

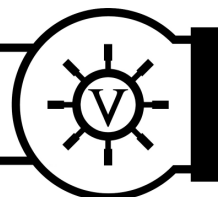
This Nearly Was Mine

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PONY FICTION VAULT



The recital hall was completely dark, save for the lights on the stage. A grey earth pony mare stood with her cello at the center of the stage. Off to the side, another earth pony, a brown stallion with a white mane, sat at a grand piano. Behind them were a mass of white walls, used to improve the acoustics.

The cellist lowered her bow, looking at the black mass of the audience. The recital hall was then filled with the sounds of hooves stomping in applause. She bowed appreciatively before gesturing to her companion at the piano. He slowly stood up from the piano bench and bowed politely. The lights went up in the audience. The recital was over.

"I don't think ponies appreciate the sonatas enough," she said as they walked backstage. "They only care about the concertos with the full orchestras. But I like the sonatas for solo instrument and piano. They're more intimate."

"You played beautifully, Octavia," said her accompanist.

She stopped. "Thanks, Frederic. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh, you could've," he replied with a subdued grin. "Just not as well."

They stepped out the stage door, greeted by a crowd of friends and admirers.

"Well, *there's* my girl!" shouted a voice from the crowd. "Outta my way!"

A very pale yellow unicorn with big purple glasses and a wild blue mane pushed her way through the crowd. "Hey, move it, buddy, I got priority!"

"Octa! You nailed that thing!"

"Octa?" Frederic asked with a dubious cock of the eyebrow.

"And you were good, too," Vinyl added. "Like, you're like a piano-playing statue!"

"So," said Frederic, "would that mean that I 'rock?'"

"Yeah," said Vinyl, "no. You do not 'rock.'"

"That's a shame," said Frederic, "for a minute there I almost thought I had your approval."

"Honestly, you two," chortled Octavia, shaking her head.

"I brought you these," said Vinyl, producing a bouquet of flowers. "So did..." She looked at the other ponies, who were starting to become quite impatient. "So did everypony else."

"Well, yours mean a lot more," Octavia said. She threw her forelegs around Vinyl's neck and kissed her. Her accompanist seemed completely uninterested in the display of affection.

"Well, I'll have to get to my job at the bar," he said. "I see you'll have a lovely reception. I'll see you tomorrow for rehearsal."

"Wait." Octavia tried to stop him. "I haven't paid you yet."

"You don't have to," said Frederic. He smiled. "You get this recital for free. Think of it as my flowers."

• • •

Canterlot was usually quiet at night, which was odd for a big city. Frederic remembered his gigs in Manhattan; that was a town that was always noisy. Big cities were usually loud, but for some reason Canterlot was oddly serene. Maybe Frederic was just used to the place.

He liked Canterlot. It was like a grand magical kingdom full of pristine white spires. Come to think of it, it *was* a grand magical kingdom. In any case, it was a classy city with classy ponies who appreciated good music, even if they talked in the stuffiest accents imaginable. Frederic chuckled to himself as he thought about that: he and Octavia had cultivated similar "proper, but fake" accents. It came with the crowd, he supposed. Sometimes Harpo would turn his nose up and play with a "snooty" expression just for laughs. Frederic never found it particularly funny, but then Harpo was a bit of a clown and Frederic's sense of humor never really went for that.

A wagon barreled down the road, its wheel striking a puddle and drenching Frederic in water. Frederic flinched, startled and roused from his thoughts, but didn't say anything. He simply watched as the wagon went down the road, and then straightened his bowtie.

Calm. Unflappable. Stoic. These were character traits he prided himself on, but the one descriptor he always aspired to was "professional." Whether he was hired for a wedding, a concert, an audition, a rehearsal, or a birthday party, he was always professional. Even

when going to his job at a lower-end bar, where the regulars didn't cultivate fake, hoity-toity accents, he was always professional.

He continued on his way and hoped that the warm summer night air would dry him off before he got to his next job.

• • •

"Y'know, I never understand," said the bartender, a husky pegasus pony. "I never understand what a classy dude like you's doin' here in an old dump like this?"

