

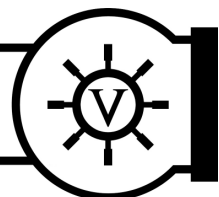
Allegrezza

CoffeeGrunt

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Octavia fidgeted backstage, ensuring her mane was in perfect form, her cello tuned, and that her bow wasn't frayed or missing any strings. Her equipment was perfect, and as she strode out onto the stage, cello in one hoof, bow in the other, she felt pleased that her performance would match her instrument's perfection as well.

Carefully, she set down the cello, resting it by the long spike that protruded from its bottom. She stood on her hind legs, a delicate and graceful synergy as she and her cello used each other for balance. Finally, she raised the bow to the strings, and began to play. The sweet melody of Beethoofen's Sixth filled the hall, a grand theatre she often packed to the rafters, tonight being no exception. Octavia was extraordinarily professional, there were no tears of emotion as she played, not like other ponies she had met, (a certain mint-green lyrist sprang to mind), no, she simply played the notes with her trademark poise and precision, and watched as the emotion unfolded on her audience's faces instead.

She cradled the bow in her ankle, nipping it between her calf and hoof. At first her fame stemmed from simply being a musical earth pony, most instruments needing magic to operate, or were simply too awkward for hoof and tooth alone. However, Octavia managed, despite her lack of a horn, and it had been said by more than one reviewer that no unicorn cellist could match her talent. Octavia allowed herself a slightly smug and haughty smile as she continued to play, watching as the effect on her audience ranged from a delicate patting of the eyes with a handkerchief, all the way up to unrestrained cascades of tears. After several songs of a similarly powerful and emotive ability, she began to change tempo, speeding up into an uplifting and heartwarming little number she had written herself. The audience was lifted too, bright smiles and soft eyes greeted her as she stood, eyes closed, sawing the bow across the strings with unparalleled execution.

Finally, her set ended, and she released her audience. Bowing low before carrying her bow and cello away, she left them to recover from the emotional ravaging she had brought upon them. Returning backstage, she rechecked her cello and replaced a string that had become frighteningly close to fraying under her fervent playing. The cello was then placed in its case with the utmost care, her bow placed inside with it. She zipped up the case with the tip of her hoof, and raised the strap over one shoulder, balancing it on the tip of her hoof while she lifted it over her head, before letting it drop softly onto her shoulder, steadying it by resting the long, thin segment on her flank.

Now that she had completed her set and tidied away her instruments, she could relax. Octavia always liked a light drink after a performance, not anything uncouth like a pint of lager, oh no, she was no drunkard. Octavia's tastes were more *refined*, naturally. She preferred the smoky taste of a good whiskey, her absolute favourite being the oaky tones of the Jura whiskey, distilled and brewed on an island just off the shore of Clydesdale. No ice to bruise the flavour, no quite frankly *idiotic* garnishes like limes or lemons to pollute its purity. No. Octavia enjoyed the taste on its own merits, and drank it straight, as she felt it deserved.

However, upon meeting the familiar blue-coated barmare, she realised that something was not quite right. The barmare was emptying out the till and stowing away drinks in the cupboards, Octavia felt a slight pang of loss as she saw the Jura bottle get tucked away besides the travesty that was *Buck Daniels*. It was at this point she felt action must be taken, verbal and peaceful action, but action nonetheless!

"Excuse me, m'am." Octavia put on her most airy and polite tone. "I was wondering if I can perhaps have a glass of your Jura whisky?"

"Sorry love, can't do it, I'm afraid." The mare's rough, Braytish accent assaulted Octavia's eardrums, but she repressed the urge to clamp a hoof over each ear. "Bar closes after eleven now, new management 'n' all that."

Octavia's grey cheeks turned white. "But. But I wanted a drink, surely just one? It's only ten past eleven now anyway, and I'll be sure to drink it quickly in order to not hold you back!"

The barmare's eyes narrowed, and she stopped cleaning a glass in order to stare at Octavia suspiciously. Octavia, for her part, crept her lips up into a smile, a benign attempt to woo the mare over.

"You, uhh, you ain't an alcky, are ya?"

Octavia audibly gasped. "An alcoholic? What do you take me for? You see that poster there? I'm tonight's main attraction! The piece de resistance! I'm an artist, not a drunkard!"

"Uh-huh. But bar's closed, you'll have to go somewhere else, love. Try the joint down the street, they're open 'til three AM normally."

Octavia's eyes hardened. "Very well. I shall!" She straightened her mane once more, shouldering her cello's case and trotting off out the door. "You just lost yourself a very respectable customer!"

The barmare snorted as the door closed behind Octavia. Her magic gripped a bottle from underneath the bar, and filled a glass about half a hoof full of a certain whisky she had been running low on.

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Octavia heard the late-night bar long before she even laid eyes on it. It was exactly what she expected to be open at such a late time in the night. The dull thud of the bass reminded Octavia of a Pilohippus banging rocks together, and probably carried the same calibre of musical talent with it. She spotted a young colt pointing a hoof at her as she waited outside, his friends chuckling amongst themselves. They had absolutely no chance

of being let in; manes spiked with gel, hoofs shod with trainers, and dressed in trashy tracksuits that Octavia imagined must be really, "hip," with these types of vagrants.

Octavia herself, on the other hoof, had no issues with entry. She casually trotted to the bouncers attending the door, smiling and bowing her head slightly. She raised the cello case and nodded at the doorway, and the bouncers parted. It crossed her mind that the bouncers must have assumed she was part of the music setup, but hadn't realised there was no orchestral involvement in the thudding bass she could hear. She managed one last glance punctuated with a haughty smile at the little rodent colt, who's jaw was parted wide with shock. The sight only stretched her smile further as she entered into the club. Although, in hindsight, she was glad the gangster pony days had ended. If this club allowed anypony with a violin case to trot right in, it couldn't have been *safe* otherwise.

She navigated her way through the narrow corridor leading from the entrance, delicately stepping over an inebriated, and probably unconscious, filly before entering into the club proper. The pulse of the strobe lights she had anticipated almost blinded her, like a flash-bang spell. She barely managed to stop herself toppling over onto a couple sitting near the door, who were similarly paralytic. She righted herself, her eyes rapidly trying to get up to speed with the situation and clarify things for her. Both sound and vision were assaulted with rhythmic booms. Flares of light and heavy thuds attacked Octavia. She just came here for a drink. Order one, pay the bill, and sit in a corner, as far from the sub-woofers as possible. She ignored the spiky-maned colts who were - despite the age restriction, and looking like they'd barely earned their cutie marks - heading up the entrance corridor behind her. Their cat calls were devoured in the music as she pushed through the crowd to the bar.

So after a fervent hoofful of minutes spent yelling over the bass, Octavia found herself sitting in an unoccupied corner, sipping a glass of *Buck Daniels* and cursing the lack of any class in this place. The barcolt had looked at her and implied, "*a classy filly like you'd drink pina coladas, right?*" Octavia's shocked expression must have told him all he needed to know. That he'd believe she'd drink that trampony's urine disguised as foals' orange juice was beyond her. He apologetically offered her the *Buck Daniels* on the house, it being the only whiskey he stocked, (and Octavia felt it barely qualified,) and she took her leave with a polite, but sharp, thank you.

Octavia now found most of her glaring directed at the DJ pony that coordinated the attack on her eardrums, the bassy undertones were cut up with an overtone of electromagnetic music. The sort of tinny, strange noises no instrument could make, and no sane pony would want to hear, Octavia felt. She bitterly swilled a sip of the vulgar whiskey pass-off. Once more she felt the night wasn't turning how she wanted. What she had wanted was a quiet, wind-down session with some tasteful alcohol and silence. She got cheap pigswill and ear-invasive thuds. She directed her irritation at the music, it was a screeching mass of magical tones and notes. It had no class, no refinement, no skill at all!

Though that being the case... why was her hindleg bobbing in time with the beats?

She suppressed the treacherous limb, and instead focused her attention on the DJ pony creating the noise. Her shimmering white coat, the *crude* blue mane streaked with electric blue, the eyes hidden away behind lustrous, purple shades. Her head bobbed in time with the music she created, hooves working a frenzy on the tape decks as her mane whipped back and forth with her head. Octavia assumed she compensated for lack of precision with speed and pure volume.

A pair of mares caught her attention a table over. One was an exuberant pink filly with candy-floss like hair, the other an irritated sky-blue pegasus punctuated by her rainbow mane and tail. Octavia saw the pink one trying to drag the other by the hoof, presumably into the crowd. The pegasus of course was having none of it, at least not until the pink one planted a kiss on her cheek, causing the pegasus' wings to burst from her back, knocking a passer-by to their hooves. A flustered motion of apologetic help from the embarrassed pegasus was blended with the pink filly's giggles, then the pair retreated into the crowd to avoid any more mishaps.

It was at that moment that realisation washed over Octavia. She hadn't actually looked at the bar's name, simply beelining for the door in search of a calm drink. However it was only now she looked at the bar mats for the drink glasses. '*Fillyfools*,' how quaint. Well, Octavia would do her best to get her drinks and leave before anything like that happened. She was a modern pony, and had no issue with it... unless a pony hoped it involved her, then she would happily evade any attempts.

She turned her irritated and flustered attention to the DJ once more. It was then she noticed the glasses turn towards her mid-headbang. A glow of white magic enveloped them, and Octavia saw a flicker of red behind the purple glass as she lowered them. A grin opened up on the DJ's face, and the glasses were once more lifted to cover her eyes, her headbanging now only matched by the riot that had enveloped in the crowd. Octavia noticed the security guards were making no attempt to restrain the rowdy, 'audience.' Typical. The look in the pony's eyes intrigued Octavia, she had expected, if anything, contempt from the younger, trendier mare playing the decks. However Octavia wasn't entirely sure contempt was what the eyes were trying to convey.

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One merit Octavia had to give to *Buck Daniels*, was that it slowly washed away any capability she had for tasting, until she no longer grimaced with each sip. In fact, she even gained the courage to move up to 'slugging' the drink, not that she'd ever be caught dead using *that* phrase. It was after several on-the-house glasses, from an unknown benefactor, that she found her lacking the co-ordination to pick them up anymore. Her teeth simply failing to clamp onto the sides. Upon blearily inspecting the two glass-mirages in front of her, she noted that instead of the stout glasses she had been given all night, she was instead looking at a slender, flute-like glass. A unicorn glass, for the only non-unicorn musician she knew of, typical.

She was so engrossed in defying both nature and pony design, by trying to lift the glass with her tongue, that she hadn't noticed the absence of the thudding bass that had troubled her eardrums moments ago. She hadn't noticed the DJ receive her standing ovation and cheers as she left the stage. In fact, she barely even noticed the same DJ as she sat across the table from her. The DJ's concerned red eyes glinting from underneath her raised, purple shades. Octavia's little bubble of glass-design irritation wasn't broken until she felt the worried hoof on her foreleg, she dropped the glass in surprise, vaguely catching the tinkling splash of it shattering on the floor.

"You, uhh... you okay there, filly?"

Octavia had difficulty locking onto a particular hazy manifest of the polar-white DJ pony, so she did her best to spread her eyes between the three of them. For Vinyl's part, Octavia looked very similar to a Ponyville mailmare she'd seen on the news.

"I am... ferpectly pine, thanks!" Tracking all three ponies was getting difficult with all the swaying the room was doing. Octavia didn't remember boarding a cruise ship, but she'd played on some now-and-then. It was also irritating that she always gravitated to the eyes of the center pony. "I'll just be on my way!"

The ill-fated attempt to sling her cello case over her shoulder and leave the club ran its course, and Octavia was soon sprawled in a mass of her limbs, hair, and case strap. Vinyl couldn't help but smile at the inebriated mare, and bent down to untangle her from herself.

"Something tells me you'll have a little trouble getting home tonight. Where do you live?"

A foreleg broke free from the mass, pointing roughly to its left. "That way... ish."

"Yeh, I think I'll have trouble finding it then. C'm'ere." Vinyl slid her legs under Octavia's body, pulling her to her hooves. "I'll help you home, you look like you won't hold a long journey, but my place isn't far, only a block or two."

Despite the added support, Octavia barely held herself steady. Her swaying motions had the obvious effect, and Vinyl leaned out of her way as she heaved the sautee'd daisies she'd had for supper over the floor. Both ponies gingerly stepped around it, Vinyl shooting an apologetic smile to the bartender, who, despite having a broom handle between his teeth, still managed to control enough of his face to look thoroughly pissed off. A shrug was all Vinyl could offer on top of it as she left, struggling to deal with the now barely conscious filly that was draped over her shoulder.

True to her word, the journey was short. Carrying Octavia up the stairs was no mean feat, she looked light and sprightly, but seemed to have lead for a skeleton. Vinyl barely managed to drag her into her bed, and throw the covers over her, before she wandered off for a much needed cup of coffee. The mare had no contact numbers in her cello case, so Vinyl was at a loss until she got the alcohol out of her system. She'd dealt with a fair few

fillies that couldn't handle their drinks, (though it was drunken stallions that were most common.) Let it run its course, then send them out in the morning. She'd noticed the mare's pink eyes as she'd been halfway through her set. She practically glared Vinyl as if she wanted her to abandon the stage. Typical that she was an orchestral musician, she supposed.

The cello was no cheap number either, the ivory tuning pegs alone said that. It wasn't until she flipped through her Musician's Weekly magazine that she noticed the pony on her bed, standing forelegs-crossed on the front cover. "*Canterlot's Earth Pony Musical Maestro.*" So her name was Octavia, she'd heard of her down the apple branch, actually. Vinyl had to hoof it to her, earth pony musicians were as common as, well, pegasus scientists, or something. Playing an instrument with magic was difficult enough, never-mind trying to do it without the amazing horn unicorns were blessed with.

The coffee, as with every night, had a short-lived effect. Vinyl felt the usual weight of a long set draping itself over her shoulders. It was a Princess-sized bed, so... yeh, there'd be room to spare. She didn't have work until evening tomorrow, so she'd be able to help the mare on her way before she left. She tip-hoofed around the bed, being careful not to wake the grey pony as she slipped onto the bed next to her, still giving a good pony's worth of room between them. She slipped her shades onto the bedside cabinet, and turned towards the mare, noting the almost graceful way her mane spread across the pillow as she lay. The delicate lightness of her breathing, the little smile that curved across her muzzle. A little giggle at a drunkard's dream. She had to admit, for an unconscious, drunk pony, she pulled off the look very well. Vinyl turned away from her, closing her eyes and drifting off to a well-earned sleep.

Octavia would never dare admit it to another pony, but that morning wasn't the first morning she'd awoken in the painful vice grip of a hangover. It wasn't the first time her taste for whiskey had gotten the better of her, nor the first time that her thirst for it had become... excessive, should she say?

It was, however, the first time it had landed her in bed with another mare.

She blearily opened her eyes, the open curtains allowed Celestia's sun to invade her retinas in full force, making her clamp them shut again. Then, she clamped a pair of hooves to her head, and took up the foetal position. The irritatingly familiar sensation that made every noise seem like an out-of-tune violin being played in her skull returned. She summoned the energy from her massively depleted reserves to stretch her limbs, which relieved her aches slightly.

Octavia stepped once more unto the breach, opening her eyes to find a fortunately placed cloud was blocking the sun, allowing her eyes to roam freely around the room. She rapidly ascertained that she wasn't at home, and slowly turned her head to the white mare sprawled in the bed next to her, electric blue-streaked mane scattered over her pillow. She nudged back the covers, revealing the other mare fully. Octavia almost felt like she was identifying a body.

Octavia sunk her face into her hooves. "*Oh Celestia, what the hay did they serve in that bar?*" She decided that the best move would be out of the door, post haste. Sadly, at that point, perhaps sensing the horrified mare's indignation, Vinyl woke up, blearily rolling over to see the look of complete shock on Octavia's face. She tried a weak smile, well aware of what the situation looked like. Octavia's eyes simply tracked the other mare as she sat up, rubbed her ruby-red eyes with her forehooves then planted her trademark shades back over her eyes. A slight shake of the head, and her mane fell into place. Octavia practically retched as the DJ went straight to the kitchen to prepare her breakfast.

"Wait! Aren't you even going to *shower* first?!"

Vinyl stopped in her tracks, swivelling round to face Octavia. "Whoa! This is my home, filly! I do as I please... and I'm pretty hungry. Ain't got work 'til six anyways. Besides, you'll probably need the shower more than I do, given how much you were drinking."

Octavia tried to suppress her stomach. That she had... been with a mare was bad enough. But one so... unhygienic, not even attempting to hide her uncouth core. She felt her self-esteem plummet, before realising that, of course, it wasn't her fault.

"Wait a minute! I'm not just hopping in your shower at your whim! You say I was tipsy, right?"

Vinyl chuckled as she levitated various utensils to provide a pair of filled cereal bowls, with a side plate stacked with toast.

"More than tipsy, I suppose a posh pony like yourself would say... 'gazeboed,' or maybe just 'lampshaded'?" She floated the bowl over to Octavia, filled to the brim with milk, and crunchy, chocolate cereal.

"Foals' cereal? For the goddesses' sake, you could at least pretend to be mature!"

"Hey! I read the box, it's fortified with vitamins! Healthy lifestyle and all that!"

Octavia planted a hoof on her face. "First you take me home, then you take advantage of me, now you feed me third-gra-."

"Whoa! Back up the cart filly!" Vinyl began to crack up, tears curling down her face. "I 'took advantage' of you?"

"Well here I am, slightly... tipsy filly, in *your* bed!"

Vinyl paused between mouthfuls of her cheerileeos. "Assuming of course we actually... did anything? Even if I was that way with mares, you were kinda... out of it, filly. I'm no expert, but you normally need to be awake."

"I am no drunkard! And would you please stop calling me 'filly'?"

"Okay..."

"Thank you!"

"... Filly." Vinyl shot Octavia a sly grin, then chomped down another mouthful of cereal, enjoying the indignation on the cellist's face.

"*Very* witty, now if you'll please, I'd like my cello case so I can leave."

"No problem. It's over there. Besides, it's a bit big for a cello, doncha think? More like a double bass than a cello. A... bassello?"

Octavia put on her most convincing deadpan, laced with exasperation. "Your knowledge of instruments amazes me. It's a custom-made piece. Anyway, I'm going home, where the facilities are a bit more... classy." She cast a furtive glance around the apartment, noting the floor had an extra layer of clothes and other debris. She couldn't see what colour the actual carpet itself was.

"Five-star livin' here. Besides, I doubt you could do much better anyway." Vinyl was still burrowing through her cereal.

Octavia halted on her way out the door. More often than not she simply brushed off challenges, acutely aware of her superiority over most competitors. *This* mare, however, she felt needed to be shown just how much better she was, especially without that confounded horn to multitask with.

"I'll have you know, I am quite the chef... in fact, where are my manners? I haven't even asked your name."

Vinyl didn't even wait for her cereal to be swallowed, simply deciding to let her words work around it. "Vinyl Scratch, at your service, m'lady Octavia." She gave a fake bow, then went back to her cereal.

"How... eloquent. I assume you know me from the-."

"Musician's weekly." Vinyl floated Octavia's special issue over to her. "Not bad, being front cover and all, I'll give you that. Still, not really the place for a chef, eh?"

Octavia felt her cheeks begin to heat with her temper. "I'm a mare of many talents, Ms Scratch. I can turn my hooves to any task. In fact, I'll be more than happy to show you. Assuming of course you can escape your strenuous work."

"I have Thursday off. Whenever you want."

Octavia smiled. "Okay, Thursday. Seven PM, *exactly* please. I'll prepare a dinner for us, the *proper* way. I'll leave my card on the side here, and do, at the *very* least, shower beforehoof."

"If it pleases my host; call it a thanks for me taking you in, and giving you a bed for the night."

Vinyl smiled as she closed the door behind Octavia, giggling through her cheerileeos as she heard the irritated mutters and groans echoing down the hallway.

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Octavia juggled the various utensils and pans simmering away in her kitchen. It was even beginning to dawn on her that an *entire* three-course meal may be a bit more than was necessary to prove the point. But Octavia had made her bed, and was willing to lay in it... as long as it was otherwise empty, that is.

The daisies simmered in the baine-marie, while she lightly fried some cowslips in olive oil. The lettuce was being steamed nicely, she felt she could quite happily declare this dinner a success. It was difficult to fail in creating a salad at least, but she had prepared a delicious basil and parsley dressing for it. A recipe from her favourite cookbook, *Olive-Oil: The Naked Chef*.

A staccato series of knocks came from the door. Octavia's less than esteemed guest had arrived. She had just enough time to ensure the cutlery was correctly arranged as she trotted to the door. She flung it open, and found the light of the hallway reflected straight into her eyes. Covering them with a hoof, she saw her guest in all her inconspicuous glory.

"What are you *wearing*?!"

Vinyl stroked a hoof down her new suit, enjoying the small bumps and indents. "It's just a little number I used to use for DJ-ing. I thought you said this was a fancy dinner?"

"Yes, fancy indeed!" Octavia could barely stifle a giggle as she saw the awkward mare shifting from hoof to hoof. "So... why did you appear in a tin-foil suit?"

Vinyl's cheeks flared up like little volcanoes. "Hey! It's not tin-foil, it's sequins! Sequins over spandex, this was classy a few years back." In truth, she simply had no other outfits to wear. Not that she'd let Octavia know that.

"Then clearly your understanding of class is *extremely* lacking." Octavia waved Vinyl in, still wheezing under the force of her laughing. "But please, stay away from the light. I like being able to look at you without my eyes smarting."

"Is that a compliment, filly?" Vinyl raised an eyebrow, stopping next to Octavia.

"Oh hardly, Ms Scratch. If you'll please, to the dining room. First on the left."

Vinyl was certain of it, Octavia was testing her. She sat at the table, salad dish on the plate before her, and no less than seven knives and forks on either side. She remembered that each one was for a different kind of dish, but they were all *identical*. Whenever she looked up, she saw the smug little tilt of Octavia's lips, her trademark subtle-yet-sly smile. In the end Vinyl bit the bullet, and picked the smallest knife and fork, then dug in. Everything fancy was small and dainty, right?

She heard Octavia's laughter before she'd even raised the first daisy to her mouth.

"Of course, eating salad with a dessert fork... nevermind, carry on. It appears to be working." Octavia raised the dainty little flower into her own mouth, and bit into it, chewing, while still maintaining her challenging expression. Vinyl took up the challenge, and bit into her daisy. It was good, annoyingly good. Sweet, yet with a subtle hint of sour to keep the taste alive.

"It's... not bad. Still, *you've* still gotta try dandelion pop-tarts. Tasty *and* fast!"

"Oh, this dinner was effortless too, for a cook of my pedigree." She laughed, waving off the several hours of preparation that went into the meal. Octavia preferred the term, 'dedicated,' as opposed to the 'obsessive' label she had often been marked with. The

starters passed in near-silence, the only sounds being the crunch of the crisp, juicy lettuce, and the sound of how smug Vinyl felt Octavia was being. She was cornered between enjoying the meal, and admitting to liking it to her.

Octavia collected the plates, and within seconds of disappearing into the kitchen, returned with a roast marrow carefully balanced on a tray between her teeth. The marrow was shrouded in a layer of tinfoil, roasting it to a sweet and juicy texture, and ensuring it didn't lose the taste into the tray.

"Oh, look Vinyl!"

"What?" Vinyl's tongue was bouncing off the floor with the sheer *smell* of the dish on the table.

"You and the marrow brought matching jackets!" Octavia giggled as she peeled the tin foil off, folding it into a neat square, and placing it next to the tray. She didn't know what she enjoyed more, the way Vinyl's jaw slackened with each insult, her ruby-red eyes glazing over slightly, or the intoxicating smell from the marrow below her.

"Oh, come now, why the long face? The guest may cut the first slice." She took her place, and watched as Vinyl carved a massive hunk from the vegetable, like a foal getting free reign of a cake.

"My, my. Somepony's hungry." Octavia cut herself a much more subdued portion. She'd never had much of an appetite, but imagined Vinyl would. She was most certainly correct. "It's lucky I made such a big marrow, isn't it?"

"Yeh... well, y'know. It's not bad... I could use more. I guess." It was getting increasingly difficult to save face with Octavia, especially while she was stuffing it with her cooking. Vinyl never imagined she'd be tortured by good food, but life was funny like that.

"Feel free, Vinyl. But while you're pausing for breath, I'd like to hear about your... 'DJ-ing' career."

A small shower of reconstituted marrow burst from Vinyl's overladen mouth as she tried, and failed, to speak.

"Dear Celestia. Ughh, were you raised by mules? Please, at least try and eat *or* talk, not both!" Octavia hoped dearly that none of it had landed on her meal, or on herself for that matter. She sighed with relief when the DJ finally finished her mouthful with as much dignity as she could muster, (not that great an amount in her opinion.)

"Well, it's harder than you think. Because you gotta get the discs just right, and have to get the right tracks for the audience, to keep 'em going. Oh, and mixing between two tracks takes alot of practice." Vinyl buried another forkful of marrow deep into her gullet.

"I'm sure it does, although I can't imagine a cello would be any easier to master."

Having learned her lesson, and taken a smaller forkful this time around, Vinyl found it easier to swallow her food before speaking. "I dunno, but I played the xylophone in school. Instruments are all the same, right?" Vinyl tried to keep her face level as she saw the irritation surface on Octavia's.

"Well, hardly! Banging a stick on some bits of metal to make jangly noises like a confounded foal hardly takes any talent at all!"

"And rubbing a stick on some wires does too?"

"Oh you have no idea! It's especially difficult with hooves, you know."

Vinyl tapped her horn. "Nope. Can't say I do."

"Typical unicorns. It's easy to play an instrument with a horn, everypony's doing it! Try doing your next set with only your hooves, I *dare* you."

Vinyl took the moment to stop eating, a wicked glint in her eyes. "Okay, you're on, Octy."

"Please, for the love of *all* that is pony... never call me that again."

"Why's that... Octy?"

"I'm holding the marrow knife. Don't tempt me."

Octavia had spent much of the last hour preparing herself to see Vinyl's... "gig." She had ensured her mane was correctly combed and conditioned to its usual lustrous sheen. Her bow-tie was carefully tied around her neck, which was no small feat considering the inherent clumsiness of the hooves she was forced to use. A final glance at the mirror, a proprietary shot of Glenmorangie to start the night, and she felt ready to watch as Vinyl acted upon her wager. The dinner had went... well, all things taken into account at least. A lot of it was idle chatter, to be fair, but she had promised to watch Vinyl play tonight, at the very least to make sure she held up her end of the bet. Octavia was always a mare of her word.

Her cello remained at home, the lack of its familiar bulk and weight made Octavia almost feel like a feather. She had always carried her cello, everywhere. One never knew when the chance to play to an audience, or practice a sheet would emerge, and Octavia liked to be kept on the tips of her hooves in that respect. Not that she needed any ego massaging, she was quite aware that the ponies she played to wouldn't see a better performance in their lifespans.

It was because of this extensive preparation for the event, that she was currently looking at Vinyl with a mixture of shock and indignation, as they waited outside the... establishment she was playing at tonight.

"It's... it's..."

"Look, I know, it's not classy. But a mare's gotta find work somewhere, right? Just, uhh... if anypony with a strange accent offers you the chance to be a model..." Vinyl shook her head in an ominous manner.

"*Those* sort of ponies come here?!"

Vinyl glanced around her, as though she were expecting a pony trafficker to be standing right behind her. "I dunno. I just play the set and leave, okay?"

"Good... but I'm staying right at the front. I don't trust these... types."

"Well, that's just awesome." Vinyl's irritating grin claimed her face. "You'll be right there to see me in my prime!"

The club was a shambles. Octavia felt sure that a weather team must have organised a hurricane on its roof. The paint on the brickwork flaked away, floating through the air like crimson snowflakes. The sign, intending to depict the word, '*Equiphilia*,' was lacking several letters from its derelict lighting. Even the doors were desperate for maintenance; worn and shabby portals to a place even Celestia probably wouldn't know about. Even the ponies that lined up with them looked as though they had been brought in by truck from some swamplands. If ever there were a webbed hoof in nature, she felt sure these ponies

would possess two pairs. Whereas the bar she had met Vinyl in was fairly lacking in class, this one held no pretenses that it ever knew of the concept at all.

Octavia allowed herself to be patted down, being sure to cut the security guards an irritated stare that conveyed her unspoken threat of a lawsuit, should their hooves go further than the call of duty. Once they had ascertained she wasn't a crazed, knife-wielding aristocrat, they allowed her in. Vinyl, irritatingly, was allowed through with a casual wave, and an even more casual call of, "*what's up, bronies?*"

Inside the club was as much a shambles as the outside had implied. The carpet was worn through to the floorboards in some places, whereas in others it had been slowly layered on top of with dirt and other debris. Obviously, a cleaner wasn't on the payroll. It was, however, the chicken wire across the stage that intrigued Octavia the most.

