

Tangled Up In Blues

By The Descendant



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Chapter 1

The Manehattan Blues

I once learned an interesting fact, when I was a foal, about ships and the sea.

It turns out, you see, that if a ship's captain dies while the ship is out on the ocean that the crew is supposed to fly a blue flag, and paint a blue band around the ship's hull.

This tells other ships that the afflicted craft is under the command of a junior officer, someone who may not have all of the experience needed to properly handle a ship on the water.

The crew of that ship, the one painted blue, may suddenly find themselves being asked to do things in a new way, or may not like their new ranking officer. They may begin to become tiresome, they may put their hooves to work improperly and they may become "lubberly".

If this happens, the crew may be said to be "feeling at their blues".

Or simply put, "feeling blue".

I feel blue a lot of the time... 'cause I am. You see... that's my name. I'm Blues.

Hi.

You've probably seen me around. I'm the one who always is running unknowingly towards the danger. I'm the one who, if something falls, it falls upon. I'm the one who is the first pony in line for something horrible, and the first one to be told "Sorry kid, all sold out!" when waiting for something good.

Painted blue.

I had always been a bit of a klutz, even when I was a foal. I remember

when I got my mark...

That's stupid. Everybody remembers when they got their mark. That's kinda the point of getting one, isn't it? Never mind. Lemmee start over.

What I'm trying to point out here is that the way I got mine is related to that early bit about the color blue and the dead sea captains. Except, there's no dead nautical ponies, so don't worry if that was going to put you off of reading this.

I should really just tell the story, shouldn't I?

I...I always loved music, you see. I knew I was going to get my mark in music. It simply had to happen that way. So, I wrote this big long sonata. It was about ships and the sea and all that other stuff that sells a lot of copies. I took my horn and went down to the big park that overlooks the harbor in Manehattan...

Oh, did I mention that I grew up in Manehattan? That's kinda important.

Anywho, I went there, down to the rocks that overlook the harbor, next to the tiny monument erected by some unknown individual to the memory of an "amiable foal" who died doing something or other in a year now long forgotten. There I unfolded my composition, the song I had written over the course of a year, and laid each sheet carefully before me on the rocks.

I lifted my horn to my lips knowing, every fiber of my being absolutely sure, that this beautiful work, this opus, would award me my mark...and it would be magnificent to behold.

I felt the reed with my tongue...I inhaled.

Suddenly, rainbow.

Not just any freakin' rainbow either. It was amazing, terrifying, startling. It flashed across the horizon with an audible boom...it leapt from deep within Equestria out to the sea beyond the harbor.

I exhaled in concert with it, but it was not my work that flowed through the horn, oh no! It was instead an insipid "bwargle", a note of high-pitched

shock and awe. At that, carried both on the wave of sonic clarity that emitted from the rainbow and my own disastrous exclamation, my sheets of music flew into the air.

I watched, my whole frame and expression falling, as they danced on the air and then down to the river below. I watched them coast down into the harbor as long as I could see them...until they were gone down into the sea.

There was the sound like a falling star sliding over an ice-covered lake, and I felt a sensation like quicksilver running down my flank.

Without blinking I stood and walked to the monument, to the tiny tomb of the "amiable foal". There I looked at my flank in the shining surface of the granite. My mark...two plain eighth notes, one bigger than the other.

It was nothing exceptional, nothing amazing, and nothing of my own making. It wasn't my music that had brought on the mark...it had been my failure to perform it.

Painted blue.

I ran my hoof over the monument, knocking away some detritus that clung to it and then thought on the life that was commemorated there. With my horn hanging loose at my side I made my way back into the city.

I walked for a long time, walked with my head down, bouncing off of the occasional streetlamp, post office box, and doom-speaking sidewalk prophets.

By the time I lifted my head from a posture better suited to examining the sidewalk I realized that I was far from home. I was in the older, less picturesque part of the city.

"Hey colt, let's see dat' horn."

Upon hearing those words I knew that any number of possible outcomes faced me...few good and many involving bodily harm. As I turned I saw an older stallion sitting on the steps of a row house. He nodded at me and I, utterly ignoring all of the good and practical information my mother and

father had imparted to me about interaction with strangers, approached and presented him my horn.

"Not ah' bad horn," he says, "Ya' any good at it?"

"Yes, but...not today, today I..." I began. Before I could conclude he had put it in his mouth and was getting ready to play.

My mind began calculating the amount of disinfectant I would need to deluge my horn with before I would risk putting it in my mouth again, but that line of thought stopped immediately when the old stallion blew my mind clear out of my little blue head.

The music he was playing was like nothing I had ever heard before. I watched him play with my mouth hanging open. I didn't think that it was my horn, it was as though he'd magically changed it into something that could read my soul.

That or he had realized how depressed I was as he saw me coming down the street...probably the later.

"How can a colt wit' such a fine horn have such a look about 'em?" he asked as he finished the song.

I proceeded to explain to him how I had lost my song, how the loud rainbow thingy had screwed up my mark.

"Ah...now ya' feelin' it, aintcha?"

"Feeling what?"

"Da' blues, colt, da blues! Ya' feelin' 'em, ya' lookin' 'em, you even colored like 'em!" he said with a growing grin.

"That's...that's my name...I'm Blues," I said, struggling to understand what he had said.

At once he started to giggle, then laugh, and at once he stood and entered his house, his laughter following him up the stairs and after he had closed the door. I was left standing there, standing in the street with Manehattan

flowing around me...confused, hurt...blue.

Painted blue.

In a matter of seconds the door came open again, and he emerged speaking as though he had begun a conversation somewhere within and had been arguing it successfully with himself. He gathered up an object that he carried carefully with him down the steps.

"...the colt's even named Blues! How's that, how's that! He's got the look on 'em, ya' gotta be for the colt."

I looked on in fascination as he opened a huge dirty case. I could see his name on the inside of the case, written on a label in immaculate hoofwriting, but I could not yet see what he'd taken out.

"Now, colt, you got yourself a mark, and it ain't bad...it ain't bad. You wear the blues, both in yer' color and in yer' face, now ya' gotta wear 'em in yer' heart," he said, affixing a strap to something he kept hidden.

"Old Moody Blues, I see it in 'ya."

At once he looped it around my neck. I looked down to see a saxophone, a big old dirty one, sitting before me.

"Go on, colt, giver 'er a go!" he says, motioning to the sax with a big grin.

I wanted to explain to the stallion that I don't know how to play a sax, but instead I simply laid my hooves on it, and from there it was easy.

I ignored all of the good and practical advice my mother and father had given me about not putting strange things in my mouth and put the reed to my lips. The horn tasted old, it was heavy in my hooves, but here was magic in it, and after a few uncertain notes I began to make music.

I can remember the song, "I'm so sad, oh so sad," it implied with its tones, and I felt a part of myself evaporating through the sax, leaving me.

I can remember Moody Blues sitting on his steps, his head bobbing with the music, ponies leaning out of their windows to listen, and ponies

stopping as they went by to watch me play. I even remember a little orange filly about my age, the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen, who slowed down as she ran along the street for a moment to listen before she pelted off again.

When it was over, Moody stepped up to me.

"Yours is ah' world of hurt, Blues, and yah' kin' thank Celestia fer' it," he said, rubbing my mane, "Yer' pain and hurt is gonna be big, and it's gonna seem like it goes on un' on. But, colt, when ya' sing the blues...people listen...and yah' know the great secret of the blues?"

I shook my head in ignorance.

"Yer' always alive tah' sing 'em, colt, yer' alive tah' sing 'em," he says with a final grin, "They take da' pain out, make it somethin' good, somethin' good. Wear yer' blues well, colt, you gonna earn every drop of em'. Yer' gonna be tangled up in blues."

With that he went up his steps into his house, clicking on the porch light as he did, leaving me in its glow and the sax in my hooves.

Painted blue.

When I got home that night my parents were already frantic, relatives having been sent to search for me. They wanted me to explain where I was, what had happened. When they saw my mark they wanted to be happy for me, but I was silent.

With their worry growing they ran their hooves through my mane, begging me to speak. I simply motioned them to the couch, and they sat.

I took out the old sax and played. Their eyes went wide, and my uncle Take Five, always a great lover of music of all types, whispered, "How does a colt that young know how to play the blues like that?"

Twenty years later, more or less, I stood outside Ponyville.

I had many experiences before this, more times where the blues had played a role in my life, but outside that beautiful little city...that is where

my troubles really began.

I had heard that the Princess Celestia had determined to hold the annual Summer Sun Celebration in the small city that year, for reasons of her own, and I figured that there might be a gig available for me to play.

I had determined to make my living with my music. Like most musicians who have made similar decisions that meant I was actually working odd jobs. This meant I was free to travel...granted that there wasn't much cost involved.

The first thing I did, of course was track down whoever was supposed to be in charge of the music. When I found her she was singing with some birds, and when I cleared my throat to speak with her the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen turned to me...

...and then promptly stared at the ground.

To say that the following conversation was excruciating would be an understatement. The more I tried to give my references and explain my availability for the ceremony the less verbal she became. Fluttershy, I later learned she was named, soon was speaking in squeaks and whimpers. This, while adorable, certainly wasn't exactly financially beneficial.

Painted blue.

I excused myself and found my way into the city. There I found that one local hotel, "The Seabiscuit", was holding a post-ceremony party and I offered my services. Now gainfully employed, if at least for the evening, I turned my attention to finding some more immediate income.

Finding a nice little spot in the middle of the downtown I opened my case, took out the sax that Moody Blues had given me all those years before, and set myself up a spot to play. Before I began I looked at the big hoof-written label he had affixed inside, his neat script pointing out his former property.

"Here I go, Moody...wish me luck..."

Even before I had taken my first breath a pink earth pony, the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen, stopped and stared at me. Carefully adjusting

my case so that she could see how pitifully absent it was of bits and currency of any type I took a breath...

Unfortunately, so did she. "Aaaahhh!" she exclaimed, quite loudly, "You're new in town, and I guess that means that you don't know anyone..."

Her concern on my part was adorable and appreciated, but unfortunately her sudden and utterly surprising launch into the string of thought had made me accidentally swallow my reed, and it was now in the process of suffocating me to death.

"...and it's not good to not know anyone, so we have to figure out a way for you to meet ponies..."

As she continued her soliloquy of revelation I laid there thrashing about on the cobblestones, choking and wheezing, begging for air.

I would say that I started to turn blue, but...well, you know.

"...and the best way to do that is to have a party!" she said, grabbing me up in a much welcomed hug. I can say welcomed because the act, while comforting on an emotional level, also acted to dislodge the reed, allowing me to resume the whole breathing thing to which I had become accustomed.

"I'm Pinkie Pie," she said with a big manic grin.

"Blues," I answered, panting.

"I'll see about that party, talk to you later Blues!" she said, cantering away. I watched her go, seeing her lively steps, hearing her happy humming.

"Wow," I thought, "That she's do that for me..."

At once she stopped and did pretty much the exact same thing, absent the asphyxiation, this time for a unicorn filly and what I guessed was her pet dragon.

My head went down to the cobblestones. There sat my reed, recently evacuated from my windpipe. I picked it up and rolled it over and over in my

hoof.

I looked up then to see that a big old stallion with a white beard and crumpled hat had been watching the whole comedic episode. "You poor bastard," he said, tossing a couple of bits into the saxophone case, and then he trundled on his way with his cart clattering along behind him.

Painted blue.

I looked to the bits, examining them as they sat there shining in the sun. With them I purchased a month's rent on a three-room apartment above a store that, amazingly, only seemed to sell quill pens and sofas.

Returning to the hotel I hid my sax in the bandstand, looked through the sheet music that the other members of the impromptu band had set up to be sure I knew the tunes, and then went back to my new and utterly unfurnished apartment for a nap.

I awoke in the dark. I walked through quiet streets to the hotel. There was no one there. The clocks all said that I was on time...but as I stood there, alone, no pony came to hear the music.

I took my sax from its case, flipped it over a few times, and played. I kept my word. When my set was over, heard by no one, I put it away, cleaned out my spot, and went back to my small apartment. It was still dark, I realized. I didn't care.

Painted blue.

It turns out that an ancient demon had possessed a hitherto unknown (or at best mythologically implied) sister of Princess Celestia about a millennia ago. During a cataclysmic battle Celestia had been made to choose between allowing Equestria to wither and die or suffer her sister to be trapped within the moon in a death-like slumber along with the demon. She had chosen to let her be trapped there until the stars aligned properly.

It turns out that as I was walking to the hotel the demon had returned, banished Princess Celestia to within the sun, and threatened to cast Equestria into an eternal night.

I hate it when that happens.

So, as I had stood alone in the dark hotel, belting out the blues to nopony, some of the ponies of Ponyville (including the three I had met or seen that day) used ancient magical artifacts to defeat the demon, free Princess Celestia, and rescue her sister from beyond the gates of death.

That worked out fine because there was a second party and I finally got paid.

As I cleaned up after that gig I met Pinkie Pie again. She introduced me to some of her friends, and promised me that she would get a party all planned out to introduce me to everyone just as soon as everything settled down.

Months passed...no party. Oh, she was trying, but it seemed like she was always busy with something else or I had a job that night. She was obviously sad that we were unable to make a date, but I didn't mind...too much.

Painted blue.

I actually started to make a nice little life for myself in Ponyville, and was meeting plenty of ponies by myself. Big Mac was one...I ended spending a lot of time with him, especially when he was looking for day help.

I had tried my hooves at a lot of things, but agriculture was new. I got to like it, kinda. It was hard, but honest, and it paid the rent when musical appreciation was at a nadir.

The best part of working on the farm was the spread that the Apple clan put out at the end of the day. I often wondered what their profit/loss margin was with all the food they prepared for the help. It was good to have a dinner that didn't come out of a can...even if sometimes that dinner was really a late lunch of about six pieces of apple pie with lots, lots, and I mean lots of extra cheese slices.

Those were the nights I was very glad one of my three crusty rooms was a serviceable bathroom.

It was as I had returned from working at Sweet Apple Acres one warm day that I had the distinct feeling that something unusual was transpiring in Ponyville. I couldn't quite put my hoof on it. There was something definitely odd, something different...something obviously atypical...

I guessed that it had something to do with the masses of winged blobs that were flying around devouring the entirety of the city in an orgy of destruction and mayhem.

"Blues! Saxophone! Borrow!" called a pink bolt that flew past me. As I looked to her Pinkie Pie called back, "And I'm sorry we haven't had that party yet!"

"Saxophone?" I thought as I began running, "Why would she want my saxophone?"

As I crested the top of the hill and entered the road that lead to The Quill & Sofa I saw that part of the building was already serving as a buffet for the blob-things. At once I thought of my apartment, my sax...

I ran faster.

I arrived at the top of the stairs to an unusual sight. There stood my apartment, untouched. It in fact teetered on a timber beam as the flying little blasphemies lazed back and forth across the sky, nibbling on nearby structures.

I opened the door carefully. Nothing had been disturbed. I breathed a sigh of relief, and then quickly sucked the air back in...the gesture had sent my apartment swinging back and forth across the sky.

There was a buzzing sound, and to my horror one of the blob-thingies came bobbling into my sitting/living/lounging/spare bedroom.

I held my breath as it circled around one, twice, three times, and quickly left, its tongue hanging out in disgust.

It was then that I realized why my apartment had been spared. As I listened to the screams of the ponies in the street below I ruminated on the apparent fact that my stained curtains, moldy bathroom, and few sticks of

furniture were not of sufficient worth to be eaten by an all-consuming flying waste disposal unit.

Painted blue.

I grabbed my one item of worth, the saxophone Moody had given me, and carefully picked my way down what remained of the stairs.

By the time I found Pinkie all that was left to witness was, apparently, a group of her friends surveying the twisted burning wreckage of our little city, their eyes awash with uncertainty and pain.

I hate it when that happens.

I showed Pinkie that I had, in fact, brought my sax. She smiled at me. "Thanks," she said, "But I took care of it. I think that we have to look to fixing up Ponyville now...so, no party again..."

"It's alright," I lied.

I return to my apartment I gingerly make my way up the steps, and placed my hoof on the doorknob.

As I did it comes off in my hoof, and the timbers that supported the whole works gave one resolute groan and flew into splinters, sending my apartment crashing to the ground.

As I looked on aghast the wood of the steps beneath me began to creak and groan as well. At once they gave way and I crashed down, down, down into the store below.

I awoke to find that I had landed on the very last couch that Davenport, owner of the shop and my landlord, had in stock. As he stared at me, hours of fighting the parasprites etched into his face, he smiled at me. I smiled back. "You lucky..." he began.

At that point the springs of the sofa (protesting being left behind, I suppose, while all of their kin had been devoured) exploded from the sofa at once. This had the effect of launching me a few feet into the air and then dropping me onto the cold floor of the Quill & Sofa.

"I'm adding that to your rent, you know," Davenport said as the smile vanished from his face.

I gave him the doorknob, picked up my sax, and headed to Sweet Apple Acres in hopes of spending the night in their barn. It turns out that they had been hit as bad as anyone, and the family huddled together for comfort. So, that night I slept beneath an apple tree as the stars wheeled overhead, fireflies flashed, and I composed a song.

"It all comes crashing down," sang the notes that flew from my sax there in the dark, "It all just comes crashing down, nothing lasts."

Painted blue.

We got to work rebuilding the city, and within hours Royal Engineers had arrived. As the magic of the three races worked in concert the city was rebuilt at a surprising rate.

My apartment was rebuilt, complete with a new (if saddeningly springless) couch. I didn't return right away. I went home.

Well, home as in to my parents. I had missed Manehattan. They had missed me. They did all the regular parent stuff; they overfed me, they asked me about work, mom wondered why I wasn't married with foals yet.

After a few days of this I needed to see Moody.

I had visited with Moody Blues many times since the day we had first met. When I was still a foal I had come seeking instruction on how to play the blues, but as I grew he showed less interest in instructing me on how to play, and grew more interested in teaching me what the blues "meant".

I never once saw the inside of his house. All of our time together was spent on the stoop of his rowhouse, watching the city scenes that sped by, watching Manehattan flow like an oil painting before us. We watched the thousand little stories of the ponies that passed before us unfolding like a foal's picture book as we sat there on the steps.

Not exactly as eloquent as all that during snowstorms and driving rain, but

always interesting.

He had begun playing his sax as I played mine, said he was ready to play along when my song "Had gotten da' right mellow to it."

"Hard times, hard times, leave me alone," implies my song, begs the notes that float out into the street, "I'm a pony of sorrow, hard times...please leave me alone."

His song matches mine, but older, fuller, his experience sounding from his sax.

His was the exact same make and model as the one he had given me, though newer by decades. The only thing that revealed it to be anything other than a regular off-the-self model was the tiny little "M.B." engraved beneath the neck screw, the little initials proving to any that cared to witness that it belonged to the old stallion.

"It's breakin' in real good, real good," he had said, "Taste's like a mule's shoe, though!"

As I had arrived that summer we spent the whole afternoon sitting on his steps drinking iced tea and eating watermelons.

He listened intently to my story of my life in Ponyville. I sensed that he was very interested in my life. I never asked him about his...I got the sense that he had no foals, or was estranged from them. The house was always silent. Somehow I got the feeling that he looked at me as a surrogate son...

"Now don't go getting' the idea in that blue head o' yers' that you're some kind of surrogate son to me, colt," he had said, stretching, "but I want ya' to know I think yer' doin' a fine job, yes indeed, Blues yer' wearin' yer' blues just fine, mighty fine..."

I nodded, not really finding it a compliment, but not wanting to argue with him. It was as though he thought I was some kind of steel, being tempered by all of this nonsense as I went through life.

As the sun went down we played together a little bit more, the notes of the two saxophones blending with the twilight that fell between the rowhouses

in visible shafts, ponies listening from backyard gardens, the little notes drifting to ears in nearby living rooms through windows left open in the heat.

He stood, stretching, and rubbed his hoof through my mane, just like he had on that first day we met. He looked tired, older than I remembered. Still, his smile was wide, and he spoke with the same tone I had first heard all of those years ago.

"Colt, yer song, it's comin' 'long sweet and good, sweet and good, but soon, Blues, colt, yer' gonna hafta deal with that one thing that makes the life o' every stallion so very painful...the thing that drives all colts mad and all stallion down inta tears..."

He looked at me, and I looked to the sidewalk for a long second, guessing what he meant.

I looked back up to him...

"Kidney stones?"

"Mares, colt, mares!" he said wiping his hoof across his face. "Mares and fillies, dat sweet agony which has inspired da' most wonderful insanity which any male has had to dwell upon!"

He shook his head at me and laughed, and turned to enter his rowhouse. As he entered the doorway he stood there, looking back to me, his smile small, looking very old and weary.

"When yer' song knows that, then'll know da' blues, colt. That's when yer' song will be good un' ready, Blues. Good luck to ya'."

With that the door closed, and the porch light came on. Once again I was left alone in the streets of Manehattan as the streetlights were lit and the city drifted into darkness and silence.

Chapter 2

The Ponyville Blues

That summer had been awesome.

I returned to Ponyville just in time to catch a bustling party season. I played gigs that went on until obscene hours of the morning...more than once I met my milkpony leaving my one little bottle as I was coming home.