"I'm a starving artist," replied Frederic. "It's standard."

He was seated at an old beat-up piano with a sticky key. The bar was a hot, musky place, filled with ponies far less cultured than himself. Still, it was a place where everypony felt welcome, and the bartender was a friendly pony who made a point of learning the names of all the regular customers. He was a friend to everypony, and it paid.

Frederic had foolishly told Octavia that she didn't have to pay. Therefore, Frederic Horseshoepin had to swallow his pride and work at a less than upscale development in town. At least the expectations were low. He played a few simple pieces from memory, not paying attention to the patrons as they shuffled in, ordered drinks, and carried on conversations about whatever was on their minds.

The bartender left a malt for him on top of the piano. "On the house, as usual."

"Thank you," replied Frederic, politely nodding his head. "You don't need to do that – I can pay for myself."

"Didn't ya just say you was starvin'?"

Frederic chuckled. "I guess I did. Thank you."

"Hey, Freddy!" called one of the patrons. "Why don't you play 'As We Lay at the River?'"

Frederic gave a wry smile. "Certainly."

He could think of worse songs to play. It was an old song, simple and sweet. Very easy to play: melody on one hoof, chords on the other. It was a sad song, about a colt longingly remembering a summer when he was in love. Like many young loves, however, it didn't last, and the song's narrator was left sad, bitter, and alone.

Sad love songs, thought Frederic, are always popular.

The song was so easy that he didn't even really have to think about it, and his mind could wander to other things that were troubling him.

"Think of it as my flowers," he mocked, that has to be the dumbest thing I've ever said. I don't even think that's grammatically correct. He shook his head. Not doing that again. You can't afford to be sentimental, Frederic. Stay professional.

That sticky key got in the way of the playing. Frederic always felt a pang of annoyance whenever that happened. A faulty instrument was simply unacceptable – if the music called for a D, and the instrument couldn't play a D, then it was impossible to play it right. One had to simply blunder through the section and hope that the audience didn't care that there was a missing note.

"So, where 'xactly can I hear you play?" asked the bartender.

"Canterlot Music Hall, if I'm lucky," replied the pianist. "But I usually do odd jobs, like here. I always appreciate the big breaks, but mostly I play accompanist. I am slated to play the Brahmas Ballades next month, though."

"The what?"

"Johannes Brahmas," Frederic explained, "probably the greatest of the bovine composers."

One of the patrons decided to raise his voice and start singing along with the playing. The patrons were free to sing as badly as they liked, but if Frederic messed up, he'd look like a fool. And a professional, Frederic was convinced, could not look like a fool.

Always stay professional.

Frederic didn't understand why he felt the way he did when Octavia had introduced him to Vinyl, weeks ago. He had felt something deeply unpleasant; something that made him feel ashamed and disgusted with himself after the fact and even up to this point, but he didn't understand it at first. He felt it again, the other night, when Vinyl brought her flowers and the two mares kissed.

He was getting better at hiding it, though. The other night he had managed to feign mild disinterest. Soon he might be able to look at them head-on. Perhaps even act supportive.

"It's a shame you missed the reception last night," said Octavia. Frederic was roused from his thoughts. He was in a rehearsal, practicing a trio sonata.

"Y'know, I don't get it," expressed a confused Pizzicato. He was a brown earth pony who must have used copious amounts of styling gel to get that mane slicked back the way he did. "If there are four of us playing..." He indicated around the room to himself, Ritornello (a yellow mare with a purple mane), Octavia, and Frederic himself. "Why is it called a trio sonata?"

"It's about the number of parts," Octavia explained, "not about the number of players."

"Take a good look at the score," Frederic added. "You'll notice that the cello and piano parts are practically identical."

Pizzicato leaned in to take a closer look at the score. "So they are."

"I take it the reception went well?" Frederic asked.

"Very," said Octavia. "Harpo and Beauty Brass stopped by. They were sad to have missed you."

"I'll have to apologize to them later," said Frederic. "I was in a hurry."

Pizzicato stood back up. "Well, from the top!"

