They were just squiggles of gibberish to Sepia.

The pen strokes she had made in delicate cursive would have only made sense to the most demented of ponies, or perhaps something as equally as bizarre as the poem she was composing, like a draconequus of legend that she had read up on last week. What was worse though was how terrible it all was. Even if it really *did* make sense, it would have easily brought a cringe to any pony unlucky enough to be within earshot of her reciting it, and one twice as intense to Sepia herself. She could imagine the giggling that would come from anypony listening to her pathetic attempt at creativity. On the crinkled roll of parchment, her writing looked like manure on a page to her. She could form letters. She could form words. She could form lines of verse. So why did none of it seem to make sense?

The pegasus gave a sigh of defeat, blowing out one of the candle stubs on the edge of her desk, leaving her to bury her head in the forelegs that rested on her desk, her office hung in dusty darkness. She closed her eyes, thinking about why it was so difficult to write one stupid sonnet. She’d read plenty of them, it should have come as second nature to her. In fact, a verse of Quill Tip, her favourite poet, would almost always get her creative juices flowing, the urge to scribble down a line or two finding its way out and onto a scrap of paper or tissue, whichever she had on hoof at the moment.

All Sepia could really decide on as perfect were two things. Firstly, her signature. She had poured much thought into it when questing in her mind for an idea to write about. Then there was the name of the pony she was dedicating the poem to.

“Criss Cross,” she muttered, throwing her head back and flopping onto the cushions of the chair. “If only you weren’t a writer. Maybe then, I’d have gotten away with a couple of cheesy limericks.”

She have her handiwork another read through, squinting hard to make out her handwriting in the darkness. whispering mixed with slight groans of disgust. Half of her poem was just a nonsensical mess that made her twinge with embarrassment with every beat and syllable. The other half was just plain dull. She’d written a ton of reports on broken shards of pottery and glass, supposedly belonging to major artifacts (she knew far better than that); the bookshelves surrounding her were stacked from the floor to the ceiling with books heavy enough to squish anypony standing beneath them should they fall, and all of them were on similar subjects to her own reports. She knew the definition of boring. After scribbling down her poem and skimming through it one last time, she knew it would be a perfect example for the dictionary.

“I can’t give up now,” Sepia said adamantly. “Hearth’s Warmings Eve is tomorrow! I have to finish this now and I have to get it right! It has to be absolutely--”

“Perfect?”

Sepia almost catapulted herself from her chair, knocking all of the papers from her desk and extinguishing the remaining candle. A quirt, stallion’s voice had whispered in her ear, almost ghostlike, yet it also felt real. Literally. As if someone was standing directly behind her.

“Alright, very funny Mr Scroll,” she said. Her boss, Fading Scroll, would always sneak inside when she was at her busiest, never glancing upwards from her work for even a millionth of a second. Although she didn’t mind the odd distraction, having to grope around in the darkness for the blind pulley was an unwelcome annoyance, especially with the self-imposed deadline approaching fast.

When she yanked the string for the blinds though, letting the mid-morning light flood through the second-floor window to burn her eyes for a few seconds, she was expecting the elderly earth pony to be sitting on the small stool near the wall, chuckling and scolding her for taking her responsibilities too seriously. True enough, there *was* a pony sitting on the stool. But instead of the darkened brown coat and greyish mane of whom she was expecting, her eyes went wide at the sight of a slightly plump pegasus, his light grey feathers ruffled and his blonde mane clashing together to create a look she envied: laid back, loving the little things.

“C-Criss!” Sepia scrambled for her poem, scrunching the parchment into a ball and stuffing it into her desk drawer. “How’d you get in here? Can’t you see that I’m working right now?”

“Working?” Criss gave her a smile. “Same old Sepia. What’s so important that you have to get it done for tomorrow?”

Sepia hesitated, quickly looking away. “N-Nothing important, just a dumb report. I just don’t want to leave loose threads hanging before I take a few days off for the holidays.”

