dangerously close to coming in the store. She had to stay alert now; Hoity Toity concluded her training early because she was so experienced, so she was responsible for helping out any potential buyers that came in now. She would not get any hoof-holding from Top Stitch.

At last, one pony finally entered the boutique. Rarity put down the dress she was sewing and stood up. She put on a big smile for her customer and took a breath, "Wel..."

"Greetings!"

"Welcome to The Best of the Best Boutique!"

"How may we be of service to you?"

Rarity held her breath for a second out of sheer surprise, then exhaled. Both Needlepoint and Top Stitch had rocketed toward the door and

snagged the customer before Rarity could get in a single word. She couldn't even say for sure if they had gone around their desks or over them. *No wonder they startled me on my first visit.* Rarity sat herself back down and started to work again, glancing up a short time later to see Top Stitch aiding the stallion with a ripped suit.

When the next customer entered the shop, Rarity again set down the dress she had been working on. She got up from her stool, only to be beat to the punch again by Needlepoint. Rarity plopped herself back down, not sure whether to be frustrated that she could not help any customers or relieved that she did not have to put down her work for too long. She watched Top Stitch see the stallion off before returning to her project.

Several more times, every customer that came into the boutique was mobbed by Top Stitch or Needlepoint, or both, and Rarity never even got a chance to move past her stool. Growing more and more annoyed, the white unicorn had to say something. She stopped Needlepoint after her most recent customer left the building by clearing her throat. "Needlepoint?"

"Yes, Rarity?"

"If you would like, I could take a couple of those customers off of your hooves, so you could have a chance to work on some of your own work too."

"Oh, don't worry about it. We are trying to give you a bit of a break. Top Stitch and I both know you have a lot of dresses to finish by tonight, so we figured we'd take up the extra customers so you can work in peace." She winked at Rarity.

"Oh! Well, thank you most sincerely then!"

Rarity smiled at Needlepoint as the mare made her way back to the desk and picked up where she had left off. *They're just trying to look out for me.* Rarity returned to her work, this time at ease.

For the rest of the afternoon, Rarity worked nearly uninterrupted. Both Top Stitch and Needlepoint took most of the customers, Rarity only getting up to help when they were both occupied with others. In the time, she was able to nearly complete an entire order of matching dresses, a feat which Rarity was very proud of.

When Hoity Toity came and locked the door for closing, she had a rack halfway filled with the completed dresses. She finished another dress,

adding it to the collection, and started to clean up as Hoity Toity looked through the receipts for the day.

As he flipped through the sheets of paper, his expression grew more and more disappointed. He finished, and tossed the papers aside and gave Rarity a stern look. "Rarity... Just how many customers did you help today?"

"Only a few, Top Stitch and Needlepoint were giving me the opportunity to get a head start on the dress order I was working on." She motioned toward the rack of completed dresses.

Hoity Toity stomped a hoof in annoyance. "Rarity, I hired you as a fashionista so you could help *customers*, not lallygag. If I wanted a pony that could make dresses, I could have hired a *foal*."

"But..." Suddenly, Rarity understood. *They weren't helping me... They were stealing my customers!*

"No buts. I expect results next week. Is that clear?"

"But..."

"Is. That. *Clear?*"

Rarity swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, off with you. I shall see you after the weekend."

Hoity Toity corralled Rarity out of the boutique, shutting the door behind her. Rarity watched as the stallion retreated into the back room, then narrowed her eyes.

A glimpse of red caught her vision, and she gave it a hard stare. Needlepoint returned her stare, then offered a grin which could be accurately described by only one word: wicked.