At first he wasn't sure why he felt it. Later, however, as he pondered more and more, he came to realize what it was he felt. It was jealousy. Unfortunately, recognizing the feeling for what it was made him feel even worse. How could he be jealous of Octavia? She was a good friend – if she was happy in a relationship, then of course Frederic should have been happy for her. He tried to be, but deep down there were still irrational feelings of

hurt and resentment. He thought more about it, trying to understand what he was feeling, and why he felt it. Then he understood: he was in love with Octavia.

• • •

"Bit for your thoughts?"

"Hmm?" Frederic looked at Octavia as he closed the lid of the piano.

"You just seemed to be off in your own little world there." Octavia was similarly putting her cello back in its case.

"Oh, just the usual things," Frederic said with a shrug. "Music, business, life in general. Nothing worth your hard-earned bits. And you?"

"Vinyl asked me to come over to her recording studio," Octavia said, hoisting the cello case onto her back. "She said she wanted me to play something that she could use in one of her songs."

"Sounds highly flattering," said Frederic. "I don't think I have any engagements today. I'll just be back at my apartment. Maybe I can try cleaning it. Or maybe I won't clean it and I'll just go to bed."

Frederic and Octavia left the stage where they had been practicing and began walking down the road. As it happened, Frederic's apartment was on the way to the studio where Vinyl Scratch recorded, so they walked together.

"What kind of music does she play?" asked Frederic.

"Vinyl? Oh, she does dubstep, electronica, trance..."

"What do any of those mean?"

"I have no idea," Octavia laughed.

"Thank goodness," said Frederic, "for a moment I thought it was just me."

"The musical crowd that Vinyl hangs around with has all these genres and sub-genres of music. Honestly, I'm impressed that she's able to keep them all sorted out."

"She seems very energetic."

Octavia smiled. "She is. I never expected to meet anyone quite like her."

Frederic looked for something he could say. *I have to say something*, he thought. *But what? Should I tell her how I feel?* He stopped walking. *How do I feel?*

"Frederic?" Octavia asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Hmm?" Frederic looked back up at her. "No, nothing. Just thinking."

"You do a lot of that, don't you?" asked Octavia. "Always thinking, thinking, thinking. And I don't think you're always thinking about music."

"Well, I guess that's between me and..." he paused. "Hm. I need to think of something to complete that sentence, don't I?"

Octavia laughed. "You think you might have come up with another witticism?"

"There's always room for more," Frederic said. He looked up at the sky. "One thing that makes Canterlot different from a lot of big cities: You can see the stars."

"Never took you for a stargazer," said Octavia.

"I'm not," Frederic said, shrugging. "Just..." He looked up at the sky. "Just a thought."

The two continued walking, watching the scenery as they went down the path they had long since memorized.

"I think I'll need to hire a piano tuner," said Frederic. "My upright seems a bit 'off' lately." He paused. "Have you ever worked with a particularly bad instrument?" he asked.

"Not since I was in music school," Octavia replied.

"Oh," Frederic chuckled, "the early days of our careers when all our instruments were on rental and the brass players just hoped they'd be lucky enough to get a shiny one."

"Don't remind me," said Octavia. "I'm very grateful that I have an instrument I actually own now. If my cello isn't working right then I'm not taking care of it properly."

"Of course," said Frederic. "I was just thinking. Sometimes the places I have to work don't have very good pianos. The piano at the bar I work at has a sticky key. I want to play a D, but it never works."

"I can only imagine how frustrating that must be," said Octavia.

"I don't get frustrated," corrected Frederic. "It's just... difficult to work with."

"If I had to be expected to work with a cello that was missing a string, I'd probably refuse."

"Hmm..." Frederic mused as they walked past a row of apartment buildings. "Refusing a job. That sounds rather cathartic, honestly."

He stopped in front of the door to his apartment. "Well, have a lovely evening," he said as he opened the door. "I'll see you for our practice session tomorrow?"

"Of course," said Octavia. She nodded her head politely when something on the floor caught her eye. "You have a letter?"

"So I do." Frederic leaned down to pick it up. "Say, it's from the Canterlot Music Academy." He began to pry it open.

"What does it say?"