“Oh, I get you.” Criss walked over to her desk, taking a sweeping look over the papers scattered all over, returning his attention to the mare. “I found your friend wandering through the astronomy department, the blue unicorn with the telescope cutie mark.”

“Starflash?”

“Yeah, him. He told me how you were busy working and how I shouldn’t have disturb you, but you’re always beavering away in your little office, tucked away from everypony’s eyes. Took me a while to find it, actually.”

*Why couldn’t you have gotten hopelessly lost?* Sepia thought. *I just want to be left in peace...*

“He also told me,” Criss continued with a slight smirk, “that you were working on a poem.”

“Oh, what?!” Sepia collapsed into her spinning leather chair, gritting her teeth and seething with irritation. While she was slowly circling on the spot without trying to resist, groaning, Criss stared at her with clear confusion.

“What what what?” he said with a slight grin, stopping the gentle motion of the chair with a tap of the hoof just above Sepia’s head. She was cradling her head on the leg that leaned on the wooden rests on the sides, looking to the floor with a frown. “Don’t tell me... You think the poem you wrote is awful.”

Sepia nodded. “Awful is being nice.”

Criss hummed, leaning across to the drawer of the desk. “Let’s take a look.”

Before he could reach in and take out the rolled ball of parchment, Sepia batted his hoof away, giving him a heavy scowl. “Please, you’re wasting your time,” she said. “I don’t want to subject you to such dreadful verse.”

Criss backed off slightly. “Well, if you’re sure,” he said, “but I know how stressful it can be to get going in writing. Trust me, I’m a writer. It comes with the job.”

Sepia sighed heavily. “It’s just that it was meant to be a gift to someone.”

“Ohhhh. No wonder then. It’s one thing doing a story for a general audience or a group of ponies, but it’s a whole different ball game when it’s for a special somepony. If I may dare to ask, who’s it for? Not that I’m nosey or anything, but... Well, okay, maybe I am just a little curious.”

Sepia shook her head. She knew she couldn’t force quality no matter how hard she tried. It was exactly the same whenever she wrote a report; if she wasn’t in the right mood, nothing ever fell into place. The poem was probably as good as it was going to be, and to Sepia, that limit was set at ‘diabolically bad’. After a few silent moments, she opened her drawer and unfurled the crinkled paper, nudging it over to Criss who was standing over the opposite side of her desk.

“Go ahead, read it,” she whispered. “You might as well laugh at it now and spare me the embarrassment of hearing about how you did that behind my back.”

She watched Criss’ every facial movement as his eyes scrolled down the page that laid before him. Or rather, the lack of them, save for him mouthing every word in an incredibly hushed tone. It didn’t take him long to finish, only a minute or so. After he had done so, he looked back to Sepia, the mare shrinking into her chair.

“You wrote this for me?” he asked, taking the paper in his hooves and giving it another look over. Sepia couldn’t help herself from hesitant laughter, blushing slightly.

“I *tried* to write for you,” she said. “I *tried*, but it’s obvious to see how I failed.”

Criss scratched his head, one side of his face falling a tad. He dragged the stool from near the wall next to Sepia’s chair, pushing the lever on the bottom of hers so that it descended, bringing the two ponies to the same level. He set the paper out onto the desk again, flattening it. “What exactly is wrong with it?” he asked.

Sepia ran her hoof through her mane. “Well it just sounds awful, and it doesn’t read much better either,” she replied. “I mean look at this line. *Soaring across lakes and streams while walkers dream their walker’s dreams*...” She raised her front hooves in the air, twisting her face. “What does that even mean?! Like...” With a moan, she brushed away the parchment, Criss catching it before it floated off the table.

“Well I don’t see anything wrong with it,” he said. “Besides, I’m not sure if you answered the question properly. It ‘sounds awful’ isn’t exactly a good answer, is it?” He chuckled.

“Well what else do you want from me?” Sepia asked, fidgeting with her hooves. “It’s just... It’s just terrible!”