"Cheers!" I would say, my eyes blurry and my sax case chiming with bits. I'd down the whole bottle in front of him before going upstairs to sleep for an immensely satisfying two hours before running off to whatever job I had organized that day.

Of course, if there were parties, Pinkie was there. She'd come up to the band and try to scream over the music. Of course she'd be in the middle of screaming into my ear when the music would stop and her cry of "Still trying to get that party for you together!" would ring in my ears for the rest of the night.

Of course, it ended. As the leaves changed color my last real job of the year was the closing ceremony of the "Running of the Leaves" marathon. I was almost late...some pony had thought it funny to turn one of the signs around and I ended up halfway up a mountain before I realized that it wasn't the most likely spot for the venue.

Painted blue.

That winter had been hard. My apartment had been rebuilt to exacting standards...no gap smaller than an inch. It was so cold that I turned...oh, right.

I did a lot of work that winter for Sweet Apple Acres, mostly hauling logs and stacking firewood that they would sell. In time I got to know more and more ponies and soon I had found that I had blended into the scenery of Ponyville, it seemed as though I was part of the very background of the city.

I learned what it was like to be an earth pony in Ponyville when winter was winding down and I received notice that I was to be part of the annual Winter Wrap-Up. I found this out when the most beautiful mare I had ever seen, this one named Rarity, delivered to me a brown vest that marked me as one of the "plant" or "earth tending" teams.

Neat.

I realized pretty quickly that this was a rather important event for Ponyville, and that they put a lot of work into it. I mean, in Celestia's name, we had rehearsals for the theme song alone for three weeks beforehoof!

On the designated day I made my way to city hall, listened to the mayor's bland little speech, and then made my way to Sweet Apple Acres where Big Mac's sister Applejack, who must be the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen, instructed us on how we were to clear the fields of snow.

There was a part of me that wondered if perhaps it wouldn't be better to let the snow melt on the ground and therefore fertilize the good earth without extraneous effort but tradition is tradition I suppose.

Anywho, I hooked up to the plow and off I went, criss-crossing across the endless fields and trying my best to look like I knew what I was doing. I started getting into a groove after about the third time I tipped the stupid thing over in the ruts.

Painted blue.

After a while I had gotten into a real cadence, and even though I was panting and heaving I felt like I was contributing, I really felt like I was part of the life of Ponyville. I really, really, really felt like I was part of a bigger story...like I was really home.

I looked up the hill as I went by to see that one filly and her pet dragon talking with Applejack. The unicorn started down the hill and sat behind a plow. I puffed myself up and did my best, once again, to look like I knew what I was doing.

As she came down the hill I saw that she moving pretty quick. Of course,

the closer she came the faster she went.

Of course, as she came racing by, her face full of fear and surprise, her cries filling my ears, I could almost picture what would happen next. It happened in slow motion, one continuous drawn out expression of misfortune...

With that, the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen, unintentionally but factually plowed snow all over me. It filled my ears, it went in my eye, the little bits of dirt from the field that clung to it entered my mouth, crunching in my teeth. The big old dirty wet snow of a dying winter slid over me, soaking me...

I turned my face to the horizon, and as her screams again grew near I sat there resigned to the pounding inevitability of it all...

With that, she did it again, and this time I am utterly covered with it.

Painted blue.

I clean myself off, shivering from the cold. I hear Applejack yelling at her. I heard the filly, Twilight Sparkle, start to cry and she began to run away. I was not enough of a stallion to stop her and tell her that it's okay. Instead my back was to her as she went, and I am instead upset, and I wondered if this is what Moody meant by mares being a good source of the blues.

I can't even begin to image how wrong I am. Within hours my education will begin.

Twilight Sparkle, that filly, saved Winter Wrap-Up, and I'm happy for her and her pet dragon. I am asked by the mayor to play with an ensemble at a party marking the end.

There's a small crowd, most ponies being too tired for festivities after their exertations of that day. Those who are there are vibrant and happy though, rejoicing that the winter was now gone and the spring now here.

Once again Pinkie Pie was there. Once more she screamed "We'll have that party for you soon!" into my ear at exactly the wrong moment, exactly as the music ended. I suggested a date as my ears rang, one I selected at random and long way off in the future. She frowned and said she had a

party for an alligator planned for that day.

Likely story.

Painted blue.

As I play I can't help but see that one unicorn is keeping to herself, she's drifting around the party, speaking to nopony, but trying to seem involved.

She notices me looking at her, our eyes meet, and I look away. This happens again...and again. As my set ends she canters over to me, and I blush. She's the most beautiful filly I've ever seen.

"Hey, I'm Seafoam," she says.

"I'm Blues, nice to meet you."

I stare at the unicorn for a few seconds. We talk about music, the weather, what she does for a living. As the lights come down we walk together through Ponyville's streets, talking about...stuff. As it gets colder I find her leaning into me, seeking warmth. It is an incredible sensation.

I walk her home to her apartment. Her roommate does a horrible job of eavesdropping as we wrap up our conversation.

"So," she asks, "are we dating or what?"

I'm stunned, and I stammer like an idiot for a second.

"Yeah...yeah, sure," I say, "Would you like to go to dinner tomorrow?"

"Yes...yes I would," she says, turning and heading up the steps into her apartment, bumping into the poorly hidden roommate as she does.

"See you tomorrow."

"Absolutely," I answer as she smiles at me and the door closes. I don't go back to my apartment. I walk the streets for hours. Even as Luna's moon glides away, I walk. Even as it gets frosty and the pale dawn hides awaiting Celestia's magic, I walk.

"Cheers," I say, greeting my milkpony, and then finally I go to bed.

The next two months are the most...interesting, of my life to that point. Seafoam is a beautiful girl, smart, and seemingly very happy. She was a lot more, well...fluid than I am. She liked experiencing new things, new ponies, new ideas. She's was also very physical...she wanted to be next to me, lay with me, wrap herself around me.

I hadn't pictured it...somepony actually wanting to rub beside me, to lay her head into mine, to run hers up my crest to my withers and back. That somepony wanted that of me. A kiss as I came off the stage, given to me, waiting for me.

Like all unicorns, her magic is visible, radiating from her horn. To an earth pony, whose magic lies within, it's always amazing to me to see it at work.

"So, ummm," I stammer as we sit beside the fountain, throwing bread to the ducks, "What is the basis of your magic? What does it revolve around?"

"Oh, this," she answers, dividing the water in the fountain into cubes that float through the air.

Neat!

"So," I say, leaning closer to her, placing my hoof on hers, "Why are you here in Ponyville? Wouldn't your powers be better used in...well, a place close to the ocean, or besides a lake?"

With that the cubes crash to the earth, and she pulls my hooves around her.

"Can we talk about something else?" she asks, her voice breaking a bit.

"Sure, yeah...sure," I answered, just the littlest bit of panic in my voice.

In hindsight, I understand Seafoam. She was a flighty thing, unsure of herself. I think of her as though she was looking for a clarion call...as though she was listening for a song to call her home. It's like she was a female bird listening for the call of a male to bring her to a new nest site.

That's the best way to look at it, I think, considering what happened next.

We are down in the market as spring is fading into summer. The first round of crops were available and we were looking them over, embracing the scents of the freshly pulled vegetables and picked fruit.

At once I come around a corner, and she's staring. I followed her gaze, and it lands square on a huge freakin' pony who's at least twice the stallion I am. I think the jerk assaulted the testosterone reserves and plundered them all just to grow his chest hair. His beard alone looks like it absorbed half of the manliness in Ponyville.

"Hey!" he cried, holding aloft a tool of some organized sport of which I have no real interest, "Who's been using my racket?"

As he looked the crowd over Seafoam stared, her mouth hanging open. Suddenly I hear Moody's voice in my head, "Mares, colt, mares," and I begin to understand.

Painted blue.

She is quiet for the rest of the day. We go to dinner, speaking about trivialities, and I can see her mind racing. She kept looking up, kept meeting my eyes and then looking away.

You're flitting away from me, little bird.

Is my song not clarion enough, does it not invite you?

We walked by the river, over the bridges. Out past the gardens where insects came and went, silently standing together watching the wind blow through the sea of grass outside the city, past the statue of the pony that stands namelessly in the path that leads to the forest...this is where, I knew, our story was ending.

I walk her up to her apartment.

"Blues," she says with a sigh, "Can we talk?"

Oh Celestia.

"It's not you it's me..."

Oh Luna.

"I think we should see other ponies..."

Just make glue out of me.

"I hope we can still be friends..."

"Sure," I say, "Good luck...with everything."

I felt that was a better way to go about it than ripping my beating heart out of my chest and flinging it before her as I wailed and begged for Celestia to smite me with the power of the sun and let my ashes drift away on the four winds.

She forced a smile, turned, and entered her apartment. Her roommate, whose name I never asked, gave me one long confused look and then closed it behind her.

I don't go back to my apartment. I walk the streets for hours. Even as Luna's moon glides away, I walk. Even as it gets frosty and the pale dawn hides awaiting Celestia's magic, I walk.

I met my milkpony at about four. He stared at me, and I back at him. "Bad night, kid?" he asks.

"Not particularly good."

"Filly troubles?"

"Not anymore."

He gave me my usual little bottle of 2%, but stopped me before I can open it. He rifled through his cart, pulling out a bottle of chocolate milk.

"On the company," he said, shaking the bottle. He placed it in my hoof and

I flipped off the cap, letting it circle on the paving stones.

"Cheers," I answered, slowly sipping. He moves on as the dawn rises, and soon the smells of the city come to life. Bread in the bakery, breakfasts of all types, and stale water being released from cisterns...these all reach me as I sit on the stones outside the Quill & Sofa.

I went upstairs. As I put away my sax I take a second to look at Moody's beautiful hoof written label once more.

"Do I have questions for you, old stallion, do I have questions for you..."

Then I slept.

Painted blue.

Two weeks later I played a gig for some sporting event, a lunch benefit for some charity or another at a local club. As the band started up the athletes are introduced. They come in one at a time, our music playing, the cameras of the paparazzi flashing as they smiled their perfect smiles.

I recognized him right away, the bearded one with all of the manliness. I am utterly unsurprised that Seafoam is by his side.

How is your new roost, Seafoam, is his the song you've been waiting for...or are you soon to hop to another fencepost and listen once more?

She doesn't see me, thank Celestia, but as soon as our first few songs are done and we take our first break I dump all of my bits into the cases of the other musicians and leave.

As I do I see her face one last time. Her expression is exactly the same as it was when we were dating. She's unchanged. I am different.

I followed the little rivulet that runs through the club down to a brook. The brook led to a stream; the stream led to a mill trace near one of the bridges across the river.

I sat there and played. I played a song that I had written in mere moments.

"Oh, my baby done left me for another stallion," it went, or at least I suspect it would have went if it had words, "and now I am so sad." It is exactly the same as half of the other blues songs I've ever heard, half I've ever played...but now I understand them, now they are part of my song.

Moody was right. Now the song gets really good...the worse it goes for me, the better the blues became.

I looked up to the bridge above the river, and realized that my song has attracted a listener. There stood the older stallion with the crumpled hat and white beard. I don't have to explain to him what the song is about. I don't have to tell him a huge backstory. He knows...knows just from the way that I am playing and how the music is flowing...he knows.

"You poor bastard..." he says, and throws me two bits. I caught them as he trundled off once more, cart behind.

Painted blue.

I laid there, my sax next to me, as the water raced through the mill trace, as the big wheel went around and around and around, making soft wet wooden sounds in a perfect cadence. The wind jostled the tree above me, and the little seeds come falling down in whirligig patterns around me.

I stood up, carefully removed the seeds, and made my way back into Ponyville.

Pinkie Pie was the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen. In that unhappy time, when I had come up the hill from beside the mill, that was utterly true, if only momentarily.

"Heya' Blues!" she called, running up beside me, bouncing around me in a circle, "I know we haven't had time to throw you a party, and I really wanna throw ya' a party, 'cause I'm really good at parties..."

I watched, smiling for the first time that day, wondering if she would ever take a breath. One was not evident as she continued.

"...but it's really nice to have something or somebody just kinda show ya' that they're glad you're here, and since you are here, and since we all

kinda' know you now having a 'Getting to Know Ya' party wouldn't work..."

Here she took a single long breath and I, expecting another long diatribe, sat.

"...so I baked you a cake! C'mon!" she called, bouncing away.

I fumbled to my hooves, quickly following as best as I could as I fought to get the saxophone case strap across my neck while cantering along.

We arrived outside the place where Pinkie worked, Sugarcube Corner, and she told me to wait outside.

She emerged with a huge cake. She then scolded me for not having closed my eyes, so she went back inside, and I closed them.

"Surprise!" she shouted, bounding out once more with the cake. I opened my eyes and beheld it, once more, in its grandeur. It was a beautiful cake, truly. It was three layers, and the frosting was blue. And I mean it was the real frosting, not that cheap stuff that stains your skin whatever color it had been dyed.

I looked it over as she talked in her usual rapid style, "So, ya' know I've seen you at a lot of parties, and when I see ponies at parties I try to figure out what they like, so I saw that you liked chocolate cake and vanilla cake and marble cake, and angel food cake and devil's food cake...only thing you don't seem to like is the cheap frosting..."

As she went on I examined it further. It had little eight-notes, each one carefully made with that gel icing, the type that you sneak out of the cupboard to suck right out of the tube when you're a foal. Atop it was, of all things, a perfect little saxophone, made of pressed sugar. It must have taken her all night.

"...it took me all night, but here ya' go! Enjoy!" she said, presenting it to me.

"Thank, thank you so much Pinkie...I, I'm so grateful," I muttered, "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome!" she cried, and then to no pony's surprise more than my

own, she lent in and gave me a quick hug. It didn't last nearly long enough.

In a moment she is bounding back within Sugarcube Corner, and I, cake in hoof and with saxophone slung around my shoulders and withers, am left standing in the afternoon sun.

I make my way slowly, oh so slowly, down the cobbled streets towards the Quill & Sofa. My each step is excruciating. My will was bent on the cake, my cake. It took on an individual identity. It was now not just a cake, but Cake. I forced myself only to see the street ahead, to concentrate only on Cake and Cake-centered concerns.

I decided that Cake would be shared with people I know. Since my little icebox already had difficulty containing my milk and luncheon meats Cake would not have long to live. The top layer would be dinner...but the pressed sugar saxophone I'd save.

The bottom two layers...

I decided that Cake will sit on my nightstand until I could buy some paper plates and disposable forks, and then I would, with a touch of sadness, divide Cake into pieces and distribute Cake to everyone who...no not everyone...

No, that is a distraction, I thought. Right now, I thought, Cake must be delivered safely home. My world shrank to about thirteen inches in diameter around Cake...if a manticore had been chewing on my hind-flanks I wouldn't have known about it until it I tried to sit. Princess Celestia could be battling a coven of earth witches three feet from me and, unless they were using Cake-based spells, I would have been utterly unaware.

My world became an endless agonizing repetition of one sure hoof-fall and then the next until I could see the Quill & Sofa on the horizon.

When I reflect on what happened next, something unusual happens. I think my subconscious tries to protect me, and I begin viewing the proceedings not as I did then, but instead as though I am floating above the scene, as though I'm having an out-of-body experience.

In short, my mind tries to save me from having to go through that again, so

it lets me watch it from outside myself.

I watch my own ears perk up as somepony calls, "Watch out below!" I see my eyes go wide, and in the space of fractions of a second my expression goes from immediate alarm to that of resigned sadness.

From high above a filly swoops in, tumbling through the air. It's one of Pinkie's friends, and the most beautiful filly I'd ever seen. The pegasus, Rainbow Dash, wheels between buildings, falling over and over herself through the sky, bouncing off of walls, skidding along the street for just an instant before igniting her wings in an attempt to regain control.

I watch in slow motion as the heads of ponies all around turn in alarm. I see that my eyes have closed down, and I've bit my lower lip, as though knowing that there is only one place where the misfortunate mare could possibly end her calamitous descent.

Her "landing" catches me square in the middle of my back, traveling forward. Her body crashes into mine with a poetic anarchy, her form wheeling over, mine arching down to the ground in just the perfect way to send my prize flinging through the air and then along the cobblestones, exactly with the correct force and momentum to make it smear across the paving stones completely.

Oh, Cake, we hardly knew ya'.

As I watch from above, circling ephemerally, I see the action speed up, and I watch as she makes a graceful recovery, slipping only slightly on a bit of the remains of Cake. I watch as a sheepish grin makes its way over her face.

I see that I'm laying there with no expression on my face at all, just lifting my head to view what is left of Cake and listening to the ponies that once more simply walk by.

Painted blue.

"Hey, buddy...Blues, right? Yeah, Blues. Sorry about that," begins the pegasus, shaking the remains of Cake off of her hoof. "I was trying this new trick ya' see and it kinda got away from me...it's supposed to be this kinda

roll into a descending spiral, but I kind rolled through the spiral and...well, yeah, you get the picture."

I see how she stops and looks at me. I watch as I say nothing, my eyes just becoming more and more distant. She now bites her lower lip and looks the scene over.

"Hey, sorry about your cake. I'll...I'll buy you a new one..."

I see myself reaching out one hoof. My floating self looks down to see my physical body reaching for something as she continues talking. There, in front of me, is the little saxophone, the one made out of pressed sugar. I reach for it, I try to tenderly lift it from the cobblestones...and as I do it breaks into tiny fragments, each crumbling away in my hoof.

I'm looking at it as she stops speaking and again she is biting her lip. After viewing this from afar a few hundred times I've begun feeling bad for Rainbow Dash. She didn't realize what she had done, of course, and she hadn't done it on purpose.

But it still didn't make it hurt any less.

"Hey, hey," she states as let the sugar slide away, "are you hurt? I didn't hurt ya' when I crashed...err, failed to recover? I'm sorry...really, and again I'll pay for..."

Her eyes go wide.

"...are you crying? Blues? Are you..."

I was, I was crying.

I was crying in short little bursts that eventually gave way to long rolling sobs. The tears fell from me as I lay there in the middle of the street, ponies looking on as they went by, as I lay there smeared with the remains of Cake, the beautiful pegasus dancing uncertainly around me as she tried to figure out what was wrong.

"Hey, hey...there's no need...really, are you hurt? I said I'd pay for..."

Then she nuzzles me. Nuzzles me! All I can do is cry more...realizing how pathetic I must seem.

I don't want another cake, I don't want her to buy me one. I want Cake. I want the cake that Pinkie Pie made for me...for me, Blues...because she wanted me to be happy, to know that I'm supposed to be here.

I want Seafoam to come back to me.

I want to live in an apartment without cracks in the wall.

I want sell recordings of my music.

I want a meal that doesn't come out of a can or that I mooch off of my friends.

I want my perfect song about ships and the sea and dead captains to have stayed on the damned rocks.

I want to be any color other than blue.

I want to be free of them, but instead I'm tangled up in blues, I'm rolling around in them until they've soaked me through...

Painted blue.

All of these things reach me as I hover above the scene. The feelings I had then reach me even as I float above my body, watching as Rainbow Dash nuzzles me and tries to get me to talk, as she dances around in worry, as she actually begins calling for help...for help!

I simply can not be far away enough, can not climb high enough inside the protective layer in my mind, to be away from the consuming frustration, sadness, and feeling of utter, complete, and total unfairness of it all.

The next memory I had, as I slid back into my body, was of the following morning. As Celestia rolled the sun out from where it had been hiding I was already walking away from Ponyville, my saxophone slung over my withers, my need and purpose for the place having firmly ended.

Chapter 3

The Appleloosa Blues

Moody stopped playing, lowering his sax, and I wrapped up the song by myself. I know that when he did this he had some bit of wisdom he meant to impart to me.

I had come back to Manehattan, but stayed in youth stables, not wanting to bother my parents with my current problems.

Instead, I spent an inordinate amount of time with Moody. He was patient...let me tell him about Seafoam and Cake in my own time.

He stopped, set down the new sax, the one with his initials beneath the neck screw, and turned to me.

"Colt, 'yah know what a stallion is 'fer...what we're made tah' do?"

I blushed brightly.

"Head out o' dah' gutter, colt! Out o' dah' gutter! I don't mean it dat' way!"

He shakes his head. He stops, looks to the horizon, then back at his sax. He looks older, even older and more tired than the last time I had seen him.

"Tho' I will impart dat' a stallion who can't satisfy his mare ain't much of a stallion at all...and dat's all I'm gonna say 'bout dat..."

I nodded.

"No colt, Blues, what I'm sayin' ain't 'bout da' body. I'm talking about in da' heart..."

He wasn't speaking of the physical aspect, but instead he was trying to tell me something about what it took to be a successful stallion in a mental sense. I put down my sax, his old one, and listened as he gave me the benefit of his wisdom.

"All ponies made up o' three parts, like a movement of ah' song. The body, da' heart, da' spirit...and in da' heart a stallion he is like a sponge," said Moody, letting the accumulated spit flow from the sax and out into the street.

"He can gather up da' pain of his mare, his foals...even his friends. Dat' what's a stallion's for, Blues...tah' be strong in da' heart, a place where others can git' gathered on up and put back in place, find ah' safe harbor..."