"I doubt it's anything important," said Frederic. "Probably just a stamped letter asking for donations or..." He stopped, staring at the letter with a stone expression. His eyes were the only feature that moved as he read it, again and again.

"What is it?"

Frederic calmly folded up the letter. "My concert has been cancelled," he said simply. "I suppose that Canterlot will just have to wait a little longer to hear the music of Johannes Brahmas."

"I'm sorry," said Octavia. "I know how much you were looking forward to that."

"I'll just have to look forward to something else."

"But still, that's not fair," Octavia protested. "I heard you practicing those Ballades. You put a lot of effort into them."

Frederic smiled and shrugged. "Well, they're pieces worth having in my repertoire, even if I don't get to perform them yet. Have a good evening, Octavia," he concluded, shutting the door.

Frederic was in a stuffy little practice room, plunking out notes on the upright piano to pass the time. He looked up at the clock: four minutes after two.

Three... Two... One...

The door opened and a black-coated earth pony with a white treble clef on his flanks stumbled in.

Five after, every time.

"Sorry I'm late!" he gasped. "I, um, I forgot what room it was... again... sorry."

"It's okay, Ritardando," Frederic said. *At least, now that I allow room for those extra five minutes in my schedule.* "Now, then," he said. "What did you want to work on first?"

"The aria," Ritardando said, nodding. Frederic flipped through the music folder he had in front of him to the piece in question. He placed his hooves on the keyboard and began to play the opening of the piece. Ritardando opened his mouth and sang, in a deep *basso cantante*:

"Deh vieni a la finestra..."

"*Alla finestra*," Frederic corrected.

"Huh?"

"*Alla*, not *a la*," he explained. "Remember in Istallion there's an important distinction with double consonants."

"Oh, sorry..." Ritardando said, shuffling his hooves a little. "Again?" he asked, still embarrassed about the mistake.

Frederic began the introduction to the aria again. And again, Ritardando sang:

*"Deh vieni alla finestra, o mio tesoro,
deh vieni a consolar il pianto mio.
Se neghi a me di dar qualche ristoro,
davanti agli occhi tuoi morir vogl'io."*

Frederic had been prepared for the mistake. He made it every week. Ritardando was a very talented pony. He had a good ear and a gorgeous voice. He was, however, very lazy and very stupid, and he didn't practice as much as he should have.

Frederic made a distinction in his mind between "talent" and "skill." Pizzicato, he thought, was a skilled musician. He worked diligently to develop his abilities. Ritardando had a great deal of innate musical ability, but he was late to his coaching sessions and he didn't practice. Frederic also suspected from his unfocused eyes that he let his mind wander. He had absolutely no sense of discipline.

Still, he wasn't a bad musician. Just a lazy one. At least, he qualified as a musician.

"Y'know, I was thinking," Ritardando mused as the piece ended, "I could get a mandolin and accompany myself. The thingy's written for mandolin, right?"

"I believe so."

"Yeah, that'd be neat. I'll get a mandolin!" Ritardando said with an excited resolve.

Sometimes, Frederic played accompanist for ponies who were singers, but not musicians. Frederic and his friends often had laughs at the expense of singers. There were countless jokes to be made about their lack of practicing, their egos, or their lack of musical education.

A foal tells his parents that he wants to make music, Frederic thought, but his parents tell him he doesn't know anything about music. He can't read music and he doesn't know anything about theory. "That's okay!" the foal says. "I'll be a singer!"

Such was the case of a young mare named Ovation, who arrived at precisely three in the afternoon. Frederic remembered their first meeting.

"What do you mean, you can't read music?" he asked.

"Well, you just play it out and I sing along," she said with a shrug.

"Hello!" she called, opening the door. That was one thing Frederic admired: punctuality.

She wasn't a musician. She was an actress who dealt in musical theatre. She had a big, if somewhat untrained, voice, and Frederic wondered if she could be an opera singer if she pursued a more classical style as opposed to belting.

Admittedly, he hadn't ever actually gone to any of her shows, though he had accompanied her to several auditions. Sometimes she had to deliver a monologue, and from what he could tell she was a very good actress. The gold trophy on her flank had to mean something, after all.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm doing fine, thank you." Frederic nodded curtly. "And you?"

