

# A Study in Rainbows

By Thanqol



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# Chapter One:

## Miss Rarity

In the year 1878 I took my title of Best Young Flier in Equestria from the University of Cloudsdale and proceeded to Beaumont to go through the course prescribed for Celestia's Royal Guard. Having completed my studies there, I was duly attached to the Fifth Neighthumberland Fusiliers as assistant Thunderstriker. The regiment was stationed in Zebrica at the time, and before I could join it, the second Moon War had broken out. On landing in Gallopoli I learned that my corps had advanced through the passes and was already deep in the enemy's country. I followed, however, with many other officers who were in the same situation as myself, and succeeded in reaching Cantar in safety, where I found my regiment, and at once entered upon my new duties.

The campaign brought honours and promotion to many, but for me it had nothing but misfortune and disaster. I was removed from my brigade and attached to the Storm Squadron, with whom I served at the fatal battle of Damarescus. There I was struck on the wing by a Zebra pie, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery. I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Zebras had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Gilda, my orderly, who threw me across her own back and succeeded in bringing me safely to the Equestrian lines.

Worn with pain, and weak from the prolonged hardships which I had undergone, I was removed, with a great train of wounded sufferers, to the base hospital at Saddleworth. Here I rallied, and had already improved so far as to be able to fly about the wards, and even to bask a little upon the veranda when I was struck down by enteric fever, that curse of our Zebrican possessions. For months my life was despaired of, and when at last I came to myself and became convalescent, I was so weak and emaciated that a medical board determined that not a day should be lost in sending me back to Equestira. I was dispatched accordingly, in the troopship *Repeated Evacuation*, and landed a month later on the Manehattan jetty, with my health irretrievably ruined, but with permission from a paternal government to spend the next nine months in attempting to improve it.

I had neither kith nor kin in Equestria, and was therefore as free as air -- or as free as an income of eleven bits will permit a Pegasus to be. Under such circumstances I naturally gravitated to Ponyville, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained. I stayed for some times in the clouds, going through the motions of building a home there as we had been taught in Flight School, but I always had a propensity for living outside my means. Before too long I was deeply in debt to an earth pony named Applejack and found myself having to either seek gainful employment or change my habits.

On the very day that I had come to this conclusion, I was standing at the Soft Serve Soda Bar, when some pony tapped me on the shoulder, and turning round I recognized Gilda, who I had not seen since I had been discharged by the air force. I joined her at the bar for a round of drinks.

"Whatever have you been doing with yourself, Rainbow Dash?" Gilda asked, "You're as thin as a rake!"

I gave her a short sketch of my adventures, only slightly exaggerated. Gilda was many things but above all she was unforgiving of laziness, so I concealed mine.

"Poor devil!" she exclaimed after listening to my misfortunes, "Beholden to an Earth Pony, no less! If you want to rough her up a bit, just give me the word."

"No, Gilda, I don't want the attention that would bring. I simply need to find some more affordable lodgings and a job."

"That's a strange thing. You are the second pony today to express such to me."

"And who was the first?"

"A young filly working at the dress studio on the hill. She was looking for somepony to go halves with her over some nice rooms she'd found which were too much for her purse."

"By Celestia, what a stroke of fortune!" I cried, "I am the very mare for her!"

Gilda looked over the top of her bottle at me. "Dash, I'm not sure how to say this, but this pony was more than a bit of a dweeb."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's never run a race in her life, has some eccentric ideas about fashion, and is a unicorn besides."

"Wow. She does sound like a dweeb. Nevertheless, I cannot allow this chance to pass me by."

"Well, do not blame me if you do not get on with her. Her name is Rarity, by the way."

"Rarity. Well, if nothing else, if she proves as insufferable as you imply, it will be easy to ditch her."

We got up and flew up to the dress shop on the hill. It was one of the new type, an assembly line production where works of art had the finesse scraped away for ease of mass production. Gone were the days of lone artisans, or so Equestria Daily claimed.

We walked inside to watch the white Unicorn hard at work. She was the only one in the room, a vast chamber with unattended sewing machines in lines, like a sweatshop. Unlike the glassy eyed assembly line workers I had been expecting, she was vibrant and animated. She sang softly to herself as she worked, dancing from machine to machine, surrounded by swirls of fabric and glittering sequins. I found myself staring, entranced by the grace and sophistication, until Gilda brought me back to reality with a slap on the back of the head.

"Eyes forwards, Dash. This is Rarity. Rarity, I would like to introduce you to my old friend, Rainbow Dash."

"Ah. Charmed," Rarity said, smiling and shaking my hand with a firmness I would not have given her credit for. Her hoof was perfectly manicured and I felt shame and awkwardness at my own filthy hooves. "You have been in Zebrica, I perceive?"

"How on Earth did you know that?" I asked in astonishment.

"Never mind," said she, giggling to herself and gesturing to her mannequin, "The question is now about the necklace. Do you see the significance of the emeralds?"

"It looks kind of froo froo," I said guardedly.

"Ha! You do not understand. Dressmakers these days have reduced their use of emeralds in craftsmanship due to limited supply, an unfortunate side effect of the establishment of mass production. In order to meet demand, they have taken to the production of coloured glass, which to the untrained eye can be mistaken for genuine emeralds. This type of counterfeit emeralds has been flooding the market and swindling hundreds of ponies out of their savings. But I have developed an easy and practical test to tell the true from the false."

"And what test is this, pray tell?"

"Simply take a metal coin and run it along the jewel. If it leaves a scratch, it is glass. If it is unharmed, it is genuine."

"Good heavens! You experimented with such a thing? What if your theory had been wrong and you had ruined actual emeralds?" I cried.

"It was a sacrifice I was willing to make to advance the cause of justice and, besides, my intuition informed me this was the right path," when Rarity said the word 'Intuition' she turned slightly to show off her flank and her three-diamond cutie mark.

"Well, then, you are to be congratulated," I said.

"I simply have a passing interest in the evolution of crime. A hobby, nothing more."

"If you've finished dweebing it up about your dresses, Rarity, we are here on business," Gilda cut in, "Rainbow Dash needs accommodation and you were whining -" Rarity's eyes narrowed, and Gilda swiftly corrected herself, "- complaining about not finding anyone to go halves with you for the lodgings. I thought I could bring you two together."

Rarity seemed delighted at the idea of sharing her rooms. "I have my eye on a suite in Baker Street," she said, "Which would suit us to a T! You don't mind the smell of perfume, do you?"

"Uh, as long as it's not too girly," I said awkwardly.

"That's good enough. I generally have dressmaking gear about, and occasionally need a model. Would that annoy you?"

"By no means,"

"Let me see, what are my other shortcomings? I have a slight flair for the dramatic and a propensity to lock myself in my room while wearing a dark cape. You simply must not think me sulky when I do this, just leave me alone and I'll soon be right. What about you? I find it's simply a good idea to know the worst of the other before one commits to such a partnership."

I laughed, but felt intensely awkward at having to vocalise my own failings. "I listen to rock music almost exclusively, I get up at ungodly hours to go flying, and get cranky when my naps are interrupted. I have another set of vices when I'm well, but those are the principle ones at present."

"Do you exclude musical montages from your presence?" Rarity asked anxiously.

"It depends on the player," I answered, "A well done musical montage is a treat for the gods, a poor one -"

"Oh, no fear," Rarity laughed, "Daniel Ingram is my composer,"

"Ah, then my concerns are dispelled." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think we may consider the thing settled - that is, if the rooms are agreeable to you."

"When shall we see them?"

"Call for me here tomorrow noon, and we'll go together and inspect everything."

"Very well. Noon exactly," I said, shaking her hoof."

As we left, I turned and asked Gilda, "By the way, how the hay did she know I came from Zebrica? Have you been talking behind my back?"

"That's just her way," she said, smirking, "A great many ponies are curious as to how she finds things out."

"Oh, a mystery is it? I hate mysteries," I grumbled.

"Then you had best study her," Gilda teased, "But be careful not to gaze too deep into the well of sissiness lest you become a sissy yourself."

"Good bye," I told her, and flew away, but as I flew back to my cloud home I found myself considerably intrigued by my new acquaintance.



# Chapter Two

## The Art of the Dress

We met next day as Rarity had arranged, and inspected the rooms at No. 221B, Baker Street, of which she had spoken at our meeting. They consisted of a couple of comfortable bedrooms and a single large airy sitting-room, cheerfully furnished, and illuminated by two broad windows. So desirable in every way were the apartments, and so moderate did the terms seem when divided between us, that the bargain was concluded upon the spot, and we at once entered into possession. That very evening I moved my things round from the hotel, and on the following morning Rarity followed me with an endless series of bags. She had enlisted the help of several earth ponies to help her carry all of her equipment across, and I found myself hiding when I noticed that one of them was the brother of Applejack, the loan shark, and a huge stallion besides. For a day or two we were busily employed in unpacking and laying out our property to the best advantage. That done, we gradually began to settle down and to accommodate ourselves to our new surroundings.

Rarity was a less difficult companion than I had originally envisioned. Other than a constant humming as she worked at her dresses, she was mostly quiet in her ways, and other than a habit of obsessive cleanliness her habits were regular. My own natural tendencies lend themselves to slovenliness, but as long as I kept my mess out of her sight she seemed content to allow it.

Nothing could exceed Rarity's energy when inspiration struck her, and fabric seemed to flow through her sewing machine like water, but when she was short of ideas she became morose and whiny. Now and again, despair would strike her and she would tear apart her designs, and slump on the couch in such a stupor I might have suspected the use of narcotics had not the cleanliness of her life dispelled the possibility.

As the weeks went by, my interest in her and my curiosity as to her aims in life began to deepen. Her very appearance was stunning, turning heads all down the street to stare at her brilliant purple mane and silver-white coat. Her eyes were stunningly blue and, paired with her eyelashes, capable of

great expression. Her perfect grooming, maintained no matter how deep her despair, had me constantly self conscious to my ruffled rainbow coloured hair and filthy hooves. Oftentimes I entertained the idea of asking her assistance in making myself presentable, but my pride - and the memory of Gilda's parting words - forbade it.

The reader may imagine what they will of me when I confess just how much this unicorn stimulated my curiosity, and how often I endeavoured to extract the true mind and motivation behind this fascinating creature. Before pronouncing judgement, one must remember how boring Ponyville was. No races, no weather worth fighting, nopony capable of challenging me physically (short of that Applejack character and her goons, but the less I saw of them the better).

The things she found to occupy her time I also found strange. She hardly studied magic at all; in fact, I found her neglect of it to be far outside all my previous experience with Unicorn battle mages in the army. The few times I saw her experimenting with magic was to perfect some minor cantrip, such as a spell to locate gold or to solidify mud. These tasks, however, were not curios of laziness - she genuinely put as much effort into mastering these trivialities as other Unicorns spend learning the art of Teleportation or Levitation.

