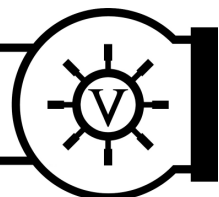


Somepony Else's Story

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PONY FICTION VAULT



“What’ll it be?” I asked.

There’s always something about that question. It’s all in the way you say it. It can imply a lot, or say nothing. In this case, I kept it straight and to the point. If I was any judge of the mare sitting across the bartop, she would appreciate that. I wanted to get it right. It’s not every day you get to serve Vinyl Scratch, after all.

She heaved a tired sigh and swept the glasses off her face, setting them on the bar. “Surprise me,” she muttered, setting her head in her hooves and staring into space.

When you’ve been riding the pine for a while, you get to be able to judge a customer pretty quickly. My current patron was certainly no stranger to a bottle, but she didn’t seem to carry any of the usual marks of a problem drinker. Trust me, I check. It might not make a lot of sense at first glance, but alcoholics are bad for business—they’re not good customers and they scare off your real business. I’ve seen good clubs go under because they served the wrong ponies too many times—made the place look like a dive.

Anyway, I didn’t get that vibe. I just saw a pony who wanted some space and a little way to stave off life for a bit. With that in mind, I turned to the racks and pulled out a whiskey. Nothing too fine, just something to get down fast.

At any rate, she seemed to agree, and the drink disappeared in short order. It was followed by a second not long after, and the expression on her face got less wooden and more sad. I gave her a moment and took a chance to go check up on my only other table, a trio of regulars who had been coming in after the evening work shift for months now. I returned to the bar after a moment and gestured, silently asking Vinyl if she was going for a third round, but she shook her head. “Meh, change it up,” she ordered.

I nodded, running through my options, as well as the mare sitting at the bar. She had a well-documented history of being wild and simple, but I had a hunch that she might still appreciate the finer things in life. As I reached for a lowball and some ice, I offered up a bit of conversation.

“Pretty far off the beaten path, eh? I don’t get many celebrities out this side of town,” I mentioned, sliding the glassware across to her.

She snorted. “Yeah, well, it’s getting hard to find some quiet in this city. Seems like everypony knows where I’m going to be before I do lately.” She took a tentative sip, her eyes widening slightly as she took the measure of the beverage she was offered. “Wow.

That's good. Like, really good." She eyed the bottle approvingly. "How much is this stuff?"

"On the house," I said, playing a hunch. "I'll trade you for some conversation."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Are you hitting on me?"

I laughed easily. "Nah. It's dead tonight, and you look like you could use a pony to talk at."

"Don't you mean 'talk to'?"

"Depends on if you need advice or just to get something off your chest."

She looked rather thoughtful at that, and as she sat in silence I took the opportunity to wave at my regulars as they dropped their payment on the table and headed out. She looked back at me. "You know who I am, right?"

I might not read much, and I don't have the budget to buy a lot of music, but you'd have to be living under a rock to not know who Vinyl Scratch was. "Sure do," I said.

She nodded. "Yeah, well, thanks for not making a big deal out of it. Though, if you wanted to, I should probably savor it. You might just be the last one."

"How so?"

She sighed. "I'm pretty sure I just flushed my career down the toilet."

I nodded to encourage her to continue.

She took another drink, as though she was trying to figure out where to start. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Nick."

She snorted. "Nick? That's sort of an odd name, even for Canterlot."

I smiled, grabbing a nearby glass from the sink and drying it off. "It's short for Nickle And Dime."

She actually chuckled at that. "You make a living out of cheating your customers, do you?"

“Nah, I gotta stretch my bits. I own a bar and live on tips. Often as not, nickels and dimes are all I’ve got left once I’ve paid my bills. Not much of a special talent or whatever, but there you have it.”

Vinyl raised her glass in a salute. “That’s a hard luck story if ever I heard one,” she toasted, finishing off the glass. “You have anyone special? Somepony that makes it all worth it?”

I shook my head. “Once. Not anymore. You?”

“Yeah. Well, I thought I did. Maybe not,” she said, her melancholy returning, and I knew we were heading into the crux of the matter.