"I'm doing well. We have that audition on Saturday, remember?"

"Of course," said Frederic, "I marked it on my calendar. Have you picked out what you plan to sing?"

"Yes." Ovation rummaged through her folder, opening it and placing it on the piano stand. "I want to start from there, okay?" she asked, pointing to a section she'd put a line in front of with pencil.

"Okay," said Frederic. He placed his hooves on the keyboard.

Ovation took a deep breath and proceeded to belt:

"Weeeeeeeelllllllllll..."

I wonder how long she's going to hold that note, Frederic thought.

*"Someone tell me, when is it my turn?
Don't I get a dream for myself?
Starting now, it's gonna be my turn!
Gangway world, get off of my runway!
Starting now, I bat a thousand!
This time, boys, I'm taking the boys and..."*

*Everything's coming up Rose!
Everything's coming up roses!
Everything's coming up Rose!
This time for me!
For me!
For me!
FOR ME!"*

She struck a dramatic pose at the end of the song.

"Good," said Frederic. "I'll make sure to come see the show."

"Hey, don't get me prepared for that," warned Ovation. "I haven't been cast yet."

Frederic chuckled. "Fair enough."

"You know, I think a lot of ponies can relate to this song," said Ovation. "That's why it makes such a great audition piece."

Frederic looked at her. "How so?"

"Well, the song's all about disappointment. I mean, there are lots of ponies at these auditions," she explained. "And a lot of them have probably been trying to get a good part for a while. And every audition they go to, they're wondering: 'When do I get my chance to shine?' And that's what the song is about."

"Hm."

"I mean, have you ever been disappointed?" Ovation asked. Frederic looked up.

"Well..." he said. "I guess I have." He shook his head. "I don't let it get to me, though. Can't get through life if you can't deal with disappointment."

"How do you deal with it?"

Frederic shrugged. "I move on."

Ovation laughed. "That simple with you? I get mad. With me, I like to vent my frustrations by working as hard as I can to prepare for my next audition. That way I'm able to take all that energy and use it constructively."

"Hm," said Frederic. He flipped through the pages of her folder, back to the start of the song. "Can't say I get 'energetic' when bad things happen to me. I just try not to let anything get to me. But anyway, this is eating up time." He placed his hooves on the keyboard. "Ready?"

• • •

Octavia sat at the window of the cafe, mulling over her cup of coffee. The establishment was full of various ponies who were either socializing or writing terrible novels that would never get published.

The bell at the door gave a light little jingle as Frederic hurriedly entered.

"Terribly sorry," he said as he marched to the table. "I'm afraid I got held up a bit."

"At least it's just coffee," said Octavia.

"Still, it's not polite."

"It's not a problem. Really," Octavia reassured him. "I saved you a cup of coffee." She pushed an extra drink towards him.

"Ah, thank you," Frederic said, taking the cup. "So, how's that concerto coming?"

"It's coming along great. I had my first rehearsal with the orchestra yesterday."

"Did you now?" Frederic asked. "That's great."

"Kind of nervous about that, though," she said. "If I make a mistake that means the whole orchestra has to stop. I was wondering..." She laughed. "I was wondering if you could work with me a little? I could lend you the score and you could help me on my own time."

Frederic smiled. "I'd be delighted, Octavia."

"How are things going with you?" she asked.

"Oh, things are going well," he said with a shrug. "That operetta I'm working for will be going into sitzprobe in a week."

"An operetta?"

"Yes, I've been rehearsal pianist for it." Frederic took a sip of coffee. He paused, as though he were almost surprised. "You've memorized my usual order?" he asked.

"You order the same thing every time. It's not hard."

"Fair enough," he conceded.

"What's the operetta about?"

"Oh, it's some silly thing about a bunch of unicorns and a bunch of fairy-ponies. The fairy-ponies are basically unicorns with big butterfly wings."

"I think there was something like that in Cloudsdale," said Octavia. "I think a unicorn had a friend of hers make wings for her."

"Really?" asked Frederic. "Interesting."