"Why is there-?"

"Chicken wire?" Vinyl giggled nervously. "That's to stop the bottles hitting me."

"B-bottles? Why would there be bottles hitting you?"

An equally nervous smile joined Vinyl's little giggle. "Let's just say... it's their way of telling me to change track. They're..well..." She stifled a real laugh, "They're not what you'd call... classy."

"I can imagine in an establishment like this. But please, don't leave me alone out here... with these... *vandals*."

"Oh, don't you worry. You can sit with your Auntie Scratch in the firing line, behind the invincible chicken wire."

Octavia crossed her forelegs, assuming her pouting position. "Don't patronise me, I'm two years older than you. I just don't like the idea of being near these ponies."

"Hey, I'm not making you stay, Octy."

"We had a bet, and I want to see you try and do a set here without your magic."

"Pfft, easy." Vinyl waved a complacent foreleg at her lower-class audience. "These are my ponies, alright? Besides... I just imagine the paycheck, and let the music drown out the smash of the bottles."

"And my consolation?"

"Well, if I fail the bet, I buy you a round of that skooma stuff you love, right?"

Octavia slammed a hoof to her face. "It's Jura, you foal... Jura."

Octavia followed Vinyl through the back entrance behind the bar itself, leading onto the stage behind the chicken wire. She claimed a seat for herself, placed so that any potential bottle projectiles would have to come through both the wire and the turntables to meet her. Vinyl took her position on the stage itself, front-and-centre, presiding over her crowd. Octavia couldn't help but feel that most of the genetic driftwood gathered here today would be traced as a serious cause of mental degradation in several generation's time.

Vinyl grabbed the first disc between her teeth, loading it carefully onto the turntable, before doing the same with another.

"Look ma... no horn." She shot Octavia a smug grin.

For her part, Octavia simply reclined as far as the bit-store, plastic chair would allow.

"No matter, we'll see when the glass starts flying."

"Oh, we will, Octy. Hold onto that carefully-groomed little mane of yours, it's about to get blown away."

"I hardly think so, you'd actually have to be able to drum up some talent in that noise you so irritatingly mislabel as music. But do please continue, I'll be sure to prepare some bandages and sticky plasters."

Vinyl laughed, before jabbing the turntable with a hoof and kicking off the set. A wave of bass hit Octavia, ringing through her skull like a migraine, which she felt certain it would give her. She clamped her hooves to her head, simply thinking of the forfeit for failing the bet, and smiling in the knowledge that eventually the polar-white mare would slip up. The same mare's hair was energetically flying back and forth as she got into her own little world, snapping a new track on whenever a particularly large salvo of bottles struck their flimsy wire shield. It dawned on Octavia that the bar must make a killing from all the bottles of lager it *had* to be selling.

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Vinyl snuck the tip of her hoof under the record, flicking it so that the record somersaulted up into the air, before catching it with her teeth. She bowed and thanked her audience, before revealing her iridescent grin to Octavia. Octavia was loathe to admit it, but she had thrived without the aid of her horn. Though she had to give Vinyl her due, she was glad the show had went without any catastrophic failures that would culminate in a mob attacking them. Octavia still had to buy the drinks tonight.

"So, Octy. Shall we head to the bar for those drinks you owe me?"

Octavia tried her best to save face, which for her, meant she took up a huffy posture with her forelegs crossed. "I suppose, considering I lost my wager. It must be said that you did

well tonight. However... I'd prefer somewhere with a bit more..." She glanced at the clientele, noting the general slack-jawed look of them all. "... Liveliness... and some elegance to boot."

"Y'know, Octy. For once, I'm feelin' the same thing. Must be because it's free for me!" Her grin was on the verge of turning into a supernova.

Octavia sighed. "Very well. I'll allow you to choose the place, seeing as you are the winner and all that... for now at least."

The pair exited the bar, Octavia flatly refusing the proffered free bottle of *Stella Artrot*, which was the crucible of all she despised in the lager industry. The salve of cheap, lager-swilling oafs that really had no position in civilised society. Obviously, an establishment of this calibre, or lack thereof, simply didn't stock anything worthy of her palette, so she departed with Vinyl to the uptown district, where proceedings were often met with more coherent elegance.

They eventually found themselves sitting in a modern wine-bar that seemed to embrace the colour purple in its entire spectrum. Light-purple carpets were lit by almost pink lighting, the stainless-steel trim reflected all the colour around it, inevitably appearing purple itself. Even the barcolt was purple, and Octavia couldn't help but feel, that he might have been the kind that wouldn't deny a tight hug from another colt. He had a very forward and feminine attitude that made Octavia want to pay her bill as rapidly as possible, and retreat to the furthest possible corner of the room.

So it was that Octavia was sitting comfortably on the plush, cushioned seating, sipping a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Wine was something Octavia enjoyed in lieu of the whiskey she often craved, it irritated her that so few establishments in Canterlot knew a good drink from a terrible one. That they continued to offer their customers the vulgar sewage water they did, while failing to stock anything with at least a little *character*, astounded Octavia. She feared that she would rapidly deplete any chance of finding a good whiskey bar at all. Thankfully, this bar was a tiny fiefdom of classy sense in the cultural swamp of Canterlot, even if the lighting was practically pushing Octavia's vision into the ultraviolet.

She swirled the glass, before taking another sip. The light but noticeable hint of gooseberry pleased her palette as it washed over her taste buds. She had ensured to ask for Sauvignon Blanc hailing from Neigh Zealand, specifically, Mareborough, where the very gooseberry hint she enjoyed in the wine was most evident. Not as enjoyable as the smoky taste of her favourite Jura, with its overtones of oak, and its smooth texture. Still, it was a good stand-in for the refined spirit.

Vinyl, obviously, opted for a glass of alcopops, for which Octavia chided her, (eliciting an airy comment about how the pair acted like an old couple, only furthering her wish to evade the barcolt with haste.) The two were now seated at the table, directing their attention to the other patrons in the bar. Vinyl tapped Octavia's foreleg, then failed to

subtly point at a pair of mares sharing a drink at the bar. One was a chocolate-brown mare, her hooves coloured a sickly-sweet yellow, and her hair a menagerie of shades ranging from deep brown to caramel yellow. The pony next to her was as lucidly clean as her colours were sickly chocolaty. Her coat was the purest white, her hooves also ending in strange, natural socks, only hers were pink. Her mane was a spectrum from the lightest to the most vibrant shades of pink, but it was the cutie mark that Vinyl was pointing at.

"What sorta pony has an ice-cream for a cutie mark?"

"I wouldn't know... maybe her talent is for... eating ice-cream? Or making them? Why don't you go ask her, and let her know you were staring at her flank?" Octavia shot Vinyl a challenge through her smile, who nonchalantly waved it away with a foreleg.

"Maybe she sells ice-cream. She could sell ice-cream and ice-cream accessories?"

"What is an ice-cream accessory anyway? What's the other one's cutie mark? Something with a loveheart... what do you think?"

"I dunno, if it is an ice-cream eating cutie mark the other has, she's got a great figure despite it."

Octavia choked as she was sipping her wine, spurring it out over the table, and causing quite frankly a *most* embarrassing scene. One which the barcolt seemed spring-loaded to pounce on.

"Oh, *darling*, don't fret and do hold on just a moment! I'll just gather a paper towel or two. Excuse me ladies," he squeezed past the ice-cream pony and her friend, before returning, said paper towels levitating ahead of him. "There we are, sweetheart, all mopped up. Please don't... spill any more, unless you plan to buy the replacement. I *shan't* complain at that!"

Thankfully the barcolt left as quickly as he appeared, carrying the sippy, wet towel in his horn's thrall. The two mares at the bar shot Octavia and Vinyl a glance, before turning back round and giggling into their drinks. Octavia turned back to Vinyl, who was starting to regain control of her lungs after the laughing fit.

"Well, Octavia. I'd say your classy dignity took a blow there!" She stifled further falsetto giggles with a hoof, her cheeks flaring red around it.

"Ugh, I'd rather just get back to my drink, rather than you derailing the conversation talking about how attractive fillies are." She shot a curious look over her wine glass, only her eyes showing, intently monitoring Vinyl.

"Pfft... well, uhh. It's not fillyfooling to compliment a mare, it's just that I've been hanging around with you. There's not much to compliment." She shot an equally challenging look at Octavia, her pupils flaring, pushing her to respond.

"Is that so? A pony with such a brash manedo can hardly speak. Ponies in glass stables and suchlike."

The ball was in Vinyl's court, who delicately raised her glass, the drink providing a small respite from the battle of wits. "Maybe, but it's all in your view, right? And in your view... bowties look cool. No pony, thinks bowties are cool."

"I'll assure you, bow-ties are very much in fashion this season. At least, amongst the upper echelons of society, they are."

Vinyl pondered Octavia's reply, before simply scratching her head in a pretense of confusion. "I don't get it... where did you find a blind fashion designer?."

Octavia returned to the table, delicately balancing the two drinks upon her forehooves. One was her Shiraz, having moved on from the Sauvignon Blanc she was drinking earlier, the other being Vinyl's drink. She delicately placed the glass on the table, but still with enough force to produce a noticeable bang. She had to hoof it to herself, she was doing well despite the fuzzy veil of alcohol that was draped over her mind.

Vinyl shot up from her semi-conscious position, her eyes turning from bright joy to dulled confusion. She tapped the glass, sniffing the contents before turning her confused gaze to Octavia.

"What the hay is this?"

Octavia had expected this, she'd swapped Vinyl's alcopops for something at least passable. Partly because she wanted to sit with somepony who wasn't drinking foals' juice, and partly because she hadn't a clue what the drink was called.

"It's a glass of Stagner's Pear Cider, try it."

Vinyl gave the glass another cursive sniff, before looking back at Octavia.

"Look, I'm not changing it back. You could at least *try* to develop a palette for a better tipple. I mean, I can't expect you to even understand why I enjoy this Shiraz, for example. But if I'm paying, you're going to drink something worthy of your palette."

"Pear cider... isn't exactly posh, Octavia..." Vinyl brushed her muzzle against the rim of the glass, before wrapping her magic around it, and taking an exploratory sip. The sip became a slug of the alcohol, and within a few seconds she returned to the air, gasping. The now half-full glass was dropped back on the table, a smile spreading on Vinyl's face as she enjoyed the subtly sweet aftertaste.

"Gotta hoof it to ya... that was good!" She licked her lips, taking another, more measured drink.

Octavia smiled, raising the Shiraz to her lips. Her snout caught the subtle play of the peppery notes of the wine as she sipped it, the flavour itself being as powerful and full-bodied as the barcolt had promised her. She'd never tried South Zebrican Shiraz before, but she had to hoof it to the barcolt, he knew his drinks. Maybe this was a new bar to frequent on her days off.

"I'm just glad you're moving up the tables. Maybe one day I'll have you sipping refined liquors and wines like a true connoisseur."

"Yeh, or I could just stick to this. Way better than Bacolti at least." She gulped down another slew of the bittersweet drink, before slamming the empty glass on the table, eyes glittering in earnest at Octavia.

"Look, just because you won our wager, doesn't mean I'm buying you a new drink every two minutes."

"Fine. I'll just go have fun with the jukebox then."

"Don't think you're just putting any old rubbish on! There's other ponies with ears here too."

"I have to save them from jaw-dislocation, in case they yawn too hard at the boring music *you* like, Octavia."

In a display of both fillyish immaturity, and surprisingly sober co-ordination, the two mares leapt from their seats, racing to the jukebox. Octavia reached it first, leaning against the hoofprint-streaked glass, until Vinyl quite rudely shunted her out of the way, usurping her delicately tuned balance, and knocking her to the floor.

"You did that on purpose, you little hayseed!"

"That I did, Octy... oh yeh, you'll love this!" Octavia's mind was bombarded by the same cheap, bassy music she remembered in the bar they had both met. "Can you hear that? Unce, unce, unce, unce, unc-ow!"

Octavia had risen from the floor like a phoenix, knocking Vinyl over to take her place. She rattled a hoof over the selection button, trying to find something worthy. "Iron Mareden, Haul Mycartneigh, Fill Coltins, ugghhhh... is there anything at all here worth listening to?!"

"If... you... let me... finish!" While standing was easy for Vinyl, the intricate maneuvering of the hundreds of muscles necessary to come to her hooves was now beyond her. She dragged herself up the jukebox's front, hooves slipping on the frictionless glass. Octavia couldn't help it, the sight of Vinyl pawing at the glass in a vain and fruitless attempt to stand up ruptured her into a fit of giggles.

"Alright, Vinyl. You're embarrassing me, I wasn't aware you were such a lightweight." She reached a foreleg under Vinyl's stomach, and lifted her as best she could, the mare shakily rising to her hooves.

"Look, Octy... I swear to drunk I'm not Celestia, okay? Just lemme pick a song. I think I got it." Vinyl has given up on magic, instead hoofing the selection button with the speed and precision of a geriatric. She flicked through the tracks, resting on one in particular. She tapped the play button, letting the music roll through the speakers.

A synergy of beautiful orchestral music, and synthetic electromagical noise. The violins were played across with the delicate thrumming of the bass, the pianos creating a punchy medley that had Octavia's forehooves tapping in time with it on the floor. It was simply a masterpiece, she sipped another mouthful of the Shiraz, enjoying the powerful taste combined with the powerful music coming to her.

Vinyl had already moved on, head bobbing with the bass, as usual. She located the chocolate fondue buffet, and balancing a stick on her teeth, speared a row of marshmallows, before coating them in a slick of chocolate, and devouring them one-by-one. Little trickles of chocolate dribbles from her mouth, and she licked her lips like an ecstatic foal enjoying a candy bar.

"Isn't that almost cannibalism, Vinyl?"

"Eh what?"

"Eating soft, white, squishy marshmallows, when you're a soft, white, squishy pony?"

Vinyl dropped the stick from her teeth, shocked by Octavia's accusations. "Are you saying I'm fat?"

"*Oh dear.*" Octavia's mind halted, then slammed itself into reverse. "No, no, no no no! I just went, you look... cuddly, like a marshmallow. Nevermind, forget I said it."

"Good, because you try to cuddle me, and I'll go Buck Norris on your flank. Now you have to do an apology forfeit for calling me fat."

"And what, precisely, would that be?"

Vinyl giggled, grabbing a lime slice from a nearby platter intended for drinks, and coating it in the chocolate. She brandished it at Octavia, who grimaced, realising the proposition. "Eat up, Octy, and be sorry."

"Can't I just say sorry?"

"Nope, that prissy tongue of yours scared to touch anything actually interesting?"

"Hoof it over here!" Octavia snatched the chocolate lime, biting onto it hard. The first moment was glorious, the bitterness of the lime intermingled with the sweetness of the chocolate. However, as the first second passed, the lime juice created a tidal wave of powerful, bitter flavour in her mouth. Her taste buds were overpowered, but she had to save face. Chewing slowly, she swallowed, rind-and-all. Alcohol was great for inciting stupid acts.

Vinyl must have seen the grimacing face Octavia had pulled, because when Octavia turned back to her, she was on the floor in hysterics. A hoof wiped a tear from the corner

of her eye, and she in turn felt a hoof pressing on her stomach. Looking up, she saw Octavia bearing down on her, stick perched between her teeth, a chocolate-coated pickled onion nestled on the end.

"*Bon appetite*, Ms Scratch."

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Octavia brandished her chocolate-pickle tipped spear at Vinyl's muzzle, who had her own stick locked between her teeth. The two stared each other down, willing the other to make the first strike. It was Octavia who made the first light jab, aiming for Vinyl's mouth. Vinyl parried the stick with a deft move of her own, poking Octavia's cheek for good measure. Octavia jabbed once more, pulling back as Vinyl moved to block the attack, then bombing the pickled onion straight into her open mouth. She laughed triumphantly, a wicked grin spreading across her face as Vinyl grimaced at the taste in her mouth.

To an outside observer, this may have presented itself as being slightly foolish. However, the barcolt had drawn differing conclusions to what a pony with a closer view and a cleaner mind may have created. He coughed lightly; a professional cough, perfectly calculated to be audible, but not intrusive. Truly, learning to cough in the right manner was half a barcolt's job, the other half - serving drinks - being relatively elementary.

"Ladies, I don't mean to intrude... but we don't like to condone those kind of acts in this bar. Not that I take any issue with it, but please, keep it for the bedroom."

Both Vinyl and Octavia gaped at the barcolt, Octavia's stick dropped to the floor, while Vinyl's dropped into her mouth, her convulsions and choking knocking the dumbstruck Octavia from her perching spot on Vinyl's stomach.

"We're... we're not... what even made you think that?!" Octavia started patting Vinyl's back with a hoof, who's face was turning to a worrying shade of azure. She gripped the stick in between her teeth, pulling it out of the DJ pony's mouth, before spitting it on the floor.

"Oh, nothing darling, just you seemed fairly close, is all. Very close... in fact."

"Hey, buddy. I'm not like that with Octavia. Mainly because she's an annoying prude who likes annoying prudey things!" Vinyl pointed an indignant hoof at the barcolt, her accuracy improved by the adrenaline countermanding the alcohol in her blood.

"Like a little white knight in shining armour, how romant... oh silly me." He grinned at the glares from the two mares. "I'll ask no more questions, so you'll tell me no more lies!"

The barcolt sauntered away. Beyond him, Octavia could see the ice cream pony from before fervently scribbling away at a notepad levitating before her, alternating her gaze between the paper and at Vinyl and herself. Octavia had suffered a significant number of

disgraces today, mainly at the hooves of the damned mare next to her. That the barcolt even suggested the possibility... well, it was simply absurd!

The little hayseed with the quill and paper was about to receive a sizable portion of Octavia's expansive and pyroclastic mind. She stormed up to the brown-coated pony, bearing over the notepad before snatching it with a hoof. She scanned the page... it's probably best left unsaid what said page contained, but Octavia would have sent the notepad to the moon had she the power. Her prepared arguments were lost in the shock, and she turned to an interesting off-white, almost beige shade. Instead of her satirical intentions beforehoof, she simply tore the paper into as many fragments as ponily possible, put them in the mare's drink, and left her with a comment on how she was the lowest rung of the pony writing society.

As she sauntered away, the ice cream pony pulled out the backup copy, once more scribbling away while requesting a new drink from the gleeful barcolt.

"Another story for the fans, Butters?"

"Oh, you know me; I love the inspiration in the field."

"Can I have a copy?"

"First edition. When it's done, Rayo."

Vinyl had watched the confrontation with an abject look of confusion and nonchalance. Octavia stormed up to her, seething with irritation at the... the invasion of her privacy in such a deep manner.

"What was on that notepa-?"

A hoof was jabbed into Vinyl's mouth. "No, we're not discussing it. Ever? Understand?"

Though Vinyl understood, it was difficult to convey this fact with another pony's hoof between her jaws. She sputtered around Octavia's hoof, who then removed it with a disgusted look on her face.

"She's still writing, Octavia..."

"Oh, who cares? No pony would read that crass, sick... teenage fantasy junk anyway."

"Ohhhh. So what's in the story?"

"I don't feel it's prudent to discuss it... it was quite... horrifying." Octavia visibly shivered, which Vinyl took as face value for her being cold, wrapping a hoof around her shoulders. This jolted Octavia's mind back to the first few sentences of the... story. "Please, Vinyl. Get off. We don't want to give them any ideas."

"Fine. You be cold then. Besides, I know what kinda 'teenage' story it is anyway."

Octavia's cheeks lit up faster than a sunrise. "Ho-how do you know?"

"It's obvious. *Twilight* fanfiction... just sick."

Vinyl carried her alcohol with roughly the same precision that she carried herself while under its influence. In essence, not very well at all. A hoofful of Stagner's bottles later, and she devolved into a barely coherent mass of stumbling limbs and slurred speech. While it had crossed the minorly tipsy Octavia's mind to simply let her walk home, and maybe watch at a distance with a box of popcorn, she decided it was for the better to help her somewhere safe where she could allow her liver to slog its way through the backlog of alcohol in her system.

Thankfully, Vinyl's choice in the winebar for the night had placed them within reasonable distance of Octavia's apartment. So Octavia had opted to take her home, (not that Vinyl was anywhere near capable of conveying a yay or neigh on that question.) It was due to this turn of events that Octavia found herself half-propping, half-dragging Vinyl to her home. In essence she had become a ponified crutch, and admittedly, her alcohol intake for the evening had somewhat affected her balance as well. Fortunately, the fresh air was doing something to keep her lucid as she helped Vinyl along as best she could.

So, in all honesty, the pair fell down into a chaotic pile of legs and hair quite a few times. Still, Octavia felt it better than lingering in the bar. She hoped that their absence would lead the ice-cream pony to write about something less vulgar, or at the very least, something that didn't involve her. Octavia wrapped a foreleg around Vinyl, shunting the groaning mare onto her hooves... only a few more blocks now.

They passed by a public house, the bar itself packed to the brim with jobs watching their hoofball games. An incredibly overrated and culture-less past-time in Octavia's opinion. Hoof a ball in a box, doesn't take any skill or thought at all! It seemed that the game had recently ended, because as they passed by the bar, a trio of cheering and heavily intoxicated colts burst out, chorusing a hoofball chant.

It was this that roused the barely conscious Vinyl to lift her head and foreleg, waving at the colts with a cry of "Green arr-may!"

Octavia snapped Vinyl's hoof to the floor, hissing in her ear. "Vinyl, stop it. The last thing I want is a group of drunk colts to know we're a pair of barely sober fillies out on our own!"

"What's wrong, Octavia?" Vinyl giggled, trying and failing to keep her head at Octavia's eye level. "Scared of a little male attention?"

"Ugh, like I'd want to spend the night with a drunken hooligan like them."

Vinyl giggled, though she'd surrendered to the alcohol and was now staring down at the floor. "So instead you're taking a drunken, filly hooligan for the night?"

"Well, I would hardly treat you in the same way one does a colt, and to be honest, you're mostly harmless anyway."

Vinyl reared up on her hind legs, blind luck and a south-westerly wind the only things keeping her upright. "Harmless? I could bust your rump easy as pie, Octavia... like apple pie... you got any apple pie at home?"

"I might, the real question is whether I'd give you any."

"If you do, I won't beat you up... I promise."

"Truly, Vinyl, you are a gentlemare."

After much struggling and more passive threats concerning Vinyl's wish for food, Octavia finally managed to drag the filly to her home. A simple night on the couch, then she could turf her out in the morning. She left Vinyl to lean against the wall, took out her keys, opened the door, then picked up Vinyl after she inevitably fell over again. Octavia felt that tonight would be a good thing to jot on her CV, in case she ever took a job in the Marefia. In honesty, she had the body-dragging experience and the cello case now, she was probably as qualified as they come.

Vinyl was placed, rather unceremoniously, on the couch. She then proceeded to de-ceremony herself as much as ponily possible, by slumping into a sprawling position over the soft, suede surface. Irritatingly, she remained awake while Octavia opened her favourite cupboard. Naturally, contained within it was a plethora of beverages, but it was the prized Jura she extracted, tipping it into a glass, and enjoying a refreshing sip as she reclined in her own chair.

Vinyl had been watching her, while Octavia had noted the fact she was slowly slipping off the couch, but didn't feel any pressing need to help. Vinyl once more that night, found herself face down on the floor, her legs flailing a second after she landed. Octavia could only take it for a massively delayed attempt to stay on the couch. She watched Vinyl's sluggish attempts to claw her way back on to the couch, sipping the Jura. In the end, she felt it necessary to help her, if only to stay her scuffing the suede with her hooves.

"Come here, you." She once more slipped her forelegs under Vinyl's form, and raised her onto the couch, repositioning her limbs to be more stable this time.

"Thanks, Octy... you got any music... can't sleep without music."

"I suppose a light piece of Mozart can help anypony to sleep."

"You put that classical junk on... and I'll snap the vinyl it's recorded on... okay?" Vinyl peeped open an eye, a playful malicious glint was visible on its surface. The tips of her lips curled upwards in a light smile. "Got anything more... my kinda thing?"

Octavia basically couldn't be bothered with the hassle of a musical argument at that point, and she doubted Vinyl's brain was receptive enough to acknowledge it anyway. She rifled through her collection of records, calling out anything that might have pleased the paralytic unicorn mare.

"Bruce Wingsheen?"

"Oh no, not an Apple 'n' Western... bin it if you wanna."

Octavia growled under her breath, the vocals in that album were particularly well sung. "Flank Sinatra?"

"Ughh... *booring!* So slow!"

"You really are impossible... hmmm..." She pulled out a cover, lightly coated in dust. "I suppose Whinny Hendrix is too old for your tastes too?!"

"You have Hendrix?!" Vinyl gasped, but not in spiteful glee as Octavia imagined she would. No, this was genuine glee.

"You... like them?"

"What sane pony *doesn't*?! Sure new bands like Hedged Sevenfold and Atreyu are a little bit punchier, but you can't beat the ol' classics." Vinyl was a little more upright, clapping her hooves together with joy.

Octavia slipped the vinyl onto the plate, eager for anything other than the noise of Vinyl ridiculing bands she quite enjoyed. She did enjoy Hendrix, the guitar was skilfully played, and it was definitely more pronounced and thought-out than most of the screaming noise that passed for 'metal' these days. It wasn't a musician she often sought out, but thankfully, one she would happily listen to if it happened to be playing. This occasion being one such instance of that.

She stood back from the record player, the music beginning to filter through. The sound of clinking glasses alerted her to Vinyl's movements, and she found the house guest rifling her way through the drinks cupboard with her magic.

"Do feel free to make yourself at home, Vinyl."

"No problem. Say, you never said you had this stuff!" She retrieved a bottle of a rich, green liquor. Pan-Equestrian Gargle Blasters, all the power of an alicorn distilled into alcohol and served up in a bottle.

"Vinyl... I... how are you so lively all of a sudden anyway?"

"Come on, Whinny could get anypony moving! What did you buy this stuff for if you're not gunna drink it, anyway?" Vinyl poured out two glasses, and a small puddle on the carpet. It's not really easy to tell whether the carpet enjoyed the drink, the green colour the usually cream fibres took up may have been equinopomorphised sickness... or it might have just been the colour of the liquor, in all honesty.

Octavia took the offered drink, that had in turn been unspokenly unoffered to Vinyl. She had tried them before. Once. The hangover was brutal, and she felt little need to drink it more often. However, there was something about the way Vinyl gleefully offered the drinks with that fillylike glint in her eyes that put Octavia at ease. She carefully sniffed the drink, remembering the not-so-delicate allure of paint thinner on its scent. Vinyl sniffed her own, her snout wrinkling at the smell.

"That'll put you into an early retirement! Alright... three... two... one... Slug!"

The pair downed the drinks, Octavia felt her world instantly get pounded six ways from Sunday in an instant. It became suddenly very difficult to orchestrate the myriad of leg muscles required to keep upright, and she plummeted to the floor in a barely conscious alcoholic haze.

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As was previously mentioned, Octavia was no stranger to awakening in the realm of the hangover. What she had yet to grow used to, was the various fiefdoms of a hangover, and the condition she'd be left in upon visiting one.

It must be said that she had never awoken upside-down on her own couch before. Octavia was genuinely unaware whether the pounding in her head was the alcohol permeating her blood, or the blood itself collecting in her head. Her head lolled over the edge of the couch in as graceless a way as could be imagined.

She shifted her body, trying to at least get the ceiling to go back to where it belonged, and return its space to the floor. This turned out to be more difficult than she had imagined, as her drunken self had apparently managed to delicately balance herself in this precarious position. A balance that was lightly stolen away as she moved, and fell head first onto the carpet, the rest of her body joining its leader in a crumpled mass above it.

At least the blood was beginning to even itself out now, but if anything, the rapid drain of blood had made her headache worse. She managed to collect and sort her body in a manner she imagined would be fitting, the carpet being lumpier than she had remembered. She felt a sharp, cylindrical edge, and a pointed cone poking into her back. The very irritated, but surprisingly well camouflaged pony shunted her off with a pain groan, and Octavia got to feel the soaring joy of a pegasus for the briefest of moments before she once more landed on the carpet with a loud thud.

"Like my head wasn't bad enough... without your rump falling onto it!"

"I can hardly be blamed... I'm not letting you near me... with that stuff ever again."