I didn't know why he had chosen to give me that piece of information at that moment, but I took it to heart. Perhaps he had remembered some mare from his life recently? Perhaps he had seen some mistake I'd made in my relations with with Seafoam? Maybe it was just some random utterance.

I pondered what he had said earlier and asked, "So, what about the third part? The spiritual part?"

He looked off into the distance, towards where Celestia's ward was dipping beneath the horizon. Without looking back to me he intoned, "Somepony smarter dan' old Moody Blues will tell ya' dat someday, Blues."

With that he rubbed my mane, went up the steps, and turned on the porch light, leaving me alone in the street once more. The next day I left Manehattan.

"Sorry kid," said the ticket agent with a sigh, "Ya' just don't have enough bits for a ticket."

Typical.

I had made for the railhead at Omareha, and despite a driving rain I had found my way there within a few weeks. I'm not the outdoors type, so I had to spend money on flophouses and restaurants, and all of the bits I had saved under my springless couch in Ponyville seemed to have only gotten me so far.

I walked out onto the platform of the station and got my first look at a train. It was at once amazing and confusing. It was a passenger train, and before it stood four huge stallions, each one larger than me, panting for breath,

drinking gallons of water by the bucket.

Behind them was a...thing. I asked them what it was, and they called it a "locomotive". I asked them if it pulled the train, guessing at its purpose. Instead of answering they looked at each other in confusion.

Whatever, I didn't have the time to ponder such oddities. I flipped open my sax case just as the ponies begin stepping off the train. I saw the stationmaster looking at me as I lifted my sax to my lips...

"Is, is that alright?" I asked.

He nodded, and I started to play. As the notes drifted around the ponies they met family and friends, they laughed and they breathed easier. I realized that only those traveling alone stopped to hear my music...only those with bleary eyes and sore hooves.

Soon the platform cleared, and it was only the ticket agent, the stationmaster, and I. They were older stallions, ponies who I sensed had seen much in their lives. They stared at the platform and sighed as my music ended and I gathered up the few coins I'd been thrown.

I approached them with the entirety of my coinage in hoof. I could already tell that it was not enough and my head dropped again, staring at Moody's hoofwritten label on the inside of the case.

Oh, Moody...

Painted blue.

The two railroad ponies stared at each other as the passenger train left, and then the ticket agent spoke. "Kid," he said, looking over his withers into the station, scanning it for ponies, "there's a freight train waiting up in the siding for the passenger train to clear. They're gonna come on down and get some water and take a break, and if, say, you happen to accidentally hop into a freight car while they're doin' that...well, won't nopony say nothin'."

Two hours later I was seated among boxes marked "Hamdingers" in an open boxcar as we flew across the Southwestern Reaches. I took out my

sax and played as the sun set on a dusty horizon.

Trains and the blues seem to go well together. "I'm leaving, leaving on train, not going anywhere," sings my song to the desert beyond the boxcar door, "not caring as long as it can outpace my memories."

The train stopped in a siding early the next morning. I slid off and tried to hide until it left. Unfortunately I slid off right into the big cistern the crews used to water themselves.

Painted blue.

I walked up to the station in the distance, hoping that there's a sign that can tell me exactly where in Celestia's name I am.

"Appleoosa" it read, and I crossed through the waiting room into the village. I've not seen anything like it. It didn't look like any other place in Equestria I've ever traveled through. It is dusty, dirty, and ramshackle. Even at that early hour the sun was beating down, causing a palpable humid haze to hang over the place.

I ducked back into the station. There was a "Lost and Found" bin by the door. I reached in and grabbed out a big hat, then headed out into the village.

My first priority is to find a job and place to live.

"You'd think we coulda' found ah' bell keeper by now," sighs a mustached pony to my left.

"Specially with the free room that goes with it," added a vest-wearing pony next to him in a sad tone.

Easy enough.

I listened as the clock chimed the early morning hour, and they are impressed when I'm able to get it to sound the correct notes for the first time since it was installed.

"Whattcha say yer' name was, colt?" asked the mustached one, Sheriff

Silverstar.

"Blues."

"Nice ta meet ya' Blues!" added Braeburn, the vest wearing one.

"Well, thank ya', thank ya' kindly," I added. They both stared at me until the sheriff spoke again.

"Yer' accent is ridiculous..." he said with a smirk.

"Just speak as ya' usually would 'till it comes natural," laughs Braeburn as I shrink in embarrassment.

My room was small, and located as it was just below the bell tower meant that I had to become accustomed to the tick-tock of the mechanism. For the first few days I lurched around in sudden shock and surprise whenever the hours and quarters chimed. The bed was jammed beneath an overhang and my first night is spent walloping my head against it in alarm on an hourly basis.

I attempted to move the bed, but as the clock chimed again I lurched out of my dreams and nearly fell through one of the unusually shaped windows.

Painted blue.

I couldn't be at home at the height of the day. There was no cross-breeze, even with the odd windows open. I ended up planning my day around sources of public water, and I sought these out as I tried to meet ponies in the village.

I soon realized that making money off my music wasn't going to work. There's a social scene, they have wild (and mild) dances, but the music isn't what I'm used to playing, and the blues doesn't seem to go over well.

I stared sadly at my sax as I left it alone as I evacuated the bell tower for the day and went looking for work. Apart from the free room my pay as a bell keeper is largely symbolic, and my room doesn't even have a stove.

Not that I needed one. I could cook pretty much anything by just leaving it

on a rock outside.

I needed to find a better job.

"What we need," said a pony to my right as what appeared to be his employee nodded, "is a colt who's looking for work."

Convenient.

Express ran a carriage company. He explained to me that he isn't getting much business, and he wants to just show off his nice new carriage, let ponies see that he's open and ready for business.

"So," I asked, "basically, what yer' saying is my job will be tah' ride around in the carriage while Apple Slices pulls, and then we switch?"

"Yup," he says, then frowns, "Yer' accent is ridiculous by da' way, stick with yer' Ponyvillish...Ponyvillian, Ponyvillandarian..."

"Yes," I said, intentionally interrupting, "Yes, I believe that will work...the job. Thank you."

And so it went. I pulled the carriage one way, Apple Slices pulled it back, he pulled up one street, I pulled it down the other, all the while showing off Pony Express Carriage Company's "awesome ride".

Sometimes it's unbearable to be pulling it, when we're out in the mid-day sun, and sometimes it was so hot in the carriage that you wish you were pulling. Still, at times there's a breeze through the carriage and I can take a quick nap.

Every once in a while we actually got a customer, someone wanting to get down to the station in time to meet a train, or some lovers looking for a "in-town" getaway. We both pulled then, quickly for the former, slowly for the latter. Apple Slices is a great guy. It's not back-breaking work, but it is tedious, and tiring...always tiring.

I get off work about three, and one day before dinnertime I wandered down into the one valley where the apple trees that all of these ponies depend upon for life itself grow. There, in the grove, I felt the leaves absorbing the

heat, a breeze blowing through, and for the first time since I arrived in Appleoosa I could breathe easily.

A river ran through it, and before I knew what I was doing I found myself sliding down the bank into the cool waters.

Only once I've let out a long sigh of contentment did I realize that I'm not alone. The most beautiful mare I'd ever seen is staring at me with wide eyes, her face just above the waterline. "Umm," I said, my own surprise evident, "Nice day fer' ah' swim, ain't it?"

She slowly raises herself up to look at me, the water streaming out of her yellow mane.

"Your accent is ridiculous," she says, paddling a little.

"Sorry," I said, returning to my usual tone, "I'm still kinda new. The accent is just kind of coming along."

"Where ya' from originally?" she asks, gracefully drifting along on the surface.

"Ponyville, well...most recently."

She stops in mid-stroke, darting back to upright and walking through the water towards me. The effect is spectacular, the water falling off of her, sparkling in the beating sun.

"No foolin'?" she stated. We talked for a great long while. Her name was Cherry, a classic Equestrian name. I find that she herself had lived in Ponyville. In fact she had a little grove of her namesake fruit, and a cart to sell them in the city.

"Why did ya' leave?" I asked, leaning back into the cool shady bits beneath the trees. She followed.

"Parasprites...ate, ate everything," she said, her shoulders coming up, her head going down, "Were you there when they came, the parasprites?"

"Yes, yes I was," I answered, remembering, "I lost my apartment."

"You rebuilt?" she asks, looking up to me.

"Yes, the whole city, actually...it came back together. Not just me, of course, but all of us...together."

She said nothing. As I watched her think I suddenly get an unfamiliar twinge of remembrance...and I realized that I'm homesick. I shook that nonsense off as quickly as possible.

Cherry stood again and started making her way up the bank.

"Do you have any plans for dinner?" she asked.

That night I had the first decent home-cooked meal I'd had since I'd arrived in Appleoosa.

Her place was small, but cozy...okay, mostly just small, but it had a porch. After dinner we sit out there and watched the sun descend on the horizon.

"You worked where?" I asked, startling a little bit at the news. She had worked in the salt mines there in Appleoosa. Even as she says it I can't imagine a beautiful mare like Cherry working in such a place, buried alive down there.

"Thar' were plenty of accidents," she says, "but at least it was cool down there. I couldn't take them long hours though...I'd go in before dawn and come out after nightfall. I quit. Told 'em tah call me back if they ever put in windows!"

We laughed at her joke, and she tells me about living here. She's a very...very hard filly. Her life has been hard. She's worked and struggled for all she has. How unlike Seafoam, who breezed back and forth...

No, I wasn't going to think like that. I wasn't "going there".

It does get cold on the edge of the desert, where we were. She brought out blankets and we lay on the porch watching the stars wheel about, seeing an occasional meteor dart through the sky.

As I started to fall asleep I felt something amazing, something I hadn't felt for weeks. Cherry had slid beside me, her side to mine, and I could feel her breathing, feel the beating of her heart.

These comfort me as I drift off into the realm of dreams.

I awoke shivering, the cold biting into me. I looked around and Cherry was not there. The door to her little cabin was closed...and locked.

I walked through the cold morning streets to my bell tower abode, all around me silent in the pre-dawn darkness.

Painted blue.

For months, this is how my life went. I wound the clock, checked to see if it was still in tune. I'd report to work and go and get all sweaty and tired...then a swim with Cherry, some small talk, and dinner. Go home.

Repeat, redo, recycle.

On my days off I spend time with Cherry, usually down in the apple grove where she works. She doesn't get "a day off"...she depends on these apples to live. I sense that she's very happy that I help her, as I remembered all that I had learned from the Apple family and help her gather them, bucking the trees and making them fall.

But I can only sense it. She doesn't tell me. She doesn't tell me anything. She's keeping me at a distance, and I can only guess why.

One day, as I returned from this activity, I saw one of them.

A bison, one of the buffalo tribesmen who occupy the world beyond Equestria's southwest border.

He made his way through the grove, looking over the trees with a judging expression on his face. I slipped behind the trees, not knowing what to do or say. I had seen non-Equestrians before, donkeys were commonly met in many of the places I'd lived, and I had met perytons as well...

But this dude was huge.

As I watched he started up the hill towards the village. From out of nowhere two more joined him, and I realized that they had been right here in the grove with me...probably watching me.

The next day I heard that the meeting between the big bison, who was apparently the chief of his people, and Sheriff Silverstar hadn't gone well. The trees, it seemed, were a problem, but how?

I don't understand, and like everyone else I wander around in a daze, wondering what would come of it.

A few days later I was riding in the carriage, napping when possible, when we came to a resolute and sudden stop.

"Okay, you pull now," said Apple Slices, waking me from my deserved slumber.

"Aw, we just switched!" I answered, giving him a cold stare.

"Yer' accent is still terrible!" he answered.

As I prepared to defend my linguistics I heard Braeburn speaking in the distance. I looked up and down the street and there, beside the inexplicable ponies who sit around and draw us every day, were four ponies speaking with Braeburn.

I looked at them, and in an instant I dived back inside the carriage.

"Hey now Blues," spoke Slices, hurt apparent in his voice.

"In Celestia's name, Apple, give me another block!"

After an uncertain moment he started again, and I'm left pondering why four of the most beautiful mares that had ever entered my life, and had brought it such pain, had come to Appleoosa.

I owed Apple for his understanding, so I took a longer turn. As I did we weren't exactly the most picturesque sight. I was distracted, my mind wandering...I wandered up and down the same street...I ran over various

inanimate objects, I got the carriage hung up on the railroad tracks.

If they were here...

Painted blue.

I talked to Cherry as we went for our swim. I told her about how I had seen more Ponyville ponies arriving. By the end of the next day Pinkie Pie...and Dash...had showed up too. She had heard rumors that one of Braeburn's cousins was bringing him a special tree to celebrate the success of Appleoosa.

It was only then that I realized that Braeburn was related to Big Mac and his sister Applejack. I wish somepony would tell me these things in advance.

"So, these mares," she says, bobbing along in the blessedly cool water, "Were you...romantic at all wit' any of 'em?"

"What? Oh, no, in Luna's name, no," I protest, but then I stop quickly, thinking on it, "But...but I can't say I didn't know them...in fact Pinkie Pie was very kind to me...gave me Cake."

"So, did you date much...in Ponyville?" she asked, taking the conversation in a direction I hadn't expected.

"No, just this one mare, Seafoam," I said, speaking aloud that name for the first time in months, "a unicorn. How 'bout you? Ya' have a special colt back on up in Ponyville?"

"Yer' accent's still ridiculous," she said pithily, slowly sinking down into the water until her grey eyes, yellow mane, and nose alone stuck up above the waterline. She regarded me balefully, and I turned from her gaze.

Her life, I gathered, must have been very hard...must have already have been very difficult when she arrived in Ponyville, let alone when she came here.

I was becoming more like her, more like all of them. I couldn't even remember the last time I picked up my sax. I was changing, becoming

harder.

Maybe someday, I thought, if I kept at it, I'd be hard enough for her to break against...to let her just smash herself open and all of her pain drain away. Could I be like that?

Moody, is that what you meant...

We came out of the water and walked up to the village.

There, to my amazement was the assembled population of all of Appleoosa, and in their midst stood at least a dozen of the bison.

As we stood in the crowd I saw Sheriff Silverstar and their leader, Thunderhooves, talking. I tried to eavesdrop on them, but before I could make sense of it Pinkie Pie burst out onto the stage and started dancing and singing.

"Why's she dressed as a harlot?" asked Cherry as Pinkie launched into her song, Twilight's pet dragon playing along on the piano.

"That's not fair," I said as the music played, "she's dressed as a burlesque mare".

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"'Burlesque' has three more letters," I answered with a smirk.

Cherry rolled her eyes, and we listened as the song ended. Pinkie had put her all into it, and I saw her happy face beaming out into the crowd as it came to an end, but soon it shrinks away...there is no clapping.

I am hard, that place has taken something from me. Usually I would have applauded anything Pinkie did...but at that moment I had no heart for it, and I'm not sorry to say that I'm ashamed of it now.

Soon there are words...soon there are threats, and escalations...and soon we the enemies of the buffalo.

Soon we are organizing, preparing to defend our ramshackle little village,

preparing to hold on to the few things we have.

That night there is no swimming. That night I go from place where I am needed to place where I can help, and Cherry does the same. I look up every once in a while, and more than once she is looking at me. I couldn't quite tell the expression on her face. Was it fear, worry, concern? None of these? All of them?

As the sun goes down I wander the street looking for some way to help build the defenses, but soon all that we can usefully do in one day comes to an end.

I feel a hoof on my foreleg. "Let's go on down un' get us some dinner," she says, and we trot off to her cabin.

She's a better cook than me, but I did what I could to help make dinner, as I had each night she'd invited me in. As we eat we talk, then head out to the porch.

"Do you hate the buffalo?" she asks, her Ponyville dialect at the fore.

"No, no...I don't hate anypony or anything," I answer, "I don't think I ever have."

"Me 'neither," she answers in her Appleoosa accent, "It ain't fair though, makin' us move the trees..."

"Ah reckon they got their reasons fer' wantin' 'em gone...just wished they'd explain 'em," I said with a sigh.

"Yer' accent is still ridiculous," she said with a laughing snort.

There was a long pause as the setting sun painted the sky purple and orange. I caught myself wondering if Princess Celestia "felt" each setting sun, if she was aware of it going back over to nature, as she spun the world back to gravity and whatever forces it were that yanked it around the other side of the planet.

Did it feel uncomfortable? Did it hurt her? Did it give her the blues?

"Blues," said Cherry, snapping me back from my philosophical ponderings, "You'll be careful tomorrah', right?"

I looked back to Cherry, saw her looking right at me. As soon as our eyes met she dropped hers, looked to the space beyond the porch, and then up to the sky.

"Yes," I answered, "You will too, won't ya?"

She didn't answer in words. The wall, the one she'd built to protect herself...it was still there. Instead, she lifted the blankets and laid one across me. She wrapped herself in the other and laid against me, laying her head against mine, the sweet scent of a mare filling my nostrils as sleep embraced me.

That night was warm, and we were both very tired, and worried. The next morning I awoke with her still slumbering against me for the first time since we'd been spending the evenings on the porch.

I let her rest there as long as I physically could, feeling her breathe, until the sun was full in the sky...until my muscles ached and I was in desperate, desperate need of the little colt's room.

I nuzzled her and she awoke with a startle. She looked to me in surprise. Silently and wordlessly she stood and entered her cabin.

I headed into the village. It was already eight-thirty, and ponies were at work preparing barricades.

I was put to work closing down the shutters of public buildings. I heard the hurried voices of the Appleosans all around me, but also the pontificating voices of the Ponyville ponies.

Cherry is working with me as none other than Her Royal Majesty's Designate Twilight Sparkle approached us. Twilight began speaking, pleading with us about this or that. I realized that she didn't recognize me...or Cherry. As she continued I looked to Cherry. Her expression became hard, and mine with her.

We jumped, to no pony's amazement more than my own, through an open

window of the cider press, and quickly ran down the aisles closing the windows.

As the time draws near I am positioned by Braeburn and the sheriff atop my clock tower along with some others, and given my ammunition.

Pies, apple pies. There was a part of me that simply wanted to eat all my ammo and lay on the roof soaking in the sun as the whole village burned. Pies. I couldn't believe it. Oh well, stick with what you know, I guess.

"Are buffalo allergic to pie?" I asked nopony in particular. I looked for Cherry, and I saw her down against a haystack barricade. Suddenly my thought of eating my ammunition was gone. I stretched my throwing leg.

I was powerfully worried about her...I wanted her up on the clock, safe. I began to make my way down to force her switch with me...but as I do noon began to chime. I realized in the confusion that it had been days since I last wound the mechanism. I wondered if the bison would wait for me to wind it up if it stopped after the third chime or so...I wondered if I could stop this whole thing if I never did.

I chuckled at my idea...no time to ponder that then and, I thought, there'd be time to wind it later.

The bison roared into the village, and I was just as guilty as any for throwing pies at them. I must have thrown a dozen...Celestia alone knows if it did any good or ill.

I panned back and forth, trying to see what I should do, where I should throw. As I do I see Cherry, her face wide in alarm. As I watch a buffalo demolishes the hay bale barricade. I watch her go sprawling, see her stand and run off.

I looked up and down the street, searching for her. Instead I saw a big bison running straight towards the tower. He is bellowing in pain and shock as, I assume, the cinnamon got into his eye.

The poor fellow runs straight into the damn clock tower.

The whole building shook, it wobbled terribly. With a resounding crack the

masonry split.

I watched in fascinated horror as my place of employment and living space went crashing down into the main street of Appleoosa.

Painted blue.

I watched as everything that I owned went sprawling out into the street, and a sudden revulsion of knowing that I'd been sleeping in a building that couldn't have survived such an impact made shivers run up my back.

As I looked down into the remains of my personal belongings and the devastated mechanism I see their leader, Chief Thunderhooves, stamp defiantly across my stuff. He missed my sax case by inches. He snorted and spotted Sheriff Silverstar...

In my mind I saw Moody's sax smashed flat, his beautiful hoofwritten label ripped to pieces. Suddenly, I was very angry.

As he charged at the sheriff I reached back, pie in hoof, and concentrated. All of my pain, suffering, and disappointment flowed from me into the pie. I locked him down with my eyes, and with a bellowing scream I let the pie fly through the air.

I missed him by about eight feet to the left. Somepony else got him though, and down he went.

I am already down into the street as the ponies and buffalo begin sobbing together. Ridiculous, utterly ridiculous. If all it had taken to end this nonsense had been for the two leaders to have gotten some pie on their faces I'd have done the service myself. I'd have rubbed it right into Silverstar's face too, and I liked him! Let him throw me in jail...it was cooler in there than in the bell tower!

I didn't think about any of this at the time of course. Instead as events played out around me I looked for Cherry.

I found her down a side street. "Are you okay?" I asked, "I saw yah' get thrown back there...ya' didn't break anything didja'?"

"Naw...just, just shaken up a tad," she said. I instantly became worried. She hadn't make fun of my accent.

"But are you okay?" I asked again as I lowered my head to hers, laid it against hers. She bolted, then relaxed, laying hers deeper into mine, resting against me...

...for all of about four seconds.

With that she stood, and walked back out to where Chief Thunderhooves, now recovered, was talking. She didn't even stand near me.

I'm not hard enough. Not hard enough to break down that wall, not hard enough for her to crash against and split open, letting the pain run out.