The two sat there, enjoying their coffee and looking out the window. Frederic spotted Ritardando outside, strolling through the street with a big dopey grin on his face, singing his heart out.

He isn't very diligent, Frederic thought. But he does seem to love what he does.

"Well, well!" called a voice. "I didn't know you classical-types drank coffee. I thought you lived off of truffles and thirty-year-old cider."

Frederic and Octavia turned around to see Vinyl leaning against their table. A smile crawled across Octavia's face. Frederic's expression, however, was as stony as ever. He didn't want to be interrupted like this – this was his time to be with Octavia, and the last pony he wanted to barge in was her girlfriend.

"Hello, Vinyl. I didn't know you came here," Octavia said, greeting her.

"Hey, I stay up late and I need coffee," Vinyl said, inviting herself to sit down next to Octavia. "So what's up?" Without waiting for an answer, she looked at Frederic and then burst out singing, *"Son, can you play me a memory? I'm not really sure how it goes. But it's sad and it's sweet and I knew it complete, when I wore a younger mare's clothes."* She took a deep breath. "Wearing clothes, that's a funny idea." She threw a foreleg around Octavia's shoulder. "So, how are ya?"

"I take it you've had your coffee already?" asked Frederic. He looked around and saw that the unicorn's outburst had not gone unnoticed by the other patrons, who were shooting annoyed glances at the window-side table. Vinyl obviously either didn't mind or didn't care.

"Something like that, yeah," Vinyl said in an off-hand tone. "So, what're you two doing here?"

"Frederic and I meet once a week for coffee," explained Octavia.

"How did that recording session go?" Frederic asked. "You mentioned something about..."

"It wasn't all that much. She just had me play a few lines," Octavia said, shrugging.

"Just so I can sample and remix it," said Vinyl. "You'd be amazed at how much mileage you can get out of a few samples. A little goes a long way, as they say."

"They also say mountains out of molehills," Frederic muttered.

"And Octa here was one great cellist!" Vinyl said as she leaned in and nuzzled her.

"Aw, Vinyl, don't flatter me!"

Frederic didn't want to watch it. It gave him that sickening sinking feeling in his stomach. He hated that feeling, but he tried to be subtle. When he saw Vinyl lean over, he quickly turned to his cup of coffee and took a sip. All the while he hated that he felt some sort of perverse aversion to the prospect of his friend being happy.

What's wrong with me? he thought.

"I don't believe," Octavia said, "that Frederic has heard any of your music, Vinyl."

Frederic snapped back to attention.

"Yeah, I don't figure he would," Vinyl agreed.

"Glad to hear the expectations are low," Frederic said as he took another sip of coffee.

"Why don't you two come by my club tomorrow night?" Vinyl suggested. "I'm gonna be playing the new song."

No, I really don't want to, Frederic thought. The last place he wanted to spend an evening at, besides a rusty torture chamber, was at one of those "clubs" where they served bad drinks and blared awful music at such an unbearable volume that a conversation consisted solely of yelling. However, Frederic had to be polite.

"I'd be delighted," he said. *Come to think of it,* he thought, *I might prefer the rusty torture chamber.*

"I'm sorry, I'm teaching," sighed Octavia. "But I'm sure Frederic would enjoy it."

"Well, I guess it's okay," Vinyl said with a shrug. "You've already heard it."

"It's quite something," Octavia chuckled.

"'Something-good' or 'something-I-don't-really-like-it-but-let's-pretend-that-it's-just-out-of-my-range-of-interest?'" Vinyl asked, teasing.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Octavia asked, her eyelids narrowing.

"Well, I guess I'll come by tomorrow night and see whether or not it drives me to amputate my own ears," Frederic decided. "I see Octavia still has both of hers, so I should be fine."

"Another rave review." Vinyl smirked.

"Anyway, I have to go now." Frederic stood up. "I have a rehearsal to accompany for."

"The club's called *The Purple Horseshoe*," said Vinyl. "You know where it is?"

"I can read a map. Lovely having coffee with you. I'll see you two later. Oh, and by the way, before I forget." Frederic tossed a few coins on the table. "Thanks for getting me coffee."