Vinyl rolled over, her crimson irises surrounded by an equally crimson array of tiny blood vessels, hardly presenting a well-maintained window to her soul. "Why... do you even have that stuff? It's... it's not natural!"

"I got bored one day, shoot me!" Octavia rolled over to face Vinyl, and she could see in her reflection on the nearby mirror - that was hanging from the wall, but fortunately, still intact - that her eyes were equally ravaged by the swarming capillaries. "You... you want a drink?"

"Yeh, my throat's killing me... wait a..." Vinyl reached around her neck, noticing an adornment she wasn't familiar with. Her magic sluggishly attempted to grip it, almost choking her a few times, until she pulled it off. In the glowing, white aura before her was a little, pink bowtie. "Why the *hay*, am I wearing your bowtie?!"

"Oh, I don't know, honestly... I'm far too tired to even consider what happened." Octavia clamped her hooves to her head, in an attempt to counteract the pounding pulse of her headache by squeezing it into submission. It was surprisingly comforting, her hooves being alot softer than she remembered. Almost like... cashmere?!

She pulled away her hooves, noticing the pink clothing wrapped around her calves, tiny, grey clefs adorned on each one. The blood once more returned to her head, congregating in her cheeks as if to laugh at her embarrassment. She ripped the socks off her hooves, stowing them under the couch, before turning to see Vinyl's grin breaking through her pain.

"Nice socks, Octavia. Now, do you mind explaining this?" Vinyl smoothed back the coat on her neck, revealing an inflamed, bruise-like mark. "Cos I looked in the mirror, and it looks like teeth marks."

Octavia's mind was slowly grinding to a halt, not really capable of processing the situation before her. "Ummm... maybe... a dog?"

"Do you even *have* a dog?"

"No. You could have simply... fallen over."

"No, these're definitely teeth... and it looks like a pony's. I dunno, what do you think?" Vinyl stared at Octavia blankly, who, with nothing to go on, fell upon that ancient fallback devised by an ingenious social embarrassment fallback inventor many years ago.

"I think we need a nice cup of tea!" Octavia rose as rapidly as her aching limbs could carry her, galloping past Vinyl and into the kitchen. Vinyl watched her past, giggling despite the pain the movements caused to her head. She reached towards the record player, that was still bleating the same incessant tune she didn't recognise. She picked up

the vinyl, her face somehow finding a shade whiter than its own natural tone as she recognised the artist, Bridle White, before tossing it under the couch to rest quietly next to the tabooed socks. This was definitely a night both of them would be glad that neither could remember.

Octavia slumped down beside the sink cupboard, neatly trying to hide her body from view while also trying to dredge some memories from the murky depths of her mind. Sadly, one of the many benefits toted by the Pan-Equestrian Gargle Blaster is that it will buck you up in every way possible, the bottle itself containing disclaimers against causing anything from liver damage to type-two diabetes.

Vinyl watched from the living room, as the silence from the kitchen signalled the fact that Octavia was in fact not making tea, and may or may not be having a mental breakdown and stuffing her head in the oven. While Vinyl was partially worried, she didn't want to intrude in on her, mainly because her hopes might have been shattered, and she would've just found Octavia moping around next to the mop pail. Instead she tried to reach out her benevolent ideals using her voice.

"Hey, Octy. How's the, uhh... tea coming along?"

There was a sharp clattering, a fervent clopping of hooves on tiled flooring, then the rattling of pots and pans. "It'll be ready in a moment!"

"Cool! Why are you using pots and pans... when you're making tea."

Octavia pulled her head out of the cupboard, halting in her frenzied effort to sound as busy as she wanted to look. "Uhhh... I like the traditional method, on the hob! It makes the tea that much sweeter, don't you... think?"

She was confronted by Vinyl's quite frankly irritating grin that was growing like a tumour on her mind. She let go of the wok and saucepan in each of her forehooves, and stowed them back into the cupboard.

"I'm no chef... but I don't think you'll get far with those. I'm guessing, that maybe you're finding this whole situation a little awkward?"

"Indeed, what irks me most is that you don't seem very fazed at all."

Vinyl disappeared back through the doorway in a light giggling fit the Gargle Blasters amplified into a migraine. She recovered quite sharply after a second or two, and returned to the kitchen.

"Oh, it's not the first time I've woken up with a hangover, a filly, and no idea what the hay happened." She locked eyes with Octavia's partially worried, partially scathing stare. "Hey, it was Uni! What pony didn't have one of those 'oh Celestia, no' mornings?"

"I, for one, didn't. I spent my time at Uni *studying*."

"Well, yeh, that's the bit in between all the fun stuff! Besides, even drunk, I think I'd pass on you." She gave a sly wink, and watched as Octavia's mind ripped her in two directions.

"I'll have you know that I am a very... attractive mare... but to colts! Not to other mares, no, not at all!"

"I don't judge, Octy. I don't judge. You can be whatever you want to be, so long as it's prudey; cos that's what's fun about you."

"Ughh, the last thing I want in this life is an '*it's cool to fillyfool*' speech from you, Vinyl. Excuse me, I think I hear my mail calling." Octavia stomped past Vinyl, eliciting another pained giggle at her indignant demeanour.

She found the offending letters, bills, coupons, and... a magazine? Tearing it open in a rare moment of fillyish glee, she glanced at the cover, then turned a remarkably similar shade of green to the dreaded Gargle Blasters.

"Hey, Octy, what's u-ohhhh... is that us?"

"For the love of Celestia, I hope not."

"Well, at least we're famous... I guess, 'The Cellist and the Charlatan.' I gotta be the Cellist, right?" She shot a grin at Octavia, who groaned under her breath.

"I highly doubt it, Ms Charlatan. The reason I am reluctant to open it... is that." She jabbed a hoof at the familiar image of a certain chocolate-coloured ice cream pony, gleefully rendered above the sharp artist's impression of herself and Vinyl. Octavia had to hoof it to the mare, writing, printing, and posting it to her home over night must have required intense dedication. Suddenly, she had the urge to install more locks on her door.

"Oh, wow, it's her. The mare from the bar!"

"Wow. Really? I simply *couldn't* tell, Vinyl."

Vinyl pouted her lip, mocking an injury to her chest by holding a hoof to her left side. "Oh, Octy, no need to get your halter in a twist. Come on, open it up, I wanna see what she wrote!"

Octavia suddenly got the overwhelming urge to throw the magazine as high into the sky as possible, in the hope it might perch itself on the moon. Or even better, the sun. "I... don't think that's a good idea."

"Awww, just one look. It can't be that bad."

"No!" Octavia gripped the paper tightly in her teeth, snarling slightly like a small terrier. "I don't want you to read it, you're not going to!"

"You're forgetting something, Octavia."

"Really, what would that be?"

"This." Vinyl wrapped her magic around the magazine, pulling it away from Octavia while holding out a hoof to stop her getting it back. She ripped off the cellophane coating, and giggled as a note fell out of the pages. "Ohh, 'To my two fateful little fillies, have fun, and especially important, have fun together. Here's two reservations to a restaurant, to get you two little lovepegasi started.'"

"She really is perverse!"

"Yeh." Vinyl cocked her head, shaking the reservation out of the magazine. "But hey, free food! Now, page seven of this little magazine is her story and..."

"You're reading it?"

"Y-yeh."

"Are you going to stop now?"

"No... not yet. Although for the record, I wouldn't ever do that with a tuba. That'd be painful!"

"Can you please stop, I'm not comfortable standing here while you read that!" Octavia jumped up at the magazine, trying to snatch it with hoof and tooth. "Why are you even reading that smut?"

"A, it's about me. And B, I'm reading it for the plot."

"Please, I am begging you. Just stop, please."

Vinyl peeked her crimson eyes over the magazine's cover. "*Pretty* please?"

"Ughhh, 'with a cherry on top.'"

"Because you batted your eyelids, and asked so nicely Octavia. Though, you should probably keep this, might be a weirdly accurate placeholder for last night. The pictures, though... skip them." Vinyl set the magazine on a nearby table, before turning to Octavia with her ditsy, little grin. "But her descriptions of your socks are pretty close to the real thing."

"Where, let me see!" Octavia snatched up the magazine, scanning the page as her face became paler and paler. "My... that *is* a painful thing to do with a tuba..."

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Octavia walked into the small apartment. She wasn't often one for intruding into other ponies' homes, but in her defence, Vinyl *had* left the door wide open. She entered the home, evading the various forms of detritus that scattered the apartment. She tip-hoofed into the bedroom, finding her quarry fast asleep, at a considerably late hour as well.

Octavia loomed over the unconscious mare, once more prodding her hoof sharply into her withers. Ponies are not often known for their burrowing capabilities, but Vinyl managed to counteract both nature and Charles Darwhinny, and evolved the ability to burrow ever deeper into her covers to avoid Octavia.

"Honestly, Vinyl, will you just get up? It's ten in the morning!"

Vinyl's eyes peeped out from her warren in the bedsheets. "But it's Sunday! No pony gets up early on Sunday, and I'm still hung over from those Gargle-Blasters."

"We had those three days ago, you really are a lightweight. Now up! I have an audition to go to today, and I'd like you to accompany me."

Vinyl exited her carefully constructed burrow of linen, dropping onto the floor unceremoniously, before propping herself up and slamming her shades over her eyes. If only to cover the tired bags, at least.

"Why'd you need me? You say I have a really bad taste in music... and I'd make you look bad."

"Well, maybe I'm taking you with me to make myself look better by comparison?"

"It's too early for long words, so I'll just pretend you said something nice about me."

"That's probably the best course of action, Vinyl. Now get ready, we're going to meet some high society. I need you to at least attempt to look presentable."

Vinyl wandered off into the bathroom, the pattering of the shower emanating from within after a moment. Curiously, she'd left the door open. Perhaps Octavia should go close it, just to be safe? It was best to preserve her privacy, after all. She trotted carefully, up to the door, which lay slightly ajar. Steam wafted through the gap, as Octavia reached out a hoof to-

The door suddenly swung even wider open, and Octavia fell to the floor in its absence of support. She spotted a contemptible Vinyl staring down at her with the lightest grin she imagined a pony face could muster.

"Now, now, Octavia. Flattered as I am, I don't want you spying on me in the shower, thanks."

Octavia sputtered, coughing out dust she imagined had lain on the uncleaned carpet for weeks. In doing so, she rapidly eradicated a large colony of almost sentient dust mites, that were in the process of penning up their request to join the United Equestrian Nations. Sadly, Ponykind lost this chance for a new ally to inevitably fight wars with and exploit for labour, so perhaps it was for the better that this fledgling civilisation met its end in Octavia's trachea, rather than having to endure that whole fiasco.

Octavia herself recovered from her unwitting genocidal wheezing, and rose to her hooves to avoid the smog of dust that had plumed from the carpet upon her impact. "Spying?! I was just going to close the door, to *save* your privacy."

"Aren't you a saint, Octy. Now please, I know we're always naked anyway, but it's still kinda weird. Go fix yourself something to eat, you little peeping tom you."

Octavia's indignant defence was cut short by the door closing in front of her, and she felt her cheeks heat up in disapproval at her well-intended actions. Evidently, the best course of action would be to stuff her cheeks full of something tasty to cool them down, as Vinyl had suggested. She opened the fridge, finding the colonial province of the dust mite kingdom ruling over a slab of potentially century-old cheese. Any vegetables inside had long-since devolved back into primordial ooze, and Octavia stopped to consider whether Vinyl actually ate any of this, or simply had the digestive system of a cow.

The fridge revealing itself to be a pony-sized petri dish, she closed it and roamed onwards. She clicked the cupboards open to search for anything tinned, and therefore potentially edible. Instead she found one cupboard completely filled with cereal. Cheerileeos, Zeco Pops, and ScootaBix all in attendance; cereals Octavia hadn't eaten since she was a filly, and had no intentions of a culinary trot down memory lane at this point.

Another cupboard yielded only a shelf full of brightly coloured boxes, the vibrant yellow of Dandelion Pop-Tarts beckoned her. Vinyl had recommended these to her at one point, yes, but her taste was hardly cutting edge. Still, it appeared to be all she kept that wasn't cereal and milk, and on a few, rare occasions, her tastes had turned out to be surprisingly finessed.

Octavia flipped the box over, eyes coursing over the instructions before she realised she was looking at the most foal-proof piece of food she'd ever eat. A pair of tarts were placed into the toaster, and she waited the intended time for the magical energies to beam through the little treats. After a fairly boring moment, the tarts were ejected forcefully from the toaster; soaring a hoof into the air before Octavia snatched them onto her plate. The packet recommended leaving them to stand for a little moment, so she gave it a hoofful of seconds before the sickly-sweet aromas got the better of her. She clamped her teeth around one such delectable slice, the outer coating feeling reassuringly cool. It was foals' food after all, they would have to keep it cool for them.

Her teeth scissored through the tart, dandelion jam spewing onto her taste buds. One moment of hyper-sweet bliss, then a fiery stab of pain through her tongue. They were hot... very hot.

Vinyl heard the scream from the shower, even through her usual habit of humming Deadhor5 as loud as she could so ponies listening would know she was in the shower, and therefore would like to not be spied on. She leapt out of the cleansing downpour, mane and tail sodden as she crashed through the door and into her living room. She spotted Octavia sitting on the couch, gingerly touching a hoof to her tongue.

"Bese bop tards are painfuw!" Octavia's tongue was red and inflamed, much like Vinyl's cheeks as they failed to repress her laughter. She plummeted to the floor, a small shockwave of dust intermingling with her wet coat and usurping the entire purpose of showering in the first place. She wiped a tear, or a drop of water, from her eye, still finding humour as Octavia glared at her, tongue hanging out of her mouth like a happy puppy.

"Oh, it's great to have you around, Octy. Let's get you some ice, and I'll sure to blow on your pop-tarts for you too, to stop any more nasty burns."

"Brow it oup your rumb, Viryl!"

"So remind me, why do you want me to come with you, Octy?"

Octavia covered her face with a hoof, sighing into the sole. "Because I can hardly be seen to go to such an event alone."

Vinyl mused over the comment as the pair trotted towards the performance hall. It was just visible in the distance, exactly the sort of thing Victorian-era ponies thought would look cool. To Vinyl, it just looked *old*. She couldn't help but remember the jumpers her grandmare would knit for her, and she'd wear, begrudgingly. She stopped her daydreaming, turning back to Octavia.

"And you don't have any friends who would... y'know, actually like this kinda music?"

Octavia didn't meet her gaze, but she saw her eyes track everywhere from the floor to awkwardly pointing away to her right. Anywhere but a place where she'd meet Vinyl's own gaze.

"They were... all busy. You know, playing their own orchestral pieces and the like." She followed with a grin that made Vinyl want to push further. However, she felt there was probably a reason for the obvious lie. As a result, she changed the subject to something less awkward.

"And why did I have to leave my shades behind. You *know* the looks I get 'cause of my eyes."

"What sort of looks? Your eyes are perfectly fine!"

Vinyl snorted, a little puff of steam burst out into the cold, winter air. "Apart from the fact they're crimson-red. It was cool in high-school, but annoying now. Everypony jokes that I'm the Nightmare with eyes like these."

Octavia giggled, bucking her rump slightly to readjust the cello case slung over her back. "Oh Vinyl, you do say such foalish things. I think your eyes are lovely, really."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Vinyl leaned in with her voice, making the full weight of the implications known.

"Well... as far as eyes go, they're quite striking... I mean... oh, look. We're here!"

Vinyl barely stopped herself from trotting straight into the form of a particularly buffed-out bodyguard. He was the kind of bodyguard you knew couldn't actually fight, and was simply a large slab of sapient muscle. However, the hours of body-building and gallons of protein shakes had the desired effect, and Vinyl shrunk back from him.

Octavia simply sauntered by him, pushing an insistent hoof onto Vinyl's withers to get her moving again. She held out her ticket-plus-one in between her teeth, which was carefully grabbed by one of the bodyguard's hooves, and ripped in two. He waved them through, glaring at Vinyl as though daring her to try something. Vinyl didn't know what he expected her to try, but felt that amongst the toffs and posh ponies that frequented these sort of establishments, she must seem like a shoplifter. Something she hadn't been for five years, she'd like to have pointed out. Sadly, Octavia's insistent pushing had moved her far past the bodyguard, which was obviously luckier for him than her.

"Octy, you can stop pushing me. I'd like you get your hoof off my rump at least."

Tiny trickles of blood seeped into Octavia's cheeks. "I was simply pushing you away before the bodyguard apprehended you for starting a fight or something. They can be quite prejudiced here."

"Aren't I lucky to have a guardian pegasus like you? Right, now where's the refreshments!" Vinyl slammed her forehooves together, rubbing them eagerly against each other.

"Through here, Vinyl. And please, don't show me up tonight. This could be career-making for me. Just... mingle, in as polite a manner as you can muster."

"Will do, Octy. I'll just camp near the nibbles."

Vinyl fled on her food-bound vector, homing in on a plate of something that looked both fancy, and chocolate coated. It had to be made by a high-class chef if it was in here, so in theory, it had to taste good too. Meanwhile, Octavia had ventured into the crowd looking for a seat, until she was sidelined by an infamously familiar green unicorn.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Octavia the cellist. Found another piece of driftwood to play your low-brow concertos on?"

Octavia whirled around to the source, a smug grin ready and waiting on her visage. "My, my, Lyra! Still playing your clunky, little harp?"

"This *lyre*, is pure gold, another league compared to that lump of dead tree you play on."

"Hah. It's most likely gold-painted tin. Besides, the pony operating the instrument is far more essential, and my cello is in pristine hooves."

"Pfft, your earth-pony gimmick might be keeping the hoof-draggers happy for now, but you couldn't even tell a tremolo from a piccolo!"

Vinyl had sat with a box of something resembling popcorn, which had instead been coated with caviar, chocolate, and anything ostentatious the chef could get his hooves on. The entertainment far outclassed the refreshments, she made mental notes on which

insults pushed Octavia's buttons the most. A timid earth pony came from behind her, beige-coated with a puffy pink and purple mane. She tapped Vinyl on the shoulder, causing her to spin round mid-insult.

"You're Octavia's friend, right?"

Vinyl swallowed the popcorn, somewhat regretting the chef's choice of adding quail's eggs to the garnish of that hoofful. "I suppose I could be called that. Vinyl Scratch, pleased to make your acquaintance." She offered a hoof, which the earth pony took in a firm shake.

"Bonbon. I see Octavia and Lyra have already started their catchup."

"Yup, it's pretty fun to watch. I'm guessing their not great friends."

"Oh, it's sad that they rile each other up so much. Honestly, they'll be there until their sets come up. If you'd like, we can grab some good seats in the theatre. Best to get somewhere close to the front for the performance before they're all taken."

Vinyl mulled over the idea, her eyes listing over to see Octavia vehemently gesturing at the green unicorn in a way she found very endearing. She couldn't hear what she was saying anymore, as the murmur in the room had masked Octavia's level-volumed rage. She nodded to Bonbon, grabbing a tray of tiny cupcakes with edible ball-bearings on them as she exited. A waiter smiled at her as she passed, his coat light brown with an hourglass cutie mark. One last glance revealed Octavia to be making hoof gestures for less cultured than she would like to believe. Ultimately, Vinyl made a mental note to tease her for everything such a transgression was worth.

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Bonbon lead Vinyl out into the theatre hall. Despite the grandeur of the exterior - in all its Neo-Gothic glory - the interior was pretty much the same as any other hall Vinyl had been to. A rare few halls, but she had went on trips to pantomimes as a filly. The stage was a semi-circular plate of perfectly smooth wood, almost as if it were carved from one tree trunk. Beyond it stretched seats arranged in rows all the way to the edge like the old Ponan Colosseum, creating an inclined semi-circle focused toward the stage in its centre.

They found a pair of seats near the front row, there were few other ponies in the hall. Vinyl supposed nopony would want to see a rehearsal or audition, they'd much rather see the finished product. Unless it was like Equestrian Idol, if those sort of auditions were the subject matter at hoof, then Vinyl felt she would enjoy the night.

Bonbon took a seat near the gangway, while Vinyl sat next to her, and the tray of pilfered cupcakes took its socially-acceptable place precariously balancing on the space between them. While Vinyl would have enjoyed to hoard the cupcakes to herself, Bonbon didn't

seem to be that bad a pony, and her manners simply wouldn't allow selfishness anyway. Not just because Octavia had told her to be polite and cultured either.

She turned to Bonbon, who she imagined had attended this sort of tirade before, and could probably help her prepare for whatever was coming.

"So, what's this all about then?"

Bonbon coughed politely, pointing a hoof at a quartet of ponies seated alone on the front row. "It's an audition for the Grand Galloping Gala. Very prestigious, Lyra missed out last year for... personal reasons. She's hoping to get a place on the band that plays in the music hall there. It's a great boost for her ponysona."

"So, Lyra and Octy are arguing over who gets to play music for the Gala... can't they just both play?"

"Oh, possibly, it's two string pieces, pianist, and a brass instrumentalist, normally. They could both play, but Celestia help the pony that has to get those two to collaborate."

Vinyl practically drooled at the prospect of some juicy gossip to collect, she lifted the plate of ball-bearing cupcakes to Bonbon's attention.

"Want some of these by the way? Can't eat them all by myself." A blatant lie if there ever was one.

"Oh, I really shouldn't... but hey, my cutie mark is a bunch of sweets." She cursively scanned over the cakes, grabbing the one with the most prolithic spattering of icing sugar. "I promised Lyra I'd cut down on sugary treats, but it's difficult to resist most times."

"I hear ya, filly. Why'd you promise Lyra that, anyway. You two on a diet together or something?"

Bonbon blushed, giggling into a hoof. "A bit *more* than a diet, we're married."

Vinyl's cupcake somehow found a way to violently lodge itself in her trachea.

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Anticipation welled in Octavia's bloodstream, seemingly giving her heart ten times the work at twenty times the beat rate. She scanned around the room as, slowly, one-by-one, ponies filtered out. Ponies she'd seen before, that she knew couldn't best her. However, the one she was wary of still sat nearby, practising on her lyre. The thought had occurred to Octavia to divert her attention through practise, but she felt Lyra would find a catty remark or other if she dared try.

The one thing that had fractured the surface of her haughty facade, was the revelation of the pony presiding on the judging panel. Even *thinking* his name gave Octavia goosebumps. Hoofz Zimmer had been a lifelong inspiration, the reason she had begged her parents for an instrument on Winter's Moon Day, no less. This iconic composer had been the subject of much lavishly-applied praise from herself over Octavia's lifetime, and the very concept of playing in front of him made her legs feel unstable.

"Oh dear, Octavia. Not going to faint in front of our esteemed guest tonight?" Lyra had stopped practising, glaring at Octavia with that familiar, challenging grin.

"I'm afraid not, Lyra. I imagine he's eager to hear my piece first, hence why you've been placed at the... back of the queue."

Lyra twitched slightly at the jibe. "Saving the best until the last, and getting the trash out as soon as possible."

"Well, if it helps you sleep at night. How was it for work, last year?" Octavia was tip-toofing the line, waiting for a response to gauge whether she could push onwards. Lyra scowled with a glare that would humble dragons.

"You know full well what happened, Octavia. But I'm not fussed at all, in fact, the only reason you got the position was due to *my* absence. Your revelry is over now."

"... And now they know how much better they can do. It's a real pity you had to dump an entire career of supposed celebrity for some mare from a backward squalor like Ponyville."

Lyra's mint-green face was cut across with throbbing, angry veins. "You dare say a single word more about Bonbon, and I will wrap that precious little bow around your neck... so then you'll have two bow ties. I'll make sure both of them are *extra* tight."

Octavia hastily drew herself as far away from the line as ponily possible, without coming across as submissive or defeated. She attempted to consider an apology or reconciliation, but was cut-off in her effort by the portly colt calling ponies onto the stage. It was her turn. Instead, she retreated away from Lyra, unpacking her cello and waving a hoof at the glowering mare. She received all the motivation she expected.

"Break a bucking leg, Octavia. Or your neck."

Vinyl finally managed to dislodge the treacherous treat from her trachea with a fit of heaving coughs, aided by Bonbon's frantic hoof patting her back to help her along. She had to admit, she was glad the cupcake had been ejected before somepony started the Hooflich Maneuver on her. Her normally porcelain-white face was blushing a similar shade to her eyes, and her heart was fighting against her rib cage as if it wanted to escape before the whole respiration thing got a little ugly.

"Sorry... cupcakes. Nasty."

Bonbon leaned back from her vigorous back patting, glancing at the tray before setting it out of both their reaches. "No problem at all. Sorry if I shocked you."

Her breathing had improved, but the blushing only increased. "Shocked? I'm not shocked, I'm cool with fillyfo-with being with mares and all, it's okay. Just that, yeh, I didn't know you could actually *marry* another mare."

Bonbon giggled into her hoof, her beige cheeks lighting up slightly. She was especially quick to blush. "Oh, it isn't *officially*, but me and Lyra don't care all that much. We have each other and our vows, that's all that matters. It's a New Lunar law that's coming in, though Celestia's against it for the time being. I'm surprised you and Octavia haven't heard about it."

"What makes you think me and Octavia would have heard about it... we're not fussed about being with mares, not that there's anything wrong with it."

"Oh, sorry, I just thought you two were..." Bonbon let the sentence hang, allowing Vinyl to work out the implications. Sadly, Vinyl's increased cranial blood flow hadn't helped her uptake on the matter any further.

"We were what?" Bonbon felt either Vinyl was a master poker player, or simply not a clever pony.

"You know... together."

In the absence of another cupcake to make an attempt on her life, Vinyl found the air itself attempting to throttle her. The episode was much shorter this time, only a few surprised coughs and another apology. She waved a hoof at Bonbon, chuckling lightly.

"Me and Octavia aren't like that, Bonbon. We're just... not really *friends*, we're..."

"So if you don't like each other, why are you still hanging around each other. And why is it that even when Octavia leaves you to prepare for her set, you stand by the buffet and watch her?"

"What? I wasn't... I was watching her argue... it's funny."

Bonbon smiled, an infuriatingly benevolent smile that practically sang *'I know exactly what you're thinking!'*

She turned and gazed out at the stage, not really focusing on the pianist currently playing, simply staring up and away from him. "It's not my business to pry, you can stay in the stable as long as you want. I know it took months for me and Lyra to tell anypony." She returned her gaze to Vinyl, who she could tell was simmering in an awkward stew of emotions and thoughts. "Just that when we did tell our friends and parents, they were much more supportive than we expected... Pity Lyra's agent wasn't so accepting."

Vinyl opened her mouth to respond, but all that came out was a low, baritone, "urr," sound. Bonbon smiled, she could read this mare like a book. A book that had been scribbled over by a schoolfilly, but just as legible nonetheless.

"Don't worry, Vinyl. Your fillyfriend's up next."

Bonbon had to admit, the little scrunched face Vinyl made when she realised she was being teased was fairly adorable. She hoped that this mare might prompt Octavia to pull the stick out of her rump. Though the thought of that reminded her of a night when her and Lyra had gotten steaming drunk, and-

The rattling of hooves on the floor snapped her out of her memories as the pianist left the stage. An elderly pony rose from the midst of the judging panel, and the pianist bowed as low as equine anatomy would allow, before silently making his way off-stage.

Bonbon remembered Lyra gushing about the pony being some sort of musical genius and the like, however, his name had slipped her memory. Lyra was always the musician anyway, so Bonbon had often sat and watched her little tirades and rants on the business. There was something so enchanting about the *passion* in her eyes as she did so.

The old pony waved at a small, plump colt waiting at the wings. "Do bring the next candidate through, Usher."

The colt nodded, making his swift but composed way towards the candidates' waiting room. He returned in mere seconds with Octavia in tow, her cello carried carefully in her forelegs.

She set up the piece, once more unifying herself with the instrument in their mutual balancing act. She took a deep breath, the first of several, and looked up at her idol, her inspiration... her judge.

"Miss Octavia Philharmonica the second, I presume?"

"Yes, sir." Octavia swore she could hear laughter from the audience, but couldn't get line of sight on the source.

"And your instrument is a... double bass?"

"A custom piece, sir. Closer to a cello, though with bass-like elements."

"Indeed. Very well, Ms Philharmonica." The phantom howl of laughter once more resumed. "I've heard much talk, but little play, about yourself, I hope you can justify the lavished praise I have been hearing."

Octavia nodded, spacing her hooves, breathing deeply. The balance perfected to the weight of a tailhair, she began. Her eyes didn't register or focus, her entire mind and heart poured into the song. A song she had composed recently, not the usual powerful, sombre, emotional pieces she was famed for... no. Something struck her one night to write something... happier, a jovial, heart-warming beat. She supposed it was the fact she was performing for the Gala, but that being the case, why were her supposedly unfocused, undirected eyes listing lazily towards a pair of crimson jewels in the audience?