“What happened?” I asked, gently prompting her.

“I made my choice,” she said flatly, pushing her empty glass across the bartop meaningfully.

I took the gesture and refilled the glass. “From your tone, I take it you feel like you made the wrong choice then?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said definitively. “I made the right choice, it just wasn’t the smart one.”

“How’s that?”

“Because I chose to fall for a mare.” She sighed heavily. “*Everypony* told me to let her go. My publicist, my manager, even my mane stylist—they all said that I was spending too much time around her, and if it was seen as a relationship that it could end up very bad. I ignored them all, and they turned out to be right.”

I was a bit taken back at that. “I would have thought your fans would be a bit more understanding than that.”

She gave a bitter smile. “Oh, my fans were. *Hers* weren’t.” She glanced up at my confused expression. “She’s a high class mare. Sophisticated, beautiful, *classical*. I gave her one kiss, and they were all over her.” Vinyl shut her eyes and swallowed hard. “It wasn’t even a kiss on the lips. Didn’t matter, though—a photo got out, and the tabloids were all over it. I swear, I see that damn photo in my sleep now.” She took a deep breath and a drink to steady herself again. I took the chance to keep quiet.

Vinyl pushed the empty glass away, instead grabbing one of the pens from the bar and starting to doodle on a napkin. She began to rough out the shape of a pony as she continued, like she was distracting herself from her own story. “Her crowd wanted no part of it, and high class society can be more like sharks than ponies. She began to break down just from the hate mail alone, but then she lost her seat with the Canterlot Orchestra, all her paying gigs dried up—her agent even quit. No pony would book any of his musicians as long as he was representing her, too. It was awful.”

Another pony began to join the first on her napkin as her hoof roamed. “I was a bit selfish about it all; I thought that maybe after all that cooled off we could just be together without having to worry about the public. Turns out she hated me. There’s a bit of a wound when you lose your chance to do what makes you special. She was furious, said that one kiss ruined her life. She wanted nothing to do with me after that; she wouldn’t return my letters, wouldn’t see me even in private.”

As Vinyl began to shade in her drawing, I realized that she was drawing the fateful kiss, like she couldn’t get it off her mind. As she had described, it was a simple peck on the forehead. There seemed to be a certain tenderness in the gesture, though I couldn’t tell if that’s how it was or just how her emotions were coloring the scene, but there was definitely something special about the way it was flowing from the pen in her hoof. I could see just how much it must have meant to her.

“After that,” she continued morosely, “the music was just gone.” She snorted at herself. “Celestia’s mane, listen to me. That’s just corny. It’s true though. I can’t write, I can’t perform, I can’t play. Every time I try to do something musical, I just can’t shake the feeling that it doesn’t mean anything.” Vinyl stopped, looking at the napkin like she had just then noticed its existence. She shook her head and let it alone, looking back at me. “I’m sure you’ve heard every cheesy line there is about love. I never got all of that. All I know is that she made it feel like it was okay for me to be me, and without her, I’m not so sure anymore.”

Vinyl leaned back a bit on the stool. “So, there ya go. It’s only a matter of time now. In the music world, there’s no room for old news, and if I can’t do it anymore, I’ll be out in just a few months, no matter how popular I once was.”

I was shocked, to be honest. I *had* heard a lot of sob stories, but this was one of the most legitimately disheartening tales I’d heard in quite a while. “Look,” I said hesitantly, “I’m *not* the pony who suggests this kind of thing, but if you just really need to keep drinking for a while, I’ll have a cab waiting for you—on me.”

She actually smiled a bit. “I appreciate the offer,” she said, “but no thanks. As much as it might feel good to drink myself into a stupor, I couldn’t do it. It’s almost pathetic, but even after everything that’s happened I don’t want to forget any of it, not even for an hour or two.”

“Wow,” I said, not exactly flexing my conversational muscles. “That’s kind of beautiful. Tragic, but beautiful all the same.”

Vinyl looked intently at me, really meeting my eyes for the first time that night. “No platitudes?” she accused, a bit of alcohol-fueled mischief in her voice. “Nothing about how it gets easier? How someday I’ll get over it?”