Her ignorance was frequently astounding. Of literature, modern music, politics, celebrity and philosophy she knew nothing. I once absently quoted the Red Stallion's famous line about reasons to win and she inquired in the naivest possible way who I might be referring to. My surprise reached its zenith when I accidentally found she was ignorant to even the role of Celestia in raising the Sun! As far as she was aware, this happened via automated means! The thought is still so astounding I can scarcely imagine how this lack of education occurred.

And then, in the most vexing way imaginable, she said, "You appear to be astonished," with that small, cheeky smile, "And now that I do know it, I shall have to do my best to forget it."

"To forget it!" I cried.

"You see, I consider a pony's brain to be like a pony's body, that might be dressed with various skills and fragments of knowledge. A truly stunning

dress is one that is elegant, simple and designed perfectly for its function. Ponies who acquire knowledge they will not use are guilty of over dressing and risk arriving at a show covered with so much unwieldy fabric that they can scarcely move. I have my work; anything unrelated to that work is wasted design space."

"But the sun! The moon!" I protested.

"What the hay does it matter to me?" Rarity interrupted impatiently, "You say a pony raises the sun every morning. If it was raised by an enormous scarab beetle rolling it across the sky it would not make a jolt of difference to me or my work."

I was on the verge of asking her just what such work might be, but her haughty return to her sewing informed me that she was no longer in the mood for conversation, so I held my tongue. An idea later came to me as I flew casually through the Ponyville skies; I could, perhaps, deduce her area of competence by making a list of her talents and determining the logical application for a pony of such skills. Taking a pencil in my mouth, I admit to having a bit too much fun assembling the following list:

Rarity, her limits

1. Knowledge of historical literature: Nil
2. Philosophy: Nil
3. Astronomy: Nil
4. Politics: Feeble
5. Botany: Mixed. Can't tell an oak from an elm but has curious knowledge about plants with practical application
6. Geology: Has a deep and abiding terror of mud, but is oddly able to articulate exactly what type of mud she is currently scrubbing from her hooves and ~~whining~~ complaining about exactly how difficult it is to remove.
7. Fashion: Profound.
8. Medicine: A talented dabbler. Has excellent skill in the few procedures and remedies she has chosen to investigate, and has no talent for curing anything as simple as a cough.
9. Sensational Literature: Immense. I have a deepening suspicion she exists on a diet of sequins and trashy romance and crime fiction novels.
10. Sings excellently when the mood strikes her.
11. Knows predominately spells for locating, sculpting and identifying. Probably couldn't run a race if her life depended on it.

12. Has a good, practical knowledge of Equestrian law.
13. Total dweeb.

When I had got this far in my list, I scrunched it up and threw it off the side of my cloud in frustration. "I cannot think of anything that requires such a random jumble of skills. I may as well give up the attempt at once."

I see that I have alluded to Rarity's skills with music, and these were remarkable, if baffling. She knew a selection of ancient, classical tunes which she occasionally conjured with magic, and seemed capable of coming up with detailed song and dance numbers on the slightest prompting, and yet when I mentioned such household names as the Eurobeat Pony or DJ. Scratch, she gave me a look of blank incomprehension. Her refusal to even listen to their music at many points frustrated me immensely.

During the first week or so, we had no callers, which I found unusual. Surely a pony as glamorous and sophisticated as Rarity was not as friendless as I, an unwashed pegasus from Zebrica? Presently, I began to discover she had many callers. There was a shy, yellow pegasus who wore a leather coat and was introduced to me as Fluttershy, there were occasional visits from Applejack's little sister, Applebloom, and an increasingly colourful assortment of ponies, including a light green unicorn, a grey pegasus and others. Whenever any of these ponies would make an appearance, Rarity would beg the use of the sitting room and I would retire to the clouds and work on re-learning my signature moves.

She always apologised for this inconvenience, "I use this room as my place of business, and these ponies are my clients." She would say, and once again I would be presented with a chance to ask her point blank about the nature of this business, but Gilda's disapproving eyes and mouthed 'dweeb' always came to mind and I would depart without complaint.

It was on the 4th of March, as I have good reason to remember, that I arose somewhat earlier than usual and found Rarity eating her breakfast. The landlady, one Mrs. Cake, had grown so accustomed to my habit of napping that my coffee had not even been prepared yet. With unreasonable petulance I rang the bell and gave the curt intimation that I was ready. I then picked up a magazine from the table and began to page

through it. Books were not my style normally, especially ones as eggheaded and nerdy as this, but I was short of other things to focus upon.

It's somewhat ambitious title was "Art of the Dress", and it attempted to show how much an observant pony might learn from the way a pony presented his or herself. It's most outrageous claim was that even ponies who went unclothed could be communicating as much detail about themselves as ones who had dressed specifically for the event. Deceit, according to the author, was impossible when everypony wore their feelings quite literally on their sleeves.

"What ineffable twaddle!" I cried, casting it aside, "I have never read anything so dweebish in all my life!"

"What is it?" Asked Rarity.

"This article, of course," I said, pointing it out. "It's so impractical it irritates me. Some egghead in an armchair thinks that she can figure anything out by looking at it. I should like to see her actually cram herself into a third class carriage with the rest of us and try to name the feelings of every pony there with her. I bet a thousand bits she wouldn't be able."

"You would lose your money," Rarity remarked haughtily, "As for the article, I wrote it."

"You!"

"Yes, I have a turn for both observation and deduction. The theories expressed there, which you find so chimerical, are really extremely practical. So practical I depend upon them for my living."

"And how?" I asked involuntarily.

"Well, I have a trade. My own idea, actually, and I believe I am still singularly unique amongst all detectives for it," she sipped her tea with a smile, "City detectives are trained in academies by the thousands. Private detectives are a bit a dozen. But I, Rarity, am a Consulting Detective. When these mass-manufactured charlatans require assistance with a case they come to me, and I put them back on the right path. Fluttershy, for example,

is a well known detective. She recently got herself into a muddle about a forgery case, which was why I asked her here."

"What was the problem, then?"

"Simply put that she could not raise her voice enough for the key witness to understand her questions."

"Ah."

"And these other ponies?"

"Mostly private inquiry agencies. I do their work, they listen to my comments, and I pocket a fee."

"And little Applebloom?"

"Ah, to peer too deeply into the politics of the Apple family is to gaze into the face of madness."

"I see. But you mean to say that you can unravel cases that stump these famous characters without even leaving this room?"

"Quite so. I have something of an intuition when it comes to crime. Every now and then something comes up which is more interesting, and I have to investigate myself, but I find that the vast majority of crimes are so easy and banal as to barely require the exercise of my intellect. The rules of deduction, which you so scorned Miss Dash, are second nature to me."

Perhaps something of my scorn showed on my face, because Rarity suddenly seemed very focused. "You remember on our first meeting you expressed surprise at me noting you had come from Zebrica."

"Gilda probably blabbed behind my back."

"Nothing of the sort! The reasoning ran so quickly that I barely noticed it; the train of thought went something like this: "Here is an athletic young pegasus, yet she walks rather than flies, and her wing is stiff against her flank. From this, we can deduce the wound to your right wing. From your association with the griffon I can determine you were part of an elite unit,

and from her subtle deference to you I can determine that you outranked her. Probably Best Young Flier material, then. So what has a pegasus of such skill out of commission and looking for work in Ponyville? The obvious answer was injuries sustained in the line of duty."

"This is quite incredible," I said, "But it does not relate to Zebrica in any way that I can see."

"I noticed the scorch marks around your back hooves from kicking too many lightning clouds. Only Zebrica has weather stormy enough to be regularly weaponized by the Equestrian armed service. Simple deduction."

"When you put it so, it seems obvious."

"Such things are obvious when one thinks in the correct manner."

"You remind me of Edgar Allen Pony's Derpin."

"Bah!" Rarity looked offended, "Derpin was a hack and a fraud. Her habit of breaking into her friends' thoughts after fifteen minutes contemplation was showy and superficial. She had some analytical genius, to be sure, but she was by no means such a phenomenon as Pony cared to imagine. And she was walleyed half the time."

"Have you read Gazelle's works?" I asked eagerly, "Does Lecoq come up to your idea of a detective?"

"Lecoq was a miserable bungler." Rarity said, waving a hoof in a dramatic dismissal, "Only one thing to recommend her, and that was her energy. That book made me positively ill. I could have cracked the case in twenty four hours, and she took six months. And oh, her dress sense! I don't often judge a book by its cover but she was simply an abomination!"

I felt rather indignant. I had thought that Lecoq's style was cool and had a great respect for the Pegasus Detective Derpin. I stalked over to the window grumpily, muttering something along the lines of, "She thinks she's so smart, huh?" under my breath.

"There are simply no crimes and no criminals these days," Rarity said suddenly, dramatically. "What is the use of having brains in our profession?"

No pony has put the same amount of effort into the study of natural talent and crime as I, and what is the result? There is no crime to detect, and if there is, it's some bungling villainy so transparent even one of the mass manufactured detectives at Coltland Yard can see through it.

"I could be famous any time I wanted, miss Dash," Rarity said, suddenly sounding deeply saddened. "I could walk out there, any time, and into a legend. But what would be the point? I do not want to get there by thwarting some schoolyard prank. I need a genuine test. A genuine challenge worthy of these skills I have spent so much time accumulating."

I was still annoyed at her style of conversation, so I thought it best to change the topic.

"I wonder what that fellow is looking for?" I said, gesturing at a black stallion stalking down the street with an envelope in his mouth.

"You mean the railpony-come-mercenary?" Rarity said, with barely a second glance at him.

"Oh, as if," I said disbelievingly, "You have no way of proving that."

The thought had scarcely cleared my mind before the stallion suddenly knocked on our own door. I answered quickly, and he stepped inside without waiting.

"For Miss Rarity," the Pegasus said in a deep, foreboding voice.

"Thank you, on the table will be fine," she said absently.

"Wait!" I said, intercepting him as he turned to leave. My wing ached from the sudden movement but I shook it off. "May I ask your trade, sir?"

"Bodyguard to Miss Applejack, ma'am," he said curtly.

"And before then?"

"I worked on the Railroad. Was injured fighting buffalo. Is there something you need, lady?"



"No," I said, a faint sulk to my voice and closed the door in the stallion's face.

I hated losing.

# Chapter Three

## The Murdered Moustache Mystery

I confess that I was freshly startled by this fresh proof of the practical nature of my companion's theories. My respect for her prowess increased enormously. However, I could not put the thought from my mind that this was some prearranged episode designed to dazzle me, though what earthly object she could have for taking me in was past my comprehension. Perhaps she just enjoyed fooling fillies?

That was... unfortunately phrased.

Ahem.

"How in the world did you deduce that?" I asked.

"Deduce what?" Said Rarity, petulantly.

"Why, that he was a retired railworker!"

"I have no time for trifles," she answered brusquely, and then with a smile, "Oh, excuse my rudeness Rainbow Dash. It was uncalled for. So you were actually unable to see that the stallion had a background in rail?"

"No, indeed."

"It was easier to know it than to explain how I knew it. Well, for starters, his cutie mark was of a boulder on a hill, correct?"