She played on, the qualms in her mind the most timid whisper, the faintest distraction like a breeze on a Manhattan skyscraper. Her bow scissored across the strings, fervently striking each note with the most delicate timing. Part of the reason she often played slower pieces was also a handicap she was born with. The awkward manner she held the bow made active ankle and hoof movements at high speed both difficult and slightly painful. She held it well tonight, surrounding and corralling thoughts of her discomfort to the murky edges of her mind. She was simply an extension of the instrument, a vessel for its will to be played.

The piece extended on, she even braved some spiccato. Considered somewhat amateurish by the high-society, but she felt such erratic play could compliment the feel of the piece. After a short time she pulled in the instrument for a light crescendo, ending on a high note as she raised her bow in triumph, bowing to her audience while maintaining her precarious grip on the cello.

There were murmurs amongst the judges, before Mr Zimmer rose once more.

"Of the string instruments we have seen beforehoof, we have no doubt yours is the most elegantly played piece. Especially given the light, almost fiddle-like manner of play. It must be asked, what inspired the piece?"

Octavia gazed out to the audience. Two little rubies stared back at her. "I'm not sure, sir. I just... felt it was appropriate."

"More appropriate than required, Ms Philharmonica. You may take your leave and rest, we will see the last candidate now."

Vinyl turned to Bonbon, who was wearing the most irritatingly invasive grin she had ever seen.

"What? You happy cos your wifey's coming on-stage, then?"

Bonbon chuckled, turning towards the stage as the mint-green unicorn made her way onto it, lyre levitating beside her. "Oh, no, just something amusing I noticed."

"What?! There's not something in my mane, is there?"

Bonbon shook her head, before looking towards the little, grey pony leaving the stage. "Fifteen-minute classical orchestral piece, and you never once took your eyes off her."

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To say that Vinyl found the hanging silence left in the wake of Bonbon's words awkward was an understatement. She was more than glad when Bonbon diverted her attention back towards Lyra's performance, leaving Vinyl to her red-cheeked, confused self.

She supposed it would be best to keep a pretense of enjoying the show, even if only to stop Bonbon asking more questions of her. The little, green unicorn stood on her hindlegs, holding the lyre in her forelegs. Strange that a unicorn would want to play by hoof, not by horn. Her piqued curiosity held her attention right up until Octavia poked her in the shoulder.

"Hey! What... why are you here? You're meant to be in the backstage bit."

Octavia idly twiddled her hooves, staring at the floor. "Well, I was just wondering if you wanted to come back there and wait with me." Vinyl's eyebrows disappeared into her mane. "They... they refilled the buffet... if you'd like some more?"

"Sure, I'll just come with you now, then."

Vinyl rose from her seat, and noticed the most fleeting of smiles as Octavia led her along. She glanced back at Bonbon, who was wearing *that* smile.

"Have fun, you two. Hope I've given you something to think about, Vinyl." She shot off a small wink, before returning her eyes back to Lyra, who was wrapping up her set.

"What did she mean by that, Vinyl? Are you two best friends all of a sudden?" Octavia barely held back the forcefulness in her voice, surprising both herself and Vinyl.

"Hey, what's up with you? I was just talking, can't I talk to another mare?"

Octavia blushed, before turning her face sharply away as she felt the heat rise on her cheeks. "Well, of course you can... no reason you couldn't. Just that... I... oh, let's just..."

Vinyl sped up her pace to overtake Octavia, moving in front of her and craning her head round to see Octavia's. All Octavia saw was her gleeful grin rising from the side like the moon. "You're blushing."

"I am not!" Octavia jerked her head the other way, even turning herself slightly out of Vinyl's view. Vinyl took the opportunity, skirting round to look at her face again, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"You are, Octy. Look, your cheeks." She swirled back around, prompting Vinyl to start giggling. She overtook again, seeing Octavia herself giggling quietly as she turned away once more. Vinyl put an insistent hoof under her chin, gently but forcefully bringing her face into full view.

"Blushing *and* giggling, like a schoolfilly. So much for a refined aristocrat, Octavia."

Octavia's normally grey face was rivalling her bow-tie. "Oh, and you simply enjoy living life *au natural*, don't you?"

"Sure, I eat Mexicoltan now and then, what's wrong with that?"

Octavia burst out laughing, not a condescending chuckle nor a haughty giggle, but a genuine laugh. "Oh, Vinyl, you really *are* a silly filly."

"Only one of me in Equestria."

Octavia calmed herself, turning back to Vinyl from her laughing fit. "So, is it some sort of luck that I found you then?"

Vinyl chuckled, her own cheeks burning like the sun. "I suppose, you're a very lucky filly to have met such a rare and awesome mare like me."

"Oh, *I'm* the filly? I think you'll find I'm the mare here!" Octavia poked a playful hoof at Vinyl's cheeks, feeling the soft warmth emanating from them. She returned her hoof to the point, lightly stroking it, enjoying the tiny pulsing of Vinyl's heartbeat, miniaturised and multiplied by a thousand. Like a lone trumpeter expanded into a glorious orchestra.

A slight cough interrupted her trance, and the pair turned to see Bonbon smiling, head tilted and eyes sparkling. "Oh, sorry to interrupt... just reminded me about when Lyra and I first met... ahh..."

She trotted casually past the pair, exhaling a soft sigh as she disappeared into the doorway. A slightly awkward moment descended, the spell that had hung by the thread between their eyes snapped like spider-silk.

"So, shall we... ?"

"Yeh, let's uhh... the buffet. I'm... kinda hungry." The awkward silence persisted, and was only magnified when the pair entered, and saw Lyra and Bonbon sitting in the corner. Both turned to see them enter, offering jovial grins and a hooves-up each.

"Should we go talk to-."

"Not in this life, Vinyl." Octavia wandered off to grab a glass of something to wet her throat. Her breathing had become frantic just now, drying her throat almost completely. Even her heart had yet to slow down. It was nerves from the audition... yes, just nerves. Nothing alcoholic was available, a pity, as it would have dulled her nerves nicely. Orange juice glinted from a glass jug before her, it would do nicely.

She noticed Vinyl beside her, carefully pouring herself a glass of cranberry juice. Her heart rate raced ahead once more at the sight. What was this?! She turned back, away from Vinyl, slugging another glass of sharp, citrus goodness. The plump pony - Usher, if she remembered the name correctly - entered. The whole room quietened down, conversations nipped at the bud.

"If you'll please, we will be having the pianists first. With me, sirs and madams." The portly colt exited with a quarter of the room in tow. Some had left friends behind, who nervously tapped their hooves together, awaiting either the joyous or disappointed return.

Next, brass were taken away, the room emptied to Octavia and Vinyl, Lyra and Bonbon, and a hoofful of other string instrumentalists. Octavia tried her best to avoid looking at Vinyl, for the sake of her pattering heart, and at Lyra, for sake of her sanity. Inevitably, this meant staring down at the tabletop she was leaning on. This persisted for a long moment, but Octavia was oblivious as she fought to understand the processes of her own mind and feelings.

After an indeterminable amount of time, Usher once more entered the room, same perfect-cut composure as before. "String instruments next, please. Mr Zimmer is very eager about the candidates."

Octavia turned to leave the room, stopping as she heard Vinyl call after her. "Hey, Octy... good luck!"

Octavia turned back, nodding and smiling as she left Vinyl standing by the hors d'oeuvres. She joined the group filing through the narrow corridor, and fate had placed her right beside the glowering Lyra.

"Well, Octavia. I see hypocrisy is still your element. Daring to insult my wife, yet grabbing onto a rag-tag vandal like that filly?"

Anger burnt into Octavia's chest, she bore down on Lyra, who barely flinched. "Don't you dare say anything about her. I am *not*, 'with,' her!"

Lyra simply patting Octavia on the head like one would a small filly. "See, it hurts to hear somepony say stuff like that, doesn't it? Now, Octavia, behold as the esteemed Mr Zimmer selects only the true talent from this crop. I'll see you in the audience... or in the dumpsters."

"On the contrary, I believe you'll be spending the night of the Gala busking for bits on the street."

"Oh, those are some strong words, Octavia. We'll see."

They emerged onto the stage, lined up before the judges like a batch of freshly-baked pies awaiting inspection. Hoofz Zimmer stood, moving down the line one-by-one, explaining failings, offering improvements, sadly sending them off one-by-one. Only now did Octavia understand why the previous groups had taken so long. He didn't simply strike a pony off for one failing. What was a reject this year could be a star the next, and he knew it. Ponies left with a hopeful smile on their muzzles. This year might not have been the one, but next year may well be.

Eventually it boiled down to just Octavia and Lyra, as both had been silently fearing. He stood before them both, smiling benevolently.

"Now, both of you displayed exceptional talent beyond expectations. Ms Philharmonica, your deployment of the cello subverts any criticisms I have levied against earth ponies, and you have allowed me to view such musicians with new eyes. Mrs Lyra, your lyre work is a return to previous form, and I am glad you have regained your previous excellence after your... encounter with the media."

He cleared his throat, dusting himself off slightly. "However, this presented us with a most difficult problem. Both of you are talented, and were you pianists or brass instrumentalists, there would have been much more argument between myself and the other judges. Thankfully, in the strings section we have space for two candidates, our problem easily solved. I would like to congratulate you both on achieving these places. We will contact you within the week for your first rehearsal dates."

Both candidates gushed a slew of praise and gratitude, eyes lit up like stage-lights. Zimmer simply waved a hoof, chuckled under his breath, thanking the pair in turn. Octavia's newfound joy was enough to even stop her casual jibes at Lyra, and she could only assume a similar happiness was preventing any insults coming from the unicorn herself.

Vinyl had, true to her word, spent the intervening time between Octavia's departure and subsequent arrival eating roughly half her body mass in chocolate fondue treats. It had, essentially, culminated in a conveyor-belt like motion with the waiter simply depositing a pile of marshmallows, fruit and sweets next to the fountain, and leaving her to it. She was in the very careful process of levitating a stick made of three skewers held together by marshmallows coating every millimetre of its length into the cascading confectionery goodness. Who would have fruit with *chocolate* anyway?

It was in this precise zone of concentration, that rarely came to Vinyl, that Octavia found her. Or, more accurately, Octavia sidlined into her a full-body-tackle-come-crushing-hug. After recovering the air from her lungs with a few gasping breaths, Vinyl looked up to see the overbearing grin on Octavia's face.

"You..got the... place, then?"

Octavia nodded her head in a rapid manner that seemed capable of snapping it off with the force. "Yes! Mr Zimmer said me and Lyra got the place and he wants me to join him next week for a practice session I just can't wait it's gunna be great!"

Vinyl gave Octavia a moment to recoup her breath after the verbal tidal wave. She laughed at the sheer joy across the pony's face and the massive excitement that caused an uncharacteristic wave of glee through her speech. Octavia soon found herself giggling too, though whether it was giggling at the good news, or giggling at Vinyl giggling, she didn't know.

Inevitably, though, Vinyl felt a little uncomfortable with Octavia bearing down on her so much. Although it took Bonbon's interventions to snap her into action. She spied the beige mare out of the corner of her eye, casting a final wink and a wave before leaving with Lyra in tow.

"Hey, Octy. Mind getting off me a sec, the waiter's looking at us funny."

Octavia blushed, Vinyl noticed she seemed to blush quite often nowadays. She carefully stepped off Vinyl, lightly coughing into a hoof to clear her throat. She waited for Vinyl to resettle on her hooves, before tentatively trying the conversation again. This time without the glares from the waiter, who had begun to pat the chocolate stains from Vinyl's marshmallow log with irritated huffs.

"So, what do you wanna do to celebrate, Octy?"

"Oh, ahh..." Octavia stared at her hooves, lightly swinging a leg to scuff at the shag-pile carpet. "We could always... go back to my place, if you'd like. I promise to lock those Gargle Blasters away."

"Hey, I'll drink whatever you've got, so long as I don't wake up in your bowtie again!"

Octavia's head shot up, smiling lightly despite the solar heat radiating from her cheeks. "Okay! Shall we..then?"

Vinyl reached out a bent foreleg, taking Octavia's and interlocking them. "We shall, m'lady. Lead the way."

Octavia almost snickered at the gentlemarely gesture, before the pair trotted out of the doorway. The waiter glanced up after them, ensuring they were gone. He sighed, lightly stroking his dark-brown mane before procuring a small, metallic stick from a pocket in his uniform. He clamped the stick between his teeth, releasing a blue light and a buzzing noise from the tip as he set off on his mission.

"Allons-y!"

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Octavia unlocked the door, holding it open for Vinyl to pass through. She followed suit, lightly closing the door behind her and showing her guest to the living room. The cello was placed on her favourite chair with extreme reverence, while she flung herself onto the couch next to Vinyl. The day had been thoroughly trying, to be fair.

She noticed Vinyl's curious expression, eying the cello case from afar. It took a moment for her to pluck up the courage to ask the question, given what Bonbon had implied to her during the fifteen minute set that had passed in a heartbeat for Vinyl.

"Hey, Octy... what song was that you played at the audition, then?"

Octavia once more took up the habit of looking everywhere but at Vinyl. "Oh, it was just... a little piece I wrote. I just felt like writing something... happy."

"I liked it."

Octavia's face turned towards Vinyl with a soft smile. "You did?"

"Yeh... can you... play it for me again?"

Octavia blushed, she wasn't often one for private concerts and had never really played to anypony but herself, and her audiences. To herself it was more science than art. Perfecting notes, pitches and keys, fine tuning and refining her work. To an audience, it was simply replaying what she had written. Less a thinking pony and more a high-class gramophone. You couldn't intimately play with a theatre full of ponies; the emotion is generalised across the whole, not focused on the one you play to in private.

She nodded hastily and went to grab the cello case. Carefully unpacking, tuning the pegs, and readying herself. She sat down next to Vinyl, who watched the sheer care and devotion she put into her work with intense fascination. Octavia would have stood, she was more used to it now, but the fifteen minutes of playing earlier had given her achy calves, and she preferred to sit down next to Vinyl this time.

She focused her breath, her heart pounded inside her ribcage, and Vinyl's attempts at motivating smiles only made it worse. She had erupted into a blush that could be considered a biological marvel, scientists would likely comment the pony body didn't even have as much blood in it as Octavia's cheeks appeared to be bearing.

She closed her eyes, recalling the notes, playing them as she did for Hoofz Zimmer, her idol. Yet, here she was, more nervous, glancing to see the smile on Vinyl's face as she watched her play, those little ruby eyes watching her command the cello. Why did she need the acknowledgement from this mare to play, why did she even *care* about her opinion?! She was the first pony she had played privately to since her father had taught her the cello, she normally waved most requests away and told them to see her in concert.

But, there was *something* about those eyes, something in them she didn't want to disappoint, never to let them down, lest they shimmer over with tears. The very idea of imagining them like that almost choked Octavia, almost prompted tears of her own.

She felt a soft hoof on her back, looking to see that the ruby eyes were etched with care. Was she showing her emotions so freely to Vinyl? Did she think she was... weak?

The hoof turned to a caring foreleg across her back, the sensation calming Octavia instantly. She found her head, naturally, leaning towards Vinyl as she played, and was surprised to find Vinyl's shoulder already awaiting her head to lean on it. She gently rested herself on Vinyl, still playing on as the other mare gently held Octavia close to her.

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Vinyl barely breathed, hardly even dared to blink her eyelids. It wasn't a tense silence when Octavia's cello finally fell silent, her private concert completed with a fluttering crescendo. No, it was the calmest silence Vinyl had ever experienced, a moment which neither pony wanted to break.

She could almost sense the fine, spidersilk-like strands that bonded her and Octavia together for that one, infinite moment. The moment that simply hung time in the air, the sensation of the bond feeling stronger, sturdier, yet one soft whisper would blow the moment away. She simply lay where she was, Octavia's head resting on her shoulder, that adorable little manedo she had falling across Vinyl's chest. She wasn't even sure if she was awake, she seemed as peaceful as a pony in the deepest realms of sleep.

However, Octavia was, in fact, of this waking world. She still felt detached from it, like Equestria was rushing past around them, while they experienced everything each second

could offer to them. Vinyl's heartbeat came thick and fast, she could feel it through her shoulder. She found herself sliding, resting her head on her chest for a close listen as Vinyl leaned back to accept her. The hoof that had lain comfortably across her back now tousled with her mane, gently stroking it in a manner Octavia was almost embarrassed to admit she enjoyed. Almost.

The heartbeat itself, only one instrument, two notes, ever-repetitive, yet fuller, and more vibrant than the grandest ensemble that even the Royal Court could offer her. She imagined the infinite complexity of the being she rested upon, only further complicating itself as she increased the microscopy of her imagination. The millions and trillions of tiny pieces, processes and pulses that made up Vinyl Scratch. This machination of so much effort and detail, for what purpose?

Octavia smiled, burying her head further into Vinyl's fuzzy coat. The hairs tickled her snout, causing it to wrinkle in a way Vinyl found adorable to watch. This prissy, cultured mare, reverting to a filly in her presence. Vinyl found it too enjoyable to even describe. There was something about Octavia when she got excited, or angry. The little cracks showed in her armour, and beneath it was a pony who Vinyl had more than liked getting to know.

For her own part, Octavia finally realised all she had ignored, all she had forgotten. Vinyl's body was the epitome of art, a contrived effort of some divine entity, to create something impossible, create something so complex that it gave pony scientists a headache. What purpose was there in art? It only exists to be marvelled at, something to cast your adoration upon, and one day hope that you can claim it as your own; to one day, experience the art yourself.

From Mozart to Beethoven to Matisse, none of them had ever tried to tell a story or change the world. They simply created something beautiful and watched in marvelled amazement as the world changed towards it. As it changed to accept the new views, the inspiring symphonies, the emotive paintings. A tear welled in her eye as she realised the foolishness of her own mind. What she felt for Vinyl wasn't there to be quantified, understood or rationalised. It was simply a force of its own nature, an appreciation of an art piece she finally understood. Love and life don't exist for a purpose, she should simply enjoy what they offered, and cast her adoration upon them as they deserve.

She felt a peace wash throughout her whole body as she finally understood. All this time she had tried to change Vinyl, and make her more cultured to suit her old views. Maybe she, as the observant, simply needed to tilt her head, and look at this pony in a new light?

Or, maybe, she thought as she slid her forelegs around Vinyl's torso and embraced her in a close hug, she simply needed to make the most of it while she still had the opportunity to peruse its perfection. She felt Vinyl's shuddering breaths as her lungs heaved slowly and silently, the heart pounding more gloriously than ever. It sounded like the deepest, most bass-heavy drumbeat Octavia could imagine. Vinyl was as scared to break this one, perfect moment as Octavia was.

Octavia pondered for a long moment as Vinyl reciprocated the hug. What could she do or say that wouldn't break the moment, that would bring it forward to new horizons? She smiled as a not-so-new idea came into her mind, back from the ether where it had been repressed to. She slowly loosened her grip on Vinyl's torso, feeling the subtle uncertainty as Vinyl's forelegs relaxed their embrace slightly.

She crawled up to look Vinyl in the eye. In those strange, little, red baubles. Completely incapable of hiding any emotion, always relying on the trademark shades to have a hope at going incognito. Asking her to remove them was the best decision Octavia had ever made, it was like removing a paper bag from her head. Now, she could actually *see* Vinyl.

The red eyes quivered with uncertainty, unsure, but unwilling to break or release the eye contact. Octavia's own eyes simply stared, delving deeper and more intrusively into Vinyl's mind. The millimetres between them disappeared under the trance, eyes closing on one another as the lips took their first tentative touch. Delicate at first, but then, Octavia found herself pressing down passionately on Vinyl's muzzle.

And to her final, internal glee, Vinyl pushed back just as hard.

Sunlight finally drifted through the window, it smote the dust that curled and flurried in the new morning breeze, like the blizzards seen in a snowglobe. It crawled its way across the floor as time rolled on, finally alighting upon a pair of ponies asleep on the sofa, in one-another's embrace.

The sun raised Octavia from her uncharacteristically late slumber. She shifted herself, slightly, as she woke, reworking muscles that had lain comfortably unused for the night. Her eyelids flickered open to see the pillow of electric-blue hair she had fallen asleep on that night. The night before came rushing back, Octavia's cheeks lighting up as she recalled some of the events that had... occurred last night. It had, perhaps, gotten a little bit out of hoof, the worrying part being there was no haze of alcohol to blame this time.

She toyed with Vinyl's mane as she shifted slightly into a more comfortable position again behind Vinyl. Octavia found herself re-wrapping her forelegs around Vinyl's still very much unconscious form. Vinyl was highly unlikely to get up any time soon, so Octavia simply didn't feel the need to either that morning.

She closed her eyes, nuzzling into Vinyl's mane, but still unable to get back to sleep. It was always the case for Octavia; she was something of an early bird, so once she was awake, she couldn't sleep until the night returned again. However, today she had no pressing engagements; no concerts or rehearsals to play. She had the day free to do whatever she wanted to do, and, currently, that was enjoying the slow tide of Vinyl's breathing.

Of course, this whole situation presented issues. Issues that flurried and swarmed in Octavia's mind like a flock of bats. Every up had a down; Octavia and Vinyl had found happiness together out of the view of other ponies. But what about when they stepped into the light of Equestria together, how would other ponies react to their... love?

Love. It was such an alien and strange concept, it barely seemed like a pony mind had thought it up at all. Trying to understand what she felt, understand what had drawn her towards Vinyl was like trying to write a poem with her hooves. It was right there, dancing in her face and cutting off her breath, yet she couldn't understand why it was there. What it aimed to achieve. She wondered if Vinyl felt this uncertain. She doubted it, Vinyl had such a clear-cut, black-and-white view of the world. Not scared to say what she felt, whereas Octavia hid herself behind a veil of decorum and circumstance.

It was removing that veil that worried her now. Having the full light of reality unleashed upon her eyes. Dreams and nightmares flickered through her thoughts, she could only remember what had happened to Lyra. She had went from Octavia's level of respected skill, to nothing, in one night; the night she publicly announced her plans to marry another mare.

High society is often called, 'classical,' for a reason. It holds to old ways in a vicegrip tighter than the one it holds its money in. Old-fashioned... decaying, even. It was funny how meeting Vinyl made Octavia realise that sometimes, the old ways really weren't better, that they had been surpassed. 'Fillyfooling,' would be something that would give Octavia grief, no doubt. But if it was a day of grief to earn a minute of peace with Vinyl like the moment she was currently experiencing... well, that was more than acceptable.

She supposed she would have to fight for her love. If it was worth having, it was worth fighting for.

What she hadn't realised, and what is often the trap of musicians, is that she had subconsciously been muttering her thoughts into Vinyl's ear. It was common for a musician who had spent her career translating thought into sound to occasionally forget to turn it off, but Octavia finally noticed her error when Vinyl shifted round to look her in the eye, grinning sheepishly with lids still half-closed.

"Y'know, I don't normally get ponies muttering Cheryl Colt in my ear to wake me up, but your singing's much better than hers, at least."

Octavia sputtered, she had somewhat been hoping for a moment longer with her thoughts, not that the interruption was something she vilified.

"Cheryl... who?"

"Wow, you really don't keep up to date with current artists, do you?"

"If she's current... she's not an artist."

Vinyl chuckled, raising a hoof to the painting above them. "I suppose old, 'Art,' the painting there is, then?"

"It was ironic...and a good idea at the time."

"What about last night?" Vinyl turned back to Octavia, eyes surprisingly alert and serious. "Was that, 'a good idea at the time'?"

"Are you implying I might be the kind to invite fillies to my home, take advantage of them and then set them loose the next morning?"

Vinyl smiled. "I don't want to be the latest in a long chain, Octavia. I'm sure there's many fillies after your heart."

"Not as many as you'd think, I suppose they all know I'm out of their league."

"I guess none of them are as dumb as me to try and take the hoof of Lady Octavia Philharmonica... by the way, what's with the na-."

"Oh Celestia, don't you start. You talk too much already, Vinyl." Octavia leaned across the hoofful of inches, pecking Vinyl on the muzzle. "You need to stop running that tongue of yours around."

"Oh, wow, you weren't saying that last night." Vinyl's grin grew with the shades of pink on Octavia's cheeks. "You haven't got a taxi waiting out there for me, have you? I'm feeling all unloved again."

Octavia groaned, blending it through her staccato bursts of giggles. "Come here, then, Octy will give you a hug."

"So we're sticking with, 'Octy'?"

"Only in private."

"You know what, Octy, I'm really glad of something last night."

"Yes?" Octavia kept up the embrace, but felt her body tense as she waited for Vinyl's reaction to the night before, what she felt and believed about their newfound relationship.

"I'm really glad you don't have a tuba."

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"I suppose I could hardly have expected an emotionally searching evaluation of last night, then?"

"Aww, come on. When was I ever big with emotions and stuff?"

"True."

Octavia shifted, causing her stomach to quake. It was far later than her usual breakfast time, maybe she should break away from Vinyl for a moment to gather up some food.

"Are you hungry, Vinyl?"

"Sorta, got any Cheerileeos?"

"No."

"Zeco Pops?"

"No."

"Scootabi-?"

"I have pancakes. Will pancakes do?"

"Only if they're the big, flat pancakes. Not those little, fat dumpy ones."

Octavia groaned. "Yes, yes, I will make you some *crepes*. You'll just need to get off me first."

"Make me."

"As you wish."

Octavia braced herself against the sofa's back, pushing Vinyl onto the floor. She casually stepped over her, before going into the kitchen to prepare their pancakes. It took Vinyl a minute or two to realise what had happened, before she regathered her tangled pile of limbs and got back onto her hooves. She trotted over to the kitchen, peeking her head through the doorway.

"That was plain rude, Octy! I never got into this relationship to be pushed around."

"Are you going to help me make the pancake batter, then?"

"Nope. I'll be in the sitting room, waiting on my apology pancakes."

Octavia chuckled, pouring the first lump of batter into the pan, before adding a healthy dose of syrup to the mix. "Of course, I'll bring them through."

"Wow, Octy, cooking for me and sleeping with me? You're the perfect wife!"

The saucepan did not hit Vinyl, however, as she had already ducked behind the doorway before starting her sentence. She reappeared, grinning, in time to take an egg-whisk to the snout. She covered her injured face with a hoof, vainly trying to rub away the pain.

"Hey, it's not sexist if I'm a mare too!"

"Still, we're not getting married. At least, not so I can be your slave. I'm the one in charge here, anyway."

"And why's that?"

"Because, Vinyl dearest, I'm the one closest to the knife block."

Vinyl retreated back into the sitting room to await her pancake delivery. Her stomach growled at her to just grab something else, and as quickly as possible. She felt that she would have to wait to get to know Octavia a little bit more thoroughly before she could undertake the liberty of raiding her fridge. Especially when she was in the process of cooking her up some pancakes.

At least Octavia had a fairly decent sound system setup. Vinyl drooled over the Pioneer record spinner, gently stroking the Ponysonic speakers with a tentative hoof. She used *these* for classical music? They must have obliterated her precious little mane whenever she turned them on!

Naturally, Vinyl found herself flipping one of Octavia's less high-brow records onto the deck, and excitedly slamming the power button with expectant glee. The record spun, the display glittered with the faint aura of magic as it counted the tracks, but barely a whisper thrummed from the speakers.

Vinyl put a tentative ear to the bass drivers with extreme wariness. Not even the slightest purr emanated, though the tweeters were also fairly silent. It is worth noting that after several years of nightclubbing and heavy dubstep, Vinyl's ears were far less capable than a filly of her age from the last generation. Still, fillies of the last generation spent all their time sewing and feeding bunnies. Vinyl was more than willing to sacrifice her top-end hearing for some throbbing bass.

Then again, she wouldn't put it past Octavia to take up knitting. Probably socks, worryingly. She spun up the volume knob, tapped the radio tuner on, and searched through the fizzle of static and white noise for something worth listening too.

Coherent noise began to form as she spun it up, forming into a radio show as she tweaked the tuning.

"-Oood morning, Equestria! The sun is up and so are you! You're listening to K-COLT and it's time for THE VI-."

Vinyl violently spun the tuning knob into a higher frequency. She didn't much like a radio show about talking. What pony'd listen to that? Real music had to be in the higher frequencies. Once more, static became sound, and noise fizzled away into light play of some old-school jazz. Not bad, better than most of the stuff she'd find elsewhere. Vinyl delicately turned up the bass while dumbing down the treble. Much better.

The music faded away, replaced by an enthusiastically vocal radio presenter.