Moody's words rang true. What else is a stallion for, but to do that?

I help remove the trees, like a good citizen of beloved Appleoosa. "Dinner?" she says after we watch the buffalo run off, pies atop their heads. In the village they held a potluck and party for the Ponyville ponies. We didn't go. Instead we sat around silently, eating, watching the sunset, and falling asleep on the porch.

I bolt awake at about four in the morning (not that I can tell with the clock gone). It is freezing. I am alone. The door of the cabin is closed...locked.

Painted blue.

I fold the blanket and leave it in front of the door. I go hopping and bucking down the street in an effort to fight the cold as I make my way downtown.

There, among the remains of the party the night before and the forlorn waste of the clock tower sits my saxophone case, untouched either in the battle or the revelries that followed.

It is the only thing of mine, apart from the hat I had been wearing since I arrived, that I take with me.

Inside, miraculously, are my earnings. I walked to the station, and sat there as the village came awake. I watched as the Appleoosans began their day,

as they greeted each other and made small talk. I saw Braeburn and Sheriff Silverstar looking over the damage, I saw Apple Slices trotting up to the restaurant for his breakfast before reporting to work. Express canters by as well, not noticing me.

I wondered if they'd even notice that I'm gone...if they'd even care. Any of them.

That's not fair. They aren't bad ponies...they are each and every one of them industrious, tenacious, and very rooted in the earth magic as any good earth pony should be. But, they are hard...so very stoic, and I can't be that.

I'm dozing as the stationmaster arrives. As he does, so does somepony else.

"Yer' leavin'?" she asks.

I had been nodding off, the sun finally beginning to warm me, making me doze.

I looked at Cherry as I awoke, the first rays of sun from behind me casting down over her. Her colors were so unusual. Yellow mane, grey eyes, pink coat...it shouldn't work, but it did. It did on her. The only thing that didn't work was the sadness in her eyes.

Mah' baby's got the blues.

I stood and walked over to her. I looked past her to the remains of the clock tower. She knew intrinsically what I was looking at. I looked down into those eyes, lifted her hat to see her face fully. She tried to look to the ground, but I lifted her head back up to face mine.

"Do I have a reason to stay, Cherry?" I asked.

She looked back at the ground, then back up to me, her eyes watering.

"Cherry," I repeated, "Is there a reason for me to stay...any reason, Cherry, give me a reason, any reason..."

Give me the reason Cherry, tell me there's hope that I can be that stallion. Let me be that stallion and I'll burn here in the sun with you for everyday of the rest of my life...every day Celestia gives me will be my gift to you, to use as you will...

Open your pasture gates, Cherry, let me run through the green fields that are the world you're hiding in your heart...

Let me rest in the cool shade of the trees, Cherry, that are the embraces you're afraid to give...let me lay there for as long as you'll have me...let the cool breeze of the kisses you keep hidden float over me...

Let me dive into the waters that are the emotions you hide, Cherry, let them flow over me and I will pull the pain you feel out of them, and give you back all the love that I can...that I know how...

"Cherry," I repeated for the third time, "Is there a reason...for me to stay."

She said nothing. I was not that stallion.

I kissed her on the cheek and turned to walk back to the station. I heard the delicate hoof falls behind me. They started out as a walk, then a trot...finally a gallop that receded into the distance.

Goodbye, Cherry.

Painted blue.

Looking up I realized that the stationmaster had witnessed the whole thing. He had stood there, key in his hoof, inserted into the door of the station, his jaw quivering at the scene that had played out before him.

"I'll give ya' three-quarter's off a coach ticket, if'n ya'd be willin' tah' ride in a caboose on a freight..." he said, looking over his glasses at me, clearing his throat.

"Much obliged."

As I waited there a passenger train arrived at about nine in the morning. I went inside the station to watch them. A few families and some business

ponies went by, but it was a lone passenger, obviously an immigrant, that caught my attention. I watched him help a little old pony off the train, see her to her family, and then lift all of his belongings with one massive bellow. He had huge worn leather saddlebags, what appeared to be a set of forge tools, a case of books, and...to my pleasure, a fiddle case.

I looked him in the eyes. He was a huge stallion, at least two hands bigger than me. I looked him square in his big tired eyes, and there was something in them. Something like an inner strength, and a caring look, but a tempered one.

I looked back to his mark. It was one of those massively descriptive ones...like the one I had wanted all of those decades ago. It was an anvil. An anvil! From the hammer that rested upon it came sparks of hearts and fireworks.

I looked him in the eyes again. He now looked back at me with an expression that denoted that he couldn't decide whether to ask me about deep philosophies, read me classic poetry, or stuff me into the nearest garbage can.

"You'll need a hat," I said, taking the one from my own head and placing it on his. "Powerful hot and dry out there..."

Fortunately it fit, somehow. He now looked at me as though he didn't know how to thank me, wanted to fall bawling into my forelegs at the act of random kindness which renewed his faith in ponykind, or stuff me into the nearest garbage can.

"Thank...thank you, thank you kindly," he said with a tired smile, much to my relief.

"Yer' welcome," I said, heading out to the trackside platform to wait for the freight.

At once I stopped. "Hey, friend," I called back to him as he lifted his fiddle case.

"Yessir?" he answered.

"There's a beautiful swimmin' spot just down the riverbank from the orchard. Yer' gonna wanna go ahead and take a nice swim there at about 3:30 or so...it's powerful nice down there..."

"Thank...thank you, I'll do that, thanks again," he said, smiling at me, tipping my old hat.

Two hours later I'm already far to the north.

"Mah' baby is a hard, hard mare, and she don't want mah' love," went my song, my saxophone ringing out across the prairie as the conductor and brakepony listened, as the caboose swayed on the tracks.

Trains and blues go well together, I thought...both are about carrying on, and soon I'd be arriving at a destination I could not have imagined.

Chapter 4

The Moody Blues

I decided to make a little side-trip and head to Manehattan to see Moody Blues.

"Little side-trip" here having the definition of "went days out of my way".

As I left the railhead at Omareha I wondered why our rail network only served small outlying communities on the frontier. Somepony could make a lot of money, I thought, by tying Equestria together with an intricate rail system.

Oh well, not my place, I'm just a bluespony.

I arrived back in Manehattan. At once I realized that I would never be able to live here again. Ponyville had spread my sensibilities, but Appleoosa had burst them wide open. The city felt constrained, suffocating. I felt trapped.

I spent a few days with my mother and father. The usual questions came forth, and my mother had an unfortunate moment of false hope when she asked about any mares in my life.

I told her about Seafoam and Cherry. She gathered her big blue son into her forelegs and rocked me back and forth. To my surprise my father took me for a walk with him through our old neighborhood.

I was once told that a father and son's relationship is complete the moment they can tell each other that they love one another. We reached that moment when he tells me about his life before he met my mother, adventures he had with my uncle Take Five and the like. It was the first time I'd heard such stories.

"I know you're hurting now," he concludes, "and that you don't feel like you've accomplished anything...but I've seen much change in you, son...you're wiser, stronger. No matter what you do, I'm proud of you. I love you, son."

"Love you too, dad."

Weird. Appreciated, but weird.

The next afternoon I gathered up my sax and headed to the Western District to meet up with Moody Blues. The second I saw his rowhouse I knew something was wrong. There were small foal toys on the stoop, and the windows were all open.

I carefully stepped over the toys as I climbed up the stairs, cautiously making my way up the stoop. I knocked on the door, begging, hoping against hope that the familiar old face would answer.

"Hey bro, whattzup?" answered a stallion, younger and smaller than me, eating out of a bag of Mairzy Dotes, the snack falling into his unkempt goatee.

"Who is it?" called a filly's voice from within.

"Some blue dude!" he called back, "Sorry bro, what can I do fer' you?"

"I'm...I'm sorry," I stammered, "I...I have a friend who, lives...well, lived, here apparently. You wouldn't happen to know if he's gone into a nursing home...or moved to Foalida?"

As I dared breathe these optimistic sentiments the filly appeared, and in her forelegs rested a tiny foal. He looked up to her, then back to me with apprehension.

"Oh, bro...sorry, bro...but, but we bought this place from the Public Housing Bureau after the city came and cleaned it out."

Oh Celestia.

"The neighbors...smelled something...and the police came..."

Oh Luna.

My vision retreated, they now seemed a million miles away, as though I

was having the conversation through a telescope. Sounds retreated, became muffled. I heard the beating of my own heart.

"Do, do you know what they did with his body, by any chance?" I asked through the fog in my head, feeling the pressure on the backs of my eyes, "Do you know anything...anything at all?"

"I am so sorry bro," he said, "I am so sorry."

Painted blue.

I nodded. The little foal gurgled in its blanket. I couldn't see if it was a colt or filly, but I smiled.

"It's a good house," I said, "it has a wonderful stoop. You can watch the city just flow on by...just sit and listen and talk..."

They both nodded at me, reacting as my expression began to fall down.

"Sorry to have bothered you, have a good afternoon," I said, forcing a smile. With that I went down those stairs for the last time in my life.

I turned into the street, started walking. At once though there were hurried sounds behind me, and I turned back towards the house.

"He's headin' that way, babe!" called the stallion, his foal in his forelegs, pointing towards me.

At once the filly was out of the house, cantering towards me. I stopped and waited. She approached me with something held before her, and I took it into my hooves. It was a huge black book with hard covers.

"We...we just found it yesterday, behind the built-in bookshelf. It must have slid down there years ago, decades ago."

I opened it, and a lost world played out before me. It was a photo album, one of the old kind where the photos were held in place by little triangles and paste.

"We...we thought we'd sell it, or give it to the historical society...but, but

perhaps you should have it...you're the only one who's come asking about him."

I looked back up to her and breathed a "Thank you". She smiled, and turned back towards her house, her family. As she did so I waved to the stallion, and he raised his hoof in reply, carefully balancing his foal.

I sat in the park overlooking the river, the exact same spot where nearly two and a half decades before I had laid my song about dead sea captains on the rocks.

I sat with my back against the famous tombstone of the "amiable colt", as I had in that moment when I thought I was in control of my destiny. He was still dead after all those years, but now I am older, and (if my father was right)...stronger and wiser.

It took a lot of that strength to work through Moody's album. I actually had to start in the middle and work back to the front, start from the first place I saw his mark, the saxophone and harmonica against a starfield, on a pony. To see him so young...not any older than me, perhaps younger, he seemed so alive.

I see him grow, and there's hoofwriting in places. It's not his, not the same as the writing on the label in my sax case. Was it his mothers? She's in here in places, but no older stallion.

I see Moody age in clippings from papers where he's playing in the band at parties. I see him and other ponies, other musicians, standing outside a club. They were clipping a ribbon to open it.

There are pictures with mares...some only in the album for two or three shots...others lasting through page after page...years of his life. In the end though none of them last to the final pages.

There are no foals, no birthday parties, no candid family photos, no wedding shots. I reach color photos, blurry with old developing processes at first, finally a clear and modern one, one shot with a group of older stallions, each with instrument in hoof, playing at some sort of funeral.

I am shocked at first, but soon I realized it's not a pony they're

remembering, it's the club. Around them are smiling faces, each one rejoicing in the life of the club now ending, counting down until it closed its doors for the last time.

I turned to the last page. It was filled with loose photos of himself and others whose names I'll never know. Camping trips, vacations with friends, business cards for instrument dealers...even a receipt, one I realized that was for my own old saxophone that he had given me. I chuckled at the price. The rate of inflation since he had bought it had not been kind.

I dig through these until I came to the last page itself, and there I found a newspaper clipping. It was a street festival, one held only a few years ago. I remembered watching it from the stoop with him on a humid day as we ate watermelon and drank iced tea.

Why was it there, I wondered? He hadn't played the gig, he had been sitting with me. Looking deeper into the photo I scanned the street for clues. I realized from the angle of the shot that his rowhouse should have been visible. I followed the street to his stoop with my eyes, and there I realized why he had added it.

We, the two of us, are there on his stoop. He is standing, apparently getting ready to return to his home and flick on the porchlight, as was his custom.

I saw that his hoof was in my mane, rubbing my head as he had done that first time we met, as he had done every time we had parted since.

The last thing he had ever included in the album was a shot of the two of us. The last thing he had ever taken the time to properly glue into place with the little triangles, even as pictures of friends he had known for decades sat loose, was a picture of he and I.

I carefully laid the album on the pedestal of the monument to the "amiable colt", and stood to pace back and forth in front of the moment, trotting along on the path.

I reached for my saxophone, his gift given so freely, as the sun once more began to set, as Celestia sighed and let it go once more.

"Oh death, why are you so cruel, why now, why like this?" intoned the sax,

"Why'd ya' take my friend before I could say goodbye?" asked my music.

Or at least it would have if I hadn't been breaking down. Instead it was making "bwargle" sounds, like the sound my old horn had made when the rainbow shook me to my core. "Bwargle" went my sax one last time before I removed it from my lips and began to bawl aloud.

As the river rolled beneath me I cried out in miserable tones, sucking in deep gulps of air to fuel my massive rocking sobs. I leaned against the grave of the "amiable colt", the tears soaking the ancient granite. I let them come, the cries, let that become Moody's tomb just as much as it was to the long-dead colt, made it sacred to both of their memories.

As my cries echoed down the river and into the harbor beyond the fireflies emerged and the lights of Manehattan cast their un-dimming glow across the waters far out into the dark sea beyond.

Painted blue.

Ponyville hadn't changed. It was still half-timbered, sleepy, and happily populated by a mix of the three races.

I arrived very early that morning, so early that I met my former milkpony for the first time in months. He offered me a little bottle of chocolate milk and we briefly chatted about life, the living of life, and the moral implications of utilizing sentient beings for food production...and mares, mostly mares.

"Good luck, buddy, see ya' around" he said, wandering off. I realized as he left that he didn't call me "kid". Oh Dad, you're a smarter stallion than me.

I walked past the semi-permanent tents that the army uses to house regiments passing through on their way up to the front lines of The Wars. I had considered joining the military as a bugler once. I had actually gone down to where the recruiting office had been after my apartment had been devoured by the parasprites. When I saw that the place had been reduced to timbers and witnessed the recruiting officer sobbing with his face on his desk I took it as an omen.

Plus, I'm a huge coward who's allergic to spear wounds.

As I crossed through the snoring camp and past Rarity's Carousel Boutique I thought about what I was going to do this time, how I was going to not just stay alive, but prosper.

There was something out there waiting for me...I was going to wait right here in Ponyville, let the plan find me, wait for it. If Moody was right, then my "song" must be ready by now...and if my father was right, I was strong enough and wise enough now to try.

I was ready to make one more throw...to take a big risk and (once it revealed itself) work to make it happen.

"What we need is somepony who is willing to take a big risk and work to make it happen," said a young stallion, standing with two others outside of the old dance hall.

I stepped back to check the bushes and see if Princess Celestia was hiding within. The deus ex machina of my existence would be a lot more comforting if I knew that my apparently immortal and seemingly divine sovereign was, in fact, "deus-ing" them for me.

I walked forward into the group, but before I could even introduce myself one, to my utter surprise, shouted my name.

"Hey, Blues!" yelled one of the stallions, maybe just a couple years younger than me, cantering over to where I stood. I smiled at him and nodded, trying desperately to remember if I knew him or if he was just really good at implying names from cutie marks.

"It's me, Bluegrass...from Appleoosa!"

"Oh!" I cried, "Right! Sorry, didn't recognize you without your hat."

He, like I, had only just returned from Appleoosa, had decided on life in Ponyville.

"Appleoosa is changing too fast, growing too quick...doesn't have the same atmosphere," he complained.

"How terrible," I lied.

He introduced me to his friends. Lucky, who was just about my age, and One Short, who was about Bluegrass's age. His mark was three horseshoes. From that fact alone I knew that the kid was born to play the blues and that, fortunately, was the reason why they were standing outside the old structure.

They had pooled their resources, and were determined to rebuild the music hall and start it up as a club again. They had their own funds, gifts from their parents, and grants from the Royal Historic Structure Re-Use and Rehabilitation fund.

"We just need a few more bits, and we can close on the place and get started with the rehab...we're just that short," said Lucky, shaking his head, making a tiny circle in the grass of the paddock.

"Excuse me one second," I said. I trotted out of their view and looked up to distant Canterlot, perched as it was on the side of the mountain, and smiled.

"Thanks."

I returned and flipped open my saxophone case. My accumulated bits dropped all over the paddock where we stood, the coins splaying out in a satisfyingly large pile.

"I'm in," I said, "You need a sax player too?"

They recovered from their shock to nod at me with wild enthusiasm.

We worked hard that late summer and early autumn. We scoured and scrapped, sawed and drilled, patched and painted. As we did so ponies came to watch, to ask us what we were doing, or how it was coming.

Impassioned amateurs that we were we did make mistakes. We stood together beaming with pride as we looked at the new doors we had just installed...only to realize in unison that we had put them in upside down. We all went scrambling for cover as our office drop ceiling dropped all the way to the floor.

"I think we should go with a skylight," said Bluegrass as the tiles that made up the mosaic on the ballroom ceiling came tinkling down around him like a rainstorm.

Outside Lucky and Short had begun to build the patio only to have it all get sucked and slurped down into a muddy morass as the pegasi unleashed a late-summer rainstorm. We went with grass.

But, we pressed on despite these setbacks, and as I watched the colts working and the old dance hall coming back to life I could not help but smile.

I looked up one day to see a familiar face looking into the wide open doors as we hung sheetrock. Lowering my mask I walked over, nodding as I went.

"Howdy, Davenport," I said, looking to my former landlord.

"I thought that was you, Blues! Good to see you back in Ponyville. Dang, you look older," he said. We had some small talk about life, the living of life, and the chronic shortage of quality sofas in the world...and mares, mostly mares.

"You know," he said, "I saved everything of yours that was in your old apartment."

I looked at the recently re-polished floor of my new club, trying to think of what I could possibly have left behind.

"They didn't last long...turned moldy and started to smell bad," he added. I smiled back at him, realizing that the only thing I had owned in that unhappy place was the contents of my icebox...the luncheon meats and the bottle of milk.

We stared at each other for a long minute. "Good to see ya', Blues. Dang, Chief, you sure look all grown-up."

He didn't call me "kid".

I thanked him for stopping in, asked him to stop in once we opened, and he

agreed.

At night we slept where we fell down tired, we ate whatever we could gather from the Whitetail Woods and whatever their concerned parents would bring them. As we enjoyed one such bounty Short's mother spoke to me in a voice that, while not accusing, was loud enough for all to hear.

"I hope, Mr. Blues..."

Mister?

"...that you are taking good care of these colts!"

I looked around to the assembly, the parents and the three others. Lucky got the joke, saw the look on my face, stifled his laughter. But the others, I realized, were simply waiting for an answer.

I was stronger, I was wiser. My song had come together, and even though my years were not even half of a decade greater than all of them combined I was the one they were depending on...the one they were looking to for strength.

Moody, you were the smartest pony I ever met.

As the dusk of autumn firmly arrived we finished off the apartments above the dance hall...our homes.

We spent the last of our discretionary funds on furniture, and as we moved the last of it in we all collapsed in my sitting room and convened the first official meeting of our Co-Ownership Trust Partnership, L.L.C., Incorporated. We desperately needed a name for the club.

"We desperately need a name," said Lucky, bringing about our first order of business, "for the club."

That we could have gotten this far and not have thought of such a thing was ridiculous. As the colts began rattling off standard names I settled back into my nice new chair, letting it learn the shape of my body.

As they went on and on suggesting and shooting down horrible, awful

name after tedious, repugnant name I leaned farther back. As I did I thought about my path here...back here to Ponyville, to this amazing opportunity.

Of all things the old story about the sea came to my mind, the one about the dead sea captains. I smirked at it as the colts continued their deliberations. Here I was, guiding them through these treacherous waters, as though I'm that forlorn first officer...the one who takes command as they slip the body of the captain into the sea, as they weep and look for direction, as they mark the ship with the azure pigments and run up the cobalt banner.

But, I realized, I'm not in as bad a shape. I can guide the ship, I know now not to rock the boat...as my song has taught me, let the sun and moon guide me, let it play out, make my choices based on what the plan is that's unfolding...don't fight the currents. You were right Moody, I thought, the song guides me, even if I'm...

...painted blue.

"Fly the blue flag," I laughed to myself, sitting back up. As I did so the faces of the colts all turned to me.

"Like Moody Blues' old place?" said Short.

"It's not copyrighted, and it's a traditional name for a club," added an enthusiastic Lucky.

I would have liked to have made a comment at that moment but, if I remembered the situation correctly, I was in the middle of hyperventilating.

"How do you all know who Moody Blues was?!" I pleaded.

"Was?!" they replied in unison, "You mean he's dead?!"

I might be wiser, if my father was correct, but I sure was ignorant.

In the space of minutes I got my education. Moody, it turned out, was a legendary bluespony. His place, The Blue Flag, had been the focal point of the blues scene in Manehattan, perhaps in Equestria, for generations. He

was considered the progenitor of the rebirth of the blues in Manehattan, and he was essentially the foremost influence on many of the most successful rhythm, blues, bluegrass, country and rock artists of my lifetime and my parent's lifetime.