"Indeed."

"This does not indicate a talent for kicking boulders downhill; it is actually a reference to Sisyphus and his eternal struggle to push a boulder up a hill. This informs us that the pony has a talent for hopeless tasks that require great strength. Next, I glanced at his feet. His horseshoes were both a much heavier kind of iron than is appropriate for farming, and irregularly

worn. He has obviously been running over metal surfaces, which makes the railroad the obvious choice."

"And how did that translate to his position as a mercenary?"

"He had bruises along his side, no doubt from ramming buffalo attacking his train, but these were old and faded. Most of his current injuries were around his forehooves and face. From this we can deduce that he has left the rail business and taken to fighting other ponies. His attitude was guarded and subordinate, making him a poor choice for a boxer, making hired muscle the most likely option."

"Wonderful!" I exclaimed.

"Commonplace," Rarity said with a sigh, though I thought I saw a smile in amongst her over-acting. She opened the letter, "Rainbow Dash, I must apologise to you. I just said that there were no criminals, and it appears I am wrong! Look at this!" She threw me the note, which I glanced over.

"Stephen Magnet?" I said, raising one eyebrow.

"Read it out loud for me, will you?" She asked.

I cleared my throat and began.

-

MY DEAR FRIEND RARITY,

I'm sorry for shouting, but Angel said that I should use capitals for my opening. I didn't mean it. Um - I paused in my recital, "She actually wrote 'um'." - Mr. Stephen Magnet, fashion magnate of the river dragons, has been the victim of a terrible attack. He has locked himself inside his mansion and we can't convince him to open up or explain what's wrong. I've tried pleading, beseeching, asking politely and even begging and I'm still not getting anything. Could you please come and help?

Yours faithfully, FLUTTERSHY (sorry)

-

"Fluttershy is one of the smartest of the Coltland Yard detectives," Rarity said, opening her wardrobe and looking through her vast array of hats, "And a River Dragon, particularly one as stylish as Stephen Magnet, is an unusual victim for any crime."

"Shall I order you a chariot?" I asked, looking out the window.

"Oh, I don't know if I'll go. The day is too overcast for my summer hat, and I don't want to over expose my autumn collection."

"What? But you've been whining -" Rarity's eyes narrowed "- Complaining about not having a proper case all morning! This is your chance!"

"My dear Dash, what then would be the point? Even if I was to unravel the case Fluttershy would get all the credit. Although I am... loath to admit it," Rarity's voice dropped slightly, perhaps in anger, "She is far more photogenic than I. And this is the price I pay for being a Consulting Detective."

"That's impossible! You are far better looking than Fluttershy!" I exclaimed, and then realized what I had said and swiftly closed my treacherous mouth.

Rarity allowed herself a smirk, "Well now. If I am able to extract a compliment from Rainbow Dash then perhaps this case has potential after all. Come!" She said, picking out a red and gray hat from her collection and galloping for the stairs, an energetic mood overcoming her apathetic one.

"Wait, you want me to come with you?" I said, hurrying after her.

"Of course!" She said, "I may extract more flattery from you yet, and flattery is best when it's grudging."

Minutes later we were in a carriage rolling over to the palace of the River Dragon, Stephen Magnet. Rarity spent the entire trip nattering about the history of the Moustache in fashion and explaining that Magnet was one of Equestria's leading innovators in the field. Apparently Moustache science was important within Equestria, to the point of having a dedicated school of magic to mastering facial hair.

"I can't say I understand the appeal," I said at the end of the lecture.

"Ah. You're saying moustaches are too manly for you?" Rarity said with a cheeky grin.

As I protested and sputtered, Rarity leaned out the front of the carriage and asked that we be let out. It was a grand and colourful mansion built by the side of the river. A high brass fence surrounded the courtyard, and statues of dragons of various ages and sizes stood throughout the garden. The one thing they all had in common were their luxurious moustaches which, yes, were made out of real hair and grafted on to the statues! Needless to say I found the entire effect enormously unsettling.

There was a police cordon around the house, and Fluttershy was standing in front of the door, quietly pleading into the mail slot. As we approached, she turned, relief writ large on her face.

"Oh, Rarity, I'm so glad you came!" Fluttershy said, "I can't even get the victim to let us into the house, and I think I can hear him crying in there!"

"I see," Rarity said, tossing her mane, "But before we deal with such things, I realize I have not formally introduced the two of you. Rainbow Miriam Dash, this is Detective Fluttershy, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash."

"Charmed," I said, bowing slightly. Fluttershy blushed and stepped backwards, mumbling. I found the entire appearance singularly adorable, truth be told, and became as curious in her story as I was in Rarity's.

"Now, could you explain the problem in more detail to me?" Rarity was asking.

"Well," Fluttershy began, "The neighbours called to complain that there were the sounds of crying coming from this house at about 6am in the morning. A local bobby tried the door at seven and, finding it locked - along with reports that Mr. Magnet had missed his early speech at the Draconic Moustache Convention - called me in."

"And you spent the next hour trying to convince him to open the door before calling me?"

"Yes, that's right," Fluttershy confirmed.

"Well, the challenge still remains. We still don't have any way of opening this d -"

There was a shocking crash as I kicked the door open. The splintered wood creaked as it swung slowly open.

The two detectives stared at me. I folded my hooves unapologetically.

"Good thing I brought you along, Rainbow Dash!" Rarity said, recovering her composure. "Please, follow behind me."

Rarity walked agonizingly slowly, studying the rug underneath our feet with painstaking detail. Fluttershy and I followed a little way behind her and, in the interim, I decided to ask the yellow pegasus a few questions.

"If you don't mind me asking, miss, but what inspired you to join the police force?"

"Well, I originally applied for a police dog trainer, but they kept promoting me." Fluttershy said, looking extremely uncomfortable with the topic, "I think it's something to do with Photo Finish."

"You'll forgive me, I've been in Zebrica. Photo Finish?"

"She's a famous photographer who's taken a shine to me, and..."

We were both cut off by Rarity staggering back from a cabinet she had been examining, exclaiming, "Dust! Dust! Keep it away from me!" I sighed, and gave one solid flap of my wings, which dismissed the cloud.

Rarity immediately straightened, as if nothing was wrong. "Well, that puts everything in context. Come on!" She said, starting to walk at a much faster pace towards the source of the wailing.

We stopped outside a large set of double doors. Rarity peeked around the corner. "Oh dear," she said, "We may have a problem."

"Problem?" Fluttershy said, sounding like she was getting ready to panic.

"Nothing that Rarity can't handle," Rarity said, "Detective, you stay here, Rainbow Dash, with me."

She pushed open the door and even I, who had seen horrors in Zebrica, shuddered to see the terrible sight laid out before us.

A huge river dragon, with vibrant purple scales, was laid out in a bubble-filled bathtub. I say without exaggeration that this creature was large enough to eat a pony in a single bite and, yet, it was wailing and crying like a small filly. His moustache, though... his moustache was a ragged, frazzled, and utterly chaotic mess of orange and blue. It went in every direction and no direction; it stood on end and sagged. It was hideous, to say the least.

"Go away!" the Dragon shrieked, "Go away! Don't look at meeeeeee!"

Rarity glanced at me, winked, and then started walking towards the wailing Mr. Magnet.

"I say, good sir, what a marvellous new style! Such attitude! Such pizazz!" She exclaimed, sounding for all the world like she was delighted by the appearance.

"Wh - what?" Said the River Dragon, turning his head to look at the tiny Detective.

"Oh, the style is absolutely perfect! I was originally worried when *Horns, Thorns and Unicorns* Magazine said that rough-and-tumble was 'in' this season, but now I see how short sighted I was..."

"What?" Magnet said, raising his head, "It - it's in? You're not just saying that?"

"Of course not. Look at my friend here," Rarity said, gesturing at me, "Isn't she beautiful?"

"My word!" said Magnet, bending over to look at my, admittedly, *slightly* roughly cut mane. "She looks like she's never had a haircut in her life!"

While I understood the reason for the deception, I couldn't help but scowl at this treatment.

"Oh, and that scowl! She looks like a genuine soldier!" Magnet said, clasping his hands together. I scowled slightly more.

"Yes. She was to be my magnum opus, but you seem to have outdone me in every way," Rarity said modestly, "I thought I had an original style going with the rainbow, but your blend of blue and gold - genius! So tastefully underdone!"

"Now that you mention it..." Magnet said, gazing into the multi-story mirror.

"See! Once again, the world of fashion will bow to Stephen Magnet!" Rarity said dramatically, "I just need to ask a few questions for all your fans out there."

"Oh, certainly," Magnet straightened himself up a bit. "Ask away."

"What happened yesterday?"

"Nothing unusual. I woke up, spent most of the day at home preparing my moustache for the speech I was to give today, had my dinner delivered and went to bed. When I woke up in the morning, I found myself like this." Mr. Magnet looked abashed, "In retrospect, I should have checked the fashion magazine before overreacting."

"Hm. What did your dinner consist of?"

"Baked goods. Cupcakes, muffins. A little gray pony delivered them."

"Baked bads, more like," Rarity whispered to me, then turned back to Magnet, "Did you have any leftovers?"

"No, I'm sorry. I ordered them from Pinkie Pie's bakery, though."

"I see. And what type of pony delivered them."

"Oh, I can never remember the differences between pony types," Magnet said, waving one hand, "It was gray, and blonde, I think."



"Interesting. Well, thank you for your co-operation. I must go and consult with my colleagues." Rarity said, and walked outside to where Fluttershy was waiting for us.

"I can't say I appreciate being used as an example of ill grooming, Rarity," I said once we were clear from the dragon's presence.

"Oh Rainbow Dash, you make ill grooming look so good!" Rarity laughed, "And anyway, that kind of show is a temporary fix, but it'll take the fashion world six or seven months to figure out. We now have breathing room."

"We shouldn't need that long." Fluttershy said quietly, "I think I've figured it out."

"Do share, Fluttershy,"

"I think that this is a cruel prank. See, a gray and blonde pegasus came in the other day. I think that would be Miss Derpy, the delivery pegasus. She came in to deliver Mr. Magnet's dinner, and then rather than leaving afterwards she hid and pranked his moustache while he was asleep."

"That does indeed seem likely," Rarity said generously, "What do you have to support this evidence?"

"Well, I found this word written on the wall outside Mr. Magnet's room," Fluttershy said, gesturing at a point on the wall, where in vivid pink letters was written the word

## PARTY

"Obviously Derpy's already damaged mind cottoned on to Pinkie Pie's ideas about pranks and pushed her over the edge. A simple case of insanity." Said Fluttershy.

"My good Fluttershy, you've cracked the case! There was clearly no need for my presence here." Rarity said, with what I identified as that same dramatic voice as she'd used when addressing Magnet earlier. "Go bring the fiend in for questioning, Dash and I will take one quick look around and depart."

Fluttershy had a mixture of emotions cross her face, both good and bad - I suspected that she was worried by the prospect she might be promoted again - but I followed Rarity as she lead me down the corridor.