I snorted back at her. “Of course it gets easier with time, but you’re never gonna get over it.” I set my rag down and put both hooves on the wooden surface of the bar. “Stuff like this hurts, and it leaves scars. Scars never really go away, but at least you took a chance. When it really comes down to it, that’s what separates ponies like you from the multitude of boring noponies who never leave home. You take chances and sometimes they don’t work. Sometimes you get hurt. But someday, after you’re dead and gone, there will be a few ponies left who will still talk about you, and it’s a sure bet that the events that left those scars are the sort of things they’ll be talking about.”

Vinyl stared blankly at me. “That *might* just be the corniest thing anypony’s ever said to me.”

I shrugged. “It’s not my ‘A’ game, but I still meant it.”

“Weirdly enough, though, it does help.”

“Eh, that’s just the booze,” I said, chuckling along with her, enjoying the moment of levity as we both trailed off and a brooding quiet returned. “If things don’t turn around, what do you think you’ll do?” I asked quietly.

She shrugged back. “No idea. Probably leave Canterlot, just go somewhere and see if I can start over.”

“Hey, don’t be too quick to give up on her. You never know what tomorrow’s gonna look like until the sun comes up. And for whatever it’s worth, I hope things work out for you,” I offered.

Vinyl stared at me for a few moments, taking my words in and weighing them in her head. She nodded and clambered down off the stool. “Thanks, Nick—for everything,”

she said, dropping a generous five-bit tip into the jar. Just before she turned to leave, she grabbed the pen and signed the napkin, leaving it behind with a nonchalant grin as the signature glasses went back on her face. “I bet I’ll be back sometime,” she said, and walked out the door.

I admit, I did read the magazines a bit more after that than I had before, hoping to see something about Vinyl. I had that stupid napkin framed and hung up behind the bar. Why not? I mean, it’s still from somepony famous, right? It’s more than some bars have.

Anyway, she did actually keep her promise to return, even though it was over a year later, and she wasn’t alone. Vinyl introduced Octavia to me, and true to the DJ’s word, she was cultured and polite, well-versed in her preferred drink, and a wonderful conversationalist. In a nutshell, the ideal patron. After a few drinks and some gentle prodding from Vinyl, Octavia began to fill in the story since Vinyl visited me.

Somewhere around three months after Vinyl had appeared in my place, I had caught sight of a news article about her. She had gotten into a screaming row with a journalist trying to follow her descent from fame. The DJ had completely lost it, screaming all sorts of unprintable things, but the line that made the paper was a great one. The journalist asked her what she would do differently given the chance to do it over again, and Vinyl didn’t even flinch. She declared without missing a beat that she wouldn’t change a thing, and that even though she had been cast aside by society, music, and even love, she still loved her marefriend with all her heart.

To hear them tell it from their perspective, that line changed everything, and I’ll tell you that it was incredibly cute watching Octavia’s blush as she told the story. They forgave each other, got back together, and things even started to pick back up for them both professionally—though I’m guessing the massive wave of fanmail the article generated from Vinyl’s fans for them both helped out. They were pretty much *the* celebrity couple of Canterlot by this point, but I made a point to give the same service as everypony else. Famous ponies are still just ponies, after all.

As they stood to leave, Vinyl caught sight of that framed napkin doodle on the wall, just over the cash register. She shook her head in disbelief, muttering to herself. “I can’t believe you kept that,” she said to me. I just smiled and nodded, and she turned to leave, but stopped, clearly trying to decide whether or not to ask something. She finally looked back as Octavia waited for her by the door. “Anypony ever offer to buy that off you?”

I grinned. “My best offer so far is five hundred bits.”

She laughed and walked out with her marefriend.

So far, I haven't seen her again. A few celebrities came by once or twice, trying out the place that DJ-PON3 apparently liked so much, but I guess it was just too quiet for them. Anyway, that was never the point. My regulars told me I should get Vinyl to endorse my bar, but I never felt comfortable with that idea. The whole event wasn't my story, after all, and it just seemed rude to try to hitch my wagon to their star. I was perfectly happy to fill my role as a background character.

Sometimes that's what life is: somepony else's story.