She was somewhat offended by his laughter, Criss pointing back to the line she had quoted. “What’s wrong with *that* line specifically? It’s a really clever metaphor, the sounds of the words making the line rather effective. I’m not sure why you don’t like it. In fact, the whole poem is pretty good!”

A twinge of embarrassment coursed through Sepia. Those were the words she dreaded to hear. “No, no! It’s so bad! I’m not just being modest, it’s legitimately terrible!”

“Okay, so it’s bad,” Criss said bluntly. Sepia glanced at him with mild surprise. “Who’s deciding on that? You? Or the whole world?”

“Maybe I should have just bought you a big cake or something,” Sepia said. “Maybe a pacifier...”

“As much as I would have enjoyed a new paci,” Criss said with a smile, “nothing would have made me even happier than seeing you attempt something so far out of your comfort zone. It’s not for you to decide whether something is bad or not when you made it.”

“Why?” Sepia asked.

“I nearly always hate my own work and people seem to like it. It know another stallion who does paintings for a living and he hates his own work, but he’s one of the most popular artists in Canterlot!” He pondered for a second. “What exactly inspired you to try this?”

Sepia kept quiet until Criss’ calm look made her think. She thought about when they first met, way back in the museum cafe a couple of months ago, when she had learned a lot more than she was bargaining after a simple ‘hello’. Criss was a funny pony. Not a comedian, although she did get a giggle or two from his flustering or how he acted during their special little roleplays, but more of a curious and rare sort of pegasus. He was distant and carefree, but could easily debate all of the little questions like ‘What flavour of cake to have?’ for hours on end. But then there was that moment in Sugarcube Corner, where she had let slip her little secret. It was what he had said then that made her realise that although Criss was more than slightly odd, in his heart he was a perfect friend.

“Because I wanted to write something that you’d truly appreciate,” she said. “I have fun writing little things. You know, things that don’t often make a whole lot of sense to the average pony or things that nopony else ever gets to see. I know that we haven’t really gotten to know each other in terms of what we really do in day to day life... Well, you know what I do at least, but I’ve really gotten to know a whole lot about you outside of you being a big baby.”

Criss blushed a little. “Yeah, well... I’m not a huge fan of pushing my own works onto people.” He gave Sepia a wide smile, scooching closer to her. “But you know, I’m really flattered that you decided to write this just for me. I mean, is it perfect as in ‘is it fancy and technical?’ To be honest, no, but then again does it have to be?”

Sepia raised her brow at him. “Yes? It’s a gift, of course it does!”

Criss shook his head. “I think your poem is perfect already. Do you want to know why?”

“Because you don’t want to hurt my feelings?” Sepia replied flatly.

“Because you gave it your best,” Criss said, leaning in for a gentle hug. “And that’s all I could ever ask for.”

It was an alien feeling to Sepia, the mare being left speechless by his actions. She had always struggled to find the right words for situations like these, intimate moments being somewhat awkward for her even amongst close family and friends when she wasn’t really in the mood for them. Perhaps Criss had a point though. She had stressed herself over a silly little poem for weeks and yet even though she knew in her mind that it was leagues below the poetry of Quill Tip and every other poet she had ever read up on, it had been liked by the one pony she had wanted to please. In the end, that was all she had ever wanted. She returned Criss’ hug with a tight squeeze around his pudgy belly, giggling.

“I suppose if you’re happy, then I’m happy too,” she said. They separated, Criss reaching across the table and waving his hoof about the floor, pulling up a satchel. Sepia recognised it as his own.

“Oh yes, I’m more than happy!” Criss said, beaming. “Of course, if you still hate your writing then perhaps you’d like to see some of mine. Maybe then you could tell me how awful I am.” He stuck his tongue out at her, making her laugh.

“Is this a contest to see who can write the worst poem?” Sepia said playfully. “Because I’m pretty sure I could make you cringe so bad, you’d need surgery to untwist your face!”