"I'm surprised you haven't said anything, Rainbow Dash. I am sure you have personal experience with this type of poison,"

"You say this was poison?" I said, snapping my head around.

"Of course. The blue spots you should be familiar with."

I gasped, and cursed my foolishness. "Poison Joke! The moustache has been ruined by a dose of Poison Joke!" The Zebras used to coat their arrows in the vile stuff, and there was no cure known to Equestrian medicine. More than one good soldier had been discharged after a brush with the terrible Poison Joke.

"Precisely. This makes it unlikely in the extreme that our courier, Derpy Hooves, was the poisoner. Particularly since I do not believe she even delivered here."

"How can you say that, without even knowing her, or hearing her alibi?"

"Because to take a job as a mailpony one gets used to mud, and dirt, and dust. It is the nature of the job. And yet, the culprit here had a perfect opportunity to do her work in the entry hall - you can see from the prints in the carpet - but she paused and went by the kitchen instead."

"The kitchen? Why?"

"Because the entry hall was dusty, and Magnet was kicking it up by accident as he passed. The culprit paused here," Rarity gestured, "Presumably excused herself and took a roundabout route to the kitchen to avoid getting her mane dirty. She was also average height, about three foot tall, chipped hoof, not particularly physically well built, and could not fly."

"How do you know she could not fly?" I said, mind boggling at all this information.

"You proved it yourself, my dear Dash. One flap of a Pegasus' wings could clear the dust that so worried her, and yet she did not think to do so." Rarity said.

"So, you suspect the baker, then? Pinkie Pie? That would seem to fit clearer with the word PARTY," I suggested, voicing my own suspicion. "And she is known for her pranks."

"Ah yes, the obvious answer. Too obvious by half, I suspect. Firstly the tracks - not one bounce the entire way. Secondly, the fear of dust. Pinkie is something of a slob. Thirdly, I sincerely doubt that anypony who is this serious about partying would write the word that small, tucked in the corner."

"There is that."

"So this is a frame job. Whoever did this has a grudge against miss Pinkie Pie. And, sans other clues to go on, I believe we must investigate Pinkie Pie's bakery to see who might possibly wish her such ill. To the bakery!"

# Chapter Four

## A Point Becomes A Line

"Shouldn't we inform Fluttershy?" I asked as we walked together through the overcast Ponyville streets, "She will be going down entirely the wrong track with Derpy."

"Whoever had a mind to set up this scheme is no doubt watching the law enforcement exceedingly closely to be sure that their scheme has worked. At the first sign of the police showing true suspicion - and they **will** show it in their blundering way - she will go to ground and the trail will become cold."

"I see. It still feels wrong to deceive her," I said, but didn't look Rarity in the eye as I said it. I understood her point but it still grated.

"Trust me, Rainbow Dash, I know exactly how Fluttershy's investigation will progress and she is in no danger of humiliating herself. Fluttershy's suspicions will fall on Pinkie eventually, when she is through questioning Derpy. By then we should have a clearer idea of what's going on."

I am lead to believe that the process of questioning Derpy about her whereabouts the previous evening was one of the most frustrating and confusing moments in Fluttershy's life.

"But what concerns me here is motive," Rarity was saying, "There is something I am missing there. Why go after a powerful fashion guru such as Magnet? If the intent is to provoke outrage towards Pinkamina, there are surely more easy targets than a River Dragon."

"Perhaps she had a grudge against both?"

"Perhaps. We need to gather more data," Rarity said, stopping outside Sugar Cube Corner, "And by we, I mean you."

"What?"

"Well, first off my face is known amongst these parts - who could not know it? - and secondly, Pinkie Pie has not yet met you and I am unsure if I want to be in the room when she finds this out. Go on in, have a conversation, you're a smart girl, Dash, you'll figure it out." Rarity gave me an encouraging clap on the shoulder, and I winced as it made my wing ache. Without another word, she turned on heel and walked back towards Baker Street, leaving me outside the glorified gingerbread cottage.

I took a breath to calm a trepidation I did not yet know the source of and walked into the bakery.

It was astounding, really, how much sugar was in the air of the place. It made my teeth positively ache just being in the room. There was only one other customer, a hunched old gray mare in a coat who was using a walker to slowly navigate the store.

"Excuse me?" I asked tentatively, and then my face was full of pink.

"The cab driver? Are you *kidding* me? That's just silly! You know what would have made the story better? If the detective was the killer! I think I read a story like that one time! It was called Batmare! No, wait, that wasn't it," the incoherent mess of pink moved back a bit and its voice slowed down a touch as confusion overtook it. "Flight Club? But he wasn't a detective! Ooh! This is hard!"

"Good... afternoon?" I said to the dementedly pink earth pony who had sprung up in front of me.

"Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie!" She said. "Said" did not capture half the sheer bubbly enthusiasm the creature put into every syllable, but for the sake of my narrative it shall have to do.

"Rainbow Dash," I said. While I was normally polite enough to offer a hoof to shake, I was almost afraid if I did so I'd never see that leg again.

"Oh! Are you new, Rainbow Dash!? I used to know everypony in Ponyville, and then Ponyville started getting so big and I can't keep track and even when my life is one ongoing party there's still more party than I can fill all by my Pinkie-ownsomes..."

I was beginning to suspect that this creature was the one behind this whole event if only because she seemed insane enough for it. Or perhaps I was hoping she was because if she was in gaol I wouldn't have to listen to this purposeless rambling.

"Miss Pie," I said, attempting to reassert control over the situation, "Did you deliver cupcakes to Mr. Magnet the other day?"

"Stephen? Oh yeah, he gets his order weekly!" Pinkie said, bouncing.

"And you deliver yourself?"

"Oh no, I can't be in *nine* places at once, silly," Pinkie Pie said, and I was struck by how specific that phrasing was, "Some I mail, some the other ponies here deliver!"

"I see. And the ones you mail...?"

"I just put up a sign and an orange and Derpy comes and gets them!"

"You don't see her do this herself?"

"It's best not to bother her when she's working," Pinkie said, face becoming utterly serious for a moment.

The execution of the crime was becoming obvious to me at this point, so I decided to switch tack. "Do you have any enemies, Pinkie Pie?" I asked.

"What? *Enemies*? Are you coco in the loco?" Pinkie said, disregarding the unwritten rules of personal space to stare directly in my eyes for evidence of my insanity. Fortunately the sound of a door slamming behind us gave me the chance I needed to back up a few steps. I silently thanked the old mare for picking that moment to leave.

"I'm sorry I asked. I don't think there's much else to say," I said, backing towards the door.

"Okie-dokie-locie! I'll have you a party as soon as I can, Rainbow Dash, and that's a Pinkie Promise!"

She started going through some ritual swear that seemed to involve promises of defenestration and self mutilation, so I hurried out the door. I actually felt fairly good about how that had gone, all told – I had discovered what was no doubt the means the criminal had used to sneak the poison into Magnet's home. She had simply picked up a crate intended for Derpy, taken it to Magnet's house and claimed she was the mailpony. Rarity would surely be impressed by my findings.

Just as I had that thought, Rarity came around a corner surrounded by a cloud of levitating muffins.

"Rarity?" I asked in surprise, and immediately found the muffins thrust into my hooves.

"While you were being so good as to distract Miss Pie, I went and gathered a selection of muffins from the mail dock, where the prankster no doubt acquired them," Rarity said as she swept past. I began to follow her, tottering under the weight of the muffins. "I left money, of course, but the principle aim is to test these muffins to see if they are also poisoned. Did you discover anything while you were in there, Rainbow Dash?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. "No," I muttered.

"Oh well, you'll get them next time," she said, and although I could see she was trying to be nice I found the gesture quite condescending.

"Would you excuse me, please? I'd like to go for a walk to clear my head."

"Of course. I believe I've got a solid idea of the case in my mind by this point and it won't take too much longer to crack," Rarity said breezily, taking the muffins back from me.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, and walked down the road.

In retrospect, I do not know what had gotten into me in that moment. This was Rarity's area of specialisation; she had trained her entire life to be a Detective, and I had barely stumbled across the concept yesterday. If, say, Rarity entered the Best Young Fliers competition and showed me up my grievances might be legitimate, but that seemed to be what I was hoping to do to her.

Now that I think about it, though, that wasn't quite the case at all. I wasn't hoping to show Rarity up; I was hoping to impress her. To demonstrate that I could at least be of use, at least be a helpful assistant, rather than a puppet sent on distraction missions to ask questions she already knew the answers to. The idea that was cutting at me wasn't envy, it was insecurity.

These brooding thoughts distracted me as I walked, and soon I had lost myself in the simple momentum of putting one hoof in front of the other. Hours passed and the sun began to set, and I found myself walking the dark streets near Sweet Apple Acres. So caught up in both my own angst over my failure to help unravel this mystery which so captivated Rarity, and my clumsy attempts to come up with some flash of revelation that would solve the case, I did not notice the silhouettes in the shadows before me until it was too late.

I could have recognized those shapes anywhere: Applejack, and her brother, Big MacIntosh. I stopped, picked off my coin pouch, and cast it to the ground before their hooves. "There's your money, Applejack. Just like I said," I said, backing up a bit, "I don't want any trouble."

"That's too bad, sugarcube," Applejack said, stepping forwards into the light, ignoring the coins, "Because trouble found you,"

I lunged into the air to flee these landlocked Earth Ponies, but I was instantly caught by a lasso that wrapped around my legs, pulled in a direction that made all my horizontal momentum vertical, and slammed into the mud. All the breath exploded from my body, my eyes rolled randomly and my brain was scrambled.

I will not bore the reader with detailed description of the experience; suffice to say I was too dazed to make out shapes or, indeed, more than slightly distorted words. What I did hear was a third voice, without any of that Apple family twang to it, shout "Enough!"

The orange mare standing over me paused.

The word "Enough," was repeated but this time lower, with more menace, and I could hear the ponies grudgingly step back. I raised my head to see my savior but could not make out more than a jagged, blurred outline.



When I heard the voice continue, “She has to be conscious for this next part,” I became considerably less optimistic about the nature of my rescuer.

A voice, low and raspy, whispered into my ear, “You’re new in town, so we’re going to be friendly about this. Give up playing detective. Go live a safe, quiet life and we won’t have any problems.”

The voice moved away.

I briefly saw Applejack standing over me, saying “An’ you can keep yer stinkin’ money!” and she shoved the coin purse into my mouth, like an apple in a pig. I almost choked on it and caught a last glimpse of her retreating tail as they left me there in the street.

Now, here I must confess to the reader a vice of mine I didn’t have the mind to confess to Rarity on our first meeting. I never give up. After that experience, the last thing I had in mind was a “Safe, quiet life”. I wanted my life to be one big problem that they and all their kind would be drawn into. Perhaps a rash decision, particularly under the circumstances, but I have never been noted for my rational forethought.