"I just thought he was a nice old pony who liked sax music and iced tea," I said, sliding back into my chair with a long slow whistle. My eyes sunk into my head at the realization of what I had just been told.

At any point in our relationship Moody could have rattled off a list of achievements, could have wowed me with name-dropping, could have trucked out award after award to dazzle me with. No. Instead he sat on his stoop and let a blue colt learn from his experience. He didn't want admirers; he didn't want to be "a legend". At the end of his days he had just wanted to pass it all along...and to have me as a friend.

I saw their eyes on me, looking to me as I wiped my hooves across my face. Slowly and certainly I told them all. I told them about my mentor, adviser, and friend. For the first time they saw the label on the inside of his case, my case, and I let them hold my first sax, his legendary sax. They passed it around as though they were holding a holy relic, they touched the label as though they had made a pilgrimage of thousands of miles to see it.

I take the photo album from my brand new coffee table shelf, and laid it before them. At once Lucky, Short, and Bluegrass were alive, pouring over it, examining it as though they were the first ponies to enter a long-forgotten tomb filled with wonders.

Soon they were calling to one another, "Is this Dusty Crossroads?" or "In Celestia's name, it's Low and Sweet, they were my idols!" To them Moody's album was more than just one pony's memories. It was like a holy text, the faces of bluesponies coming to life, pulled out of the darkness of death itself.

I watched them, a smile growing on my face, for more than an hour. Moody's album was coming to life again. The names had meaning again.

They stopped and were quiet. Bluegrass lifted a loose picture, the single big portrait of Moody with his last sax, the one with the little "M.B." beneath the neck screw.

They looked to the last picture in the album, of Moody and I on his stoop in the newspaper clipping. They then looked at me, and I saw something in their faces as they sat in the shafts of autumn light falling through the windows.

As a group they stood up, and left the room, taking the portrait with them.

"Hey!" I called in sudden alarm, standing and trotting along after them.

To my surprise Lucky stopped me at the top of the stairs leading down. He gathered me up in a hug. A hug!

"Blues, stay right here, okay?"

I nodded, and returned to my apartment. I went through my new rooms, I pranced up from my bedroom through my sitting room, to my kitchenette to my bathroom, I picked up small things in my den and put them back down again.

All the while the sounds of light construction vibrated up through the adjacent stairwell.

"Hey Blues!" I heard Short call, and at once I was cantering down the stairs.

As I did a series of lights passed around me, and I am made to look back up the stairwell I had just come down.

It had been a blank space an hour before, an overhang in the wall above the stairs. It cleared the fire code, but just barely, and everypony who went up the stair naturally ducked their head to avoid it.

Now, it was no longer blank. Instead it was alive with magical candlelight and lanterns that burned their purple and green flame. It was an altar, and in the middle of it, obvious to all who were present in the club, was the picture of Moody Blues from the album. It sat in a big golden frame on a background...

...painted blue.

Beside it were some old concert posters and a frame filled with ticket stubs, Moody's name and image all over each of them.

They had chosen that spot on purpose, I realized.

We had been discussing about what to do with it, and as I had told them about Moody they had wordlessly decided that this was the best use of the space.

Every pony who went up those stairs ducked, needlessly or not, as they came to the overhang. Now, instead of simply protecting their heads, they were bowing...paying homage to the spirit of Moody Blues.

This was now more than a dance hall, more than a club...

...it was now his memorial.

I looked up into his eyes, immortalized as they were in the photo, and they reflected the candles. His eyes, looking to me over the neck of his saxophone, shimmered as they had done on the last day I saw him alive, as he had gone up those steps and inside his rowhouse, flicking on the porch light to see me safely on my way home.

I started to cry...yet again. Once more I had started to cry, and to my embarrassment they each gathered around me, the colts, embracing me in a group hug.

"I hereby make a motion to call the first meeting of The New Blue Flag Club Partnership, L.L.C. to a close," said Lucky as I wept.

"Seconded," called Short.

"Aye", added Bluegrass, and with that night settled in around the club.

That night I slept in my brand new bedroom, on a brand new bed, a fine one made of sturdy wood and a comfortable mattress. I had thought it would take me days to get used to the new room, to the new mattress, like it had during my long weeks of traveling, each flophouse bed being a new nightly torment.

Instead I dropped off to sleep within moments, Moody's old album clutched to my chest, and soon I was dreaming of being in that club...the original Blue Flag.

As I found my way to a seat in that dream the most beautiful mare I'd ever seen batted her eyelashes at me and I watched as a young Moody Blues burned the place down with his music...I watched him illuminate the world.

Chapter 5

The Penny's Worth Blues

We had set Finder's Day Weekend as our opening weekend target. We actually were probably ready to go before then, but we rehearsed, went over the fire codes with the fireponies twice for safety, and took our time hiring the best barkeeps, bouncers, and janitors we could find. Our non-discretionary funds would last through the end of that month, so we made sure we had everything set up to go.

As this time of waiting came around I sat on the veranda that surrounded the old dance hall playing my sax and garnering the interest of passers-by. Often Miss Rarity, who owned Carousel Boutique across the road, would come by and check on us, and we were happy to have such a great neighbor.

Play sax, meet new ponies, distribute fliers. Recycle, redo, reuse.

As I did this one day I noticed something unusual. One of the posts that supported the roof of the veranda had taken on an unusual foal-shaped lumpiness.

As I watched the lump I continued to play and as I did two eyes settled out from behind the post. It was a little filly, a little blank-flank with a fearful look in her eyes. As I played she continued to watch me.

I had never seen a look like that in the eyes of child before. Children should not look so sad. Life would be hard enough. That was one fact I knew for sure. Before I could rationalize what I was doing I was speaking to her through my saxophone.

"I see you" implied my song, "you silly thing."

With that she became self-conscious and began to walk away. As her hooves hit the ground I played tiny little notes, giving her motions music...just to have some fun, hopefully get one laugh out of her before she disappeared.

At once she turned, a fierce look on her face, and she came galloping back over. As she did I played "Tallyho!" and she became self-conscious once again. As she went away I played light little music, as light as a saxophone can, to give her the impression that she was flying.

She turned around again and came stomping back. As she did so I played great ponderous notes, aiding sonically to her attempt to intimidate me.

"I was gonna tell ya'," she yelled, utterly ignoring all of the good and practical information her parents had hopefully imparted to her about interaction with strangers, "that I've got a horn like that!"

"It's a saxophone," I replied, regarding her with one eye, suddenly realizing that I was an older single male pony talking to a filly-foal that, based on my best information, I was not related to and I did not know, "And didn't your daddy tell you not to talk to strangers?"

"My daddy doesn't come see me anymore."

Oh Celestia.

Oh Luna.

She looked at me as those fierce eyes fell away to something less. I pulled my legs up onto the veranda, and opened the door behind me. Ponies coming and going in all directions could see us now, it was now a public space. I would stay on the veranda. She would stay in the street. Okay, good...

"I'm Blues," I said, "Do you play it often?"

"I'm Penny's Worth," she said, her face becoming much softer, a hint of a smile "and I can't play it...it's too big for me. But...but I'd like to hear what it could sound like..."

So, I played. I played nothing too bluesy, nothing too sad. Soon she stood with a smile and cantered away, and that, I assumed, was that.

Until the next day when she did the exact same thing, and the day

after...and for a week following.

I appreciated the audience, but it was a little creepy.

One day I emerged onto the veranda, opening the doors again not only in anticipation of the juvenile section of my fan club but also to let the last bit of dust out of the dance hall.

We had decided, even though we weren't going to officially open for a month, that since we already had the staff on the payroll and the place ready, that we should have a "stealth opening" that night.

We would do this just to try it out, just to see how we do, see if there's anything we could do to make adjustments so that the "real" opening would be...perfect.

Well, as perfect as we could make it, we...the colts who were once assaulted by a drop ceiling.

As I put the doorstops in place I looked around for Penny's Worth. Seeing as none of my posts were deformed I assumed that she had simply tired of it and moved on...

C'est la vie...whatever that means.

I sat down to start rehearsing once again when I happened to glance up. What I saw in that fleeting moment almost made me swallow my entire sax in driving and consuming fear.

There, in the distance, I saw Penny being lead by one of her hooves into a group of ponies, her eyes back towards me, looking directly to me across that distance, wide with a nameless emotion.

Something moved inside me that I had never felt before, something I cared never to feel again.

I dropped my sax and leapt from the veranda, galloping full tilt across the green and up the street. I dived into the herd of ponies that were making their way this way and that, obviously unaware of the situation as I saw it.

"Penny?" I called, restrained at first, but soon louder, "Penny?!"

I weaved through the crowd, and there, right up on the edge of the square, I caught sight of her bubbly pink mane, that sand colored coat as she disappeared around the corner, still being lead by the hoof, looking around bewildered.

I am there in an instant, breathing hard, interjecting myself between her and the pony who was leading her away.

"Penny!" I cried, standing tall, my body ready to do anything, to tear into the monster, "Penny, do you know this pony?!"

"Oh hi, Blues!" she says with a giggle, "I was wondering if you saw me! This is my mommy!"

"Awkward," I thought as I deflated, "Also, potentially felony-inducing."

I looked down across Penny into the horrified eyes of the pony who had quickly gathered her into her forelegs as I had darted among them. Penny, mistaking it for an embrace, answered her mother's hug.

I looked into the eyes, now defiant and challenging, of the mare. Despite her countenance I saw the most beautiful mare I had ever seen, and also saw that she was determined to either find out who I was and how I knew her daughters name, call for help at the top of her lungs, or beat me to death with a nearby pump handle.

I looked up to see that we were in fact just outside Sugarcube Corner.

"Fancy a doughnut?" I asked, heaving for breath, hoping to bring about the first one to the exclusion of the others.

After a few graceless minutes Pinkie Pie had brought us our orders.

"Bluesy, Bluesy, Bluey's back! Now he's gonna take a whack at bringing back our dancing shack..." sang Pinkie as though she had just learned that I was back in Ponyville.

Her song ended with another one of her amazing hugs, and as I blushed

Penny giggled as only a little filly can at an outward sign of affection.

Pinkie Pie had always been dear to me, she had always shown me remarkable kindness and concern. It was to no pony's surprise more than my own that I'd never fallen in love with her. Maybe ponies only fill certain roles in our lives...maybe it's just as simple as we can't choose the ones we fall in love with.

Painted blue.

"So," began Taffy Twists, Penny's mother, "this is the Blues you've been telling me about, Penny? In Celestia's name, Penny! He's a grown-up! A stranger! I thought you were talking about one of your little classmates, not a grown adult pony!"

For the first time since I had arrived back in Ponyville I was sickened at being called an adult. Adults know better than to strike up an acquaintance with a foal they just find on the street. Maybe I'm not so wise, Dad.

"You don't know what this stallion could have done! He could have taken you off to a salt mine in Appleoosa!"

Unlikely.

"He could be a mean pony who..."

"He's not mean, mom!" cried Penny, defending me out of the blue, "He's silly and kinda stupid!"

I smirked for an instant. Out of the mouths of foals. It was, though, perhaps the most accurate description of myself I'd ever heard. I quickly beat down the smirk and made the responsible part of myself rise up.

"Your mother is absolutely right, Penny, you had no way of knowing what type of pony I am on the inside. You can't tell anything about a pony from the way they look, you can't read their hearts..."

"And where were you, young lady, when you were meeting with Blues?" she said, that worried mother part of her very, very, very close to the surface, "Tell me the truth..."

"I was just kinda standing in the street...listening to him play," said Penny, confusion evident in her voice, "Why?"

Her mother blanched.

"Because if something had happened to you, like if you got hurt, your mother would need to know to look in all the places where you should be. That's why you sat in the street and listened while I sat on the porch and played, where everypony could see us. That's why I opened the door to my club, so that my band could see everything and know we were safe...and why I never invited you in..."

Her mother looked to me, then to Penny. "Is that what happened?" she asked in quieter tones.

"Yeah," replied Penny, quickly returning to munching on her cider doughnut.

Her mother looked at her, then at me, then drank some of her coffee. Penny lifted her hot chocolate, and I my spiced cider. The cool afternoon of the autumn day was drawing over us, and the Indian summer was quickly drawing to a close. I looked up as Taffy addressed me.

"That was a wise decision to make, Mr. Blues."

Dammit, Dad!

"You are absolutely justified in feeling the way you feel," I stated, nibbling at my cider doughnut, "It is how any parent would feel...how I would feel if a child of mine was in such a situation. I am sorry for the worry this has caused you. Really, I am truly, truly sorry."

"However," spoke Taffy Twists, addressing me personally, "why would you, then, strike up a conversation with my daughter, sir?"

I would not lie. That could only make the situation worse. I took a deep breath.

"Because I had never seen such a sad child. I just wanted to see if I could

make her happy...just one laugh."

I dropped my gaze to my cider. I felt Taffy Twists eyes on me for a long while afterward.

"And what is it you do, Mr. Blues?" she asked. I explained that I was of the owners of the new club, and a saxophonist. I explained how it was Penny's interest in my playing that had her brought her close to my porch.

Taffy Twists continued to stare at me for what felt like an eternity. Before long though, to my surprise, we are standing at the door of The New Blue Flag.

"Can I really go in?" Penny asked her mother. Taffy nodded, and at once the foal dashes within.

"This...place...is...amazing!" called the little foal, spinning around, prancing jubilantly across our polished dance floor.

"Hey! Lookee here!" said Lucky, carrying a few instruments to their positions, "Looks like your Streetside Appreciation Society finally made an interior appearance!"

I looked quickly to Taffy, and I can see from her expression that she was now truly beginning to see that Penny had never been inside, that we had both been telling the truth.

As I give them both the tour we get another guest. Miss Rarity, our dear neighbor, arrives and to our amazement she has brought us all a "good luck" gift. The four of us look on in awe as she reveals costumes for us to wear. They are incredible...each reflecting our unique personalities, but each complimentary of each other.

Mine, of course, is blue. Tiny cobalt gemstones cover it, yet it is incredibly light, and I sense there is magic in it. It is the finest piece of clothing I have ever owned.

As we put them on I heard Rarity speaking to Taffy. I eavesdropped as her beautiful voice oscillated up and down.

"...and please tell your cousin Bon Bon to pick up her...oh, for months now...No! These? Wonderful neighbors...gentlecolts each of them...Oh my! She's yours!...I didn't...she's beautiful, Taffy!...no, only out on the street, darling, from the porch as far as I saw..."

And, finally, to my immense relief, "I've known Blues for going on two years...oh, yes...gentlecolt."

I heard a "bwargle" sound, a sound that had as much meaning to me as my mother's voice, and I turned to see something that made me very happy. Short had produced his own first sax, a tiny one, a foal's sax.

She had ignored all of the good and practical advice her mother had given her about not putting strange things in her mouth and put the reed to her lips. She did so again as Short pressed the keys, opening the valves, and in an instant she had played the first bars of "The Wheels on the Cart", sorta.

Her mother looked at her, her mouth hanging open. "You can borrow it," said Short, "if you come back for lessons from Blues. I play the base and harmonica now, so, I don't need it...plus I'm all grown up, too bad about that, huh?"

"Really? I can?" Penny answered happily. Her mother walked over slowly, and nuzzled her daughter. "Okay, Penny's Worth," she said, "we have to let these stallions get ready for their show."

"But, but can I come back sometime? Can Mr. Blues give me lessons?" she asked, grabbing onto her mother's hoof, dropping to the dance floor as an immobile Equestrian lump.

All was quiet.

"We'll see," she answered, "We'll talk about it tonight."

For Penny that was as good as a yes, and the little foal ran happily around the wide open room, whooping and hollering joyfully, bringing obscene amounts of joy to the faces of the four colts and two mares there gathered.

I walked them to the door, the other colts thanking Rarity over and over.

"...and we have an unofficial kind of opening tonight, and next week, but we'll open officially in three weeks, on Finder's Day weekend," I said, giving her the official spiel. Before I had even thought of it the words, "I'd love to have you here for any of them," had fallen from my lips, and she gave me a cross stare.

Another mare had given me a similar stare once...a mare hidden behind walls she'd built to protect herself. What constitutes your wall, Taffy Twists? Why did you build yours?

I looked back to the floor as we reached the doors, examining the doorsill. "Mr. Blues," she said, Penny hanging off her leg, "Thank you for being honest with me."

"I'm sorry to have caused you any concern," I said, nodding to her, "I'd love to give those lessons...somepony did so for me once..."

She looked at me again, this time regarding me with a pondering expression, and with a nod of her own she and Penny were out the door, Penny waving to me as they cantered away.

I watched them go for a long while.

The hours sped by, and we ate little and talked less. As eight chimed from the Ponyville clock we started to play slowly, our barkeep put ice in glasses, and the bouncers, Tuff Stuff and Pink Bunny, took up positions at the door.

For a half of an hour, we played to ourselves. That was fine, this was the test opening, no biggy.

At eight-thirty Davenport became our first customer. He was followed soon after by my former milkpony. Almost instantly after that came the old stallion with the crumpled hat and white beard. He slowly came up to the stage and put more bits in my case, but this time he only smiled at me, and I back at him. Our traditional conversation no longer applied, and instead I quickly changed the song to one closer to his era.

Soon ponies were trickling within.

I looked up to the door to see the massive, hulking, brutal form of Pink Bunny, our bouncer, giving me a questioning look. He pointed down and there stood Twilight Sparkle's pet dragon. I made a motion through the air and Pink drew a big "X" on his clawed hand with a grease pencil, allowing him inside.

As we took our first break I introduced myself to the dragon, the first I had ever spoken with. I soon learned that he wasn't a pet, but instead something more like a cross between a personal secretary and an adoptive son!

"Here kid, on the house," I said, returning with an ice cream sundae with garnet sprinkles, somehow hoping to make amends for my years of misunderstanding. As he ate we talked about life, the living of life, the socio-economic implications of fire-based communications systems...and mares, mostly mares.

As he spoke about Twilight, and another pony he didn't want to name, I saw something in him. I remembered something I had seen him do once, and a thought shot through my mind for a second.

"Hey, kid, can you read sheet music?"

"Ummm, yeah...why?" he asked.

Fifteen minutes later Spike the Baby Dragon became our first guest performer, playing a variation of the "Hard Baby" song I had written as I left Cherry behind, tapping it out on our old piano.

"How does a kid that young know how to play the blues like that?" asked Bluegrass. I just hung my head and chuckled, channeling Moody.

"Mares, colt, mares!"

As the crowd left I saw that Taffy Twists hadn't come, and I was surprised by how depressed that made me.

A few days later I sat on our porch, practicing once more.

I looked up to see a familiar face smiling broadly at me, so close to me in fact that it filled my vision.

"Does your mother know you're here?" I asked.

"Yup!" replied Penny, "and she says I can sit on the porch, too...but I can't go inside, yet."

She waited while I grabbed Short's sax. I set it up for her on a stand at first, letting her lift it a little bit longer each time she came to take a lesson. By the end of the first week she can hold it for almost the entirety of the scales, and she can play them as well.

"You did very well, Penny," I tell her as her lessons come to an end for the week, "You're learning very fast."

"As fast as you learned?" she asked.

I'll not lie to her. "No," I said, watching her face drop, "I had learned a different instrument first, so picking up a saxophone was easy, plus, I had a special type of magic."

"Magic?" she says, her eyes sparkling, "Like the type the unicorns my mommy works with use?"

"Well," I said as I rocked back and forth a bit, "yes and no. All of us Equestrians have magic, even us earth ponies, but this magic was unusual, you see. It was already in me...it was the way I used something..."

"Used what?" she asked, going silent, standing closer, as though she expected it to be a secret.

"My hurt...the things that make me sad, in my heart," I said, placing my hoof to my chest, "A wonderful old pony showed me how to use them...to make something better...something beautiful."

Penny looked at me, then stared at the saxophone. Silence was our companion on the porch for a few minutes, and I listened to Ponyville pass by as she stared at it.

To my amazement, she reached out for the saxophone, and standing, took it to her lips and then stared at me. It took me a minute to understand, to see what she was asking, but when I did I closed my eyes and told her I what I had realized over those years.

"Picture the sadness, Penny, the way it wraps around your heart, the way it sits behind your eyes. Imagine it turning into a liquid, like melted gold...then, then make it turn into a mist. Now, make the mist...the music."

Bwargle. Bwargle, bwargle, bwargle...toot. Toot, toot, tweet. Toot, tada toot, tada toot toot tweet...

My eyes opened to the picture of an unsteady Penny playing an uncertain version of "The Wheels on the Cart". I was amazed at it, I was overcome by it. My mouth moved up and down, my eyes went wide.

"I guess I'm sad sometimes too," she said. In one quick motion she had placed it on the stand, given me a big bear hug, and cantered off towards home.

I watched the street for long moments after she had already disappeared. I then stood, went inside the New Blue Flag. There I stared up to Moody's altar until I felt the need for dinner.

That night was our second "super-secret" unofficial opening night. It wasn't much of a secret. The crowd was larger, livelier. In their midst I saw my old friend Big Macintosh. He was wrapped up in bandages...his war wounds must have been acting up again. During our break Spike played a couple of songs while I met with Big Mac, the huge stallion embracing me in his massive forelegs. I realized I hadn't checked in when I had returned...