"Thanks for listening, *fih-tees*, this is Three-Colt, ah-whooo, and you're listeni-."

The sound disappeared as Vinyl slammed the radio tuner off. It was a dying format these days anyways, what with horn music downloads taking off so well. She grabbed the first record she could find, dropped it on the deck and spun the vinyl. Maxed out the bass, before turning the treble to a bare minimum. Marching away, she planted herself on the couch.

The music began, thrumming powerful bass with only the barest hint of actual instruments. "*Just like Celestia intended*," Vinyl thought. She was surprised at how good

Mozcart sounded with maximum bass, maybe she'd have to grab a couple of his albums when she headed home.

It was then that she noticed Octavia trot in the door, two plates of pancakes balanced delicately on her hooves. She acquired the source of the earthquake-like blast waves. Her own sound system. Panicking, she dropped the plates onto the coffee table before dashing over to the Ponineer record player. She scanned the knobs, every setting out of place; completely wrong! It had taken her months of careful refinement to acquire the optimum listening conditions for Beethoofen's work, emphasising the string instruments at the top end while deferring to the double bass and cellos near the bottom.

All of that picked up and cast out the window by the white unicorn bulldozing her way through the pile of pancakes levitating before her. Vinyl raised another forkful of syrupy, doughy goodness to her lips before she noticed Octavia glaring at her from across the room. She carefully ate the pancake fragment, before delicately placing the plate on the table. Just in case she needed to run.

Octavia's left eye twitched, in a similar manner to how a crazed gunpony's triggerhoof would twitch. She was completely wordless as she subconsciously tried to fix the system with a stray hoof. Her voice came in a passive-aggressive growl that would have put Vinyl's hair on end, if the gel wasn't already doing the job for her.

"*What*, did you do, to my record player?!"

The short walk to Octavia's rehearsal passed in something akin to an awkward, heated silence. Octavia had made it quite vocally known exactly how difficult it had been to recalibrate her sound system to her usual specification. It was around the moment when Vinyl suggested that her modifications had improved the sound of the system that Octavia almost felt like throwing one of the Ponysonic speakers at her.

Vinyl had left Octavia to it. After eating the pancakes, making something up about a DJ-ing gig, and exiting stage left as rapidly as possible while Octavia was still in one of her moods. At this moment in time the tension was still persisting between them as they trotted down the road, and Vinyl found herself wanting to break the incandescent silence between them.

"So... you fixed it okay?"

"Well, of *course* I fixed it in the end. What you failed to anticipate is the hour and a half it took to do so. I had to listen to Beethoofen's seventh symphony five times before I could prevent the double bass from overriding the violins!"

Vinyl scratched her head, narrowly avoiding falling into Octavia as she tried to keep up with Octavia's determined pace on three hooves.

"Ah well, least it's all fixed now. I won't touch it again."

"You're right, you won't if you know what's healthy for you."

"Oh, them's fighting words!"

"I prefer, 'precautionary warnings alluding to bodily harm.'"

"Them's... complicated words!"

Octavia trotted ahead, practically breaking into a canter as though fuelled by nothing more than the sheer kinetic power of her indignation.

"How can you even trot into another pony's home and toy with their belongings as though you own the place."

"I preferred you the night before, then... you talked less."

"Likewise."

Thankfully, Octavia's huffy attitude only got the opportunity to last another moment before they finally reached their destination at her breakneck speed of power-trotting. Unlike the previous grand hall she had auditioned at, this was a more sober location for

the rehearsals. In lieu of gothic architecture and eerie pegoyles looming out of the masonry, it had a shimmering, slightly frosted glass front across the building, with a delicate and thin network of steel beams stretching out across its surface like a web.

Vinyl decided to start making amends by opening the door for Octavia, receiving a passive-aggressive snort before she entered into the atrium. The room was light and airy, almost like the Cloudsdale Presidium itself. Sunlight filtered through the glass front, the time of day allowing its full power to beam through the glass, scattering past the steelwork and leaving a blurred and faded mirror of the metal framework on the interior. It was carpeted in a fashionable manner too, with a sleek, polished desk crewed by a sleek, polished receptionist taking centre stage.

Octavia cleared her throat slightly, before opening her mouth to request directions. Hoofz Zimmer had simply given her the address, with no real indication of what room in this fairly sizable building she'd need to attend the rehearsal in.

The receptionist cut her off before Octavia's lips had even parted, not even looking up as she concentrated her magic and moving a hoof file back and forth across an already immaculate pedicure. Octavia was suddenly very conscious of how unkempt she must have looked by comparison. Vinyl, as always, carried all the composure and presentation of one of those old ragdolls Octavia had as a filly. She smiled for the briefest of seconds as she recalled her joy in receiving the Classypants cello kit one day. It was what started her off on the path to playing one herself.

The receptionist simply pointed a currently unpedicured hoof down a hallway, rattling off directions for stairs, corridors, left turns, right turns, gone-too-fars, and magical fractures in space-time. Octavia nodded in a bewildered manner, remembering only the room number. At least she could just follow the signs on the walls.

Octavia and Vinyl continued down the corridor, her confidence growing as she found her faith in the signs fulfilled. A thought suddenly crossed her mind as she noticed the passive, bemused smile on Vinyl's lips. Vinyl always seemed to wander around in a constant state of abject happiness with that irritatingly endearing little grin. Octavia stopped dead in the hallway, Vinyl slowing down beside her. They were outside the required room, but Octavia felt a little housekeeping was in order. At least, until she was ready to deal with it later.

"Vinyl..."

Vinyl noticed the slight trepidation that weighed down Octavia's words. She hesitated a moment, until she realised Octavia needed more coaxing to continue.

"Yeh, Octy?"

"About... about us. I... don't really want anyone to know, just yet. Let's keep it to ourselves for now, if... if that's alright with you?"

"If it's okay with you, it's okay with me. What're you so scared of anyway?"

Octavia hesitated this time. Her eyes quivered uncertainly as she stared at the cream, tiled floor as though searching it for answers.

"I'm not entirely sure. I just know I'm not ready yet. Sorry."

"Hey, c'mere. You've got nothing to be sorry for."

Vinyl wrapped her forelegs around Octavia. Awkward, given the bulk of the cello case on her back, but had the desired effect on Octavia's tension.

"I'll keep it mum 'til you're ready, okay? Our secret."

Octavia nodded, finally breaking the embrace. She halted, taking a deep breath before smiling, and nudging the door to the rehearsal theatre open. Vinyl hasn't really admitted that the real reason she was so happy to keep their current... relationship - if it could even be called that yet - on a down-low was because she was as equally frightened of the reactions as Octavia was. Sure, everypony experimented in college and university, but keeping to the fillyfooling afterwards wasn't exactly looked brightly upon even by the common pony. Coming out of the stable to a room full of stuffy, classical musicians could only be a barnload worse.

The rehearsal theatre was very different to the audition theatre, much in the way that the whole building differed to the former; modernism creeping into the aged ways of the classical musicians. It was set out much like the cinemas Vinyl had frequented back in high school. Cushioned fold-up chairs descending in perfectly straight rows along a slope, ending in the stage itself. The ceiling was surprisingly high, the skeletal bones of the building's steel framework poking through it at some points.

Hoofz was waiting at the stage, the rest of the quartet still setting up and tuning their respective instruments. Octavia turned to Vinyl, trying a half-hug before remembering the situation they were in. She smiled, embarrassment filling her cheeks with crimson, before she cantered away to the stage. Vinyl simply trotted slowly to the nearest row to the front she could find. What she hadn't expected was for Bonbon to comfortably find a seat a few to the right of her, before exclaiming at how much of a coincidence it was.

"Well hello, Vinyl. Haven't seen you in a little while! How are you and Octavia doing?"

"Oh... we're good. As in separately good, y'know. Not together."

Bonbon nodded, winking and tapping a hoof to her snout.

"Ah yeh, don't worry. I get ya. So... uhh, if you don't mind me prying. How did you and Octavia celebrate her getting the position?"

"As in the musical position, not the se... umm. We just went back to hers. Chatted a little, y'know. Tea an' biscuits. She gave me a private show too."

Bonbon's eyes lit up, she giggled away, before evolving into a witch-like cackle. Vinyl felt her cheeks grew hot as the cogs in her brain slowly worked out exactly what she had said which would elicit such a jovial reaction.

"No, no, no, no. I mean on the cello. A show on the cello... in private!"

Bonbon nodded, shaking a tear for her eye with the tip of a hoof.

"But of course, Vinyl. I'm glad you two had... fun. In a platonic and unromantic manner."

"Yeh... exactly what you just said. They're starting the rehearsals now, lemme watch."

Vinyl leaned forward, trying her best to concentrate on the quartet, and the elderly pony leading them. As always her eyes were drawn to the practically lucent expression of the mare next to her.

"For Celestia's sake, will you stop grinning at me like that!?"

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Octavia set the case on the stage, deftly flicking open the clips and unveiling the instrument within. The whole situation was much calmer now, especially in contrast to her ragged nerves that night. Zimmer knew her skill and prowess, she had nothing to prove this time. Instead, she simply had to learn the notes required for her.

Learning was something that came relatively naturally to Octavia. Truly, any musician worth their salt-lick was also a fast learner. Decoding notes, rhythm and timbre at a speed ponies of other professions found difficult to match. Octavia's own specialty was more the art of learning and understanding a piece. Looking beyond the notes and timing to the emotion behind it, mimicking the composer's emotion and intent with each saw of her bow. If she were to try, she could most likely learn any instrument she wished to. It was simply a matter of preference and habit that she stayed loyal to her cello after all these years.

It was a gift from her father, no less. After discovering her fascination with music, her parents plied her with instruments in the hope of teasing her cutie mark from her. Xylophones were too cumbersome, a hoof was unable to play them in the light, delicate manner they required. Piano, too rapid, working across the vast spectrum of notes and keys to play her music was too much for her young and stunted fillyhood legs.

No, it was the cello she finally settled on. It was awkward at first, difficult, as any instrument should be, but it was also an instrument of the utmost precision. An acute tilt of her bow could change the tone and mood of the note entirely. She could command it

with the slightest nudge or twitch at her will, playing music near effortlessly that made her parents weep in proud tears when they first heard it. She was so proud of that moment, she barely felt the heat on her flanks as her treble clef appeared.

It became a routine, not in the dull manner a laypony would go through. Working in an office, enrolling in dross such as filing reports and compiling spreadsheets. More like the greeting of a close relative after a hard day's work. The stalwart cello that relied on her for stability as much as she relied on it. As such, she rested herself against it, watching as Lyra and the others tuned and tweaked their instruments. She idly twiddled the tuning pegs, the cello already being mostly in tune before she had departed her home. It helped take her mind away from what chaos Vinyl had wreaked on her home audio system.

Hoofz distributed the sheet music, each pony placing it upon their music stand. Octavia perused the notes. Smooth jazz, very suave. Not a style she was familiar with, but it could hardly be called an intensive genre. The entire purpose of it was to lull the audience into a calm and contented demeanour. Perfect for the aristocratic members of the Gala parties. No real need to dance, not even a reserved waltz. Simply the necessary music required to aid the various ponies in their small talk and mingling.

The quartet was fairly diverse. There was Octavia and Lyra taking the strings department. A stallion with a blue coat and a trio of notes on his flank was currently holding his saxophone in a casual leaning stance, poring over his music. The other pony was a near jet-black colt, his mane and tail the purest pearl white. On his flank was a small segment of a piano, the white keys standing out from his coat while the black keys blended in flawlessly. It could easily be mistaken for teeth if the light wasn't in such a beneficial position.

Turning her attention from the potential dentist pony, Octavia began to practise small segments of the notes. Her's was the more involved role, along with Lyra's. The piano stayed to a melody that could almost be referred to as, 'chilled,' while the saxophone stayed at the low, jazzy tones that fitted the character of the instrument so well. It was the job of Lyra and Octavia to be the garnish in the quartet, flavouring the otherwise mellow palette of the piece.

She shot a look to Lyra, who seemed to have reached the same conclusion. Despite her constant jibes, Octavia knew Lyra was a potent musician. In fact, it could be argued that was the reason she threw insults at Lyra in the first place. No classical musician made friends in their business, just rivals and doormats. Each nodded in perfectly timed synchronisation, only a hoofful of metres apart, but still too far to engage in the labour of conversing with each other.

Somewhat fortunately, Hoofz noticed the tense and icy blockade between the pair, and sundered it with a calm sentence.

"Miss Heartstrings and Miss Philharmonica, I'd recommend you two had better begin conversing if you are to align the tempos of your two pieces, it would greatly help the composition as a whole."

Lyra nodded first, sharply with a nervous vigour before treading confidently over to Octavia, Lyre encased in a purple field of magic.

"Well, Octavia, it seems Mr Zimmer has paired us up. I suppose we'll have to cooperate if we want to see our paychecks after all this is over."

"I imagine so. But please, lower the tone of that lyre of yours this time, it's far too... *bright* for this piece."

"Says the pony who plays an instrument with a tone almost as low as her brow!"

"It was but a simple request! However, I can see *nothing* is simplified enough for you to understand!"

Vinyl watched the verbal slugging match until Zimmer stepped in, demanding the pair cooperate. Even at this distance she recognised Octavia's annoyed face, the little scrunched up snout and narrowed eyes she pulled whenever she had been bested. Vinyl loved trying to tease that face from her, it was her most adorable visage.

Bonbon chuckled, leaning onto the row of chairs in front as she peered onto the stage, watching Lyra and Octavia reluctantly practising timing exercises they wouldn't have performed since kindergarten, most likely. Each would play slightly faster, louder or higher than the other, eliciting a small shake of the head from Hoofz as he told them to start again.

Bonbon chuckled, turning to Vinyl.

"My wife and your fillyfriend sure do get along well."

Vinyl's cheeks heated up, she barely managed to coherently sputter her words. "Bu-but... she's not my fillyfriend, okay?!"

"Oh, yeh. I forgot..wink, wink. Nudge, nudge, eh?"

"Seriously, you... you are the worst kind of pony."

Bonbon relaxed back in her chair, flicking only the briefest of challenging glances at Vinyl before speaking.

"You gotta admit, she'd look adorable in socks."

"Who, Octy?"

"Nope. *I* was talking about Lyra."

Bonbon's grin went stratospheric. She turned to Vinyl, winking while still managing to maintain the impossibly wide muzzle stretching caused by her gleeful smile.

"Gotcha!"

It would be understandable for Octavia to note that she found the experience of a 'time-out' rather humiliating. It had cut through her fourth tirade about how Lyra's method of play was akin to a llama castrating a cat in a most irritating manner. It worried her deeply, however, that Hoofz Zimmer had decided to split the pair from the group and deposit them outside the performance hall in a somewhat embarrassing tirade. Thankfully, he hadn't decided to simply fire Octavia and Lyra from the quartet, they were instead simply left to cool down.

However, while Octavia enjoyed the idea of Lyra suffering at the same time as her, she didn't enjoy the current situation of having been deposited in the same side-room as her. This had caused the last twenty minutes to be an uncomfortable broth of awkward silence and snide whispering battles with each other. Inevitably, and in Octavia's eyes, mercifully, the silence had persisted over the argument, smothering the conversation in a blanket of noiselessness that made the nearby ticking clock thud like a hammer.

Octavia and Lyra were sitting next to each other anyway. While Octavia had found fascination in her own forehooves, Lyra was positively riveted with the sensation of idly toying with her mane.

If Vinyl and Bonbon hadn't entered the room when they did, Octavia and Lyra would most likely have suffocated on the dense, tension-soaked air between them. Or fought again.

Bonbon entered first, smiling to the pair as she held the door for Vinyl.

"Hi, Octavia. You two been having fun? I brought your special friend through."

"Bonbon, I don't know what you're trying to implicate here, but myself and Vinyl are simply close friends."

"Yes, *very* close, if I hear correctly."

Octavia's barely suppressed temper flared to the surface.

"You didn't, Vinyl!"

"I didn't, Octy!"

"But you just did, Octavia!" Bonbon grinned as she closed the door behind her. "That worked better than I expected."

Lyra smiled, not so subtly shunting Octavia from the seat beside her so Bonbon could take it.

"Hey, while I'd love to congratulate you, Gumdrop Cheeks, Octavia isn't hard to outsmart, nor her 'friend.'"

Octavia snickered into her hoof. "Gumdrop Cheeks? And you claim that I am infanti-."

"Shut up, 'Octy'."

"Honestly, can you not simply shut up and play the Celestia-damned notes, Lyra? Then we can all go home."

"I would if you weren't trying to smother them in that droning dross you call spicatto!"

"I'm not the pony trying to turn everypony else deaf with that shrill pizzicato stammering you choose to 'play' in!"

"Oh, you can't talk! The way you were playing that last piece was simply atrocious!"

Vinyl had been trying to find interest in the old magazines scattered on coffee tables around the room. Failing that, she felt it necessary to silence the others so she could prevent the migraine, gained from trying to understand quantum string theory in the Scientific Weekly copy she had found, from getting any worse.

"Okay fillies, seriously? Why not just both play, then go home?"

"Well, Vinyl, I would if Lyra here would play alongside me properly."

"And I would if Octavia knew how to play."

Bonbon stretched, standing up and walking over to the door. "Well, I can see that Lyra's in one of her moods. I'd like to go home at some point, y'know. I'm sure you would too, Lyra, it's Thursday, *remember?*"

"What do you mean it's... ohhh, 'Thursday.' Yeh, I wouldn't want to ruin Thursday nights at all."

Lyra and Bonbon burst into a fit of giggles, before noticing the expressions of the other two in the room. It is interesting in times like these to look into a pony's mind, as it ends up rather like a mental-cleanliness litmus test. While Octavia's had ground to a halt trying to consider what social engagements a pony may have on Thursdays, Vinyl had already generated a visceral and worryingly accurate depiction of Lyra and Bonbon's Thursday nights in her head, with full-HD clarity. Some artists could argue that such imagination could have resulted in excellent works of art, but what was playing out in Vinyl's head would have been rejected from most esteemed galleries anyway.

As a result, it was the look on Vinyl's face more than Octavia's that hurried Lyra and Bonbon's laughter to an awkward, light giggle. Lyra cast around for a less embarrassing subject to move on to. Luckily, Bonbon was a step ahead of her.

"Look, ladies, I think we all need to grow up a little here. Obviously, if you both got picked, you're both good at what you do. Maybe you just need to stop being at each other's throats."

"I'd be more than happy to make a truce with Lyra, were she so willing."

"Were it so easy, Octavia. You constantly start the arguments anyway."

"I remember the last one being entirely of *your* design."

"In your warped little world where you can actually command an instrument, yes. But here in Equestria we-."

"Lyra Heartstrings! Honestly, sometimes I wonder why I put up with you, you like to run your mouth around too much sometimes."

"Hey, you don't hate it on Thursday nights."

Vinyl had slowly sidled over to Octavia during the attempted and subsequently broken truce. She leaned in towards her in an attempt to subtly whisper in her ear. She was fully audible to everypony in the room, but the polite company endeavoured to ignore it anyway.

"I like it when you run your mouth off too."

"Shut up, Vinyl."

"What? You're cute when you get all angry and use long words."

"Vinyl, I swear to Celestia, I will eviscerate you!"

"Getting cuter."

"Will you just be quiet, you're exacerbating things here."

"Hhnggh, I think my heart just popped."

Octavia shook her head, opting for the silent treatment before Vinyl attempted to infuriate her any further. She still spied her out of the corner of her eye, benign smile and gleaming shades awaiting her whenever she deigned to look in that direction.

"Hey, Octy."

"What now?!"

"You're even cuter when you go all quiet and sulky."

• • •

Lyra and Bonbon stared at the subtle wisps of smoke diffusing from Octavia's heated temperament. Ironically, the closer Vinyl was to danger, the more she pushed herself towards it by taunting Octavia. Thus, Darwhinny's Theory of Natural Selection was given a beautiful demonstration as Octavia shunted Vinyl in the ribs, causing her to collapse onto a seat. Vinyl rearranged her legs after landing to make it seem as if it were purposeful, rather than having her rump kicked.

Bonbon lightly clapped her hooves as Octavia finally cooled down, offering an apologetic hoof to help Vinyl back onto her own.

"Wow, Octavia, you sure do have a temper. Better be careful, Lyra."

Lyra snorted through her snout. "Of course, she can bring down a rugged street waif like that, but hardly somepony as capable as me."

"Vinyl is not a street waif!"

"Yeh, I'm not her wife, fillies!"

"No... you..." Octavia sighed into her hoof. "She's a... DJ. Besides what business is it of yours anyway?"

Lyra reclined casually in her seat, getting comfortable for the forthcoming show.

"Nothing much. Just admiring the intense hypocrisy you're exhibiting at the moment, Octavia."

"In what manner do you mean, Lyra?"

"Oh, vilifying me for marrying a filly. Yet here you are, with one of your own. A unicorn, too. Very intriguing!"

"I swear that I am not in a relationship with Vinyl. We're just... friends."

"Of course, of course. Hey, Vinyl?"

Vinyl leaned around Octavia, getting a clear view of Lyra.

"Yeh, what's up?"

"Think fast!"

Lyra caught a particularly weighty hardback copy of Kazoo Weekly in her magic, and lobbed it at high velocity towards Vinyl's head. An instinctive pulse of the horn saved Vinyl's shades from being shattered by a fascinating article on kazoo case designs, enveloping it in a grey aura of magic and slowing it to a halt as it brushed her snout.

Bonbon cracked up as she fell back down into her chair, pointing a hoof at a now very confused Vinyl Scratch and Octavia.

"I knew it! I knew you two were together!"

Octavia's brain rolled into action first, as usual.

"What? How does throwing books at Vinyl prove anything?"

"I dunno, Octavia. Perhaps... her magic? Something a little different there, Vinyl?"

It was only now that Vinyl noticed the absence of her native pearly-white aura, now replaced by a more slate-grey one. She focused her horn, but it only increased in its grey intensity, rather than diminishing.

"You've got Octavia *all* over your horn! You dirty, little scoundrels, you two!"

"What... but I..."

"Ha! Can't hide unicorn magic, all in the subconscious!"

"Why is that happening?!"

Lyra sat up properly, looking Vinyl and Octavia in the eyes while she grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"You see, a unicorn derives its power from intense concentration... yes, even her. Most concentrate on themselves, inner power, et cetera. Occasionally..." Lyra picked up a book from the coffee table, enveloping it in a beige aura, rather than the expected mint green. "A unicorn finds a pony that they concentrate on instead, without even thinking about them... or *her*."

Octavia crossed her forelegs, defiantly standing in front of Lyra.

"Still doesn't prove any of my involvement."

"It only happens after you... get quite close with the other pony."

"I... well... um..you see."

"Oh wow, Octavia. You are too easy to trap."

If Bonbon was cradling a warm feeling of mirth in her gut before, it was now an inferno as she bent over in laughter, falling off the chair but continuing on the floor nonetheless.

"You two... you're just... it's *adorable* how they... try to hide it... so badly! Reminds me of me and you, Lyra."

"Well, Octavia. I must rescind my previous insults, we appear to have more in common than I expected. Even before I received that magazine through my door."

"Wha-what magazine?"

"Tuba."

Octavia could have happily died there and then. At least, were it not for Vinyl's intervention. In a somewhat misguided sense of bravado, she wrapped a foreleg around Octavia's shoulders and brought her in tight against herself. Octavia was happy that she at least had somepony to hide behind for the moment.

"C'mon, leave Octy alone. What have we done to you two anyway?"

"Vinyl, please. They read the magazine."

"What, the ice-cream pony one?"

"Yes, they did."

Vinyl paused for a long moment as her albino cheeks drained of what little blood they held normally. She stared into the distance as she tried to work out some means of escape, while Octavia used her as cover for the next mud-slinging match.

Lyra was already standing, although to Vinyl's surprise Lyra's smile was friendly, not intimidating. Bonbon stood beside her, leaning her head against Lyra's shoulder with a contented expression across her face.

"Well, Vinyl. I have to say I'm glad Octavia found *somepony* to help her edge that stick out of her rump, even if you went and stuck brass instruments elsewhere."

"Look, that didn't actually ha-."

"Yes, I know. I was joking."

"Oh, okay. How did you get it anyway?"

"Junk mail. Came with two injury lawyers letters, and an offer for a horn extension kit."

"They do those?!"

"You creep me out."

Octavia emerged from Vinyl's side, though she kept Vinyl's foreleg around her shoulder, and mirrored the action with her own.

"So what now, Lyra? Tell the world, and watch me fall? I wouldn't blame you. In hindsight, I hardly said a word when you were put under the microscope."

"Well. As tempting as it would be to see your bitter rump get its just desserts, I can't help but feel that since Bonbon has made me a better pony... revenge is such a silly thing anyway."

"So all is forgiven?"

"But not forgotten. Besides, a lesbian calling out another lesbian would hardly make headlines, would it? There's Equestrian Warming for everypony to worry about instead. Besides, you two remind me too much of Bonbon and I. Hay, you have some good times ahead."

Octavia tentatively unwrapped her foreleg from Vinyl, stepping forward and raising a hoof to Lyra's attention. Lyra eyed it with abject suspicion, before extending her own and taking it in a firm shake.

"Just remember, Octavia; I'm okay with it, other ponies probably won't be."

"I'm fully aware." Octavia turned back towards Vinyl, before grabbing her in a crushing hug. "But I suppose together, we can ignore their catcalls. Now, I remember there being a certain quartet we were forming half of?"

"Indeed, Miss Philharmonica. Are you ready to join me in the performance?"

"Miss Heartstrings, it would be my pleasure."

The quartet of acquaintances finally departed the side room. With the truce now in place, Zimmer sighed as he looked at his watch. It had taken the pair of string instrumentalists an hour to essentially tell one another to be quiet and play the notes. This job was too taxing for an elderly stallion. After his paycheck went through, he'd book a nice, permanent holiday to the beaches of Sri Llama.

Vinyl and Bonbon got comfortable in the seating area once again, while Lyra and Octavia reclaimed their space on the stage. Each found the sheet music they had scattered around in their standoff, and pored over it together. Octavia noted an interesting point in the notations scattered over the page, sparking her interest into the nature of the musical piece.

"Intriguing, he has your harp playing in lieu of a guitar. I imagine he couldn't find a guitarist to match your ability?"

"Nor a bassist to match yours. Hmm, I hope this is more than just a hashed together band, Octavia."

"I'm sure it will work. You have the notes in hoof?"

"But of course. I can argue with you, and learn at the same time."

Zimmer turned away from the quartet, before slugging the last of his drink, and taking up his place on the conductor's box.

"Alright, fillies and gentlecolts. Now that we have had time to gather ourselves, I'd like to begin. The songs will be light, ballroom melody music. Requested by Princess Celestia herself to fit the more casual nature of this year's plannings. If everypony is ready, I'd like to begin on my count."

He caught up his baton in his magic's aura, making it dance in front of the musicians. He counted from three, lightly tapping the stick against thin air as he counted.

Lyra began first with the pianist, creating a light, bright melody. Soon the saxophonist and Octavia were folded into the song, adding substance in the lower pitches. The entire ensemble rising and falling over another, yet remaining in unison.

Up above them in the seats, Bonbon found a little burst of joy in seeing Octavia and Lyra finally getting along.

"Our fillyfriends seem to be doing pretty well, don't you think, Vinyl?"

"Yeh, I'm amazed Octy closed her muzzle long enough to make up with Lyra. Hay, I was kinda hoping they'd fight, she's really fun to watch when she gets mad."

Bonbon smiled out towards the performance, watching her little, turquoise unicorn play. Eyes closed, hooves flowing across the strings. She could memorise sheet music in a heartbeat.

"Oh, don't worry. I tease Lyra all the time."

"What about?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be right of me to talk about it. But she has... eccentricities."

"Now I'm just more curious."

Bonbon pondered for a moment, before asking her next question.

"Okay. I ask something about Octavia, you ask something about Lyra."

"Won't Lyra be mad?"

"Yeh, that's the fun part. Only if she finds out, though."

"You remember when you said Octy would look cute in socks? She does."

"Ohh, you saucy, little pair! How'd that happen?"

"We got drunk on some of her booze a while ago. Woke up in bowties and socks, can't remember anything about the night itself, though."

Bonbon chuckled. The image of Octavia parading in a set of socks just blew away her dams, unleashing a flood of joyful giggling out of her mouth. It just seemed so fillyish for the uptight mare.

"Oh, we all have those kind of nights, Vinyl. I'm guessing you wanna know what Lyra's secret is?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"She... thinks that she can see... humans."

"Oh... she, right."