I eventually untangled myself from the rope, got to my feet, set my jaw, and started walking back to my accommodations at Baker Street. I was driven by a quiet resolve, and a kind of fury that they had thought that I would bow to their demands. I walked for thirty minutes as cool and composed as any pony past or future. However, the moment I opened the door to my lodgings, my legs decided that this was close enough and I collapsed to the ground.

The motion was made doubly ungraceful for the fact it happened directly in front of Rarity, who was at her workbench with the muffins. She let out a shocked gasp and dragged me over to the bathtub, where she began pouring hot water and applying gentle care to my bruises. Floating brushes expertly began to extract the mud that had coated me from my fall. Some part of me knew that this was the exact kind of girlish spa treatment I had sworn to avoid, but I did not find it within me to resist.

Instead, I decided to focus the mind by making conversation, on what I hoped would be a light topic. “That picture,” I said, indicating a picture of Rarity alongside a purple unicorn. “Who is she?”

“Oh, old friend of mine. Twilight Sparkle,” Rarity said, focusing on my mane, “Knew her a few years back. Unfortunately... well.”

“Well?” I pressed slightly, for the first time hearing Rarity unsure about something.

“Well, I made her a dress. Her exact designs and specifications. And oh, stars and sequins, it was hideous. The ugliest thing I’d ever made. But she loved it, loved everything about it, and I never had the heart to object. She was such a good friend, too, but I haven’t spoken to her in a year or so. Something about her studies.”

“I hardly believe you are capable of making anything ugly,”

“Well, the vast majority of my work is absolutely stunning,” she said, picking up a hairdryer. I suddenly realized that I had recently, silently, accepted the offer to become a piece of her ‘work’. A mild panic struck me.

“Tell me you haven’t done anything – well, anything –“

“Don’t worry, Rainbow Dash,” Rarity said with a grin, “I believe this is going to be the best piece I’ve ever done.”

“You’ve just been waiting for a chance, haven’t you?” I accused, slightly wildly, “One moment of weakness and, BLAM! Makeover!”

“You make it sound like it’s going to be painful!” said Rarity in mock horror, producing a variety of sharp bladed instruments from her bag.

I must, again, point out that under normal circumstances have resisted this kind of girlish treatment more than I did. You must keep in mind the trials of my day before you judge me harshly.

But relent I did and, it was with greatest fear that I turned my gaze to look into the mirror Rarity presented me at the end of the piece.

“I look the same,” I said in surprise. The mud was gone, a few feathers straightened, my hooves less worn and chipped, but otherwise the same.

“My dear Rainbow Dash,” Rarity said, laughing in delight to see my expression, “What would I change?”

I was rendered speechless by that.

“I find you a most interesting case, Rainbow Dash. A Study in Rainbows, as it were. Virtually every fashion and style has gone through my mind in turn – and be sure, if you continue to be such an agreeable assistant you will see some of them – but none of them remotely compare to the basic material. I feel like any dress I would inflict on you would be to promote my fashion career rather than your character.”

“Surely not!” I protested, unwilling in the extreme to accept such obviously fanciful flattery.

“Hmph! I would argue this in circles if I had time but I believe Detective Fluttershy is on her way here and we shall be interrupted shortly.”

“Fluttershy?” I said, and immediately remembered the case of the day which had slipped from my weary mind. “Oh, of course. How do you know?”

“Elementary, Rainbow Dash. The standard chemical test she would have performed on the moustache takes six hours to confirm as Poison Joke, and immediately after receiving that conclusion from her lab she will rush down here to inform me that this, paired with Derpy’s alibi, puts the lantern of suspicion on Pinkie Pie.”

“You know this case before it has even happened!”

“Why yes. And I am nursing a theory about the true culprit’s identity. It was a puzzler at first, but I believe this will all be dispensed with by noon tomorrow. A pity, for a moment there I thought there would be a mystery to it –” Rarity was saying.

Right on cue, there was a very gentle knock on the door.

“Come in, Detective!” Rarity called.

There was another knock, slightly firmer. I glanced at Rarity and then opened the door.

A small white bunny in a police uniform hopped in and offered a scroll to Rarity.

“Officer Angel? What happened to Fluttershy?” Angel thrust the note at her again. Rarity picked it up, glanced it over, and her eyes widened in shock. Wordlessly, she passed it to me.

I cleared my throat and read it out loud.

-

MY DEAR FRIEND RARITY

I’m very sorry about the shouting, but something important has happened. The lab proved that Stephen Magnet’s moustache was destroyed by a dose of Poison Joke. Derpy’s alibi is rocktight; she was attending a crowd scene all last night and has dozens of witnesses. We’re currently looking at the baker as the potential poisoner –

I stopped reading. “Why, Rarity, it all is happening exactly as you said!”

She gestured for me to continue

- But another situation has come up that requires urgent attention. Sapphire Shores, the Pony of Pop, has been the victim of a similar attack. While reports are yet unconfirmed, I believe she has also been exposed to the Poison Joke. I fear the two are related. I would ask your help. If that’s okay with you, I don’t want to be a bother.

Yours faithfully, FLUTTERSHY

-

“Hm, she did not write sorry that last time,” I said looking at the final capitalisation. “Perhaps she is becoming more confident?”

Angel pointed.

“Ah, of course,” I said, “She wrote her apology on the envelope, and apologised for forgetting.”

“But Dash! You see what is happening here!” Rarity said, pressing her face close against mine. She looked panicked, “Somepony is attacking fashion ponies, one by one! And they are moving far faster than I expected! Something must have tipped them off!”

“Well –“ I was slightly nervous to explain my run in with the Apple family, but Rarity didn’t even give me the chance.

“After Shores, they are no doubt going to make an attempt on Hoity Toity – and if they are moving this fast, chances are they will make it at his appearance the Equestrian Art Exhibition tomorrow!” Rarity said, pacing so rapidly I could scarcely keep track of her, “And after Hoity Toity the only remaining member of the Fab Four is Photo Finish! And if we don’t stop them in time...”

“Rarity!” I shouted, breaking her out of her trance. “There’s a time for analysis, and there’s a time for speed,” I unfurled my wings, “And we’ve got *plenty* of speed.”

Rarity stared for a moment, then smiled. “I knew I kept you around for a reason, Rainbow Dash.”

# Chapter Five

## A Justification For Fashion

I am not commonly so churlish as to race down the streets of Ponyville as if it were a battlefield over Zebrica, but in this instance I felt quite justified in my haste. Rarity had instructed me to “Reach the scene of the crime and prevent the police from bungling it before I get there”. While it sounded simple, Rarity’s frequent insulations to the sheer defectiveness of Equestria’s police force gave the task a great urgency.

I screeched to a halt in front of a glorious theatre, open-aired with a long, gem-encrusted catwalk. There were ponies milling around outside, blocked off by a police cordon. Some were giggling, others were looking worried. I approached one of the gate guards and, after a halting start, was allowed in to the scene of the crime.

Detective Fluttershy was sitting with the victim, who was curled up on her bed, sobbing softly. Sapphire Shores was a fine looking mare, it had to be said, but she was in no means her best state. Fluttershy turned to look at me as I entered the room, and shrugged slightly.

There was the sound of laughter from nowhere.

I stopped, looking around, old battle reflexes tensing my body. The laughter got louder, more pointed. “Who’s there?” I shouted, and there was another great roar of amusement.

“It’s the Poison Joke,” Fluttershy said in a quiet voice, and a number of small giggles accompanied it. “It has changed Sapphire Shores’ background music to a laugh track.”

There was a great roar of laughter at this. I winced with sympathy.

“Perhaps we should take this elsewhere?” I said to Fluttershy, and there was a burst of laughter and what I believe were wolf whistles. Fluttershy blushed slightly at the implication and I did my best not to do the same. We

left the raucous room, closed the door, and finally had the chance to hear ourselves think.

“Fluttershy, Rarity has asked you to keep all of your ponies outside before she gets here,” I said, “And also not to let anypony leave without Rarity checking them.”

“Oh, but the crowd that was in here has already been let out.” Fluttershy said, and then lowered her voice a little in shame, “It happened before I got here,”

“The entire crowd!” I exclaimed. “At least tell me the rooms haven’t been disturbed!”

“Well, we had to look to find where Miss Shores had hidden herself...”

“Please, then, send your men outside and keep everypony you can for questioning,” I said, already fearing Rarity’s reaction.

My fears were immediately justified by a dramatic screech from the stage, “Oh, you insufferable bunglers!” Both Fluttershy and myself hurried outside to see Rarity gingerly lifting a bouquet of blue flowers with her magic.

“Rarity!” I cried, but she threw the deadly poison blue flowers to the ground in a fit of pique.

“Just as I feared! – The horsassin threw a bouquet of flowers from the audience, Sapphire picked them up to smell them and was poisoned, and then in the muddle the louts at the gate just let our culprit walk right on out!”

“Oh. We should probably stop testing all the muffins then,” Fluttershy mumbled.

Rarity spun with dramatic rage. She flowed into these moods so often that one would think one would not lose the ability to tell when she was genuinely angry – that thought would be wrong. When Rarity was actually mad there was never any doubt. “So close! She was so close I could almost touch her! So close I can still... smell... Oh!” Rarity hopped down off the stage and started walking through the stands, horn glowing brightly. She seemed half following it, half being pulled along by it.

“Rarity, whatever is the matter?” Fluttershy asked, and I felt inclined to parrot her question.

“A gem! Somepony lost a gem!” Rarity was saying excitedly as she galloped to try and keep up with her horn as it led her through a convoluted search pattern of the stands.

“Rarity, there’s been a crime –“ I tried to remind her, but she would have none of it. Despairing, I turned back to Fluttershy.

“While Rarity is rummaging for spare change, do you mind if I picked up where we left off last time?” I suggested.

“Oh, certainly. What were we talking about?”

“Photo Finish.”

“Oh.” That was not a happy ‘oh’.

“I apologise if I raised a poor topic –“

“No. I just... I just sometimes think she’s more interested in following my career than me.” Fluttershy said, spilling out with a very quiet anger that I had not been expecting, “She keeps saying I will bring Justice to Equestria, but all I’ve ever wanted was to train dogs –“ she caught herself, and put on what I perceived to be a practiced smile, “I’m sorry, what must you think of me telling such things to a stranger?”

“If it is any comfort, I would rather count you as a friend than a stranger,” I said, offering a hoof to shake.

“Fooooound iiiit!” Rarity’s sing-song voice interrupted the moment as she lifted a bright pink gem into the air. It was star shaped, an exceptional cut.

“What have you got there, Rarity?” I asked, hopping down into the stands to join her.

“The piece of evidence that will clear this case for us!” Rarity said with pride. “The culprit dropped this gem, I am sure of it!”



“Sure? But any of the ponies in this hall could have dropped that gem!”

“That is a vanishingly unlikely possibility, Rainbow Dash, as you would know if you had read the guest list,” Rarity said smugly.

“Rarity?” Fluttershy said quietly, “I’ve read the guest list and I don’t understand either.”