We talked about life, the living of life, and the obscene frailty of the apple commodities market...and mares, mostly mares.

Spike ran off, running on all fours in a spectacular effort to be home before his curfew, so, we did another set and then asked our guests to return the next week for our official opening.

As they left I looked them over...and I realized that I had been hoping that one pony had come. But, she hadn't. I wanted to show Taffy Twists what I

really was...how I was. I didn't know why, but for some reason I found myself wanting her approval.

That week was a blur. It was one part preparing the building for our opening, fixing the few things that had gone wrong (toilet tanks aren't load bearing...who knew?), and watching Penny grow in her skills.

I had never paid much attention to foals. They simply weren't part of my life as a young male single stallion. I had no siblings, so I was nopony's uncle, so...that was that. But, as soon as Penny had showed her magic, had let it cascade forth like that, suddenly she became an important part of my world.

We shared that special inner magic...magic that Moody had revealed in me. He had brought it out in me by giving me his first sax. I had brought it forth in Penny by just showing her that she mattered enough to be given a chance.

"Mommy said that I should wait here for her to come and get me, rather than go home," said Penny as our lessons began that week, "she has to work later than usual, so...wait here. That's what she said."

Okay, fine...not a problem. Unless, like, I had other plans, but...fine.

Not all of my time with Penny was spent playing the sax. She would have homework on her mind, sometimes, and we'd work on that. The things they make kids learn these days! Really, teaching them the Pythagorean theorem in first grade? I was in third before they had us working at that!

Sometimes we didn't even do that much. Sometimes, especially when it was the start of the weekend, we'd just sit and watch ponykind flit by.

Just like I had with Moody.

But that week, the one before we opened the place up to (what we hoped would be) the teaming masses was pretty much spent just on her hoofing of the sax, letting her learn where they were supposed to fall when she made the notes on her scales.

"Think of that song you played, and work backwards," I said, directing her

through the method.

"Can't I just use the magic tah' play whatever song I want?" she asked, in a confused tone.

"Ha! No," I answered, channeling Moody's brutal honesty, "The song you can play, it was already in your heart because Short had helped you play it when you visited with us...so, it was already 'spooled' and ready to go...but, it will help you learn others, especially the ones you write yourself, and the ones that have meaning for you..."

I sat still for a moment, watching her practice her hoofing. As did I thought of all my songs, the ones I'd made after each bit of pain and loss, "Crashing Down", "Train of Memory", "Hard Times", "Baby Done Left Me", "Hard Baby", "Death the Thief"...the unofficial and descriptive titles that held mountains of meaning to me, that bore witness to the trials of my being and other dripping silly sentimental nonsense.

Painted blue.

Her mother had come to get her each evening at just about five, her work up on the mountain being at some important juncture. I had gathered that she did some important work in Canterlot, and that she was one of those ponies who rode the incredible magic carts that traversed the space between Ponyville and Canterlot each day.

In short, she commuted to work and back.

We listened, as we practiced, for her arrival just after hearing the flapping of wings overhead and the springs of the suspension not so far away.

"We have plenty to eat here," I offered each night that week as Penny jumped into her mother's forelegs, "you're more than welcome to stay and have some, so you don't have to cook..."

"Thank you for the offer, but I've already planned our meal..."

Audible sigh, head drops, tired metaphor.

As that last weekday ended, beginning that odd time when 'week' becomes

'weekend', Penny and I began listening for her. As we did pegasus ponies began drifting clouds into place, seeking to get in the last scheduled rainstorm of the week before the weekend got underway.

Like everypony else I had checked the weather schedule posted in the town square that week. It had become almost automatic to do so, one of those traits of civilized life; brush your teeth, comb your hair, say 'Thank You', check to see what sort of weather our magical flying colored ponies will be manipulating the forces of nature to bring about and assure the continued life of Equestria, don't pick your nose, etc., etc., etc...

As I had read the weather chart I was upset to see that the weather that day had called for: "Rain from 5p.m. to 8p.m., varying by location."

At first I had been upset because I had worried that it would affect the turnout for our opening weekend. As I saw Penny looking up and down the street for her mother, the clouds getting thick overhead as the pegasi shouted orders to one another, I suddenly had another, greater, concern.

I tried to flag down one of the pegasi, but they were in a rush to be done with this late shift and didn't see me...or intentionally ignored me.

As the rain began to fall Penny looked at me with worried eyes. A single shiver went up our backs at once as the first truly cold wind of the autumn blew down the porch.

"Stay right here for a second or two, okay?" I said, making a smile appear on my own face despite my emotions. She looked up to the rain and then back again.

"I'll be right back," I said. She nodded at me, and I quickly went inside.

I grabbed everything that I owned that was made of fabric. Blankets, towels...curtains. I took the old gum blanket tarps we had used while painting the place out of storage. I borrowed the pillows from the office.

"Hey!" I called out in general, giving a whistle.

"Whaaaat?" replied Lucky, poking his head out of the coat-check room.

"Cover me for dinner!" I called as I ran towards the door.

The second I arrived at the door, piles of layers of reams of fabric and tarpaulin across my back, I stopped dead cold.

Outside the door, at the very top of the steps, stood Penny's Worth. As her worried head went back and forth, gazing up the street and down the street, up the street and down the street over and over, looking...longing for her mother, she stood there shivering. The cold autumn rain was as unforgiving as the circumstances of her life.

On her face was the same torturous expression of deep permeating sadness I had first seen two weeks ago. I realized then where her song flowed from, the sad she felt, how it was that she had come to be...

...painted blue.

"Kiddo," I said, stepping out the door, depositing the stacks of cloth nearby, grabbing up a towel, "Come out of the rain, silly."

"But, how will mommy see me?"

"She knows exactly where you are...just like we talked about the day I first met your mommy, remember, stay put...she'll come to you...she's probably all worried that she hasn't been able to get here yet..." I said, drying her head, getting the water out of her puffy pink mane.

There was a noise at the door. "Hey, Blues, I did dinner last night! It's not...oh...oh, okay, sure..." said Lucky, seeing the context of my dilemma, watching as I dried Penny's mane.

"I've got dinner," he said, "Should I make some extra?"

"Yes...yes, thanks Lucky," I said, seating myself on the chilly porch.

I put a set of pillows down to sit upon, one where I would sit and another in front of me so she didn't have to lay against my side if she didn't want to.

Of course, once she saw what I had in mind, the first thing she did was plop herself down against my side.

With that I began to wrap us in towels, then blankets, and finally the gum blankets. I designed each element perfectly, allowing it, I believed, to be the most efficient way to preserve heat and keep out moisture. As I went on, Penny offering helpful, and sometimes not so helpful, advice I wondered if it was possible to get a second mark...this one for structural engineering.

Once I had carefully arranged all of this I heard a still small voice.

"Blues," she said, looking at me through the hole I had left in our little cloth mountain, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Painted blue.

I quickly undid all of it, and she trotted off through the rain to the outhouse behind the paddock. As she returned I quickly wiped her down again and just flopped the whole assembly back over us.

Making sure it was water-tight we sat and listened to the rain, watching ducks slowly waddle along, hearing the voices of the pegasi high, high, high overhead as they shouted words we couldn't make out to one another.

There was a sound like the sloshing of a washing machine, and it grew louder. Overhead I heard the voices of my friends as they looked up the street. I heard Short as he called out what they were seeing. Soon it was very loud indeed, a continuous rolling drone, and Penny looked up to me with concern. "Blues?" she asked, but I pointed to the street and said, "Watch."

With that a regiment of soldiers came marching down the street between The New Blue Flag and Carousel Boutique making, I guess, for the semi-permanent camp nearby. Their band wasn't playing, each music pony instead sheltered their instrument from the precipitation. I looked for their bugler...wondered if in a different reality I was marching through the rain and he was sheltering on this porch.

I couldn't see what regiment it was. Their flags were furled and covered with gum covers to protect the silk from the driving rain, and through the

foggy pelting rain I couldn't see their regimental number or corps badges on their helmets, but it didn't matter. The colts on the porch above clapped slowly as they went by.

"Wow!" went Penny, waving furiously at their colonel. The dignified pony noticed her, and dipped then lifted his sword from his muddy boots to his streaming helmet. "Miss, Sir."

She continued to wave as the whole regiment, some thousand ponies, went by, each company lead by their captain, each who saw us nodding or saluting. The soldiers themselves would wave, or nod, or laugh at the sight of us, peaking as we were from beneath the blankets. All the while the rain kept coming down, tinkling off their armor with the sound of a million chimes, washing down the tired faces of the soldiers, soaking the soft parts of their uniforms.

Surprisingly soon they had all passed, and as their supply wagons and ambulances went by they left fresh ruts in the now exceptionally muddy road.

"Wonderful" I thought, "Our opening night and our customers will be traipsing mud through the place."

"If we got any," I thought again, looking to the darkened sky.

Painted blue.

I looked down to Penny, she had buried herself in the blankets again. An idea fired across my brain, and I entertained it. I stretched myself, grasping for my saxophone gingerly, not wanting to jostle her.

"Penny," I asked, raising myself a little, "What do you think it felt like being one of those soldiers? Do you think they were cold, sad? Why would they be sad? Do you think...think that they miss their mommies too? How does it feel right now, Penny, in your heart?"

As I asked each of these questions, she answered. As she did I gave her words notes, let her feelings become the bridges and chords of the music. As I did my best to play the sax from the unusual position she gave her feelings sound.

"No," she'd say, "it's more down here," or "It's not that sad!" or "Can we try that part again?"

And so, as we lay there in the blankets, Penny's Worth wrote her first song, "Marching in the Rain".

With that exercise complete she stuffed herself deeper into the blankets, and was silent for a while.

"Blues," she said, "My mommy is coming."

"Yup, any minute now, probably just got held up at work...maybe carriages can't fly in the rain," I said, realizing that I'd never seen one of the carts in the sky during a shower.

"Blues," she said, a moment later, "if she's really late, what will I do?"

"You'll have dinner here on the porch with me. I had Lucky make extra," I said, proud of my foresight.

"Blues," she said, "if she...doesn't come back, ever...like my daddy..."

Oh Celestia.

Oh Luna.

"...would you take care of me?"

"Of course," I answered.

To my utter surprise she actually fell asleep. A nice little nap as we waited, on the porch, in the rain.

As six moved towards six-thirty there was a rumbling shock, and a filament of purple light condensed into a ball which then shattered into the forms of Twilight Sparkle, Spike, and Taffy Twists. I watched as they materialized in the middle of the muddy street.

Watching ponies flash and teleport never gets old.

"Blegh!" called Spike, wrapping himself around Twilight's leg to keep from sinking deeper into the mud.

"You're not climbing up here with feet like that!" called Twilight, conjuring a poncho for both of them with her magic.

My focus however was on Taffy. The second she had materialized she was already mid-stride, heading towards the New Blue Flag at a gallop, the mud flying up into her as her hooves beat the wet ground.

She stopped dead at the top of the stairs, almost crashing into her sleeping daughter and I before she had realized that we weren't a pile of discarded laundry.

"Hi," I said quietly, "She's asleep."

"Oh," she said, looking down as I uncovered the blankets, leaving a few towels across the slumbering form of the foal.

The look of concern she had on her face, her love and worry over her daughter, was so strong...palpable. She, in that moment, was the most beautiful mare I'd ever seen.

I know, I say that a lot. But...but as I saw her emotions so close to the surface, there were things I wanted to say.

It was in that silence that I conveyed to her all I had been trying to say since I had first met her two weeks ago. I used my eyes, my big old yellow eyes, to tell her what I had done, silently, as to not wake the foal.

I have protected this child, my eyes told her.

When she was cold, I kept her warm.

When she was wet, I kept her dry.

When she was in doubt, I gave her my strength.

When she was in fear, I gave her my resolve.

I have done this because she trusts me, relies on me, has become dear to me...

...and she loves you, therefore you are dear to me.

My eyes are rather expressive, apparently.

I looked from Taffy's eyes to her forelegs...they were muddy, dirty. As she saw me looking at her body she recoiled a touch, standing and staring at me.

I moved slowly, letting Penny's little form slide gently down my flank until she rested gently on the pillow, her nap uninterrupted.

I gathered up a big white towel, the same one I had used to dry Penny's mane.

"You can't pick her up with those hooves and forelegs like that," I whispered, motioning to Taffy. For the first time she seemed to notice her dishevelment, and with small uncertain motions she opened up her forelegs to look them over.

The towel had been rather new, we had just bought them a month ago, but I sacrificed its virgin sheen to her needs. I placed her hoof in the towel, and she let out a gasp of surprise, but did not withdraw, as I began to wipe the mud from her hoof and foreleg.

Behind me I heard Lucky arriving at the door, most likely to tell me that dinner is ready. He sees what was going on and, being an awesome wingman, doesn't say a word.

Out in the rain I see that Spike had crawled beneath a blushing Twilight, staring out from beneath her front legs like any pony's foal would do.

I wipe the mud from Taffy's leg, past the fetlock and back, in slow deliberate movements, capturing all of the mud that I can.

I feel her pulse. She's breathing shallowly.

As I finish I hold the towel to her other hoof, just beneath, letting her choose to lower it. She moved with flitting uncertain motions, the same way Seafoam went through life. I offered it up again, and as I leaned over Penny's still sleeping form again she stood there looking at me for a second time as the rain continued to come down...and then lowered her other hoof into the towel.

I have followed your law, Taffy, my actions tell her.

I have protected your foal from these elements, had found a way to do so without breaking my word to you, without jeopardizing the narrow, thin, sheet of trust that stretches between us.

I have done this, it implied as I slowly removed every last bit of mud and dirt from her trembling hoof, because I want you to trust me. I don't know why, Taffy, but your trust means something to me...I want you to know that you can rely on me...

I have protected what is most precious to you, Taffy, as I always will, as I will always find a way to.

I see the walls you've built, Taffy...don't let them rule you, as they did somepony else who was once dear to me.

Let me take some of your burdens, Taffy, put them on my back...that's what a stallion is for.

Actions, it seems, can speak louder than words, and as I finished she held her trembling hooves out to me for a second longer. I lifted the sleeping Penny into her forelegs, and Taffy stared at me.

"Lucky," I said, turning to him, "Would you put some dinner into the travel trays...enough for both of them?"

"Sure," he says, heading back within.

"You don't have to do...to do that," she says, loudly at first, but then silently as Penny tossed in her forelegs.

"It's already six-thirty, it would be seven before you were ready to eat and

then it would be her bedtime," I said in a small but resolute voice, guiding my little blue-painted ship through the storm, "take your foal home and sit with her...she missed you terribly."

She looked at me with an expression I'd only ever seen in movies. I explained to her, kneeling before her over the pile of blankets, how we had written a song.

"She'll be ready for a recital, soon, I think," I whispered.

"That...that would be...wonderful," she says, looking down at the silent foal.

Lucky returned with the travel container, wrapped up in a bag, with bread and salad. Excellent presentation. I carried them out into the rain, Twilight volunteering to carry it as Taffy carried Penny. I gave Spike a quick endorsement to Twilight, and she remarked that he wouldn't always be able to play at the club, but she'd love to come hear him some time.

I returned to Taffy on the porch. I was now wet through.

Before she could say anything I had wrapped a gum blanket around Taffy and Penny.

"We'll...we'll have to repay you for dinner, have you over some time," she said, slowly making her way down the steps on three legs, clutching Penny.

"I'd love to come. Let me know when," I said, water dripping down my face.

She turned back to me with the rain running down the sides of the gum blanket and said, "If...if it ever comes back to this, again, feel free to...you can go inside, with her now...if it rains...or, whenever."

"Okay," I answered, waving goodbye.

With a last long look to me she stood beside Twilight and Spike. As they flashed away the last thing I saw was the faintest hint of her raising her hoof to wave in reply.

I picked up the towels and went inside The New Blue Flag. In less than two hours I would be officially opening my club.

Chapter 6

The Taffy Twists Blues

Hey Moody, it's me...Blues.

Just checking in, letting you know what's been going on in my little blue life over these last few of months since the club opened.

I've been thinking about you a lot recently, so, if those of you who have gone down into the Well of Souls do, as they say, watch us in the waters, or can flit around those you knew in life unseen, well...sorry if this is "old news", but...I just wanted you to know.

Oh! You'll never guess where I am as I'm thinking this, as I'm making this little note for you in my head...

We opened the New Blue Flag during Finder's Day weekend. Miss Rarity had made up this huge blue flag to fly outside the door, and it was worth every bit of her commission. It's magnificent, Moody, I hope you can see it from beyond where the Pony of Death carried your little light in his lantern. It has our marks, the colts and I, in small little silver spirals in the middle cascading out across a field of blue so perfect you'd think you could go swimming in it.

Bluegrass says that he had her base it on the one that everypony thinks you and your colts had flying outside the original Blue Flag, but that nopony remembers...so at the time I thought that Luna, Celestia, and you only knew if it was true or not.

We wondered how many ponies had been waiting beneath its tassles as we waited for the club to open that first night Moody. "Celestia's will," Lucky had said as the clock struck eight.

Our New Blue Flag is certified by the fireponies to hold 750 revelers at a time.

We had that inside the first hour, Moody, the first hour!

It was amazing to me to see them all, how the moisture from them, those ponies who had been waiting in the rain, evaporated above them in a visible haze, how they laughed, danced, and cavorted as we played the blues, jazz, swing, bluegrass...even a touch of country, and (forgive me) some rock.

The second night went just as well, except there was no mud and rain, so we opened the doors and windows and let the music and laughter pour out into the streets of Ponyville.

When it was over we pulled out one of those long tables, the ones we keep under the stage for ponies who rent the hall for parties, and dumped all of our earnings all over it.

We paid the staff their deserved salary; our bouncers, our barkeepers, bussers, and wait staff, the dishwashers, and then...finally, the band/ownership committee.

With our bits in our saddlebags we all then stood there, the entirety of the employee and managerial components of The New Blue Flag Club, L.L.C., and stared at what was left over on the table.

It was obscene, Moody, it was absolutely disgusting. I actually felt bad about how many bits were still there, shining in a decadent heap the table. And here we had dipped the prices just to get ponies in the door!

How did it go with the original Blue Flag, Moody? Did it feel like this? Did you have a big first weekend? Did it ever have hard times? I wondered then why you had closed it, but I think I know now...

You should see how Penny has grown over the five months. She is so much stronger, less fearful. She even got her cutie mark!

We had moved our lessons off the porch as autumn descended into its "cold and wet" phase. At first we sat right up on the stage, but to my surprise she only wanted to be up there when we were practicing the sax. If we were doing homework she wanted to be right down in the middle of the dance floor, laying there as her pencils and crayons rolled in all directions, where she could see up through the skylight.

Her focus is much better, she's not worrying about things, so she has more energy to put into the music and her work.

"Will my music ever be as good as yours?" she asks as she had wobbled through a new song.

"Probably," I said, "Maybe even better. But...but you'll have to learn to focus, and...and you'll have to develop the song within, Penny, your song will mellow as you learn more about yourself, as you go through life, have new experiences. Some will be sad, some happy, but each will add to your song."

Who had I been paraphrasing there, Moody? Who had told me something similar while I sat on his stoop, eh?

I remember how sad it had made me that my life would be tangled up in blues, and I was worried about how it would affect her.

"Okay!" she said, diving back into her lesson, and I could only smile.

Which, of course, brings us around to the matter of Taffy Twists.

At first she had just stood at the door and called to her daughter, and I'd walk Penny to the door and have some small talk as she looked down to her daughter as she swung back and forth from her legs to mine and back.

Soon enough though she was coming to lay with us as we finished Penny's homework. She would watch with a smile as her daughter wobbled through a song, or would sit quietly with her eyes on us as we finished her declination tables.

One day, two weeks later, she lay there nearby as we both watched Penny play her way through the song she'd been preparing for an eventual recital. As I watched Penny play suddenly an amazing sensation went up my foreleg. I looked down to see that she had placed her hoof on mine.

She was just as surprised as I, as though she had done it by reflex. She quickly looked up to me, withdrew it, and with a bright blush went looking back to her daughter.

There were cracks in her wall, Moody.

The Harvest Festival came around. It is a holiday that, despite its ancient roots in earth spirits and agricultural magic, had pretty much devolved into an excuse for costumed foals to run around in costumes begging ponies for mass-produced candy treats.

The only adult ponies who participate are emotionally compromised stallion-foals who no sense of self-worth and don't care about looking like idiots in public so of course I went as my old friend Cake.

For the first time since I was a foal I was looking forward to the festival. I hadn't worn a costume for a decade, mostly because at this time of year for the last few years I was suffering from crippling depression and living in moldy apartments.

The dance hall was rented by the school district to put on a haunted barn as a fundraiser and the band and I dived into helping out with reckless abandon. Penny and I came up with a great little chamber...a frosting-smear Kitchen of Doom.

Pinkie Pie and Rarity had helped us out with this one, my two good friends. Rarity did the costuming, Pinkie the frosting.

"See the Pony Eating Cake!" said the sign outside, dripping with frosting. As the fillies and colts sheepishly entered they were treated to the sight of Penny, dressed as a demented chef, munching Cake's topmost layer.