"Yeh. Celestia bless her, we're talking to therapists. But she says she keeps seeing them everywhere. Windows, mirrors, TVs, watching her. She's obsessed, but I've managed to help her calm down about it."

"Oh... right. Cool."

Vinyl turned back towards the performance, if only to avoid further awkward conversation. Down below, Zimmer waved the baton in a wide, sweeping arc, before stopping it dead, levelled straight at the ensemble. He quietly stowed it away as the quartet finished their piece, and cleared his throat.

"Well, despite some... altercations in the beginning, we are far ahead of schedule. You have all learned the piece faster than my already quite trying expectations, so you are commended for your ability there. In that case, being as we are ahead of schedule, I believe we can end this session here. We will practise this piece further next time, then continue on to learning the others. Good evening to you all."

Zimmer bowed as his musicians reciprocated the gesture, before stowing away his equipment and heading off to a small tavern at the Canterlot quayside he enjoyed frequenting. It served a special brand of barnbrew ale that was definitely what he needed after a strenuous day of work.

Octavia practically rammed her cello into her case, excitedly half-galloping up to Vinyl like an ecstatic schoolfilly during her lunch break. She soon noticed the complete and utter lack of composure, and reasserted herself, slightly.

"Well, Vinyl. Anywhere in particular you would like to head on to now?"

Vinyl scratched her head with a hoof, shifting awkwardly between her remaining ones on the floor.

"Umm, I've got... work, Octy. Sorry. I'll have to see ya tomorrow, alright? Really sorry, but y'know, it pays the bills."

"Oh, I could hardly expect you to skip work for me, of course! I... I just wondered if I could come."

"Oh, no. You *really* wouldn't like it, Octy, trust me."

"I... alright. I'll... see you tomorrow, then."

"I'm sorry, Octy, I just gotta get the wages, okay?"

Vinyl turned away, slowly strolling out the door before gaining momentum and departing. Octavia watched her go, at something of a loss for an explanation. Bonbon sauntered up to her side, leaning in while Lyra was still tidying away her instruments.

"You know, I never heard Vinyl mention any previous engagements."

Octavia whirled round to face Bonbon, eyes alighting on her concerned expression.

"What are you implying?"

"Well, she seemed to give you the cold shoulder there, Octavia. Might have other, more important things to attend to."

"Like what?"

"Oh... you know these DJ types. They're quite... prolithic."

Octavia watched as Bonbon trotted down to the stage to meet Lyra. Curiosity bettered politeness and trust, and she found herself cantering out the door after Vinyl. She quick-marched through the corridors of the performance hall, cello case bouncing off her rump as she exited the building proper. Having made good time, she spotted Vinyl trotting down the street, something of a hurried pace guiding the DJ's hoofsteps. Octavia was behind her now, switching from cover to cover like a character in an old style detective movie.

Vinyl happened to glance behind her, forcing Octavia to duck behind a cart, lightly trotting in time with it to keep its protective cover. She spied Vinyl turning down a street, and broke through to an alleyway to head her off, while remaining unseen. Vinyl's uncharacteristic secrecy worried Octavia. All forms of thoughts flowed through her mind. What if she wasn't the only pony Vinyl was with at the moment? Just another in a long line. She ducked behind a dustbin as the potential adulteress strolled past the alleyway's mouth, her pace now much more confident and forceful. Octavia peeked her head round the corner just in time to see her enter a large, grey building.

Octavia waited outside for a moment. The building offered no clues to its purpose. It seemed to be undergoing some sort of renovation, the signs had been taken down while the brickwork was being turned from grey to a more vibrant red. She swallowed her fears, bit the bullet, and opened the doorway.

A reception greeted her. Warm, cosy, but far from modern. It had the air of something that had run out of financial support in a time frame measured in decades. The receptionist greeted her warmly, as she approached.

"Good evening, ma'am, you appear to be lost. Is there any way I can help you?"

"I... I'm looking for a mare. White coat, blue mane, note cutie mark. Her name's-."

"Vinyl, yes. She's just in the hall there, I didn't know she'd gotten another musician to help her."

"*Another?!*"

It was true, all true. Vinyl must have been in there with another pony, how could Octavia have been so *foalish*? Her heart vied for hope and trust while her mind cowed its words with callous ones of its own, claiming Octavia was a fool to ever trust such a pony.

The receptionist noticed the pause in Octavia's end of the conversation, circling the counter to stand next to her.

"I can show you, if you'd like. She's just in the hall over here."

"H-hall? Why is she in there?"

They reached the doorway before Octavia's question required a verbal answer. Inside the hall a basic set of brightly coloured lights pulsed and throbbed. Vinyl stood on a plain, wooden stage, doing that Celestia-awful act she called music. The floor was filled with some twenty or so ponies, colts and fillies, all very young.

"It's so kind of her to do this for us, the children look forward to it each week."

"I've heard she's quite the DJ. It gathers her a fair paycheck too, if her bragging is accurate."

"Oh, that must not be us, I'm afraid. We don't have the means to pay her, she volunteers... has done for years."

"Why is that? I never knew her to be the sort to do unpaid labour."

The receptionist cocked her head, confusion plastered across her face.

"Do you... do you not know where you are, ma'am?"

"No, the sign outside is gone."

"Ah, my apologies. Vinyl has been a long-time friend of ours since her own fillyhood. She even earned her mark here. It's best if I bring you to her and explain on the way."

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Vinyl flipped the record into the air, catching it into her magic and dissolving it into dust before the children arrayed in front of her. Oohs and ahhs were shared, followed by a light flurry of hooves clopping on the wooden dance floor.

"Well, that's that one done. Does anypony want more music?"

A chorus of young voices screamed to the affirmative.

"Aww, come on fillies and colts, these speakers are making me go deaf in here. C'mon, louder!"

The screams practically blew Vinyl's ears off. She shared a smile, nodding her head as she set another record on the turntable and started it off. A small cough from behind her

caught in her the midst of her element, and she turned to see Octavia staring her in the eye.

"Why didn't you tell me, Vinyl? Why the secrecy?"

Vinyl could never really lie, and with the cat out of the bag, there seemed to be no point to. The music hid their conversation from the children, who continued to frolic in free happiness.

"Sorry, Octy. It's just... something I've always done. It's great to see the kids here smiling, even if it's not going to last. I know it doesn't get me paid, but, hey... I like doing it."

"When did all this start?"

"Years back, I had a brother, Bright Minim. We were pretty close, and one day... he got sick. So I used to come here, every day, to play to him, and make him feel better. Soon, I was playing for the whole group. After... after he went, I just kept on going. There's so many kids here who need a chance to smile, Octy. Sorry I kept it a secret from you."

Octavia smiled, wrapping her forelegs around Vinyl in a tender hug.

"You big, sappy, idiot. You're an idiot, did I ever let you know that, Vinyl?"

"Thanks, Octy. A hundred times a day."

"Why did you think I wouldn't approve... why did you hide this away?"

Vinyl slowly wrapped Octavia in her own embrace, the two shifting side to side in the lightest metronome.

"My dad didn't like the idea. He said that since Bright died, there was no need to go here. I was disgracing his memory and wasting time working for no money. I've just kept it as a side job alongside my normal one. I... I just... didn't want you to be disappointed in me, either."

Octavia planted a soft kiss on Vinyl's cheek, nuzzling her with a soft giggle.

"You know, you're so endearingly short-sighted, Vinyl. I'm not disappointed, I'm just amazed at the heart of gold you must have. And at the fact that you never asked me to help you out."

"You'd really want to? I... I don't wanna push you into it."

"Look. If it means a lot to you, it means just as much to me. You're making life enjoyable for these children."

"You know, Octy. I've been here ten years, and I've seen so many of them come and... go."

Octavia nuzzled Vinyl once more before breaking off the embrace, though she felt resistance from Vinyl before she eventually gave in.

"We can talk about it later, if you'd like? I think there's some colts and fillies watching us, though."

Vinyl turned around to see her little audience staring up at herself and Octavia, each one grinning ear to ear. She trotted to the edge of the stage, sitting down with her legs hanging over. After a moment, Octavia joined her, shyly greeting the poorly children. Up close she could see some with clumps of hair missing, others thin and weakly built. All of them, however, had an adoring stare as Vinyl laughed and joked with them.

All the time, Octavia sat and watched, before she joined Vinyl on the stage in a mock musical battle. The whole thing was incredulous and jovial, eliciting a lot in the way of joy from the children. Despite her role as the Arch-Cellist, though, whenever Octavia looked at Vinyl she felt the most powerful feeling she had ever experienced. A volatile combination of affection and pride for the other mare, who would devote her time to the joy of others, and shrug it off as if it were nothing.

Octavia marvelled at Vinyl Scratch's intricate little existence. Every day revealed another reason to spend a lifetime with her.

"Have at thee, vile Jockey of the Discs!"

Octavia brandished her cello bow like a sword, waving it at the white unicorn across from her, who gasped in mock amazement.

"You think you can defeat my music, Violin player?"

"Cello."

"Whatever. I will make music so loud, your precious cello will play nothing but dubstep for weeks!"

Octavia took her turn to gasp in a most theatrical manner, once more jabbing her bow in Vinyl's direction.

"Wanton words shall be your downfall, Mistress of the Mic! Now I will show you what *real* music sounds like!"

Octavia brought her cello up on its stand, giving it a showmarely twirl before locking it against her shoulder and beginning to play. She burnt across the strings in a rapid fashion, a way she hadn't played in for years. Inevitably, one of the strings would probably snap, but she had spares at home for after the little battle. Around the moment Octavia's ankle began to cramp she wrapped up the piece in a melodramatic crescendo, bowing to the children still watching as Vinyl crossed her forelegs, pouting at Octavia with a put-out expression across her muzzle.

"Not bad, Octy, but you haven't seen nothing yet."

Vinyl flipped a record into the air with her magic, catching it with the tip of her hoof and balancing it there. She allowed a moment of fervent applause before she flicked her ankle, sending the record somersaulting into the air before it landed on the deck, already spinning as she set the needle down. She then began her own, little embellishments on the track, a fairly mundane electro piece. Hooves working across the levers and switched on the deck, warping the track into a powerful leviathan of bassy wrath. She decided to show Octavia up. Remembering the old bet over her magic, and found herself performing the whole song by hoof.

She brought the whole song to a summit; anticipation in the music rising as she progressed. Tempo and power becoming increasingly excited towards an almost unbearable ultimatum until, finally, she made the drop. The song plummeted into an abyss of bass and rapid pulsing electro, before she finally petered the melody out into a fine, crystalline chime that she held until it disappeared beyond everypony's hearing. Vinyl shut off the deck, catching the record as it spun to a halt, and flipping it back into its sleeve. Rapturous applause greeted Vinyl as she bowed to the children

"Very well played, for a DJ, Miss Scratch. But I'd like to give my commiserations, because I feel confident in my ability to beat you."

A light cough came from beyond the symphonic standoff, and the audience enthralled in it. It cut off Octavia midway through the falsetto introduction to her next piece, and she lowered her bow to identify its source.

The source was the receptionist mare who had greeted her on the way in. She carried an expression that was a mix of concern and apology, trotting up to the children arrayed on the floor and herding them together.

"I'm sorry to cut this short, Vinyl and... you know, I don't believe we exchanged names. I'm Crystal Murmur."

Octavia stepped off the stage, greeting Crystal with a hoofshake.

"Octavia. I won't bother with my surname, it will only cause Vinyl to laugh."

"You know it!"

Crystal's face lit up in recognition, sparking a light excitement in her tone.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to have cut you off. It's just that *some* ponies need their sleep, sorry fillies and colts, I'm sure Vinyl and Octavia will... come again soon?"

Octavia nodded at the promise turned request, right as the group of colts and fillies turned towards her, eyes glimmering with hopefulness.

"Of course. I still need to show *somepony* what real music is."

"Self-teaching's the best way, Octy."

"Silence, you."

Crystal managed to gather the fillies and colts back together, after they had begun to dance around in joy.

"Alright fillies and colts, say goodbye to Vinyl and Octavia."

A chorus of gratitude met Octavia as the little ponies congregated around her. Crystal smiled, inclining her head as she shooed the herd of children from the room. She waited a moment before she followed them, glancing up at Vinyl standing on stage before turning back to Octavia.

"You know, Vinyl's said many good things about you. It's been a pleasure to meet you in the end."

"Oh, she *has*, has she?"

Vinyl must have felt the weight in Octavia's words, because she had taken it upon herself to bury her head in the chest of records, feeling the need to alphabetise them all of a sudden. Crystal nodded, her little smile causing her cheeks to pinch and brighten.

"Yes, she has. I look forward to seeing you soon, Octavia. You too, Vinyl!"

"Later, Crystal! Tell 'em I'll see them next week."

Crystal departed the hall, while Vinyl kept her head buried in the chest. In actuality, she was just flicking records around to keep up the act of *looking* busy, but it didn't take long for a certain somepony to notice the act. She noticed the shadow fall over her, just after the sound of a cello being packed away had finished. She tried to hum a song to look even busier, but humming dubstep is difficult until one developed a subwoofer in one's voicebox.

Octavia's face appeared from the side, and Vinyl turned her head slightly to avoid her gaze. Still humming, though she was now doing so through a beaming grin. The face appeared on the other side, and she turned again, little laughs cracking her rhythmic musings. Finally, Octavia decided to grab her by the shoulders, rolling Vinyl onto her back in an effort to bring her into the inevitable position to see Octavia's own smile.

"Wow, Octy. Mind not lying on top of me like that? You're lucky the kids aren't still here."

"Oh shush, you! You really are quite the specimen, Vinyl. Always oscillating between the idiotic and the saintly. Spreading my good name around to everypony you meet."

Vinyl stared into Octavia's lavender eyes with her own naked, ruby ones. Her shades had fallen on the floor during Octavia's uncharacteristic little rough-and-tumble.

"One of a kind, you'd have to travel all over Equestria to meet another pony like me, Octy. I guess you're pretty cool, too."

"Oh, you can be insufferably arrogant. Endearingly, insufferably arrogant."

"Well, Octy, I guess you're just going to have to..." Vinyl retrieved her shades from nearby her, the grey aura fading as she set them over her eyes. "... Deal with it."

Octavia closed the distance with a peck on the lips, before drawing back to see Vinyl's giddy smile.

"I suppose I'll have to, won't I?"

"So, what do you wanna do tonight, then?"

Vinyl's grin spread across her cheeks, arching an eyebrow for good measure. Octavia gaped at her for a second, before experiencing a moment of blushing realisation. Her voice turned to a hushed whisper, tinted with laughter.

"Vinyl, you really can be so forward sometimes."

"What, I didn't suggest anything. Not thinking dirty thoughts about us again, Octavia?"

"Oh, but you... You really are the most irritating tease, are you aware of that?"

"I aim to please, m'lady."

"Well, I was feeling something more towards a nice, relaxing drink than anything else."

Vinyl gently raised her shades from over her eyes with the tip of a hoof, narrowing her eyes in an intently scrutinising expression.

"Alright. But I'm not drinking that weird stuff you do. It's Bacoltis all the way for me."

Octavia rolled her eyes, offering a hoof to help Vinyl from the floor.

"I suppose my attempts to integrate some self-respect and class into you have failed?"

"Completely and utterly."

"Yet you are still satisfactory."

Vinyl gasped in faked amazement, standing on her hindlegs while spreading her forelegs as wide as possible.

"Satisfactory? I'm the best mare out there, Octy!"

Vinyl's Equestria-beating composure was fragmented as Octavia playfully nudged her in the ribs, causing her to topple backwards onto her back. Octavia scampered over to where she had fallen, concern evident on her face as she leaned over Vinyl's horizontal form.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Vinyl."

"You will be."

"Wha-?"

Vinyl grabbed a hold of Octavia, rolling over and pinning her down on her back. Octavia struggled against the pinning of her shoulders, staring up at Vinyl who had repeated her forelegs-wide gesture of triumph while sitting on her to complete the pinning maneuver..

"You're forgetting something, Miss Philharmonica." Vinyl leaned in, whispering in Octavia's ear. "I know your weakness."

"What is that... oh Celestia, please no, Vinyl. Not here."

"Nope, it's my revenge, and I'm having it how I want it."

Vinyl snuck the tip of her hoof into the side of Octavia's stomach, rapidly tickling her across the vulnerable area. Octavia devolved into paroxysms of laughter, fighting harder than ever to break free of Vinyl's vicegrip.

"No, Vinyl... please! I... this is just... immature!"

"I knew you'd be the ticklish type, Octavia."

Vinyl snuck the hoof-tip into Octavia's neck, watching as she jerked her head around in an attempt to escape the crippling laughter-inducing nerve attacks.

"Vinyl..for Celestia... stop, now!"

"What's that, Octy? Tickle harder? I'll be the gentlemare and oblige."

"No... ser... iously. Stop!"

"Let's turn it up to eleven."

Octavia fidgeted further under the increased magnitude of tickling, managing to wrestle her hindlegs free. Octavia pressed them against Vinyl's midriff, pushing her clean off and causing her to land in an uncoordinated sprawl on the floor. Octavia clutched at her ribs, still attempting to regain control of the heaving fits of laughter rolling across her body.

Vinyl managed to get to her hooves roughly around the moment Octavia was stumbling to hers. She placed her trademark shades back across her eyes, laughing as she saw Octavia struggling to stand after the fervent tickling session.

"Wow, Octy. I haven't seen you this red faced since that night after the audition thingy."

"Shush... you. Just... struggling to get my... breath back."

"I could give you the kiss of life, if you want. Or a hoof onto your hooves?"

"I'll... pass on the kiss, thanks. Just... lend me a hoof."

Vinyl reached under Octavia's ribcage, groaning as she lifted her unsteadily to her hooves. She wrapped her leg across Octavia's shoulder, enjoying the slightly close embrace as Octavia completed the pony crutch.

"The best part about this, Octy, is that we haven't even started drinking yet."

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"Barkeep, two Flaming Sambuckas!"

"Vinyl, I've not even started drinking yet. Do you want me to drink a Sambucka already?"

Vinyl stroked her chin for a second, before turning back to the bar.

"Make that one, we'll split it." She leaned in close to the barcolt, hissing in his ear. "*She's a lightweight.*"

"I am not, and we're not splitting it."

"Aw, but it'll be roman-."

"A Chardonnay, if you'll please, sir. And... a Bacolti?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Terrific."

Octavia hoofed over the money, before picking up the two drinks and beginning her journey to the table. Vinyl and herself had decided to spend the night in the winebar, that was now, thankfully, absent of ice-cream ponies and other awkward occurrences. The barcolt was still here, however, flaunting his marely mannerisms as always. She was halted, however, by the same barcolt who had just served her, levelling a pointed hoof and stare at Vinyl.

"Excuse me darling, may I just trouble you for your ID, please?"

Vinyl stopped in her tracks, worried shock appearing over her face before casual calm took its place. She whirled around, grinning as she fetched her ID from her pocket.

"I gotta say, it's flattering to be told how young I look. Here you go, brony." The ID danced before the barcolt's eyes, somewhat unsteadily, before her nodded and dismissed her with an effeminate wave of the hoof.

"Sorry to bother you. Just new policy and all, enjoy your night, you two!"

"I... yeh, will do."

She turned back to Octavia, shrugging her shoulders before they continued on to the table.

"I guess I must look quite young and fit, then, Octy. What do you think?"

"I suppose you do look quite young and... fit, Miss Scratch. I'm intrigued by the ID, however. I don't even have one and they let me go."

"It's 'cause that bow-tie makes you look like my grandma."

She spotted the trademark indignant expression, opened mouth and raised hoof that heralded the onset of an Octavia rant, and decided to cut it off in its infancy.

"I'm just foaling around. Only a joke, my little pony."

"I... don't patronise me."

Vinyl flipped the small ID card back out, revealing a photo from some years ago emblazoned with various specifics and details of herself. Octavia, however, homed in on the name rendered in bold, black font across the top.

"Vinyl Jennifer Scratch. You never told me you had a middle name."

The ID card was snapped out of the air and stowed away in Vinyl's pocket once more. She turned to hide her crimson cheeks, finding a table in the corner that would do nicely for the night.

"My mum thought it sounded nice... anyway, there's a table over there with our name on it, Octy."

"It is a very nice middle name. Almost gives you a sense of... decorum. Pomp and circumstance, if you'd like."

Vinyl laughed as Octavia set the drinks down on the table, waving away the compliment.

"Probably as classy as I'll get, Octy. I don't wanna be a posh mare, just somepony good at what she does."

"Well, I believe you've already shown a surprising capability on that front. Perhaps others can be considered."

"Nah. Not the poshness that's the problem, just the stuffiness that comes with it... no offense."

Vinyl dived back onto the soft couch beside Octavia, grabbing her Bacolti and swigging back half the bottle in one gulp. She reached out a foreleg, drawing Octavia closer in a soft, warm hug. Octavia had taken it upon herself to be more frugal with her alcohol, and was delicately sipping her wine, allowing herself to admire the taste and texture of it

before swallowing. Sadly, she hadn't gotten Vinyl into the habit of drinking alcohol for anything more than the task of simply getting drunk.

Vinyl heaved a sigh of contentment. She slouched back further in her seating position, pulling Octavia slightly closer to herself while sipping more of her drink. She soon noticed the familiar sensation of the soft weight of Octavia's head on her shoulder, and gently rested her own head on Octavia's.

Decent drink in one hoof, great mare in the other. Vinyl felt she could chalk down life as something of an excellent occurrence at that moment.

Vinyl casually swilled another gulp of her drink, her sense of fulfilment only becoming more complete by the moment. Of course, while alcohol has rarely been considered a functional vector for gaining spiritual peace in general pony society, Vinyl had always found it to be an excellent relaxing agent. It dulled down her fervent miasma of thought into an enjoyable trickle that unveiled itself to her at a much slower and more manageable pace.

It was because of this new state of mind that she failed to notice the barcolt's repeated attack runs on her vicinity, swooping down on nearby tables and claiming their abandoned glasses. Each strafe drew closer than the last, and they were finished with a fervent glance over at the pair. The barcolt had managed several of these passive assaults before Vinyl finally noticed the attention she and Octavia were receiving. She stared down the barcolt as he moved to assail the table adjacent to her and Vinyl, causing him to cough lightly and cloak himself with a polite smile.

"Good evening, ladies. I hope you're enjoying your night?"

Vinyl shrugged, displacing Octavia for a moment. Octavia had fallen asleep on her shoulder, an understandable idea given the trials the day had brought to her. Octavia rarely enjoyed the sensation of being involuntarily awoken. The fact that the method employed this time was a not-so-subtle jerk of the shoulder from Vinyl hardly aided her disposition to being woken up.

"Yeah, apparently Octy here was too."

"Shu... silence, you. Are we still in the bar?"

"Yeah, you're normally meant to walk home before you hit the hay."

Octavia slid off Vinyl's shoulder, propping herself on the table in an attempt to stay alert.

"You could have woken me sooner, or at the very least, in a more graceful manner."

Vinyl shrugged once more, mirroring Octavia's pouting expression for good measure.

"What can I say? You looked so peaceful, and I enjoyed the silence."

Octavia's pouting passed beyond Vinyl's ability to mimic, her brow narrowing into an irritated glare. It was the same glare Vinyl had once told Octavia she enjoyed thoroughly. It furrowed her brow into delicate, little lines framing her fiery eyes as she continued to glare. The barcolt had, meanwhile, been watching with his jaw slightly ajar, hoof raised in the air pointing at the pair.

"You're the two fillies from the story, aren't you? I remember you two little lovebirds from the night Butters visited!"

"Oh Celestia... we'd prefer not to discuss this matter, good Sir."

"Yeah, Octy didn't like the fact she was on the receiving end of your buddy's tuba joke, mate."

Octavia buried her face in her hoof, groaning as she rubbed her face.

"Oh, I'm very sorry about that, ladies. I just enjoy reading her works. All of them. The one with you two is most likely the premier so far, definitely her most popular!"

Octavia was face down on the table, moaning her words into the beer-stain encrusted wood.

"So which one is this, again. So we know which copies to burn?"

"Oh, it's, 'The Cellist and the Charlatan,' from Issue fifteen... released on the fourth of Mare... went gold three days later. Why you'd want to burn it, I'd never understand!"

"You have a worrying memory for something private, yet based on events that have never actually occurred."

The barcolt shrugged, maintaining his now somewhat unsettling grin as he did so. Octavia hadn't seen him blink yet. She was certain ponies physically couldn't withhold blinking for this long.

"Well, you must admit that it was an extremely interesting story, at the least."

"It was the creation of the piece in its entirety that I disliked. Again, I'd really like not to discuss this matter, so if you'd please, mister barcolt."

"Yes, darling?"

"That was an implication that you should leave. Now."

The barcolt took a step back, remaining still very much in range of the pair's speech. Octavia found the resulting silence extremely uncomfortable, prompting her to turn back to the awaiting barcolt with a furious glare in her eyes.

"Can we *help* you at all, sir?"

The barcolt idly pawed the ground with a hoof, staring at a point just below Octavia's space on the couch.

"I was just wishing to say, I knew you two would be great for each other the moment I first saw you both. It was so adorable the way you stared into each other's eyes. You're my waifus, you two."

The barcolt ejected a dreamy sigh from his lips, staring wistfully up towards the ceiling.

"Well. As flattered as we are, we'd enjoy some... privacy, if you'd please."

The barcolt leapt back to attention, his already fairly effeminate voice tinged with soprano levels of pitch.

"Okay, I'll be just over there if you need anything at all. Anything."

Octavia and Vinyl watched as the barcolt scampered away to the bar, still glancing in their direction between serving customers.

"Well, that stallion is quite..."

"Creepy? I'm thinking creepy, Octy."

"What is a, 'waifu,' anyway?"

"I think it's that stuff ice-cream cones are made of."

Octavia sighed, sipping some of her now-warm wine, before spitting it out into the glass as casually and discreetly as she could manage. Warm wine was as enjoyable as warm ice-cream, in her eyes.

"You know what, have you finished your drink yet, Vinyl?"

"Yeah, I finished it before you woke back up. I got kinda bored with nopony awake to talk to."

Octavia turned away from the still-omniscient barcolt back to Vinyl, trying to pierce the shades she had decided to wear again that night. Octavia secretly despised the glasses, they made it extremely difficult to gauge Vinyl's thoughts, as though she were hiding from something. She felt that, perhaps, breaking them would be a considerably fortunate accident. As long as Vinyl didn't feel too attached to them, that was.

"Well, I'm finished. The barcolt is unveiling an aspect of his personality I find disconcerting, and I'm very tired. What say we go home now? I've had enough fun for the night."

"What... we're going home now?"

"Yes, I don't really want to stay here."

"As in both of us?"

"Unless you *want* to stay?"

Vinyl shook her head, nearly displacing the shade from her snout.

"Just... uhh, are we going home... *together*?"

"Well, again. If you want to."

The statement hung on the edge of Octavia's lips, causing Vinyl to grin. Though Octavia couldn't see into her eyes, she could see right into Octavia's. She had to admit to herself that she liked what she saw. Invitation admonished by uncertainty, a look that made Octavia's eyes sparkle in a most alluring way.

"If you insist, madam Octavia. I suppose I will have to take you home like a gentlecolt would."

"How chivalrous of you. Let's go then, just... try to avoid eye contact with the barcolt."

Vinyl stepped in behind Octavia, finding her eyes drawn to the cutie mark on her flank as she trotted in her wake. Octavia glanced over her shoulder, a less irritated expression than she expected catching Vinyl's attention.

"Vinyl."

"Yeah?"

"When I say, 'don't look at the barcolt,' I don't mean stare at my rump instead."

• • •

The decision having been made en route to their destination, Octavia found herself following Vinyl into her flat, carefully treading over a secondary carpet of DJing magazines and old glowsticks. She made to sit on the couch, but noticed her intentions impeded by a disarrayed assortment of vinyl records, pop tart boxes, and record player parts. She gently brushed the detritus to the side, before comfortably resting herself on the sofa.

Since Octavia had mentioned her sudden pangs of hunger during the walk home, Vinyl wandered off into the kitchen to organise some food. Alcohol made a habit of draining her stomach, it seemed, and the organ often attempted to compensate with yet more food. Not often a clever idea, but the situation normally presented itself when Octavia was not in the mental state for clever ideas.

Vinyl's couch, while hardly being an exemplary sample of furniture - or, at the very least, well kempt - was extraordinarily comfy due to the fact each of the springs inside it had broken through age. This resulted in an almost beanbag-like effect where Octavia found herself sinking euphorically into the depths of its suede comfort, until she resembled an aristocratic prairie dog.