Rarity paused for effect. Of course she’d known that neither of us would understand her logic, setting up her reveal perfectly. “There are only a small group of ponies on the guest list who can afford genuine gemstones. There are an even smaller group who own gemstones anything like this little marvel. An even smaller subsection would be carrying blue flowers this evening. And there are none, none, who would be wearing anything with pink star gems in autumn – I mean, assuming the laws of public decency still apply.”

“I believe I must take your word for that one,” I conceded.

“So, if nopony attending this show would be wearing a pink star gem, that leaves only our mysterious assailant who I’d imagine would have sneaked in. And sneaking is difficult to do in a dress, making it likely that this was the only gem she brought with her. And if she brought a large, shiny and gaudy gemstone on a covert pranking mission, it obviously means a lot to her personally. No doubt she planned this attack poorly, due to the haste in which it followed the previous one, and dropped it in her panic. And if it is that much of a sentimental piece to her she will go to great lengths to re-acquire it!”

“Marvellous! If you are right, she’ll come right to us!” I exclaimed in excitement.

“Not if she smells a trap. Fluttershy, I need you to continue to investigate as though you know nothing of this,” Rarity said, “If my guess is correct, you will find the word “PARTY” scrawled somewhere inside this building too. Search until you find it and then send ponies to watch Pinkie Pie. I need you to promise to keep this a secret, otherwise all will be lost. Please! Please-please-please-please-pleaaase!” Rarity said, gripping Fluttershy by the shoulders as she begged.

“O-okay. If it’s that important to the case, then I promise,” Fluttershy said, nodding quietly. Rarity breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Very well, girls! I’ve got to go put an ad in Equestria Daily, and then Rainbow Dash and I shall spring the trap. We’ll have this trickster yet!”

The following day, Rarity and I were sitting together in the lounge room. Rarity was as chatty as ever, telling me of the difference between a backstitch and a croissant – Or something along those lines, I confess I was not paying attention – and I was pacing nervously, constantly glancing out the window. By this point I had become accustomed to Rarity’s way of blathering on; it was, as she put it, “A way to keep my mind alert and agile”, and her voice was melodic enough for me to not consider asking her to stop.

A little after noon, when Rarity had finally convinced me to sit and eat something, there was a loud knock at the door. I hurried to open it and was met with the sight of an old gray mare in a cloak, leaning heavily on a metal walker. I realised after a moment I’d seen her in Pinkie Pie’s bakery the other day.

“Good afternoon, madame,” I said, trying to keep the tension out of my voice.

She looked at me with a curious expression, and then said, “Excuse me, but I saw an ad in the paper stating that you had found the gemstone in my daughter’s wedding ring.”

“Oh, indeed. Come in, come in,” I said, leading her across to Rarity. Rarity smiled.

“You’ll forgive me if I ask some questions to check your story.” She said, “I wouldn’t want to give you the wrong gem by mistake. Dash, if you could write these down?”

“Certainly,” I said, producing a quill and ink.

“I do not mind, this should be a simple matter to straighten out,” said she.

“Very well. Your name and address?”

“Cloud Kicker, 13 Duncan Street, Houndsditch. A weary way from here.”

“Cloud Kicker? That’s a pegasus name,” I asked, looking up.

“My mother’s side,” said the old mare. I nodded.

“And could you describe the nature of the gem you lost?” Rarity continued.

“Well, I did not lose it for one. It was, from the description in the paper, the very gemstone my daughter purchased and had set in her wedding ring. That would be a pink gem, cut in the shape of a starburst, with a faint warmth to the touch.”

“And your daughter’s name?”

“Lyra, Cloud Lyra.”

“Ah. I found this gem in the gutter outside the theatre last night; was your daughter attending the show?”

“I don’t know all her comings and goings, but I do know that if she has lost her gem I should return it.”

“Indeed. Then, is this your gemstone?” Rarity said, producing it and setting it upon the table.

I watched this exchange closely, holding my breath, looking for any sign, or twitch, or flinch.

The old mare turned the gemstone over in her hooves, then set it down and said “There can be no doubt that it is.”

“Well, then, I would not wish to deprive your daughter of her wedding ring,” Rarity said, “I am prepared to call the matter closed. Please, take the gem,”

“Thank you,” said she, picked it up, and walked out the door without another word. Rarity and I stood in silence as we heard her footsteps go down the stairs, and the slam of the door as she left.

“This is it!” Rarity cried in delight, “Either she is telling the truth, in which case her daughter is our assailant, or she is lying and is in cahoots with her! Quickly, Rainbow Dash, follow her at a distance and see where she goes! Either way, she will lead us right to the criminal!”

I did not need to be told twice. I peeked out the window just in time to see the old mare hail a carriage, tell the driver, “To 13 Duncan Street, Houndsditch, please!” She got inside and drew the curtains, and I jumped out of the window and began to follow.

I maintained a medium-altitude glide; slow and precise enough to remain perpetually out of view of any of the cab’s windows, fast enough to keep the cab continuously within my sights. I had been trained for such stealthy flight in the air force, and I can say with utmost confidence that I never let the cab out of my sight for a heartbeat.

And yet, when the driver pulled up outside thirteen Duncan Street and opened the door, there was no pony inside. The driver began to give the finest assorted collection of oaths that I had ever listened to, and I, perched on a nearby rooftop looking at the empty carriage knew that, somehow, I had been fooled.

It was with great reluctance that I returned to Rarity to report that somehow the old mare had escaped from a sealed cab underneath my very nose.

“Troubling, but I do not believe this is a total loss,” said she.

“Not a total loss!” I cried, “I held the culprit in my hooves and let her get away!”

“But the process has given us one last, very important piece of data, Rainbow Dash. One piece of data which could break this entire case wide open. But before we can rely on such data, we must rely on intuition. Intuition tells me that the criminal will strike again at Hoity Toity’s art exhibition this evening, and if my luck holds I will be able to catch her in the act.”

"I hope you are right, Rarity." I said, but Rarity was smiling.

"And, as an added bonus, there is simply no way for you to get into an art exhibition without a brand new dress!" Rarity said, rubbing her hooves together.

"You know, the detective stories I read as a filly seemed to involve a lot less dressing up for some reason," I said, though in truth I was already resigned to the prospect.

"Like I said. Derpin and Lecoq were amateurs compared to me," said Rarity.

# Chapter Six

## The Truth

At this point in my narrative, the reader is surely forming an uncharitable opinion of me. Here we have, you surely say, a brash young Pegasus who has served alongside Griffons and Hippogriffs, who has caused thunderstorms over Zebrica, who has broken the sound barrier in her early days - who is, surely, the epitome of coolness. And yet, you proceed with your observations, here she is indulging in the most girlish and dweebish behaviour imaginable alongside a girlish dweeb by the name of Rarity. Surely there is a contradiction, you observe, and begin to doubt if my 'cool' credentials were ever genuine.

To a degree, I must concede the point, but I remind the reader to keep in mind the circumstances. I had spent many weeks with Rarity by this point with only the most minor concessions to her ways, which I assure you is no easy feat. Secondly, the old injury to my wing kept me from entertaining my regular hobbies. Thirdly, the sheer adrenaline of the chase and the drive to apprehend this vile trickster made a concession to fashion more palatable than I would have been. Finally, I defy anypony who would judge me for caving in to Rarity without having been on the receiving end of her manipulations.

So, when I resume the narrative on the note of Rarity squeezing me into an extremely girly dress, I beg the reader not to think less of me.

Ahem.

"And now just a little bit of eyeliner to finish the effect," Rarity was saying.

Actually, I have decided it is for the best if I skip my narrative ahead just a little.

"There! What do you think?" Rarity said, turning the mirror around to face me.

For a moment, I thought she had showed me one of her posters or a particularly large piece of design art. It was many long moments before I realized the gleaming pegasus in that mirror was me. My mane had been straightened - at the cost of the lives of many brave combs - and tied back into a magnificent ponytail, and yet my fringe remained as rough and wild as if I had just been flying through a storm. I was wearing a necklace with amethyst grapes and a toga design of sky blue and rainbow fabric, fluffed with clouds near the edges. It was lighter than air, so light that it didn't seem to weigh me down or impair my movement or my wings, so light that I suspected more than a little magic in its construction.

I am not a pony who knows anything about fashion, this I confess freely. And yet, I thought that in that dress, in that moment, I looked *good*.

"Do you like it?" Rarity pressed, breaking me out of my reverie.

"I am... amazed," I confessed, "The last thing I looked remotely presentable in was my uniform."

"Oh! You absolutely must show me at some point!" Rarity said, looking delighted. As she spoke her own dress began to assemble itself around her with a glowing magical display. It would have been an impressive transformation sequence if she hadn't spent the entire time talking about military uniforms and the dressmakers who had both designed them and designed dresses based off military designs.

"Indeed, Rarity," I said, "But we must hurry; the show starts soon!"

"Oh, of course!" said she, looking as if she was about to gallop for the door but remembering her dress and exiting in a stately walk. We hailed a carriage and were transported swiftly towards the Guggenhorse Museum. As usual, Rarity continued to ramble, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

"And you're sure the criminal will make her appearance here?" I interrupted a, no doubt fascinating, lecture about Sky Pirate influences on pre-modern designs.

"Oh, why yes. She has been spooked, and twice, and if there's one common thread in pony nature it's that when a pony is spooked they make

poor decisions." Rarity said, "She will be here tonight. I will know her when I see her."

"How can you be so confident?" I said, "I mean, I have nothing but respect for your skills, but how do you know for sure?"

Rarity gave a small smile, but she said nothing.

We arrived, and began to walk towards the gate of the museum. Ponies lining the red carpet turned their heads to stare at Rarity. I didn't presume to think that any of them would be looking at me; I was clearly a simple soldier, no matter what I was dressed in. The doorpony didn't dare ask the name of Rarity and unhooked the line to let her in. We strode into the huge circular chamber. Immediately, my eyes went to Hoity Toity, who was sitting on the top floor, gazing down on the dancing ponies below him, eyes unreadable behind his reflective violet glasses.

There was music in the air, lively and classical, and ponies were dancing, talking, or admiring the paintings. There were a lot of ponies, but the room was huge, giving plenty of space to move about. I scanned each of the four floors in turn, looking for anypony who looked suspicious.

Rarity stepped forwards, flicked her mane, and her horn started to glow. "After me, my dear Rainbow Dash," said she with a smile, and I knew then that she had the scent of the criminal's gemstone.

Making our way through the party was like navigating the lines of a terrible thunderstorm, and only Rarity knew how to fly. Just as we neared the stairs she raised a hoof to stop me and whispered, "No, there is Consul and he is an insufferable boor; we shall be drawn into an endless conversation if we pass by him. We must go around,"

And so we turned and made a circuitous route to the second staircase. Rarity was still following the direction of her horn, but constantly adjust it to avoid those who would draw her into conversation. Just as we reached the top of the first set of stairs Rarity raised a hoof to her lips and pointed across to the other side of the hall.

The old mare in the cloak was standing there. Looking right at us. Then she began to move at a hurried pace up the stairs.