The foals booed, and one particularly sharp one said, "Oh, it's wordplay...I get it, see, it's an exploration of our fears and apprehension...we wrap ourselves in worry so that when we enter our expectations are that..."

That's the point where I opened the huge mouth, complete with yellowed felt teeth, let out an unearthly noise, and chased the foals around the interior of our chamber for a good minute while they screamed in primal fear, their eyes wide with unrestrained terror.

Good times, Moody, good times.

The night wore down and parents began to arrive to begin taking apart the sets. Penny and I, who had made a point not to give away too many details of our plan, sat awaiting Taffy.

"Penny?" she said, passing within through the flap, looking at the sign, "How did it go? What was your skit like?"

With that we give her the full effect, spraying frosting everywhere, Penny munching horrifically, and I beginning my chase.

Rather than screaming Taffy instantly gets the joke, and even while I am chasing her around she began to laugh. As she laughs, Penny laughs, and soon my roars mix with giggles and become bwargles of laughter. Soon there was frosting in my eyes and I tripped, falling to the floor even as I laugh and try to clear my eyes.

"I'll get a mop," says Penny, leaving the chamber as the lights came back on in the dance hall.

I can't get the frosting out of my eyes, and it's starting to hurt. As I curse under my breath, rubbing around them, I felt the sensation of a hoof in my mane.

"Here," says Taffy, "lean back."

She produces a handkerchief and slowly, certainly, she leans into my Cake costume and begins to wipe the area around my eyes free of the frosting.

"Blink," she says in a soft tone, one I'd not heard from her before. As I did the moisture of my eyes began to clear some of the frosting, and as I looked up at her she licked the handkerchief and put it back to the task of clearing my eyes.

Just as I had wiped her hooves weeks before, she carefully and cautiously freed me from the detritus, sensing how far I'd let her go, letting me decide how far we go down the road towards familiarity.

I tell you, Moody, that if she had begun to lick to frosting off my face with great long lapping motions while giggling softly I wouldn't have lifted a hoof to stop her.

But, instead, as I looked up to her, my vision restored, we smiled back and forth uncomfortably, each one waiting for the other to speak first.

There are cracks in your wall, Taffy. What's going to break through?

Are you still flitting around, Taffy, or are you eyeing a spot to land and roost?

As Penny returned I wiggled out of my Cake costume. I tripped over one of the eight-notes, sending myself sprawling into more of the frosting.

Painted blue.

Penny and Taffy helped me up, and within a few moments we had cleared our set and soon were helping clear the hall. We finished and to everypony's surprise it was still relatively early. I walked Penny and Taffy home, Penny even able to gather more candy from some lit houses, the faces of pumpkins still illuminated on the still air by candles that flickered and bobbed as we passed.

As I saw them to their door, seeing their little place for the first time, Taffy spoke saying, "We still owe you that dinner. How about next week?"

"I'd love to," I answered.

I'd never visited you during any holidays, did I, Moody? Did you carve pumpkins? What does a legendary bluespony's pumpkin look like? How did you spend the holidays? Did you ever have anyone over on Blessings Day? Did you spend Yule alone? Apart from New Year's at the Blue Flag did you have ponies with you at any of these times?

When did you spend time with the mares in the photos, Moody? How long were they in your life? Did you tell me about the purpose of a stallion, to absorb pain and doubt, based on your own pain or instead in remembrance of happy times spent in their company?

I spent time with Taffy, alone, for the first time after that dinner, Moody.

The meal had been delicious. The colts were decent cooks, but nothing

tastes like a meal made especially for you.

Penny brought me things from her room, she kept wanting me to see the little toys and awards, school projects and semi-completed art projects. I listened intently as she described each, Taffy looking on as I'm slowly covered in the colorful crafts.

Penny had an invitation to spend the night with a friend, and as she gathered up her overnight gear, we loaded her up and saw her to the door. As a dizzy looking Applecore and her father guided them away I turned to say my goodnights.

Before I could even speak Taffy said, "You don't...you don't have to go...right away."

She made us some warm drinks and we sat in her parlor talking. She tells me about her work. She works in public affairs up in Canterlot, in the House of Earth, the royalty of the earth ponies.

"Whenever they want to do something in public, like a charity event, I'm the one...well, there's a handful of us, who make all the preparations," she said, sipping from her mug.

"That sounds very interesting," I said, smiling at her.

"At times," she said, "It's not always just flying off on magic cart to the far reaches of ponydom...at times I want to just make up the events, not have to be away from Penny all day, something I can do from here in Ponyville. It fits my mark though, making up something special," she said looking back to the wrapped pieces of taffy. I looked too before I realized that I was, in effect, ogling her flank.

I looked back to my hot chocolate and then told her a bit of unfortunate truth. "I have something to tell you...something embarrassing."

As she looked on with a tilted head I explained how I had seen her in the street the day before and went up and began to speak with her for two minutes before realizing that it was a different pony entirely.

I had apologized to this other pony and said I thought she was somepony

else.

"Tell me about it, happens all the time," answered a mare at her side, a green one with a golden lyre as her mark.

To my relief Taffy laughed. "That was most likely my cousin Bon Bon or one of our little family circle. We all have a resemblance, all the fillies in one generation...it's a magical condition."

I'd never heard of it. But then again, I added, sometimes I can see two ponies in the streets who look relatively alike. I once looked out the window of the carriage in Appleoosa to see myself dancing.

She laughed again. I loved the sound.

Cracks in your wall, Taffy.

"I keep seeing this pegasus with Penny's bubbly pink mane and same sandy coat color. I keep imagining that she's what Penny will look like when she grows up...minus the wings, of course."

She looked back to me, tossing her head a bit.

"I've never seen Penny open up to anypony outside of our own family, let alone a stallion, as much as she has with you," she said, leaning forward a little, looking me up and down.

"We have the same magic in our hearts," I said. She then studied me carefully, tilting her head from one side to the next.

One of the first things Penny had said to me jumped into my mind.

"Hey," I asked, "Penny had said that you bought her a saxophone once, but that it was adult sized..."

"I'm always buying her things, our closets are full, just to let her know that I'm thinking of her when I'm on the road. Celestia alone knows why I bought it. Probably just because I was in that part of Manehattan..."

I coughed a touch, Moody, fighting to put down the mug.

"...at an estate sale. Are you okay?"

I began to turn blue...er, as she said it. See where this is going Moody?

"May I see it?"

She took me upstairs to the edge of her bedroom. I waited in the door. She rustled through the closet, pulling out the tarnished sax. I went to sit at the top of the stairs and she laid down beside me as I examined it.

I took the time to do a regular check first, see that everything was free and moving, that nothing was missing. It seemed in pretty good order.

With that I took a deep breath and focused on the space beneath the neck screw, wiped away a bit of oxidation to see what I already knew would be engraved there.

"M.B."

Pain and loss, Moody, are very real things, as you know, and sometimes they strike us out of the blue.

"What's...what's wrong?" she said, her expression going ashen as my tears started. Dammit, Moody, I cry a lot. I know that in past periods of Equestrian history the ponies would save their tears in crystal jars, keeping the salt from the evaporation for generations. There's a special magic in it, they'd say.

If I had kept all the salt from all of my tears we could have melted all the snow on the roads in Manehattan, Moody. I'm a proper bluespony, Moody, just as you knew I'd be...my pain became a song, and I shared it with her.

As Taffy looked on I put that horn to my lips Moody, your last horn, and let it flow out into the house. She has her hoof over her heart as she sees the pain, hears it, feels it.

"Left behind, left behind," sings my song, echoing in her stairwell, "artifacts of ones dead and gone."

Your horn tasted better than you described it, Moody. It tasted like eternity, like a forgotten world...and yes, perhaps, just a touch like a mule shoe.

As tears flowed down my face she watched me, two single shimmering tears of her own, crying at my pain...my song.

When I finished playing that song I carefully laid your second horn down beside me and fell backwards across the landing at the top of the stairs that lead up from their parlor to the second story bedrooms.

Why do so many important parts of my life happen on porches, stoops, landings and stairs, Moody? Is there somepony there on the other side of existence who can explain that?

As she looks down at me I tell her bout you, Moody, about who you had been in my life. I show her the engraved initials, and her mouth hangs open. There are those, Moody, who think Celestia is a trickster...that she makes our lives miserable for her amusement. They are fools. They know nothing, you know that for fact from where you are, don't you? Celestia has her plans, true, but they aren't meant to hurt. They have their purpose...

"Do...do you want the sax?" she offers.

"No...no, you...you bought it for Penny. It's hers, he'd want a young bluespony to have a good horn, even if she can't use it for a while. If she sticks with it, I'll...I'll tell her someday about who owned it...the pony he was..."

Celestia's purpose for your old horn came to that. As I lay there telling Taffy of you she lifted her hoof and began running it through my mane, looking down at me with tender eyes.

Thank you, Celestia. Thank you, Moody.

Soon, she began to lean. Soon those eyes closed, and mine did as well...soon I felt how close her lips were to mine...

Anchor here, Taffy, I'd just shown you my storm within, and you can see it is a safe harbor.

"Mom!" called Penny, "I'm back! Applecore was throwing up all over the place!"

Taffy bolts upright, shock in her eyes. Her hooves go to her mouth. At once she had jumped over me and was going down the stairs as silently as possible, looking back to me and then to the kitchen where Penny was dropping her gear.

Painted blue.

"...it was green and yellow and there were chunks of..."

I stood and made my way to the bathroom on silent hooves.

"You know, honey, that I...I was showing Blues that sax I bought for you. He, he likes it very much."

"Is Blues still here?" said Penny with a surprising enthusiasm that made me quite happy to hear. I also heard her mother jump at the question.

"Yes...he's, he's..."

On cue, I flushed the toilet.

"Occupied!" I heard her call.

You're always your parents' foal but they are very happy when you are grown up and can take care of yourself, mostly because they can finally ship you all your crap that's been clogging up their house.

I received mine and put everything that I thought of value or had meaning around my rooms and donated the rest to charity. As I looked at it all I was actually just a touch proud of how full my room was, how many emblems of my life I was surrounded by.

We had gotten a lot of business at The New Blue Flag from the army camp nearby. The soldiers were glad to have a place to escape the monotony of winter camp and when they were on leave or dismissed they'd crowd in with the regulars and civilians.

As Servicepony Day drew near I suggested to the ownership committee of The New Blue Flag Club, L.L.C. that we hold a special event weekend for the regiments that were encamped nearby. "Aye!" shouted the entire workforce, and at once we set about preparations.

We rented these two huge freakin' tents to cover the paddock, to temporarily expand our capacity. We'd hire some new acts to play out here and circulate between inside and out. Tuff Stuff and Pink Bunny held up the massive posts that held the tent aloft as Bluegrass, Short, Lucky and I went gingerly about the upper fold, wrapping them to the posts.

"Hey!" called Short, reading a warning label, "It says don't anchor to the main post while expanding the guidelines or you could fall through the seam!"

"What? I can't hear you! I'm anchoring to the main post while expanding the guideline!" I called back as I fell through the seam.

As I climbed back up they shook their heads and laughed, and I shrugged.

Painted blue.

Awhile later, as I careful pulled at the anchoring post and cautiously avoided the guideline, I happened to look back towards the dance hall. We were almost level with the second floor windows, actually third floor if you consider how tall the hall was above the dancefloor, and I marveled at how well our trim work and gingerbread was holding up.

I happened to glance towards my own sitting room window. As I did a shadow of a pony flit across it, my humble belongings being thrown up in the air behind the intruder.

I was being robbed. This never, never, never happens in Equestria.

"I'll be right back!" I called, as I tripped over the guideline. I was already running, my hooves paddling through the air, as I fell through the seam again. I hit the ground running, and bursting into the club I grabbed "The Heat" off the wall.

It was a decorated canoe paddle, one meant for humorous initiation

ceremonies, but a paddle nonetheless. I crept up the stairs silently, making down the hallway towards my room. As I passed Bluegrass's rooms I checked them quickly. His things were undisturbed, or in reality not any more disturbed than he usually left them. I alone had been targeted.

I entered my door as quietly as I could, peeking around the corner. Noise was coming from my bedroom. I noticed that even though my things were askew, they had not been broken, just...put back shoddily. Unusual. The burglar would have plenty of time to tell me about his obsessive-compulsive disorder as I had Pink Bunny and Tuff Stuff bounce him back and forth in the most brutal game of tetherball I could picture.

I stood at the door of my bedroom pounding "The Heat" into my hoof as the intruder, unaware of my presence, rifled through the storage box that stood beneath my bed.

"Boo."

At the noise the thief stood shock upright, almost unponylike in appearance.

I dropped "The Heat" as I stared into Taffy Twists' eyes.

She was able to burst past me, Moody, and out the door because I was in just as much shock as she was.

"Wait!" I called, seeing her just gallop out of my rooms, actually giving a small kick like a wild horse would when in fear. I ran out into the hallway and heard her sobs in the near stairwell.

I went quickly but cautiously down the hallway in the opposite direction, and dropped down the stairwell nearest the main door, the one with your altar over it, Moody.

I hear the thudding of the doors on the far, far side of the dance hall, beyond the stage, office, and kitchen. She'll find no escape in that direction, I knew. Those doors were locked tight with keys kept in the safe in the office. I heard her sobbing as the thudding stops, as she comes out through the kitchen, knowing she must face me.

I had already hung "The Heat" back up when she came trotting through the main hall. Seeing me there her sobs become more forceful, rocking her as she canters across the dance floor and up and into me, as we fall to the floor just short of the doors.

We lay there, her curled up with her legs beneath her. I wrap my hooves around her and repeat over and over, "I'm not angry....I'm not mad, Taffy. Taffy, I'm not mad..."

As she cries I rock her and the autumn sun sends purple and red dots over us as it filters through the stained glass of the doors.

As I rock her I begin to ponder why she would do this. A few scenarios play out in my mind, and I save one for last. She didn't need money, she's not a thief. As my chest and barrel are soaked through I ask her each one.

"Taffy," I asked as the sobbing subsides, "Do you think I took something from you? Is something missing from your place?"

She shakes her head no, rubbing it against my chest.

"Do...do, you think I'm hiding something from you?"

She shakes her head.

"Taffy," I ask, hoping that this one was true, "Were you checking my story...seeing if I had told you the truth? Like you have to do when preparing sites for the royals?"

She cries afresh, new sobs, and my suspicion is confirmed. She was getting ready, making preparations...loosing the anchor chain, fluttering above the landing site.

"Taffy...Taffy," I said, lifting her head to look at me, her colors blurred by the red of her flush and pained outpouring, "I've told you the truth, I swear it in Celestia's name, in Luna's name. I want you to trust me. I want you to lean on me, Taffy..."

"Penny loves you!" she called out, her sound muffling as she wiped her face against my chest.

"I know," I said, pulling her in closer, "I love her too."

"I..." begins Taffy, sucking in a great quantity of air, and I fear she's pulling the words back in that she was getting ready to say...I hope she was fueling her will to say them, to go once again into the tempest waters where she'd been dashed apart before.

I am a safe harbor Taffy, I am painted blue to let all see my weakness, so they know what I am.

I am strong Taffy, I am not going to drop the nest you build here.

Pull out the bricks, Taffy, come through the wall to me.

"I love you," she says, lifting her face, looking into my eyes as hers stream tears.

"I know," I said, placing my head to hers, wiping mine along hers, wiping down across her forelock to her withers and back, "I love you too. I love you Taffy."

We sat together like that, together, for a good long while, as the purple and red dots moved over us as Celestia slowly dropped the sun.

"Hey!" calls Lucky, opening the door. "Are we gonna put this tent up today or...oh. Oh...Oh," he states, seeing us there. Being the awesome wingman he is he slowly closed it as he went back outside.

After a while we stand, and I take her hoof in mine. "Let me show you something," I say, leading her back towards the stairs, and together we pass beneath your altar, Moody, bowing.

I put the doorstep in the door, leaving it wide open, and having done so she enters. As we put my rooms back in order I lead her down the shadowed corridors of my life, pointing out the meaning of certificates, remembering Yules where I received this gift or that, the importance of blankets I was wrapped in as a foal, my first pair of horseshoes, bronzed, sit on the shelf....pictures of me at scout and/or band camp.

Time passes quickly, and there's an "Ahem" at the door. Lucky stood there, two plates in hand.

"Thought you two might like some dinner," he says, self-consciously.

"Thank you, Lucky!" she says, giving him a quick hug, turning him bright red.

"Gentlecolts, all of them," echoed Miss Rarity's words in my mind. As Taffy took the plates and cleared my little kitchenette table he quickly looked at me and mouthed "That's two you owe me!" as I nodded in agreement.

As we eat I wonder about Penny. Apparently Applecore, now recovered, had asked for a "re-do" of the sleepover. As I wash dishes she wanders around my rooms. There's only one left to tour.

I walk deliberately to my bedroom, and I latch this one open as well. Slowly she enters. I had already sat down beside of my bed, ignoring the way things were still spread around. If she chooses to close the door, to turn it from an open space to an intimate one, that's her choice. I rejoice in her presence either way, and it is her wishes and wants we address here, not mine.

Instead she focuses on the big black book in my hooves as I collect it from the small bookcase. She lays herself across my bed, resting her head in her hooves as she looks over my shoulders at the pictures.

I show her your life, Moody. I share your life with her...it was the last drop of my life I had left to show her, how you had added so much to mine. I hope you don't mind. As we reached the last page I showed her the picture of us together, the newspaper clipping.

"He would always rub my mane," I said, "I don't think ponies of his generation did the whole 'bro-hug' thing."

"Like this?" she asks, running her hoof through my mane tenderly.

"Ha! No," I add quickly, "It was closer to a noogie...but, but it was all the emotion he'd allow himself."

Just for the record, Moody, if you'd wanted a hug, I'd have given you one.

With that she kissed me on the cheek.

"I like your way better," I said, turning to reply in kind. She though had already draped her forelegs around my shoulders and hung her head over them, resting into me.

I looked to the window. Luna's Harvest Moon was already climbing. I laid my head into hers, rubbing against it briefly before I too fell asleep.

Chapter 7

The Friendship Blues

I awoke alone. With small panic I leapt up and quickly went sprawling to the ground as my legs began to feel the multitude of pin pricks which indicated their protest at having to support me as I slept sitting on the floor. My back too disliked having slept against the bed, and it protested in loud terms. None of these hurts though could match the pain that was flying through my heart at the idea that she had left me...

Painted blue.

I was able to soothe one of those complaints as I lurched into the sitting room. There a small note met me, one in her perfect little hoofwriting.

"Had to go pick up Penny. We'll both be back tonight."
-T.T.

"Yes!" I cried, throwing my hooves into the air. At once my legs and back, frustrated at being ignored, launched another attack that sent me flailing and screaming into my coffee table.

Even when I'm happy, painted blue.

I asked you before, Moody if you knew where I am as I'm making this mental note to you. Of course you know, but if you had guessed at the club doing that servicepony's benefit you'd be wrong.

I would like to tell you what happened there though...

That night the club was alive with ponies. Soldiers of the brigade that was stationed in the camp above Carousel Boutique filled both the tents we had set up and the old hall itself. They mixed with our regular customers as their proud flags flew from rafters, the colors adding excitement to our party.

Penny and I smiled at one another, and I lifted her onto the stage. "You

ready kiddo?" I asked as her mother looked on in surprise. "Yup!" she answered, lifting her little sax to her mouth.

"Ladies and gentlecolts," I cried, "In honor of our guests the serviceponies, I present for your patriotic consideration Miss Penny's Worth, in her world debut, playing 'Beneath Sun and Moon'!"

As I slid off the stage so she could look at me and concentrate the soldiers and Ponyville civilians alike applauded. I looked to Penny, she took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

"Beneath Sun and Moon", as you know Moody, isn't Equestria's national anthem, but it is dear to the hearts of all Equestrians. It's song about our good land, and how we all are one ponydom despite being three races. It's about how the Sister Sovereigns guide us, watch over us, love us. So it was that even as it wobbled from a child's saxophone it caused ponies to remove their hats and helmets, and more than a few misty eyes were seen.

I felt Taffy leaning against me, the beautiful light frame resting easy alongside mine and the engaging scent of the mare washing away all the others in the room. I laid my head against hers. It was at that moment when, barely a few chords into the song, Penny saw us.

As she looked at us, Moody, her whole expression changed. I swear, Moody, the kid became lighter, her whole countenance fell away and was replaced by a being made of "Zap!" and fireworks.

She had seen us, the two of us, Taffy and I, leaning into each other...the love between us now evident to her.

In her little world something fell into place, something that had not been meshing properly came together. At once all of those concerns, the worries that had dogged her, parted ways and she focused on her song...

...her song, Moody!

At once life burst from that saxophone. It was incredible. "Beneath Sun and Moon" came alive, and the crowd was awed by it, overwhelmed by it.

Her song ended, and in that still sudden second between when it ended and when the crowd could begin to cheer something amazing happened.

There was a sound like a falling star sliding across a frozen lake, and a look went over Penny's face like somepony had poured quicksilver down her flank. She looked down, her face went wide, and she turned to us with the most perfect expression on her face that I'd ever seen.

If I could have bottled that expression, Moody, I could have sold it for ten bits a pop on the street.

"Mom!" she called out, her voice still the only one in the room as the crowd looked on unspeaking, still awestruck, "My cutie mark!"