Vinyl finally returned from the kitchen, a swarm of teacups and toast in her horn's aura. Octavia would normally complain at the notion of eating jam on toast like some sort of pre-school filly, but, at that moment, she was far too famished to complain to any degree.

The record player parts and other paraphernalia were delicately raised from the couch in a haze of magic, and placed on a side cabinet with an almost reverent level of care. Octavia stared at the pile, chewing on a piece of toast with a thoughtful expression on her face. She finally finished the piece - and several more - before she found her mouth available to perform other, less nutritious tasks. One such task was breathing, the other being speech.

"Why the pile of record player parts? Did you get bored and attempt to destroy them?"

Vinyl held up a hoof, furiously working her jaw to chew the toast, before swallowing. Octavia had to admit a level of contentment that at least *some* of her more gracious ways were wearing onto Vinyl's composure.

"Well, course I broke 'em at first. It's the only way I could get to the parts."

Octavia's outstretched hoof wavered over its position indicating the pile of parts, as she tried to understand the intentions behind the actions.

"I don't..."

"Look."

Vinyl's magic grasped the parts in a grey aura, levitating them under their mutual muzzles. She brought each item forth one-by-one as she spoke, waving them in front of Octavia's eyes to give her a closer look.

"This part here is an anti-crackle filter, keeps the records playing more cleanly. This one's a multi-purpose deck for all different sizes of records, this part here is for anti-vibration when the record's playing, 'specially when you've got a banging bass nearby. A higher grade stylus here to catch the music better, and a high-grade magic board for running it all. Oh, and I took the case from this one... because I thought it looked cool."

Octavia's jaw slackened at the tsunami of unsuspected knowledge. While she was normally able to process unexpected situations fairly coherently, alcohol is a substance well known for its ability to confuse such thought coherency. In fact, some could argue that was the entire reason anypony drank it in the first place.

"Well... I see you're getting fairly in-depth with this. I never knew you to be the technical expert, Vinyl."

Vinyl waved a hoof at Octavia in a modest manner, swatting the compliment out of the air.

"Nah. Record players are easy, just an analogue circuit with a small pre-amplifier to boost the signal out through the phono. Wiring stereo's a pain in the rump, but it gets sweet results. Trying to get an amp up and running is a lot harder, trust me."

"Again... you have a lot more knowledge on the subject than I expected."

Vinyl chuckled, her hooves free, and her toast had long been consigned to the place in the sky where toast goes after it vacates this world. She dusted the crumbs from her hooves, and found a convenient gap in a nearby pile of cereal boxes to sit her plates on top of.

"I'm a DJ, if I can't get a decent setup built for myself, what good am I? Kinda like how you build your own cello, right? A lot of guitarists build their own instruments."

Octavia nervously poked her own cello case, suddenly aware of how little detail she had afforded to it in her thoughts. It was simply a machine that fulfilled its intended purpose, nothing more or less.

"I received my cello as a present on my birthday. Most musicians I know simply have one made for them."

Vinyl's eyes lit up, her mouth gaping into a genial maw.

"You're kidding? Building your own stuff is half the fun! You get to spend forever tweaking it until it's *perfect*, and it sounds just right for you. I woulda thought you'd be all over your cello like that."

"I just... let it play. Tune it, and that's it."

"Ah, obviously I take far more care and attention in my profession, Miss Octavia."

Octavia snickered, before realising that she was in fact snickering, and instead turned her mirth towards a falsetto laugh. Vinyl's lips quivered as she attempted to hold a poker face, before they reached their resonant frequency and shattered apart, allowing deep, heaving laughs to break through.

"Oh, Vinyl... you really are a kidder."

"I was serious."

"Shut up, you."

Octavia playfully cuffed Vinyl around the ear, who jerked away from the hit in mock pain. She rubbed the, 'sore spot,' signalling her hurt feelings with a firmly pouted lip.

"Octy, that wasn't very nice. You'll have to kiss it all better, now."

The sly wink Vinyl had attempted was turned to a confused blink midway through the motion as Octavia cuffed her again, slightly more forceful this time than before.

"Hey... if I told you I liked it when you hit me, would you stop?"

Octavia held her hoof in mid-air, musing over the question with a contented smile on her face. She hesitated a moment, before cuffing Vinyl again, lowering her hoof to defer towards a sly wink of her own.

"Well, I would consider that you would be a very strange mare to enjoy such abuse. But I already know you're a strange mare."

"I prefer not mainstream, much more flattering."

"But of course. If hitting is the only thing you enjoy, I don't know how far we can go before I have to bludgeon you with your own record player."

Vinyl locked her eyes with Octavia's, trying her best to maintain a coy expression.

"Oh, there are *other* things I enjoy too. But I think you're kinda familiar with them after *that* night."

"On the contrary, I can't remember a thing about *that* night. You may need to... re-educate me, if it's not too much of an effort."

Vinyl smiled, leaning in closer to Octavia and whispering in her ear.

"Just one warning, though. I like teaching through demonstration, if that's okay with you."

Octavia blushed, coughing into the sole of her hoof in an attempt to hide it. She giggled, before being whisked away by the hoof as the lesson began.

The midnight moonlight crept through the curtains, illuminating the room within. Eerie protrusions burst forth from the floor and walls, casting grim and wavering shadows that seemed to stalk their way across the room. Octavia had never enjoyed nighttime, her night sight had never been something to shout about. Sadly, Vinyl's room was full of all manner of debris, casting irregular pony-shaped shadows onto her imagination.

The problem being, of course, that Octavia couldn't sleep. But an hour ago, this had been something of an advantage during the nighttime activities. Now, though, it kept her mind turning over the same niggling doubts, snowballing them into overbearing worries and trepidations. She glanced at her... partner. She supposed that was the correct term, was it not? It had been a worryingly infrequent label that she had been unable to apply to many other ponies. Yes, the insufferably idiotic- yet practically saintly - mare laying beside her was her partner. Octavia felt assured of this fact.

She shifted once more, moving into a more comfortable sitting position, as opposed to awkwardly laying enveloped in Vinyl's embrace. It had started as being perfectly comfortable, but in Octavia's current fitful mood, she soon found the itch to constantly readjust her posture to remain comfortable. She stared out of the window, the curtains that were hastily pulled closed before the lesson began were still hanging ajar, fluttering softly in the breeze.

Of all the sky available, the moon had taken the lion's share. It hung in the ethereal blackness, softly glowing amongst its confederacy of glimmering stars. She sat for a moment longer - or so it felt - watching the celestial body's imperceptibly slow movement across the sky. A half hour bled away as Octavia gaped at the stars, trying to surmise the shapes and intentions behind them. Maybe Luna herself had hidden the answers to her subjects' questions amongst the stars, if Octavia only took the time to search them thoroughly.

"Hey, Octy... trouble sleepin'?"

Octavia sharply turned, barely containing a surprised hiss. Vinyl almost leapt out the bed at the sudden movement, caught halfway through blearily rubbing her eyes with her forehooves.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Vinyl chuckled, still groggy with the stupor of sleep. The moonlight caught her eyes at a sharp angle, bouncing their image in all their scarlet beauty to Octavia.

"You had no problems with keeping me awake a little while ago. Why you still up? Thought you'd be the early to bed type."

Octavia playfully dug a hoof into Vinyl's stomach, eliciting a soft, "oof," from the other mare. She toyed with her hooves for a moment, until Vinyl's characteristic impatience overtook her less characteristic manners. Octavia found a concerned pair of eyes cresting the horizon of her sight, as Vinyl crawled over to sit next to her.

"Octy. Are you okay?"

Octavia slowly turned to Vinyl, unaware that her worry was so evident to the outside world. She wasn't shivering, nor were her eyes particularly dulled with the pallor of her trepidation. However, despite her almost poker-winning facade, Vinyl could identify the signs. The subtlest twitch in her left ear, the most minimal pause before each sentence, the way in which her eyes would drift from their target for but a second before being snapped back in place.

Vinyl had - much like flocks of birds who foresee incoming disasters - found the clues, and took the necessary action. Octavia felt the uncertainty in the hug, and returned it without hesitation. She almost crushed Vinyl's ribs with the sheer pressure of the embrace, not releasing her for any feasible period of time.

"I'm just... I, I want to ask you a question, Vinyl. I... *need*, your answer."

The embrace slackened ever so slightly, before Vinyl redoubled her efforts. She leaned closer, whispering her reply into Octavia's ear.

"Anything you need, Octy, I need."

"Where... where are we going with this, Vinyl?"

Vinyl's brain froze, barely able to work her own counter-question into her sentence out of a sludge of foal babble.

"I don't get what you mean."

Octavia released the hug, furiously jabbing a hoof at herself and Vinyl.

"Where are we going with *this*? Us... where are we going Vinyl?"

Vinyl experienced something rare, that night. For every argument there was a counter-argument, no matter how simple the comeback was. For every joke, a chuckle and a compliment. For the first time in her admittedly short memory, Vinyl had encountered a sentence she had no immediate reply to. One that she felt required far more thought than she could give in such a short timespan.

"I... I don't know, Octy."

Octavia's breath caught in her throat, attempting to seal off any access to her lungs. She glanced at Vinyl accusingly for a moment, mouth agape with superfluous shock.

"But... I thought you had been here before. You said you'd been with countless fillies and colts in your younger years."

Vinyl gave a small laugh, more out of necessity than mirth. A short, sharp, almost tragic laugh.

"Yeah, and think how long they probably lasted. Sure, I had some fun, but I never remembered any of their names afterwards... never even found out half of them in the first place. Those... those weren't the same. Not like this. Not like what I have with you."

Despite herself, Octavia smiled. Her worries were still there, though for but a moment they were set aside in her mind.

"Look, Octy. I'll hold my hooves up, I've been playing it by ear. Most ponies I get close to find some other filly a week later, and go post-to-post all their lives. I don't have a plan, and that's most of the fun with you. I get to take each day at a time, be happy I got them, and be happier I got them with you. It's like... exploring, except now we can do it together, and face what's out there, *together*."

Octavia snuck the tip of her hoof into the corner of her eye, deftly removing a tear before any attention was brought to it. She leaned forward, lightly pecking Vinyl on the lips. Even in the pale light of the moon, Vinyl's white coat reddened noticeably.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to search this all out ourselves, then. I should have known coming to you for advice and closure would be a fruitless effort."

"I dunno, I got some apples in the kitchen. Too late to eat though, Octy."

Octavia chuckled, finally settling down muzzle-to-muzzle with Vinyl. She brought her body close, loosely embracing her with a free foreleg. A posture she could remain comfortable in, thankfully.

"Good night, Vinyl."

"Night, Octy, make sure you grab some beauty sleep. You could use it."

Octavia suppressed her gasp, eyes flicking open to find a wry smile rendered on Vinyl's face in the faltering moonlight. She shut her eyes, burrowing her head further into the pillow to gather more comfort. Her own little smile flickered over her lips, an early warning to the wary Vinyl.

"Says the pony to whom beauty is as prevalent as intelligence."

"You know, Octy. It's nicer if I pretend that one's a compliment."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Vinyl."

• • •

Octavia wrapped her forelegs around Vinyl's midriff, vainly attempting to heave her away from the doorway. She dug her hooves into the ground to gain leverage, finally loosening Vinyl's grasp in a crashing, two-mare pile up. Octavia slowly brought herself to her hooves, donning her most sincerely disappointed facial expression.

"Look, you have to come shopping with me, whether you like it or not."

Vinyl attempted to hide behind herself in a rather convoluted foetal position, groaning into the paving slabs and old chewing gum.

"I don't like clothes shopping. Come on, we just went to your rehearsal, can we just go home?"

Octavia dug her hooves in further, metaphorically this time. Her disappointment became a saddened pout, and she made sure to force her eyes to water with awaiting tears. Vinyl glanced at the imminent and purposeful downpour, and released a resigned sigh. She got onto her hooves, noticing how the tears rapidly evaporated, and a smile unfolded on Octavia's face.

"There we are! You need a new Gala dress, Vinyl. I won't take no for an answer."

Vinyl chuckled, falling in line beside Octavia.

"You're a manipulative mare, Octavia. That move just then was nasty."

"A mare does what she must, Vinyl. Besides, you've pulled the same trick on me many a time. You've become an accomplished user of the puppy eyes maneuver."

Vinyl slung a foreleg around Octavia as they walked down the street, giving a tight squeeze before she released her hold.

"I guess that makes you my faithful student, Octy. Besides, I already *have* an outfi-."

"If you're suggesting you appear to the Grand Galloping Gala in that tin foil outfit, then don't say another word. There are old Doctor Whoof episodes that would be embarrassed to use that."

Vinyl took her turn to pout; lowering her head a few degrees, removing her shades, and ensuring Octavia was treated to a panoramic view of her glistening, watery rubies.

Octavia noticed the attempt to sway her opinion, and turned away, scoffing at the sight of it.

"It doesn't work if I just did it to you."

She turned back, the very same eyes were still staring at her. Vinyl was nothing if not determined once she set her mind to a task. Octavia occasionally likened that mentality to a cavepony rubbing sticks together for fire. Vinyl often didn't enjoy this view once she realised Octavia was implying she was simply bull-headed.

"Look, Vinyl. We have to get moving, if you'll just..."

Vinyl's stoic pouting achieved new levels, Octavia wasn't sure that amount of tears could be dammed any longer.

"Alright. If you come with me, I'll make it up to you later on."

Vinyl decided to play this round cagily, still keeping the safety off her tear strewn eyes.

"How are you gunna do that?"

"Well, I'll do you some... favours. *Later on.*"

For reasons that cannot be explored at this time - due to the potential of young fillies and colts reading this fiction - both Octavia and Vinyl shared a wry, knowing smile with each other. Vinyl drained away her alligator tears, adopting a sprightly spring in her step as she trotted to the Canterlot shopping mall that awaited them both.

"Y'see, Octy? That's why you're still my student."

• • •

After much searching, deliberation, and quick snacks in coffee shops, Octavia and Vinyl finally happened upon the appropriate shop they had planned to visit. They arrived laden down with several bags of stuff that they hadn't planned to buy, but apparently the advertising departments of various high street shops had decided they should.

The boutique itself was a large and flamboyant affair, lavishly decorated in things that looked very expensive, and Vinyl noted, not very hard to fit in a saddlebag. It was also rather extravagantly tiled, '*Un Magasin qui est Vraiment Sympa,*' which Vinyl's rudimentary French had very little understanding of.

Octavia scoffed at the name, before nudging open the door and allowing Vinyl entry into the room. Immediately upon entering the boutique, they were met by a seemingly aristocratic mare, her navy blue form shrouded under layers of pompous and extravagant

dresswork. Octavia felt that she had taken it upon herself to be a one-mare mannequin for her designs. More to the point, it seemed she aimed to advertise all of them at once.

"Well good afternoon, ladies! I'm Toile Chatoyante, and this is my *Boutique Magnifique!*"

Octavia shied away from the overbearing salespony approach, before carefully extending a hoof to shake Toile by. She released a slight sigh, noting the pent-up excitement in the other mare's shake.

"Good... afternoon to yourself, too. Myself and my friend were looking for Gala dresses, I was wondering if you had any designs that would suit?"

At once Toile's eyes lit up, a canvas and pen appearing from a backroom amidst an aura of midnight blue magic. The pen danced in the air, sketching lines that flowed as gracefully as the pony they were intended for. An avatar of multi-tasking, Toile was in the process of stitching the very same dress together with her magic as she drew it, until Octavia cut her off with a confused query.

"Miss Toile... what are you doing?"

The swarm of myriad objects and fabrics halted in midair, the ethereal blue magic holding them in place. Toile turned around from the midst of her artistic fervour, apologetically blushing.

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry to have rushed ahead. All my dresses are hoof made on demand, I have a talent for telling sizes at a glance, and what would suit a mare. For example, your choice to wear a pink bow tie shows you wish to draw attention to your eyes, so I have designed your dress to do the same."

Octavia idly toyed with her bow tie, unsure how to respond to the insight to a thought process she wasn't even aware of. She had simply felt her bow tie looked... nice. Vinyl snickered slightly in the background behind her, as Toile returned to her work.

A mannequin had been brought to the centre, the various pieces of fabric and clothing forming in the air above it before plummeting onto the wooden form like birds at the sea. In this manner, a dress most elegant began to form. A long, flowing gown grew, jet black frilled with vibrant pink, that coated the rump. The forelegs of the mannequin were enveloped in knee-length socks, a dim, slate grey topped with a subtle, pink frill. On the left ear a small rose of beautifully folded fabric was perched, and a necklace set with a morganite in its centre was draped over the neck.

Toile stepped back, a set of scissors and a needle and thread her only remaining tools. They nipped away at some areas, and extended others, refining and perfecting her work. Octavia stepped forward as Toile deferred to her, allowing Octavia a full view of her

work. Carefully, Octavia caressed her dress with a hoof, eyes floating over the design. It was truly a breathtaking sight to see something so personal created so quickly.

"Feel free to try the dress on, I would not expect you to purchase one without having worn it beforehoof."

Octavia broke her gaze away from the garment, nodding. At once the dress was lifted off the mannequin, and the miasma of midnight blue magic took Octavia a full hoof off the floor, affixing the dress onto her. It was something of a disorienting experience to say the least, but it had achieved its intentions, and Octavia was carefully lowered to the floor fully clothed.

She felt it necessary to parade the outfit, noting how the way the silky socks hugged her forelegs was almost *too* enjoyable, and the outfit overall flowed perfectly with her own movements. The entire piece weighed barely more than a feather in her mind. She turned to Vinyl, who had been giving her more than one appreciative glance throughout the parade, and was currently stood with her mouth slightly agape in a some amazed smile.

Octavia executed a quick twirl for Vinyl, ending with an inquisitive glance. Vinyl took a moment to regain her faculties of speech in order to convey her thoughts to Octavia. Thankfully, her social acceptability faculty was also in place.

"It... you look... great, Octy. Just beautiful."

Octavia blushed, an action that the pink of the dress accentuated even more.

"Well, I think that's that one definitely bought. Now, Vinyl, I do believe it's your turn."

Octavia began the process of removing her outfit, a task that went unaided while the fashionista in the room was otherwise occupied. Vinyl stood forward, an aura of blue stealing her shades away and moving them to sit atop her horn. Toile simply stood for a moment, intently sizing up her task.

"Intriguing that you choose to hide such *striking* eyes. They are truly your greatest asset. Hmm, There should be a piece on the head, to bring them out to the onlooker, while the rest of the body should blend with the mane to frame them. Yes! I have it!"

Toile's once dulled eyes lit up with inspiration, the swarm of fabrics and equipment were thrown up into the air, congregating around the mannequin as they began to work. As before, a gown was formed, though this time it was a darker affair. The torso was clad in deep black with a red band at the hip, while the rump was then covered with a piece that extended to hoof level, midnight blue and trimmed with a series of pink musical notes.

More unfolded, an almost neck scarf-like piece; shimmering cyan, with a deep, black musical note set into the centre. Finally, a ruby red rose was created, a carefully folded affair much like Octavia's that was set atop the mannequin's head. Toile finalised her

design, the last pieces falling into perfection as she heaved deep breaths from the exertion.

Octavia had removed her own outfit in time to see Vinyl's being fitted. Vinyl was somewhat less co-operative, and fidgeted as Toile put on her outfit. Not that it seemed to affect the fashionista's worryingly acute magical capabilities. Vinyl was once more levitated down onto the floor, where she tottered unsteadily in her new outfit.

She turned to Octavia, who emitted a sharp gasp. Whereas she had always found Vinyl's eyes alluring, now they were truly mesmerising. The dress almost seemed like a magnifying glass to them, drawing all focus onto the bright eyes that awaited her verdict.

"My... well, it *is* possible to make you seem cultured. You're simply... breathtaking."

Octavia noticed a small smile from Toile in the corner, as Vinyl gave her a customary twirl. Octavia also noted - in a thought pattern she didn't often champion as her most eloquent - that the outfit also accentuated Vinyl's curvy form in a most flattering way.

"Well, I guess that means you've got yourself two happy customers, Toile. Isn't a pair of smiles the best payment you can get for your art, eh?"

Toile chuckled, a glassy, fluid affair like a teaspoon stirred in a cup.

"Indeed, but the rent pony doesn't accept smiles as payments. I can offer you a couple's discount, if you'd like."

Octavia coughed, blood rushing to her face as Vinyl nervously scraped a hoof across the ground.

"Heh, you figured it out, did ya?"

Toile smiled, already writing out a receipt with a spare quill and parchment.

"Like I said, my talent is in sizing up a pony, or ponies. You two just seemed... it made *sense* to create dresses for you both together. It's rare you get a pair that trot through that door and shine together as you do. Now, about my payment."

Vinyl chuckled, reaching into her saddlebag for her money, while Octavia blushing did the same. They both glanced at each other as they paid, faces burning, though they were both aware the other was laughing inside.

Mounting entries on her to-do list coupled with a draining amount of time in which to attend to them had made Octavia somewhat irritable. The night of the Gala was upon them, and she was expected to be in attendance with her ensemble in no less than an hour. As such, it was very much to her chagrin that she discovered Vinyl asleep on the bed, where she should have already begun changing into her outfit.

A burst of sharp jabs to the stomach remedied the situation, and Vinyl's bleary eyes were met with the sight of a rather indignant Octavia bearing down on her.

"Vinyl, are you *asleep*?!"

A brief respite was given from the intent glare, as Vinyl's hooves shakily rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah... I was, what's up?"

Octavia practically cuffed Vinyl to her hooves, her benevolence somewhat lessened by copious amounts of stress, and an impatient cart driver waiting outside to bear them away to the palace.

"*You're* what's *meant* to be up! Come on! Get ready, get dressed, we're leaving in fifteen minutes!"

"You know, I can just hitch a cab and catch u-."

"No. I need you to come *with* me, Vinyl. You're mon invitée, *comprenez*?"

Vinyl's linguistic skills were laughable at best while fully conscious. In her current situation of verging on the waking world, her brain simply let anything that wasn't the Princesses' Equestrian fall straight back out her ear holes.

"Wait... what? I'll just... get ready. You look angry and tired."

"You're looking rough around the edges yourself, Vinyl. Please hurry up, this is important!"

Octavia cut off her admittedly cold deadpan, digging around to find the saddlebag with her dress inside. She had already managed to freshen herself up, and had discarded her bow-tie for the purposes of her dress.

The emblazoned insignia of Toile Chatoyante's cutie mark - a piece of fabric being cut to the shape of a pony with some scissors - was inlaid onto the buckle of the bag. Octavia hadn't considered opening it since they had bought them. Lately, her life had been something of a rush between last-minute rehearsals, spending time with Vinyl, and - of course - their weekly attendance at the Children's Hospice. Thankfully, they'd managed to

achieve all three, and came out mostly intact, though Octavia's sanity was on tenterhooks at the end of it all.

She hastily pulled open the rucksack, bounding backwards out of her coat as the bag erupted in a volcanic plume of pink and grey. The dress was catapulted up into the air, before it homed onto her like a flock of hungry birds. It adhered itself to her, wrapping itself around where it was intended, and enveloped her in its fabric embrace. As Octavia fought to catch her breath, the small morganite necklace gently floated down, and latched itself around her neck, as though apologising for its peers' rowdy behaviour during the dressing process.

Octavia scanned over herself, ensuring everything was fitted properly, and finding no fault. A trip to the mirror confirmed her satisfaction, the dress was as perfect as the day she had bought it. The self-dressing idea had also saved them valuable time, which was something of a bonus. It had to be the most traumatising convenience Octavia had encountered in her life, especially as she was unused to the ways of magic.

It would also be something amusing to *forget* to alert Vinyl about.

A moment later, the very same unicorn stumbled out of the shower, apparently not opting for the cold function to wake herself up. A glow of her horn caused her body to steam, before it blasted outwards in a puff of cloudy mist. She emerged from the epicentre of her rapid drying technique, shaking her mane to ensure it fell into its usual position, before opening her saddlebag and proceeding to explode once more in an admittedly lesser cloud of steam.

As Octavia fell from behind the doorway, barely containing fits of laughter with a hoof, the last pieces of Vinyl's dress fell into place. Octavia had issues breathing after the hilarity of Vinyl running in circles around the room, trying to evade her own Gala dress, but now she found her breath stolen by the sight of the mare before her. Vinyl turned around to her, a sullen expression dominating her face as she fidgeted in her outfit.

"Admit it. It looks stupid, doesn't it?"

Octavia reacted immediately, shaking her head with considerable force.

"Very much to the contrary. Why, you'll be an excellent partner to the Gala, my dear Vinyl."

The mare herself blushed, adding a burst of colour to the muted tones of her dress. She stood before the mirror, twisting and turning to see herself from different angles. Octavia noticed a repetitive hoof pawing at her unshielded eyes, a wisp of magic picked up the trademark shades from the bedside cabinet, before hovering them shakily in the air, then placing them back down again.

"She was right, this dress does make my eyes look good."

"Vinyl, it doesn't take a dress to make your eyes enchanting, but it certainly accentuates the effect."

The red of Vinyl's cheeks married to that of her eyes, framing them ever more beautifully for Octavia. It was only because she caught sight of the clock in the corner of her eye that they ever appeared at the Gala on time.

"Oh, by Celestia's bea... Come on, Vinyl. We have a Gala to wow."

Vinyl fell in behind Octavia as the pair cantered down the stairs out to the waiting cart. The driver stubbed out a cigarette, before reattaching his reins and scuffing the ground as if he'd been impatiently raring to go all this time. He nodded to the pair as they boarded the open-topped cart, giving them a second to get comfortable before he started his purposeful stride to the palace on the horizon.

The first of the night's fireworks began in the distance, stealing the stars' grace from the sky as they dominated its beauty for this one night. A more attentive astronomer might have noticed the stars burning brighter than ever despite this, an effort by a certain Princess of the Night to ensure her work didn't get upstaged by the pyrotechnics.

Vinyl devoured the scene with wide, open eyes. Her first Gala was *definitely* going to be a memorable one.

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Vinyl spent the entire journey through the palace gardens sitting with her forelegs hanging over the edge of the cart's railing like a happy puppy, which had initially annoyed Octavia before she gave up any efforts to change the situation. Every piece of the Princesses' regal abode seemed to fascinate her, a whole world had been laid here inside the castle walls, and Vinyl had never had the opportunity to glimpse it.

They disembarked at the end of the last path to the palace itself, which loomed before them in its stoic defiance against the laws of physics and architectural sensibility. The path stretched out before them, its usual simplistic sandstone paving garnished with a red carpet for this night only. Octavia approached the palace with a purposeful stride, while Vinyl's was more akin to a caged pegasus blended with a filly in a sweet shop.

They entered the gates side-by-side, however, and were greeted by the benevolent smile of Princess Celestia. Octavia bowed, smiling as Vinyl did the same. At least there was some decorum present in her partner's mind. The Princess thanked them for their arrival, as though it brought her the warmest joy to see them. Her pearly face broke into a warm and natural smile as though it were made of liquid porcelain, and her demeanour was calmer and more welcoming than anypony's mother had been. Octavia and Vinyl left her presence, feeling as though they were close friends entering the family home of a mutual friend, not the regal abode of a Princess.

The pair entered the ballroom, which was still off limits until the final preparations had been made. Here was the Princess of the Night, Luna, ensuring the decorations and ornaments were of sufficiently polished standard. Vinyl could only assume that the pony who created the tapestry of the night sky had high standards for a ballroom, and watched as Octavia trotted up to meet her musical peers.

Vinyl waited back a bit, trying to find a way to snatch one of the hors d'ouvres from under the protective cellophane without one of the attendants noticing. She spotted Octavia eagerly beckoning her with a hoof, before she lightly trotted up into the midst of the classical ponies.

Unlike previous years, the standards of the Grand Galloping Gala had been raised of late. A few more cutting reviews had been levelled at the ensembles of the past - and one particularly career-destroying allegation towards the personal life of the pianist at the last year's Gala - which mainly boiled down to them not fulfilling the refined presentation that was expected from an event of such prestige.

As a result, the ensemble had arrived in dressage equivalent to those who they would be performing for. Octavia had naturally planned on performing in her current dress, and Lyra had arrived in her own dress as well. It was a flowing gown of the purest white, as though stitched from the clouds themselves, and it seemed to be twice as light as she moved gracefully underneath it. A saddle was rendered in gold edging, that also banded around her neck and shoulders to create a style reminiscent of the ancient Pegasopolitan togas. Each hoof was shod in shoes of the most precious gold imaginable, and her lyre was cleaned to a lustrous sheen as she stood with it in hoof.

The other two musicians had arrived in outfits that were more sober and less expensive of taste. Being stallions, they arrived in fitted black suits, with the pianist opting for a red shirt in contrast to his black and white coat colouration.