I spread my wings to lunge after her, but Rarity bit my tail and pulled me back. "No, Dash!" she said, "The security pegasai will stop you, and it'll take too long to explain to them! This way!"

Grudgingly, I started to follow Rarity. She was going slowly, far too slowly for my sanity, but I reminded myself of what it was like to be a young filly following a teacher's lead on how to navigate a hurricane, for that was the most apt metaphor for the situation. I smiled as Rarity gave a friendly greeting to a pair of unicorns as she passed them, I nodded politely as we got held up by a talkative old gentlecolt until Rarity was able to extract us by flowing into another conversation. Every time I worried about wasting time I glanced across the hall and saw the old mare trapped in a conversation with some dullard, and my spirits were lifted. We were overtaking her!

This dance of conversations, excuses and departures continued until we reached the top floor, and walked sedately towards Hoity Toity, who was surrounded by security. Evidently he was wise enough to take extra protection after the attacks on his peers. This was my first good look at Hoity Toity, even though I had known of him before I had met Rarity.

They said that he was found at the bottom of the ocean in a fridge, and the first thing he did upon being released was criticise the fisherman's hat. They said that once every ten years he ate a single mouthful of grass to calibrate his criticism appropriately. They called him the Incorruptible, the Classiest, the Stig - all anypony knew for certain was that he went by the name "Hoity Toity".

"Mr. Hoity Toity," Rarity said, and I heard she was slightly out of breath - she was intimidated by this stallion, I realised.

And so was I. There was no telling what was going on behind that mirrored gaze.

In the panic of the moment, I blurted out my warning before he had a chance to address us. "Mr. Toity, I believe somepony is going to attack you tonight."

"I see. Most ponies settle for attacking my senses," Hoity Toity said, glancing down at the ballroom, "I suppose it was a matter of time before they progressed to attacking my person -"

At that moment, the old mare burst up the final set of stairs. I cried, "That's her!" And lunged, throwing my wings open and flying for a high speed tackle. There was an impact as I hit her, and we tumbled head-over-heels into the word.

And I heard a terrible ripping sound.

I outright stopped breathing. In that moment, I didn't care about the criminal. I just cared about discovering where I had damaged Rarity's beautiful dress. This, as it turns out, was a terrible mistake.

I was lifted into the air and cast aside. I managed to grab a mouthful of the old mare's cloak as I went, and there was another long rip as I tore it off with me. All throughout the hall there was a gasp.

The criminal, the poisoner, the evildoer - I knew her face. I had seen it in Rarity's picture.

"Twilight Sparkle!"

She shook off the disguise and the illusion that had cloaked her purple fur and revealed her true face; a brilliant purple unicorn, horn crackling with magic, and dressed in - in -

I apologise, even today I find myself struggling to write down details of Twilight's dress. I am not, as I have stated to the point of parody, a fashion pony but this was...

It looked like she was dressed in a tablecloth. The fabric was so thin and limp it rippled and creased as she moved. It was emblazoned with stars, suns, moons and planets in a garish over-designed pattern. She was wearing a headdress with four antennae-like stars upon it. And for some reason, the purple and black of the dress was matched with teal bows on her chest and tail. There was no co-ordination, none whatsoever.

And she wore a golden tiara - the one nice thing in her outfit - with a bright pink star gemstone set atop it.

And what made it worse, infinitely worse, was the knowledge that Rarity had designed this monster.

After getting over their initial shock, Hoity Toity's security attacked Twilight. And I had seen unicorns in the throes of magic before, but I had never seen anything like this. She jinxed every single one with an original and creative hex, turning one into a pot plant, giving another an outlandishly sized head, and summoning a swarm of small winged fly-like creatures to carry the third out the window. This hardly seemed to slow her down, and she smiled menacingly as she produced a bouquet of blue flowers from behind her. Her eyes were glowing with incandescent white light.

For my part, I was pinned under a pile of glowing purple magical rocks, unable to struggle free, and I could only watch the Unicorn's rampage.

Hoity Toity didn't so much twitch an eye muscle. "My only regret," he said, looking his end in the eyes, "is that I am to be done in by one dressed so utterly hideously."

"YOU!" Twilight shouted, rage lifting her into the air on wings of violet magic, raising the flowers as if she was about to strike him with them. Hoity Toity gazed on impassively.

"STOP!" Shouted Rarity, jumping between the two.

The glowing purple Unicorn stopped in mid blow. Confusion crossed her features. "Stop?"

"You can't do this!" Rarity shouted.

"Did you HEAR what he said?" Twilight said, voice raising and thunder rolling behind her, "He called your dress ugly! They ALL called your dress ugly!"

"AND THEY WERE RIGHT!" Rarity shouted back.

That stopped the purple unicorn in her tracks.

"I'm just standing up for you -" she started, but Rarity, burning with anger, stepped up to her. She seemed so small against the crackling purple mage, but she didn't let so much as a flicker of fear cross her face.

"They all told the **truth**. They all gave their opinions honestly. And I needed that! Without ponies to tell me when I'm on the wrong track, how will I learn to do better?"

"But you worked so hard!" Twilight cried.

"No matter how hard I work, I can't force anypony to like something they don't like," Rarity said, "And I can't go around attacking them just because they don't like what I like."

Twilight fell into a stunned silence, and Rarity continued.

"It's good you wanted to stand up for me, Twilight, but only if you're protecting me from liars or haters. If somepony has an opinion that's different from yours, you have to understand and accept that and take it on board, and not just assume that they're wrong. And different opinions and genuine criticism help us do better next time. The worst thing you can EVER do to an artist is to tell them they're doing fine when they're screwing up."

The light went out behind Twilight's eyes, and she slowly fell to the floor. Her magic began to undo itself - the pot plant returned to a pony, the inflated head shrunk down with the sound of air being let out of a balloon, and the swarm of insects returned the kidnapped pony and left with a "Sorry for wasting your time, sir." The rocks pinning me also dissipated into thin air.

Twilight was beginning to tear up. "I'm so sorry, Rarity -"

"Don't tell me you're sorry," Rarity said, "Give me your *honest* opinion."

Twilight stopped in place. She shuffled a little, and eventually said, slowly, "Teal and *purple*?"

Rarity threw back her head and laughed, loud and melodic, no trace of that anger on her face, "I don't know what I was thinking!"

After a moment, Twilight began laughing as well. I joined in, and shortly thereafter Hoity Toity let out a low chuckle. On his cue, everypony started laughing - an honest, genuine, friendly laughter.

The next day, I was drinking my coffee, and Rarity was working on repairing my dress. I had apologised profusely but she hardly seemed bothered by the damage - indeed, claiming to enjoy the challenge of fixing it.

"Rarity, you must explain your approach to this case to me," I said, as I took a drink.

"Oh, I would be delighted. After we catch the real criminal, of course," said she, as cool as one pleased.

I spit out my drink.

# Chapter Seven

## Reichenbach Falls

Rarity levitated over a cloth and began to soak up the spilled coffee as I stared in shock.

"But Rarity, we solved the case! Twilight Sparkle was the poisoner; we caught her in the act!"

"Dash, I know Twilight," Rarity said, staring through her orange glasses at the tear she was looking at, "She is certainly smart enough to come up with a plot to poison the four greatest fashion ponies in Equestria, but even at her angriest she would never, ever try to frame Pinkie Pie for it. And if she did, which is impossible, certainly not in such a clumsy way."

"What are you saying?" I said, mouth agape.

"I am saying that Twilight Sparkle has no way of accessing the rare and exotic Zebrican plant, "Poison Joke". I am saying that Twilight Sparkle has no motive for framing Pinkie Pie. I am saying that Twilight Sparkle would not employ the Apple family to attack you in the street." Rarity said, turning to face me.

"You knew about that?" I said, having previously hoped to keep the details of that particular failure from Rarity's ears.

"Rope burns on the legs, and yet you still had your money afterwards? It was apparent. There was something else at work there."

"A third voice did speak to me, when I was down," I admitted, "warned me away from the Detective business."

"And that voice is, no doubt, the one behind all of this. That figure is the one who set this whole chain of events in motion. And I have no doubt that we shall confront this mastermind at Sweet Apple Acres," Rarity said, putting away her sewing tools, "And I must again thank you, Rainbow Dash. Were it not for your run in with Applejack this entire layer would have

passed me by as naught more than an inexplicable mystery. Thanks to you, I am now certain of where this criminal resides."

"Rarity! You compliment my failures far too much!" I protested

"Imagine what it must be like to please me then," Rarity said with that easy smile as though there was naught in the world the matter. "Now, I shall fetch you another cup of coffee and we shall head across presently."

I had to pause to marvel at Rarity's courage; she was prepared to walk into Sweet Apple Acres and the heart of this mysterious schemer's power, and her only concern was picking which hat she wished to wear. Rarity decided we should walk, even though I was having reservations about the stormy clouds overhead. While I personally had no fear of wet weather, I was concerned for the state of Rarity's hat, and I only just now realize the sissiness of that sentiment.

We opened the farmyard gate and made our way towards the bright red barn unmolested. Rarity was quiet, something I found slightly unsettling after having become accustomed to her constant light banter. I felt the mood chill as we reached the barn and heard only silence from inside.

"Ah, it seems we are expected," Rarity said, indicating a note stuck to the farmhouse's front door. I took it and, as was becoming my habit with Rarity's mail, read it aloud.

-

## RARITY

You crossed my path on the fourth of January, on the twenty-third you incommoded me; by the middle of February I was seriously inconvenienced by you; at the end of March I was absolutely hampered in my plans; and now, at the close of April, I find myself placed in such a position through your continual persecution that I am in positive danger of losing my liberty. The situation is becoming an impossible one.

I am quite sure that a pony of your intelligence will see that there can be but one outcome to this affair. It is necessary that you should withdraw. You have worked things in such a fashion that we have only one resource

left. It has been an intellectual treat to me to see the way in which you have grappled with this affair, and I say, unaffectedly, that it would be a grief to me to be forced to take any extreme measure.

This is not danger. It is inevitable destruction.

-

"This is he!" Exclaimed Rarity, "Long have I seen his hoof at work as I plied my trade. He whispers lies into the ears of ponies, he manipulates siblings and orchestrates betrayals. Had he his way he would turn everypony against every other, and end friendship between any except himself. A dangerous colt, and cunning."

"Ah, see there is a post script," I said, turning the letter over, "If you wish to pursue this matter to its most inevitable conclusion, meet me at Reichenbach Falls." Why, that is in the Everfree Forest!"

"My good friend Rainbow Dash, I must go after him. To allow this miscreant the pride of scaring me away I can not endure, even if it means walking into his trap."

"I feel the same. There is little I would prefer than to settle my argument with Applejack," I agreed.

Together we walked through the vast and empty apple orchards and into the looming darkness of the Everfree. It towered above us, primal and raw, as though it would consume all fashion, all civilisation, all life. And yet, Rarity went in, like a seraph carrying a lantern into the darkness. I followed. How could I not?