At once the crowd burst out into cheers, the whole of the dance hall, the entire assembly that had gathered around the open windows as the song progressed, cheered wildly.

They all cheered again as Penny leapt from the stage into her mother's forelegs, they rocked the structure with their cheers so much that ancient dust bunnies we hadn't thought to clean out came down from atop the rafters.

So loud was it that the flags overhead vibrated with it. I noticed all of this as I climbed back up onto the stage. As I did I felt a little tug and looked down into her face, the little wonderful face.

"Let's see that mark!" I said, gathering her up, tickling her as I lifted her around.

It was a gumball machine. At first I was startled, was Penny destined for a life of automated food distribution maintenance?

No, I realized, think about how she got it, stupid. She had gotten it because she had focused on us. She had received clarity, a deeper understanding of the mechanics of her world. Because we loved each other she no longer had those worries, those fears, those permeating concerns that clouded her little world.

Now, to her, it was all clear blue skies.

The gumballs in the machine all exist, but they come out one at a time...you put in your money and out comes your...penny's worth. Oh. Ohhh. Ohhhhh!

Hers was the gift of clarity, of focus. Celestia alone knew what she could do with such a powerful mark...how her song would come out in the end.

"Up, up!" she called, and I lifted her high above me and spun her around, and she fell into my forelegs as we wheeled down to the floor, her mother looking up to us with tears in her eyes and her hoof over her mouth as the crowd continued to cheer.

I don't hate Penny's biological father, Moody. I don't hate anypony or anything.

In time, I knew, in an effort to be honest with me that Taffy would tell me about him, not wanting to have any secrets from me. I could already guess though how the story would go.

Poor Taffy, alone, seeking shelter from a storm in her life, thinking she'd found a safe harbor.

Oh, Taffy, there were hidden rocks...weren't there? Oh, Taffy.

They aren't real stallions; those who whisper sweet lies, those who play a game with the hearts of mares...they are merely animals spreading their seed.

From a biological perspective, with most stallions off fighting The Wars for all of these generations, I guess it's necessary. There are repercussions to having the streets of these villages and cities filled with a ratio of 3 mares to 1 stallion. Ponies don't come through some magic mirror or through some other ways found in the fables we tell foals to avoid telling them the embarrassing truth.

So...I don't hate him. If he hadn't scratched his itch I'd never have met Penny, and therefore never met Taffy...never fallen in love with both of them.

But, as I sat there on the stage embracing Penny, receiving her kisses over and over as the crowd continued to cheer for her, I couldn't help but think that the bastard was the biggest bloated sack of stupid idiocy to ever trot Equestria for leaving this behind.

I looked down into her face as the band began to play again. "That" I said, resting my head to hers, "Was one killer first recital, kiddo!"

She just giggled as I lead her to her mother's side. There I watched as Taffy's cousin Bon Bon and her green life partner cooed and cuddled and fawned over Penny. Soon more relations were coasting over to them as I looked on amused.

As I did I felt Bluegrass tap me. He lead me aside and to the door to the office. He killed the lights as we looked out through the doorway, over the heads of the throngs of the ponies listening in as Spike burned the place up on the piano.

We gazed for long seconds.

"What am I looking at here?" I asked him after "ridiculous" had firmly set in.

"Look to the third booth down on the far side," indicated the colt subtly with his hoof.

I focused on the table, partly hidden as it was by the moving crowd. As I did I concentrated on it, narrowed my eyes.

"In Celestia's name!" I cried, "I...I don't believe it!"

"I know...how," began Bluegrass.

"They're almost out of toothpicks!" I said, scrambling for the supply cabinet.

Bluegrass smacked his hoof to his forelock, gathered me up (toothpicks in hoof) and pointed me back at the table.

"Look at the stallion," he said in a cloaked whisper, "The band and I were discussing this...we're like 99.999% sure it's Midnight Runner."

Midnight Runner, Moody, I'm sure you know that name. I sure did. There was probably no more successful blues musician alive, Moody, and with your passing he was probably the greatest living one too.

We looked across the way to where Midnight Runner sat among a small crowd in one of the booths, the old grey stallion bobbing his head with the music our young dragon friend was playing.

"You should go talk to him," said Bluegrass.

"Why me?" I asked.

"Hey, you're the boss around here," he added with a shrug.

I was about to snort and make a comment, but as I looked down to Bluegrass I saw that he was staring back out across the way, not a hint of irony on him.

The colts saw me as the boss, Moody. I was in charge, Moody. I was the respectable one, Moody. I was the presentable one, Moody. Celestia help us all, Moody.

We soon had to retake the stage, and as Spike took his bows and ran off, the applause for him turned into a repeated call for Penny to take the stage again. She played one more song, her first, "Marching in the Rain" with us and then was off to bed.

As we wound down the night I determined to see Midnight Runner. As the crowd dispersed though we lost sight of him, and soon the place was empty.

At the next meeting of The New Blue Flag Club, L.L.C., his presence was noted, but I first suggested that we have all of our families here at the club for a massive Blessings Day dinner. "Bring all of them, all that we can fit inside," I motioned.

"Second," called out Short.

"Aye," called one and all.

As the meeting progressed I had the pertinent information that I was now deeply and utterly in love and that I would appreciate the understanding of the gentlecolts in the matter added to the record.

Lucky added to that report that I already owed him two nights of his dinner duty and that would start to accumulate interest if canoodling transpired and he was put in the position of having to do so again.

Recognizing that information as factual I agreed to the terms and we set about planning for Blessings Day.

Two weeks later our families began to arrive, and we put them up at the better hotels like The Seabiscuit. As morning dawned on the feast day they arrived in a constant stream, the older ponies meeting one another, making new acquaintances, and renewing tenuous bonds of familiarity. It turns out that Short's father served with Bluegrass's uncle in one of The Wars, same regiment and everything.

To my delight Taffy and Penny escape unnoticed from a mass gathering of their clan and join us. Penny joins the myriad number of nieces and nephews of the colts as they run around the dance hall, and I introduced Taffy to my parents.

My mother regards Taffy as some Celestia-sent prize for her years of patient waiting. "We aren't married, mom!" I laughed.

Yet.

The entire staff is there, it takes nine of those long tables to fit them and the families. It takes three more to fit all of the food they've brought, and the kitchen had never been so busy.

As everything comes together I am seated at the head of the u-shaped stretch of tables, Penny and Taffy to my left, and my mother and father to my right, the rest of the committee panning out and down, from Bluegrass and his massive herd of family all the way down to Pink Bunny and his mommy.

I see all eyes on me, Moody, on "the boss", and I realize I'm being called upon to make the Invoke.

As I turn to the stage where the pictures of Luna and Celestia sit among a display of food and gifts the families stand with me, and I feel Penny's hoof in mine.

I'm not the most spiritual pony, but for the first time since my grandfather, now there with you in the Well of Souls, Moody, had said it the Invoke has meaning for me.

"For all we are given," I said, and bowed. They all did the same, and we turned to eat.

As we did the conversation flowed around, and the place was almost as loud as it was during nights we were performing. As I stood to get some more from the buffet table I felt the light move funny, and I looked to the door. There a figure stood briefly before leaving.

I looked to my bouncer Tuff Stuff and he galloped to the door. I would have sent Pink Bunny but he was too busy cautiously cutting his food like a gentlepony, chewing each bite thoroughly. The massive, hulking, brutal form of the bouncer was sweating under the withering gaze of his tiny mother.

Tuff Stuff opened the door. I saw him extend a hoof...and for a second, Moody, I thought it was you he brought within. I'm sorry, but it's true...I know because I almost dropped my plate all over one of Bluegrass's nephews.

The old pony came forward, and those of us who recognized him gasped. It was Midnight Runner.

"I'm sorry tah' interrupt," he said, removing his checkered cap, "I'd totally forgotten that it wer' Blessin's Day. I...I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all!" chimed we four colts in unison.

Many of the families kept talking, not caring about or even noticing him, as he spoke with us, the three other ponies leaning over me to hear him.

"I've been thinkin' about hittin' the road again, and I'mma always's lookin'

for new talent for the label. I was here that other night...couple weeks ago. Stallion alive, you colts killed it, ate it up, them soldiercolts were eatin' it up, eatin' it up."

Our pride grew as this legendary figure inflated our egos.

"So...I got tah' thinkin', if you colts would like tah do some recordings..."

That was my dream, Moody, if you remember. To be a big recording star, to tour Equestria, become a legendary performer, selling records left and right.

Here he was, Moody, one of your old associates, he even held his head like you. He was you, I realized, if you'd made a different choice...

"...or come on the road with me and the like, move on up tah' Manehattan."

The room was suddenly quiet.

"Whattcha think, colts?"

I slowly spun in my chair, looking up to the colts. As I did I felt for her hoof, ran my hoof across her foreleg.

I'm your harbor, Taffy. You are safe here, Penny is safe here.

I looked up to the colts, gave them everything they needed to know with one look.

I can't go.

I've made a promise.

This is where I'm supposed to be, I'm home for the first time in my life.

We've done something amazing here.

I won't stop any of you if you want to go, but please, please stay.

You're like brothers to me.

I love you each.

My eyes, if you remember, Moody, are very expressive.

I looked to each of them in turn and got a nod, and then turned back to Midnight Runner.

"I'm sorry...we can't."

He didn't ask why, there was no long explanation of our stance, no counter-offers. He just nodded and turned to leave.

"I mean...we can do the recordings, but we can't move to Manehattan, or tour for years at a time...we're home, here, you see."

He turned back to us, his smile returning.

"Well, 'spose that'd work, yeah...that'd work."

"Won't you join us for some dinner?" Short asked.

"We'd love to have you," added Lucky.

"I've got some stuff that's been wanting to show you since I was a foal," added Bluegrass.

The old stallion ran his hoof through his grey mane, turned and looked at the tables of smiling faces...the little wave he got from Pink Bunny's mother.

"Well," he said with a wheeze and a chuckle, "Beats walkin' back to dah' hotel just tah' eat alone, don't it?"

"Yessir," I said, "Yes it does."

Later I sat with him as he had some desert following his meal. He sat with Pink Bunny's mother as I sat in that towering pony's shadow. I carefully cleared a spot on the table and laid out your album, Moody.

As he gasped and rocked back and forth he spewed forth names and remembrances. He was even in a few of them, pictures from the original Blue Flag, you and he battling it out.

"Dat' Moody Blues, weren't no pony ever better ya' know..."

"I know," I said, "He taught me everything I know about the blues. Showed me how getting tangled up in them would show me my song, perfect it..."

"Did he now?"

I showed him your case, Moody, with your name still inside on the label. I let him hold your first sax, the very same one he had played against on that stage with you two generations ago, and something moved in him. I showed him your altar and he is saddened, but not depressed.

I see what he is Moody. He is you if you'd gone the other way, if you'd made the other choice.

"C'mon, colt," he says, motioning me to stand up, "Let's give this a go."

We stand in front of your altar, Moody, as I lift your old sax to my lips, the colts running for the stage as they see what's about to happen. Lucky taps out a rhythm on the drums, Bluegrass at his guitar, Short takes the base. Our families begin to clap as Runner lifts his fabled harmonica, the one called Tangerine, and belts out the blues as I accompany him.

For three songs I'm able to pretend I'm playing at your original club, the first Blue Flag, and in his eyes I'm you...and he gets to be young again for a moment.

As it ended he looked up to your altar again.

"Y'all got a ladder?" he asked, looking to each of us.

Soon Pink Bunny, Tuff Stuff and I are holding the ladder as the old pony climbs, and we are one and all astounded as he leans in and kisses your portrait, Moody, right on the forehead.

Such is our tradition now...every pony who comes to the New Blue Flag to

perform must climb the rickety ladder and supplicate themselves thus.

"You'll come back and play with us sometime, right?" I ask as I see him to the door.

"Of course!" he says, putting his checkered cap back on. He looked at me and smiled.

"Old Moody Blues, he'd be proud of you, Blues," he says, shaking my hoof.

"Thank you," I said, nodding to the grey stallion. He took a few steps back and apparently noticing a sound, turned to look at its source. He gave a slow whistle.

"Ya' even got da' flag right!" he said with a chuckle before walking away, his hooves crunching the fallen leaves.

I returned inside to see the band, my employees, and my parents standing beneath your altar and staring at me. Penny and Taffy came forward, holding my sax, your sax, and its case.

"While the ladder is up," said Lucky, pointing, "It's time."

"What, wait, what?" I asked, confusion reigning down over me as I stared at my, your, beloved sax.

As I look on Bristle Brush and Sweeps, my janitors and the most unfortunately marked ponies I'd ever met, bring forward two immense glass cases and set them on the overhang next to your portrait.

I soon understand what they want of me. They want me to take down the blue flag that our little ship has been flying. They want the waves to wash away the blue band I've painted around it, let it return to a proper ship, ready to make for distant shores.

They want me to take the captaincy.

Penny and Taffy each give me long hugs as I first take the case up, and arrange it so that all can see the label, then close it within the glass.

They both give me another hug, and my parents as well, as I gather up the enchanted sax. I kiss it beneath the bell, place it on the stand, then forever consign it within the glass, sealing it until Celestia decrees otherwise and consecrating it to your memory.

I kiss your portrait, then make my way down the ladder. As the colts take their turn to kiss your forehead I watch the sax shimmer in the spotlight and then turn to those gathered there.

"Well," I said, already becoming emotional as I watched, "That was powerfully symbolic, but it does leave me without a sax..."

"Taken care of," says Bluegrass as two of his nephews bring forward a new case.

All my family and friends gather around as I look at the label. At first I had been worried that Taffy had tried to give me back Moody's second sax, the one I'd told her to give to Penny.

But that, I realized immediately, couldn't be the case...literally. This wasn't the same make as either of Moody's. This was a Grand Persian case, which meant that the sax inside would have to be one of the most perfect instruments made in Equestria.

"How...you, you didn't have to..." I stammered.

"It was in the equipment budget!" shouted back Tax Form, our accountant, hired just that week to manage our burgeoning income.

I swallowed hard, opened the case.

Hello, beautiful.

I lift it up and out, and around its perfect surface are engraved names of ponies I'd held dear, and pictures of my parents, grandparents, and the band.

And you too, Moody, smack dab in the center of the bell...smiling wide.

And...I notice two ovals not yet engraved, but present...ready...and room

for many, many more.

"It's perfect...thank you, thank you all so..." I begin, becoming emotional.

"Plaaayyyy!" demands Pink Bunny in a bellowing tone.

I lift it to my lips. It tastes like a mule shoe, thank Luna. I take a breath and...

"Bwargle", goes the sax, a rather traditional sound for me. Not it's fault, as soon I'll be making music with it that challenges anything I'd accomplished with yours, Moody (no offense).

However, my problem at that moment was, if you've been paying attention to my story old friend, was that I had started to cry...yet again.

As I cried Penny and Taffy come forward, wrapping their hooves around me. Soon my parents followed, and my band, then my employees. They join me in these tears, I don't cry them alone this time...these happy tears, these type of tears I'd been waiting to cry for more than two decades.

As I lift Penny up onto my back I listen to the sound of them all, especially Pink Bunny's tearful bawling. I see all of them, my little crew, and realize it's not so bad being...

...painted blue.

I looked to your picture again, Moody.

Like I said, I've been thinking about you a lot recently. If you can see us from down in the Well of Souls, I hope you can see how things have gone in the months since that tearful Blessings Day.

Do you know where I am yet as I scribble this note to you in my own little blue head? Of course you do, I'm being facetious, but do please have a guess.

I'm not in the club, the weather has turned good again, even if it was a hard winter, and I'm very ready to be outside.

It was a hard winter, but for the first time since I was a foal I'd looked forward to the winter holidays. Yule, New Years (which was a blast at the club), even one I had found repugnant and depressing a few years ago, Lovelaced Day, these all took on amazing new meanings for me, now that I had special ponies, ponies I loved, in my life.

It was amazing to me to be able to carry a sleeping Penny up the stairs on a cold blustery night, let her and her mother sleep in my bed while I slept on the couch so they didn't have to fight their way home through the snow. I enjoyed drifting off to sleep listening to the small sounds they'd make as they were sleeping in the next room.

More than once I awoke with Penny laying on my chest, having joined me in the night, and once her mother too with her head resting against Penny and I as she sat sleeping on the floor beside the couch.

When we awoke her the next morning she had a similar experience to what I had months before when I awoke from the same position. Penny and I had to fight from laughing aloud.

I fall more and more in love with that mare everyday, Moody.

It was a hard winter, Moody. The crowds dropped off after the winter really set in, but we've made a very respectable profit every month, and we'll pay off our loans early at this rate. The crowds are picking up again as the weather turned good.

I found a drawing Lucky had made of a brand new New Blue Flag, a massive club that can hold 5,000 ponies at a time. Colt's got dreams. Short though...I think he's thinking military. Doing his part. Whatever his decision, I support him. Bluegrass is happy no matter what, looking for a mare of his own though!

We had one really big crowd that winter, the weekend that Midnight Runner came to play with us. The joint was packed to capacity. He kept his word, and he was magnificent.

He died two weeks later in Fillydelphia, you know, before he was able to start a new tour. Our place is now famous as the last place he played. I assume you've met up with him there. Please tell him that we miss him

already, and that Tangerine already has her own place of honor on his own altar.

Tell him I look forward to playing with him again someday.

Just not very soon.

Which brings us back to you, Moody.

Moody, I'm telling you these things because I've been thinking about you a lot recently.

You see, I think I've figured out what happened.

You sacrificed yourself, didn't you?

You simply stopped. Walked away from the fame, the club, everything. I've wondered why you'd done that, why you never told me about your life before we met.

It wasn't simply that you were an iced tea enthusiast, was it? You had a reason to be on that stoop. You knew, somehow, that someday some poor unfortunate pony was going to come walking down that street with his head held low, bouncing off of garbage cans and street performers.

So, thinking that saving that pony was more important than your own fame and fortune, you just walked away. You just walked up those stairs, flipped on that porchlight, and spent the last decades of your life waiting for me.

That's what you meant, isn't it, when you told the old sax "ya' gotta be for the colt"...isn't it? You had been waiting, watching, preparing for the instant I would come down that street. By Celestia's will, I realize it now.

Have you guessed where I am Moody? I'm standing with Penny and Taffy as we watch the most amazing meteor shower I've ever seen. They are huge, audible as they crackle through the atmosphere. Penny clings between Taffy and I as we watch, she tips back and forth, trusting, knowing we're both there to catch her.

The child is so much better now, stronger, more alive than when I first met

her. As the meteors are falling I see enchantment on her face, and in her mother's I see calm, certainty...hope, love.

You left bits and glamour behind because you knew doing so would, in time, save that child, one you'd never meet.

You gave up having your name in the entertainment magazines because you knew that I'd pull Taffy, a mare you'd never see, out of her fearful loneliness.

You essentially buried yourself alive in that rowhouse knowing that doing so would give me nights like this, Moody. I know that now.

I'm told by very wise ponies that there is no greater love than to sacrifice ones self for ones friends, Moody, and I see that's what you did. Even after you'd met me, even after you'd passed on your horn and got me tangled up in blues you still stayed on that porch for those last years...years and change, of your life waiting to see if I'd be coming back that day...to be sure that even if I was tangled up in them that they wouldn't choke me.

You sat there in the rain so that some day I could reach out to Penny and fall in love with Taffy.

You sat there in the snow so that someday I could meet the colts and have my own club where ponies flock by the thousands.

You sat there in the beating sun so that the losses of my apartment, Seafoam, Cake, and Cherry wouldn't beat me.

You sat there instead of in a club of your own, getting more and more famous and wealthy, and chose to wait for weeks on end for me come so you could help me through them, help me learn from my tribulations, add them to my song so that it "had gotten da' right mellow to it" as you would say.

And all that you asked in return was to play that song along with me a few times...and that I be your friend, the last one you ever made as your life slowly but certainly ended.

Had you waited for me, that last day? Had you sat on your porch as the

taste of copper entered your mouth? Did you look down the street one last time to see if I was coming as your left foreleg went numb? Did you flip on the porchlight as you struggled into your house and up the stairs one final time in case I came late?

Your love goes on, Moody, through my song. Your love goes out to Penny and Taffy, to the colts, my parents, my friends like Big Mac, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie, even my employees...

... yes, even Pink Bunny is the benefactor of your benevolence.

Do you know you are my very best friend, Moody? A stupid tiny little inconvenience like you being dead doesn't stop that, our relationships we forge in life continue onward in cascading spirals for decades, even generations after we are gone. We can never know the number and magnitude of the lives we touch with our love, and the Pony of Death can only remove the veil of flesh and carry it to the Fountainhead, but from the Well of Souls we continue to draw our strength for as long as we live...and through those we touched ever after that...

You sat and played the sax with me Moody, taught me that it was alright to be painted blue. I am forever your friend, Moody, and eternity rings with your kindness and love as clearly and as loudly as a saxophone sounding out into a darkened club as glasses tinkle and ponies stare into each other's eyes.

That, Moody, I think is the type of thing that's possible when friendship is magic, and while Procer Celestia Invictus and Procer Luna Revenio continue to guide their charges across the Equestrian sky.

~~The End~~