Vinyl was distracted by a light tap on her shoulder, turning to find Bonbon giggling at her from behind a shod hoof. Her own outfit was more down to Equestria, and was a simple design of deep, navy blues and pink, frilled edgings. The borders of the gown were decorated with tiny images of wrapped sweets where the blue fabric met the pink frill. What Vinyl couldn't help but notice despite all this was the tiny, gold lyre hanging from one of her ears. She didn't need to ask who it was a tribute to.

"Well, well, well. Lyra and myself were curious if you were coming at all. Nice to see you're glamming up for the night, Vinyl."

Vinyl took the hoof held out for her, shaking it firmly. Thankfully, it didn't feel like two warring tribes declaring an end to hostilities anymore. It might have even felt like two friends.

"Yeah, Octy and me saw a mare in Canterlot town for the dresses. Some French mare."

"Toile Chatoyante?"

Vinyl took a moment to peel apart the words. Even names needed to be translated back to her.

"Yeah, her. What, did you... ?"

Bonbon smiled, nodding her head and twirling her outfit. Vinyl couldn't help but appreciate the flawless way it was married to her figure. It definitely carried the fashionista's hoof in its design.

"She works wonders, and Lyra is a fan of the dress, too."

"What, her dress?"

Bonbon blushed, allowing a sheepish expression to merge with a coy smile on her face.

"No, mine. Anyway, what are you planning to do while those two are off on their little musical session?"

"Dunno. Stay here and... listen, I guess?"

Bonbon waved away the proposition with a gleeful hoof.

"Ah, no. I have a much more *important* task for you. Given from the highest authority in Equestria, Vinyl. Let's just say we're going to... spice things up a bit, round here."

Bonbon beckoned her over to a far table, while their partners took their places on the stage, and tuned their instruments. She reached under her dress, pulling out several artifacts hidden therein. Vinyl couldn't help but crack up at the immaturity of it all. Hot sauce, sneezing powder, instant wing-popper, horn relaxant. Bonbon's plan was to turn the most prestigious event of the year into a college-level prank conga.

And Vinyl was *so* game to join in.

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"Well, Octavia, it's nice for us *both* to be at one of these, don't you think?"

Lyra levitated the tiny tuning peg out of its keyhole, each string of her lyre tightened to perfection. A casual flick of the hoof unveiled a flawless graduation of the notes across each string.

"Indeed. Rivalry leaves such little time for camaraderie."

"We're musicians, not soldiers. Besides, rivalry made us both better in the end, right? Hay, we're both sittin' here at the top, now. And we've each got a mare to go home to at the night's end."

Octavia looked up from her cello, breaking away from her last hairline tweaks to the tuning.

"I suppose you're right. I'm amazed at how well Vinyl can carry a dress, given her normally more... roughened approach to presentability."

Lyra shrugged, leaning casually on her instrument as she floated it with her own magic. Octavia couldn't help but imagine this as being like trying to lift your own body, although unicorn magic appeared to break any rules pony science had previously held in place. The pianist and the saxophonist had finished their preparations, and Octavia crouched down once more to complete her own.

A moment later and she was standing, strumming her bow with satisfaction. The A string was slightly below its intended pitch, and she corrected it as such. Finally, her instrument was ready, and she exhaled a deep breath of anticipation as she made herself ready.

"Remember, Octavia. We're doing a marathon here, not a sprint. This isn't your usual quick concerto then off for a whiskey, we're here most of the night."

"I *have* done this before, Lyra. I am quite fine. Just... slightly nervous, is all."

"Well, stiffen that upper lip, and show some of that trademark pomp. The Princess is arriving with her first guests."

The doors at the far entrance opened wide; great ballroom doors that had led onto the Canterlot Royal Gardens, where the guests had been instructed to wait for the final preparations. Princess Celestia walked through, each hoofstep in pristine, metronomic time, dominating the attention of everypony in the room. She halted in the centre of the ballroom, illuminating her horn as the chandeliers above burst into life. The candles burned more like a hearth than any candle anypony had seen before that day, lighting the room like the homely fireplace that wards away the cold winter.

"My loyal subjects, welcome to this year's Grand Galloping Gala. I apologise for any inconveniences that may have arose due to the changes to schedule this year, but attendees of the last year's ball will know *exactly* why these came about. I hope you all enjoy the night, I and my sister will be in attendance if you require our attention."

From behind her sister, as though manifesting directly from her very shadow, Princess Luna appeared. No pony saw her enter or leave the room, nor did they know how she appeared in its centre unnoticed. She held her posture in a tall and regal manner, as only the ponies who remember the older and prouder times of long ago can do. While she held herself in confident stance, her voice did not carry itself as Celestia's had. It spoke more

with the crack of an uncertain leader than with any authoritative tone normally used in such circumstances.

"Citizens of Equestria. I, Princess Luna, declare that this Gala has begun!"

Once more she trotted to her sister's side, the pair closely conversing with each other as ponies of all breeds, colours and backgrounds milled around in a sea of small talk and mingling. The hors d'ouvres were unveiled, and with a sharp nod from Hoofz Zimmer, the ensemble began to play.

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Vinyl stood in position, fluffing her dress out slightly to boost its obscuring properties. Bonbon was behind her, eagerly sprinkling wing popper onto a small tray of daintily baked cupcakes. The white powder was completely indiscernible amongst the polar-white icing on the cakes, that were topped with an image of a pony outlined in edible ball bearings. Bonbon gave three coughs - the signal that she had finished - and the pair retreated to a nearby area in visible distance. Eagerly chomping on a small collection of unaltered cakes, the pair of pranksters eagerly waited for their prey to fall upon the cakes.

This took longer than expected. For privacy reasons, the pair had opted for a table on the edge of the ballroom, where they were less likely to be seen. Most of the gentry of Canterlot had homed in on the central table, however. It seemed to be running dry, and Bonbon insisted patience was the answer. Bonbon obviously hadn't known Vinyl for all that long a time, and had only now realised that her level of patience was minimal at best.

"Come on, Bonbon. This is *boring!* I wanna go chat to some ponies or something."

Bonbon didn't take her eyes off the prize, the first few stragglers were alighting on the table. All she needed was one pegasus to eat a cupcake, and there'd be a *most* embarrassing fiasco.

"Hold your horses there, Vinyl. The patient baker gets the best cupcakes, right? Besides, who'd you talk to here? You said you found Octavia stuffy when you met her, and she's not half as high-snouted as all this lot."

Vinyl shrugged, snatching up the last cupcake and flicking it into her mouth. Bonbon couldn't help but think that ponies would have paid to see a seal perform such a trick with a fish.

"Okay, I guess. Besides, Octavia's not all that snobby anymore. She's actually great once you get to know her."

Bonbon halted in her sentry-like pose, before tilting her head slightly in agreement.

"Can't disagree, I guess. I'd say it's more because she got to know *you*, though. That mare needed that stick pulled out her rump fast. But yeah, now that Lyra's stopped throwing darts at a picture of her-."

"She did that?!"

"She took losing her job hard, needed to blame somepony. Anyway, now that those two are okay with each other, I'm okay with her. Never had a problem with Octavia, Lyra did."

Bonbon's head jolted, aligning smoothly to see a trio of ponies in tight-fitting flight suits trot up beside the booby-trapped cupcakes. She sniggered, waving to Vinyl then at the Wonderbolts. Of all the ponies for this prank to unfold on, these were the perfect candidates.

A mare with a mane of fiery orange shades picked up the first cupcake, taking half the cupcake in one, hungry bite. A contentedly high-pitched moan later, and her fellow performers were delightedly tucking in to the delicious, sugary treats. Bonbon began a steady countdown, and no sooner than when she had reached zero, the mare's wings erupted from her back mid-conversation, with a sound like bedsheets being shaken in the wind. A chain reaction began, as the wings of the other two pegasi gave hers a standing ovation.

Several ponies in the vicinity cried out in outrage, allowing the unlucky victims to know exactly how offended they were by the sight, and that fillies and colts would also be disgusted if they weren't banned from attending such events. The three quite wisely decided to exit the room, while yet more ponies appeared to discover an offended group of ponies present, and felt entirely offended at how offended the other ponies had been after the incident, despite not witnessing it themselves.

It is for such reasons that ponies who feel offended at things in order to gain popularity and attention ended up inducing the Ponitical Correctness laws several years later, that - amongst other things - banned all communication between ponies in case somepony got offended. Thankfully, this was overruled a week later by the We're Not Foals party, and, as a result, is of no consequence to any of the events in this story whatsoever.

Vinyl and Bonbon hadn't joined the offended parties - and the offended at offenses parties - because they were too busy laughing at how offensive their offense had been. Indeed, if anypony hadn't been bickering about the supposed decline of society long enough to hear the pair's raucous laughter, the offenders would have been very obvious to them. Thankfully, high society enjoys complaint as a hobby above all else, and it was long after the last, fitful laughs escaped Vinyl and Bonbon's bodies before the crowd dispersed into their miasma of small talk and mingling once more.

Octavia turned to Lyra, having watched the entire event unfold from the conception of the plan to the ultimate result with a mixture of social horror and repressed laughter. She

tried her best to whisper at the unicorn, still playing on in a feat of multi-tasking only mares can really achieve.

"I never thought I'd see the day where I found somepony who was a bad influence on Vinyl."

Lyra shrugged, her lyre staying in place as it floated in its aura of beige magic.

"Didn't take a lot of convincing from what I saw. Hey, at least they're keeping busy."

"I just hope they don't get thrown out."

Lyra chuckled, grasping her lyre once more in her forehooves. Standing while playing may have seemed odd, but it allowed Lyra to play repetitive sequences with her hooves, keeping her magic for more complex and delicate notes. In that way, she essentially played two ponies' music at once. It required a tough regimen of walking hind-legged - and sitting as such - to achieve, but the increase in quality was more than self-evident.

It still gave her an occasional cramp she needed to work out, and she found herself casually shifting from hoof-to-hoof as she spoke.

"Pffft, wing popper? Unlikely. It's the horn relaxant that'll cause all the ruckus."

"Horn... relaxant?"

"Popular with college parties and ponies who dislike unicorns. Funny to watch, but not to be hit with."

Octavia's voice was edged with sharp concern. Magic was something far too temperamental to toy with, as far as she understood it.

"So what results does it have, will anypony get hurt?"

Lyra simply tapped the side of her snout in a coy manner, smiling wryly before turning back to the crowd that milled around before them.

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Delicacy. That is precisely what the next operation in the pranking chain required. Given this prerequisite, it is still unknown to many of the ponies who found out, why exactly Bonbon chose Vinyl to undertake this next maneuver. Especially given that a secondary prerequisite to Vinyl's demeanour is that both subtlety and delicacy were not entirely her forte.

Still, Bonbon had wanted to remove herself from the equation if anypony noticed the next, more risk-laden component of the plan. Vinyl was currently in the process of

carefully pouring the solution of horn relaxant into the punch, drip by potent drip. A firm cough disrupted her highly strung and mostly forced concentration, and she yelped, dropping the bottle into the punch whole.

She spun around, certain that she had been discovered. Instead, she found a tall, regal-looking unicorn standing before her. His coat was the purest alabaster, with a golden mane and tail that flowed like a river of silk. Vinyl found herself backing away from his smile, which seemed far more forward than she had preferred.

"Good evening, pea... I mean, my lady. I hope you are enjoying the night?"

Vinyl scratched her head, decided to play this round cagily. She shrugged, opting to give very little in the way of signals back to the stallion.

"Quite enjoyable, yeah."

"Indeed, your coat reminds me of somepony I met at this Gala just last year. Very memorable, if I do say so. However, I can already tell you will be a far better concu - I mean, you are a far better mare overall."

Vinyl chuckled, waving away the compliment.

"I'm... spoken for, m'lud. No offence."

"Where is this stallion who has claimed your hoof? Tell me, so I may order my butler to engage him in gentlecoltly hoofcuffs for you!"

"Shouldn't you be doing that, to win a mare's hoof?"

The unicorn gasped, reeling his head back in theatrical shock.

"I would never stoop to such levels. Not like the vagrant who has claimed you! I, Prince Blueblood, would be a far more fitting stallion!"

"Well. My, 'stallion,' is up on that stage, playing the cello. So, you can understand what I mean when I say, *I'm really not interested.*"

Blueblood's eyes roamed over the ensemble, visibly relaying his confusion to Vinyl.

"I don't understand, that stallion is playing a piano."

"It's the mare at the front, your highness. Octavia Philharmonica, if you like. So, like I said, you're really not my type."

"You mean to say that you are... Urgh! I did not know such... *debauchery* was present in this Gala! I will have you two cast out for... I can scarcely believe I breathed the same air!"

Vinyl shrugged, slipping to the side to allow Blueblood line-of-sight to the punch bowl.

"I'm very sorry, your highness. I think cleaning your mouth with some punch will help, the waiter tells me it is very enjoyable."

"Far too enjoyable for your lips, harlot!"

Vinyl managed to maintain her icy composure as she walked away, casting a parting glance in Blueblood's direction. She smirked, raising her voice so he would still hear her as she left.

"Oh, trust me, Blueblood. I wouldn't drink a drop of it."

Vinyl cantered over to the corner table, where Bonbon lay in wait, rapidly mounting a seat to wait for the fiasco to unfold. The minutes ticked by as Blueblood downed glass after glass of punch, until they evolved into a fairly large chunk of an hour. After a substantial amount of time had passed - during which Blueblood had harassed another couple of passing mares, and essentially emptied the punch bowl - he left, seemingly oblivious to the bottle laying in the depths of the punch bowl.

Bonbon turned to Vinyl, her expression layered with confusion and suspicion in equal amounts.

"Have you, uhh, have you still got the bottle, Vinyl?"

"No. It fell in when he interrupted me."

Bonbon gasped in shock, gripping Vinyl by the shoulders with a worried expression on her face.

"You mean... he got the *whole bottle* in one dose?"

"Yeah, how strong was that stuff, anyway?"

Bonbon slid back into her own chair, smiling before opening out into a rugged cackle.

"Oh-ho-ho. Strong enough, now. I think ol' Blueblood's gunna cause quite the commotion. The stronger the dose, the longer it builds up for. I wouldn't recommend standing near him when it does let loose."

Vinyl took the hint from Bonbon's eyes, finding the implications comical enough to hazard a chuckle herself. Beyond her, back on the stage, the ensemble was beginning to

pack up, surrendering their stage to a large pack of bulky ponies laden down with decorations and ornaments. Vinyl found the sudden transition to be very intriguing, and leapt from her seat to investigate the matter.

"Hey, Octy, what's with the big changeover?"

Octavia looked up from her case, her previous icy irritation melting away. She quickly sealed up the case with the zip, before carefully setting it on her back so as not to ruffle her dress.

"Thank Celestia that was over, we were... evicted early. Apparently the Hoofie awards of all things are presenting at the latter part of the Gala this year. At least I get paid the same amount for less work, I suppose."

Vinyl seized Octavia, pulling her close in a casual yet tight hug.

"See, my good influence *is* wearing off on you! You'll make a real good procrastinator one day, Octy."

"I'm amazed that word fits into your vocabulary, it seems too long."

Vinyl smiled, suppressing a laugh before straightening her face. Every time she glimpsed at Octavia, though, the laugh would attempt to force its way out. This obviously caused some indignation on Octavia's part.

"What are you laughing at like a little schoolfilly for?"

Vinyl wiped a tear from her eye, finally having surrendered to the laughter within. She stopped holding her sides, managing to stand on eye level with Octavia again.

"Just... y'know, you made it too easy to say something dirty, there. 'Seems... too long...'"

Octavia lost Vinyl to another bout of laughter, leaving her to crouch on the floor in stitches, while Octavia covered her face and her own laughter with a hoof. However, she found it very difficult to hide the sound of her stuttering giggles, or the bouncing of her shoulders, which only made the scene more hilarious in her eyes.

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"Better?"

"Yeah."

"Have you stopped laughing yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Let's watch the awards."

Octavia stood more comfortably, ignoring the irritated whispers from the crowd that had milled around them, congregating towards the now fully prepared stage. Vinyl dusted herself off, her dress still in its fully shimmering condition. That designer had to be a breed of secret alicorn wiccan to create clothing that simply didn't dirty after rolling on one's floor in fits of unrestrained laughter.

The stage suddenly lit up in bright lighting cast from an ethereal plane no one could see, simply magicked out of the air itself. A subdued puff of smoke shrouded the advance of the night's host. Her coat was seemingly made of stardust, glimmering in an enchanting manner and taking her supposedly blonde colouration to another realm of alluring quality. Her hazel mane was in a controlled yet free manedo, cascading down her shoulders, yet held back at her fringe. She smiled, waving out towards the Gala audience, before lighting her horn to create a collar of shimmering, emerald magic around her throat.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlecolts of the Grand Galloping Gala! My name is Champagne Supernova, and I'm here to present to you this year's Hoofie Awards!"

Champagne stroked her throat with a gentle hoof, the band of magic increasing in density as she increased the volume of her megaphone spell.

"We have awards from all disciplines here for you and only you, tonight, our most esteemed guests. The nominees have been selected, and invited as per the requirements to attend. Tonight, we will be presenting you with award winning talent from everywhere from acting to acrobatics, as well as music and the newly integrated category: 'movies.'"

Champagne paused, evidently at a moment on her script when she was expected to allow the audience to applaud. No such event occurred, so she simply winged it and continued on regardless.

"For the first award, we have the Best Actor award. Amongst the shortlist are Robert Whinny Junior for his work in Iron Stallion, Leonardo Dicantero for his role on Trotter Island, and finally we have George Cloney, nominated for his part in The Colts Who Stare at Goats."

An envelope was procured from the pillar in front of Champagne, levitated in a delicate aura of her emerald magic. She carefully began to lightly tussle with the envelope in an effort to open it. Vinyl turned to Octavia, tilting her head in the direction of the awards ceremony.

"So, who do you want to win? My vote's on George Cloney, I love his films."

Octavia shrugged lightly, tilting her head in a motion of careless nonchalance.

"All his movies are the same. Anyway, I'm quite tired, can we just... go home?"

"Ummm, no. Let's just... stay to hear a few more awards, alright?"

Octavia narrowed her eyes at Vinyl, trying her best to guess at what she was planning. She never took an interest in culture or art, not in the time Octavia had known her, at least.

"So you're a massive fan of movies, then?"

"Yeah, of course! They're great on the sound system I got at home. Five-point-one speaker surround!"

"Is that the one composed entirely of subwoofers?"

"Well, and a centre. That's why it's called five-point-one, see?"

Octavia chuckled, watching as Whinny Junior trotted onto the stage, beginning his thankfully rather concise acceptance speech. He only listed off three-hundred crew members to thank, which saved everypony a lot more time than was normal at such proceedings.

"Of course, I'm sure it's amazing. Ponies in Neighjng can probably hear every sound in perfect clarity, in amongst the earthquakes it causes. Can we just go home, now?"

"Pfft, who needs treble tweeters, anyway?"

Octavia awaited the answer to her final question, which she rapidly ascertained wasn't about to arrive. She stepped in front of Vinyl, blocking her view of the stage.

"What are you up to, Vinyl? Why do you want to even stay here, anyway?"

"Uhh, trust me, you'll like it when you find out."

"I'd better, if for one seco-."

Vinyl hissed, silencing Octavia. She sharply nodded her head at the stage, and at Champagne who had just finished surrendering the Best Actress award to its professionally teary-eyed winner. The announcer retrieved another envelope in her emerald aura, and cleared her throat to begin the next run of nominees.

"Next, to change to a different tune and medium, we have the Best Musician award. Picked by the pony, for the pony, these are the musicians who have touched the most ponies' lives with their art. The nominees are; Whisper Echo, for his breakout album *Clouds over Canterlot*. MC Col-7, for his tour *Thunder and Lightning*, and finally, Octavia Philharmonica, for her work in her classical concerts."

Octavia very slowly turned round to Vinyl, finding her beaming grin more infuriating than pleasing.

"You mean to tell me, I was nominated... and you knew?"

"Well, pretty much. I wanted it to be a surprise for you!"

Octavia began to gasp for air, panicking for breath as she tried to understand what was going on. Vinyl reached into her dress, retrieving a letter with Octavia's name and cutie mark emblazoned on the front.

"It was hard to keep you from noticing them. I was just glad that your music got recognised, y'know. I knew you'd be here anyway, so I kept them back to make it a surprise... hopefully a really good surprise if you win!"

"But I don't have a speech, how am I even meant to... wait, this is easy. I won't even wi-."

"... And the winner is, Octavia Philharmonica!"

"What the bu-!?"

Octavia's curse was cut short by a roar of applause from around her. She shyly waved, until she noticed Champagne beckoning her to the stage for her Hoofie statue. The pedestal was freed for her to speak into the microphone, though her vocal chords were still very much imprisoned.

"I... well, this is a surprise. A pleasant one. I, sadly, don't have a speech prepared. Well..."

Champagne leapt to her side, helping prompt her along. Partly due to showmarely camaraderie, partly because she needed her to say something worthwhile for the director's cut.

"How about your inspiration? What helped you make the music that enthralled Canterlot?"

Octavia blushed, smiling down at Vinyl in the crowd.

"Well, a very close friend of mine. Miss Vinyl Scratch, who has been... well, very close to me for these last few weeks, and taught me a lot about music and life."

Champagne raised an eyebrow, unveiling a wry smile and a glinting eye to Octavia.

"Why not bring her onto the stage, then? Come on, Vinyl, the inspiration is as essential as the execution."

Vinyl suddenly found the spotlight directed to her, an entourage of cameracolts appearing from the ether to take snapshots of her as she nervously ascended the stairs. She finished her journey at Octavia's side, smilingly somewhat awkwardly due to her nerves. Champagne aimed her microphone at Vinyl's muzzle, acquiring her trademark ex-journalist smile.

"So, how does it feel to be considered the inspiration for such an excellent musician?"

Vinyl coughed slightly, her cheeks filling with a torrent of embarrassment.

"Well, it's... the best feeling in the world. I've always thought Octy was amazing, even if she was too snooty to let anypony tell her. I'm just glad that she thinks the same of me."

The microphone slowly tracked back to Octavia, and her rosy cheeked expression at the gushing compliment from out of nowhere.

"Well, I have to say, I've searched high and low, and yet there's nopony out there like you. Not a colt or filly so idiotic, so stubborn, yet... so capable of making me smile."

The mic was whisked away, as Champagne pointed it back at her own muzzle. She smiled at the pair for a moment, before turning back to the audience.

"Well everypony, let's give it up for Octavia, and her fillyfriend, Vinyl Scratch!"

A roar of applause cut out the pair's confused stammering, as Champagne gently led them off the stage. They turned back around to her before departing the stage, finding her standing before them with a beaming grin.

"What? It's not as if I couldn't tell you two were together. Reminds me of when I met Morning Glory, ah, she's still got the bright smile you two have. Oh, anyway, show's gotta go on!"

Champagne trotted back to her pedestal, showmately professionalism still reassembling as she reasserted her mane. She chuckled in exasperation, before beginning the announcement of the next award winner. Somehow, she felt the acceptance speech would be slightly less sappy, this time.

Vinyl turned away, beginning to leave the stage as Octavia followed in her wake. The pair passed Princess Celestia, who smiled to the pair as they crossed each other. After they left her sight, they overheard a colt in the royal guard uniform was standing before her, rushing off a report to her.

"... He just completely disappeared, ran off with some of the Neighjng acrobatics team to join their circus. We think he's gone insane, your highness! We found a bottle of these narcotics in the Punch he was drinking, seemingly of his possession..."

Princess Luna appeared at the far doorway, hastening towards her sister with a small squad of her bat-winged guards. She cantered in front of Celestia, blocking her casual strolling pace as the guard - now low on oxygen, with his grey coat turning violet - still relayed his knowledge on the incident to her.

"Sister, I hath mustered my guardsmen. Pray tell, where shall we begin the search?"

Princess Celestia yawned, stretching out somewhat more dramatically than she intended to.

"I say we call off the search for tonight, the weather is terrible for it."

The view from outside the bay windows presented a beautiful night of cloudless serenity, with a full moon dominating the skyscape.

"Sister? It is as flawless a night as one could hope for."

"Is it now? Ah, no look... terrible."

Celestia tutted as a sudden cloud formation came seemingly from out of nowhere, covering the sky in grey clouds and darkness. Celestia smiled, winking to Luna before she trotted away. She turned her head over her shoulder, parting with one, last sentence.

"I suppose we'd better leave it until tomorrow, sister."

Octavia and Vinyl had watched the entire charade, giggling lightly to each other as a still slightly confused Princess Luna decided to polish off the last of the hors d'oeuvres. Octavia started towards the door, before noticing that Vinyl hadn't opted to follow her. She turned around, noticing an uncharacteristically nervous grin on her face.

"Vinyl, aren't you coming?"

"Oh, yeah. Let's go out this door, though, Octavia. I think... it'll be quicker."

Octavia stared at the side door in abject confusion, before she simply decided to go along with the request. Vinyl still carried a somewhat worried stumble in her step, as she trotted to open the door for Octavia.

The garden beyond the door seemed to be the home of all the triumphs nature had ever achieved. Flora and fauna of all beautiful forms and species filled every space, yet they left enough room for two starry-eyed and awe-struck ponies to stroll together in its midst. Vinyl found what she was looking for, a clearing in the centre of the paradisaical setting, large enough for a sizable group of ponies to stand in comfortably. She guided Octavia towards it, somewhat less subtly than she had hoped for. Octavia smiled as she found herself being gently shunted into the clearing.

They stared at each other for a moment, while Octavia noted the manner in which Vinyl hopped from hoof to hoof. It was how she always acted when she was nervous, Octavia had found. Her eyes turned downwards, her hooves became restless, and she bit her lip incessantly.

"I must say, that horn relaxant had quite... dramatic results."

"Oh, yeah. It can drive a colt to anything, he coulda done worse than some acrobats though. Hehe, yeah..."

Octavia picked up Vinyl's head by the chin, levelling her eyes with Octavia's own. She smiled for a moment, and it seemed to settle her restlessness slightly.

"You brought me out here for a reason, didn't you, Vinyl?"

Vinyl scratched her head, her eyes roaming around the trees laden with floral arrangements and strange, exotic birds. She coughed to clear her throat, before she centred her attention back on Octavia.

"Do you remember that night when you asked me, 'Where are we going with this, Vinyl?'"

"Yes, and I remember that you didn't have an answer that night."

Vinyl lightly scuffed the ground with her forehoof, glancing between the earth and the earth pony before her.

"Well, I've been thinking about it ever since. I think... I think I know where we're going."

She focused her eyes, locking on to Octavia's own. Avoiding them made her nervous, gazing into them washed it all away.

"We're gunna get a house together. With a big garden for sunbathing and growing food, and a spare bedroom for if we ever have guests. It'll have a sweet kitchen, so we can cook stuff from the garden, and for each other..."

Octavia giggled at the claim. They both knew only one of them should legally be allowed to cook.

"Octy, come on... right, and we'll have a veranda right up the front. So that later on, when we both get old and cranky together, we can sit there on rocking chairs, waving our sticks at these young fillies and moaning about how good they've got it."

"I would love to see that, Vinyl."

Vinyl smiled, restraining the tears that mobbed the corners of her eyes. She had never been one for deeply emotive thinking. It was quite new to her.

"I haven't even mentioned the best part, yet. The best part, is that we wouldn't rent the house or anything. No, we'd buy it, so it'd be ours forever."

She sat down on her rump, trying to clear her throat. She had rehearsed this moment at every moment she wasn't with Octavia, and it had still not made it easier.

"Just... just like you, Octavia Philharmonica. I... I want you to be mine, forever, if you'll take me."

She pulled out a box from her dress, gently teasing open the latch with the tip of her hoof. The hinge swung open to reveal a pair of radiant gold bands, each band the width of a pony's leg. One had a treble clef, cut from a solid amethyst. The other was a deep, black onyx note. Octavia clasped a hoof to her mouth, gasping through her joyful tears. Vinyl held her own tears back all the harder, she couldn't allow them to ruin her recital. She cleared her throat, with one, last verse to say.

"By Princess' will,
Through good or ill,
Our souls entwined,
'Til the end of time."

Vinyl finally found the courage to look up, finding Octavia in fits of unrelentingly happy tears. At the moment, she couldn't hold her own back any longer.

"So... will you marry me?"

Octavia tackled Vinyl in a cripplingly tight, tear-spattered, kiss-smattered, bear-like hug. She worked her way through her own emotion to whisper in Vinyl's ear as they lay on the grass together.

"How could I ever say no?"