The walk was long, the woods misty and cold. The weather was untended, somehow managing itself with neither the blessing of Celestia nor the labours of the Pegasus Ponies. A miniature Zebrica within the heart of Equestria. Creatures dwelled in the undergrowth that set our manes on edge, but we stayed on the trail and were fortunate in the peace we encountered.

Finally, we emerged onto the hill above Reichenbach Falls. The rocks were cold, wet and muddy. A river of thick, black tar flowed from some terrible



crevasse deep in the mountains. It flowed right to the edge where it poured off in a long, sticky flow, dripping like treacle, filling an enormous lake of the vile black stuff. Here and there along the riverside were twisted, dead trees. And there, standing right by the side, looking into the distance was a figure in a dark cloak and hat.

Cautiously, we approached. The wind this high was cutting, and though I was used to it, Rarity had to lower her head to make progress. The walk towards that isolated, cloaked figure seemed eternal, but neither of us were willing to dignify him by calling out to him.

"Are you familiar with the liquid in this river?" said he, gazing off into the distance, as we made our way cautiously closer.

"It is a type of tar that is singular in its stickiness. It never, ever washes out. It never, ever comes off," the cloaked figure went on. "The last pony who fell into the stream had to be shaved bald."

He turned around dramatically, and we got our first true look at this mastermind, this manipulator, this evildoer, this blackguard!

He was a purple baby dragon, in a top hat and cape, with a luxurious black moustache that looked like it was held together with the very oily black tar that flowed in the river. He let out a cackling laugh and a gout of green fire from his mouth.

It ignited prepared lines of black tar we had not seen, and encircled us each with a ring of fire. I spread my wings and began to fly but, too late again, realised that was the motion the concealed Applejack had been waiting for. A lasso caught me around the midsection and dragged me to the ground.

"Got her, Spike" Applejack was telling the dragon as I shook stars from my eyes. "Should I dump her in the river?"

"No!" said the dragon, Spike, said, "That is not nearly complicated enough! Dangle her from that tree and slowly lower her in!"

"Dangle her - what?" Applejack said, "That seems mighty complex for no good reason."

"Just do it! There's a way to do these things!" The dragon said, and the orange earth pony shrugged. In short order I was dragged into place, hooked over a tree branch, and Applejack began slowly lowering me head-first towards the bubbling black tar.

Meanwhile, Spike had turned his attention towards the trapped Rarity.

"It has been such an elegant dance, my sweet," he was saying, twirling his moustache, "I, the most dangerous criminal, and you, the foremost champion of law. It has been almost intimate, how well we have come to know each other's minds. Every crime, every scheme was set up with the intent of testing your abilities, and I was not disappointed. Each trial you overcame, and proved yourself all the more worthy to be my girlfriend."

Rarity scoffed, "Your girlfriend! The nerve!"

Spike growled, stepping closer to the ring of fire. "I am the Napolecorn of Crime! I am Spike the Terrible! I am the mastermind behind every crime worth noting of the past two years, and I have made your career! Without me, where would you be? Sitting at home in Baker Street, unravelling petty mysteries about glowing dogs? No, Rarity, you NEED me. I am the Luna to your Celestia; the Trixie to your Twilight; the Spiky Masher Plate to your Aristotle. Without me... you are nothing."

Rarity did the worst possible thing she could have done to him.

She laughed.

"You! You are a blunderer and a fraud! You pour lies and poison into ponies' ears and they do all the thinking for how to commit the crime, and then you come in afterwards with some petty, small minded and transparent attempt at misdirection. Only you would be pathetic enough to try to frame Pinkie Pie. Only you would be pathetic enough to try it three times. And only you would be pathetic enough to attack my friend on the street out of *jealousy* and reveal your entire scheme in the process. And you *should* be jealous, because Rainbow Dash is more a man than you, with your fake, oiled moustache could ever hope to be!"

"Well, we shall see how amazing your beloved Rainbow Dash is after she's dipped in oil and shaved bald!" Roared Spike in fury, "Applejack! Drop her!"

I braced myself for the end.

The tension went out of the rope.

I fell.

I remember reflecting that it wouldn't be that bad. I'd have to stay inside for a few months. Maybe I could learn to sew.

My face hit cold, hard stone.

I had never in all my life been so glad to have my face hit cold, hard stone. And my face has hit stone more often than I care to admit.

"Uh, no," said Applejack, "I signed up for this 'cause you said these two were spies for the Lemon family, not to help you with your creepy crush." She pushed her hat back, looked down at me, and offered me one hoof. "No hard feelings?"

I grinned and took it, and Applejack pulled me to my feet.

"You can't do this!" Spike was saying as Applejack and I started towards him.

"Aw, if it were up to me, I'd let you go," Applejack said, raising her forehooves, "But Bess and Punchy here, they get awful mad when they get lied to, *and they been drinkin' all morning!*"

I swooped up and cleared away the flames surrounding Rarity with a few solid beats of my wings.

She started advancing on Spike, who was backing up to the very edge of the Falls.

"Stay back! Stay back!" He shouted. He produced a scroll from his cape and held it over the edge. "Stop! This is the cure to the Poison Joke - any closer, and I'll drop it!"

Rarity lowered her head and jumped.

She hit Spike, teeth fastening around the scroll, and they both tumbled over the side.

"NO!" I shouted and lunged over the edge, spreading my wings and catching Rarity in my hooves half way down.

Spike caught Rarity's tail in his teeth, but his hat blew off and fell into the black, bubbling soup below.

Rarity was looking up at me with infinite courage in her huge, blue eyes. "Rainbow Dash, take the cure and drop me."

"No!" I said, struggling to keep aloft. In the old days, I could have carried four ponies and broken the sound barrier all in the same movement, but here, now, with my aching wing that had never healed properly it was all I could do to stay aloft. We were losing altitude fast.

"Dash, listen." Rarity was saying both quietly and firmly, using her magic to slip the scroll into the brim of her hat, and then place it on my head.

"Magnet and Shores, they won't survive the Joke. My coat will grow back."

"No!" I shouted again, and yelped as Rarity bit my hoof in an attempt to dislodge my grip.

"Dash! You have to let go, or we'll both go down!" Rarity was saying, her voice more panicked now.

"NEVER!" I shouted, but it was futile. We were inches above the muck now. Below, Spike's feet were almost touching the black filth. Rarity bit my hoof again in another fruitless attempt to get me to drop her.

But then a thought came to me.

"Rarity."

She looked up at me, her teeth still biting at my leg.

"You think short tails are in this season?" I said.

It was with a wicked smile that Rarity conjured a pair of scissors with her magic and snipped her long, beautiful, purple tail, dropping the heavy baby dragon into the thick black muck.

With that weight gone, I soared.

It was no Sonic Rainboom. It was no Loom of Doom, no Buccaneer Blaze, no Comet's Keelhaul. It was, in fact, an awkward, ungainly flutter. My old instructors would have hung their heads in shame, my old unit who was used to seeing me do the impossible would have been disappointed to their cores.

But it was not that the moves were graceful, or fast, or precise. It was the fact that I could do them at all. That I could make myself fly with only half a wing. The best kind of impossible.

We made it to the bank of the tar lake. I clipped a tree as I passed and my wings gave out, and we both fell into a huge mud puddle in a tangle of limbs, feathers and hat.

"Mud!" Shrieked Rarity, pulling herself free almost immediately. She stopped in mid movement, and then turned her head to look at the huge tar lake, where a faint black silhouette was struggling to swim to the shore.

"You know," she said, "Now that I think about it, mud isn't so bad."

I laughed as I got to my feet. My wing was cramped and aching, but I was too elated to think straight.

"You know," Rarity said with a little smile, "When I first met you, I made the guess that you were the Best Young Flier in Equestria?"

"Yes," I said, catching my breath, "You told me as much."

"I was right," said Rarity.

\*

We made our way back home, not bothering to wipe the mud off. We laughed the entire way. Each time we tried to return to normal conversation, one look at the mud-coated other would dissolve us into laughter. Laughter so relieved and joyful that tears ran down our faces. The looks passing ponies gave us, mud-soaked yet well-dressed maniacs, made us laugh even harder.

We entered our room at Baker Street together, still laughing, but stopped to see a worried looking Detective Fluttershy sitting at our table.

"Fluttershy!" Said Rarity, "Whatever is the matter?"

"It's... it's Photo Finish. She's been attacked with the Poison Joke." Fluttershy said.

"What!?" Rarity exclaimed, "Impossible! We have Twilight under lock and key! How did she -"

"It wasn't Twilight," I said quietly.

Both turned to look at me.

"It kind of fits her modus operandi..." Fluttershy started, but I cut her off.

"But not her motive," I said, walking towards Fluttershy.

"I-I don't know what the problem is, surely there's not that much of a difference between two poisonings and three," Fluttershy was saying worriedly.

"It matters," I said, coming eye to eye with the little yellow and pink Detective.

"I-I-I-I-" she stammered.

And burst into tears.

"I JUST WANTED TO TRAIN DOGS!" She wailed.

I wrapped my hooves around her and patted her on the back as she bawled.

"There there. It's all right," I said comfortingly. "We found a cure. We can make this right. You're not a bad pony, you just made a bad decision."

"Y-you did?" She said, looking up at me with huge, watery eyes. "I'm... just not sure I want to be right! I don't want things to go back to normal! Please!" She was outright begging at this point.

"Fluttershy," Rarity said from behind me, "What exact effect did the Poison Joke have on Photo Finish?"

"Oh," she sniffed, "Every picture she takes has a pancake photoshopped onto everypony's head."

Despite myself I let out a chuckle.

So did Rarity.

So did Fluttershy.

And in an instant, we were all laughing again.

"Don't worry, Fluttershy. We'll help you," said Rarity, and I nodded in agreement.

"If only to make sure it's pancake time whenever you want a break from policing." I said.

\*

And so ends my narrative.

Rarity, of course, refused all of my suggestions to have it published. She claimed, as was her way, that it was "A poor show of her talents", against "Unworthy or misguided criminals", and "Better consigned to the dustbin of

history". I was unable to sway her, and yet, here I am, submitting my poor account to the public of Equestria Daily.

This is not a decision I made lightly. My friend was quite clear about her wishes to remain incognito, and that she was quite sure that a superior case would eventually come along that would finally meet her expectations. But I believe she is wrong. I believe that no case, anywhere, will ever truly challenge the incredible intellect of Rarity the Unicorn. I believe that the casual, low level detritus cast about by her wit is still so above that of the average pony that it deserves fame and admiration. And I believe that sometimes a friend cannot see how amazingly talented they are, and that there is a point where modesty becomes insecurity.

I know my lamentably slow and tedious style does not do justice to the instant wit and flashes of insight that are my companion's norm, and I know that my heavy hoofed prose will often drag the reader out of the story to marvel at my poor turns of phrase or mangling of language. All I can hope is that I have somehow managed to communicate some of the sublime finesse with which my best friend, Rarity, handles every part of her life.

If anypony ever needs a mystery solved, you can always find us at 221B Baker Street.

Yours sincerely,

- RAINBOW MIRIAM DASH

*--The End--*