Vinyl and Octavia watched as Frederic went straight for the door. Vinyl looked at Octavia with a dubious expression.

"Lovely?" Vinyl asked.

• • •

"Alright, let's take it from the start of the nightmare song."

"You mean the start of the song or the recitative?" asked Frederic.

Frederic was at an upright piano in a small gymnasium, while various other ponies were sitting or walking about. He was at the rehearsal for the operetta, and the lead comic baritone, a white earth pony – he would attach a fake horn as part of his costume – stood in the middle.

"Um, yeah, let's start from the recitative," said the director, a smaller unicorn. Frederic began to play, and the earth pony began to sing in an accent even more outrageously fake than Frederic's own.

*"Love, unrequited, robs me of my rest:
Love, hopeless love, my ardent soul encumbers:
Love, nightmare-like, lies heavy on my chest,
And weaves itself into my midnight slumbers!"*

Frederic had to suppress a sigh. *I'm starting to get sick of songs about heartache.*

The song proceeded for another thirteen pages as the baritone half-sang about an absurd nightmare he had. He didn't put a whole lot of work into projecting an operatic voice, as the song and the role called for a heavier focus on diction and comic acting. The singer once joked that he got the part because it called for the worst singer in the company.

"Alright!" announced the director. "Now let's have our run-through and then we can go home. And let's not forget to give a big hoof to Frederic here."

Frederic, who had been moving the score back to the beginning, looked up as there was a thundering of hooves around him. He smiled, grateful for the recognition, but he realized why the director was doing this: this was the last rehearsal they had before they started working with the orchestra. Once that happened, he wouldn't be necessary. His job was practically finished.

Well, he thought, *time to get a new gig*. He stood up and smiled, admitting to himself that it was nice that he was getting his own applause for once.

Frederic sat alone at a table, poring over the menu. Breakfast, breakfast, and more breakfast. Then the next page had things that weren't breakfast. It was a small diner, the kind that had cheap, tasty food that wasn't particularly healthy. The last part didn't concern him.

There weren't that many ponies there in the morning. Most ponies preferred to have breakfast in their own homes unless they were trying to navigate a tight schedule, in which case they had Frederic's full sympathies.

"Hello, sir," said a unicorn waitress. "Can I get you anything to drink to start?"

"Just a coffee," said Frederic.

"Decaf or..."

"Decaf doesn't help me wake up," said Frederic.

"Hey... I know that voice," said a mare.

Oh, no... thought Frederic.

Vinyl Scratch poked her head over the back of her seat – she was seated in the stall right next to Frederic's. "Well, waddya know – it's Octa's piano-buddy! Small world, ain't it?"

"Umm..." Frederic mumbled. He needed his coffee. "Hi."

Vinyl immediately jumped from her stall and circled around to Frederic's table. She sat down opposite of him and set down her purple glasses.

"Ain't this great?" she asked as she opened her menu. "I'll have a milkshake, thank you."

"Alrighty, then," said the waitress. "I'll come back to take your order later."

Frederic nodded as the waitress left. "Thank you." He looked at Vinyl, who was obviously not the kind of pony he'd sit down to have breakfast with. "Hi," he said, before looking back down at the menu. He turned to a page that had things that weren't breakfast on it. He contemplated whether or not he should get some pancakes and toast or a sandwich.

"I love these places," said Vinyl. "I always like having breakfast. Sometimes I come here and have breakfast for dinner. I love doing that."

"That's a mind-bender..."

"I'm not sure," Vinyl said as she looked over the menu. "Do I want pancakes or waffles?"

Frederic lowered his menu and raised an eyebrow. "Aren't they the same thing?"

"One's crunchier... Yeah," Vinyl said. "I'll have waffles. How about you?"

Frederic stared at her as the sound of the ceiling fan filled his ears. "I haven't decided," he said, before returning to the menu.

Vinyl leaned forward. "Y'know, I've been thinking a lot," she said.

"About what?"

"Your image," said Vinyl. "It's always important for performers like us to think about that. The kind of picture we want to put forward."

Frederic lowered the menu again. "I do not have an 'image.'"

"Uhh, yes you do."

"No I don't," said Frederic. "I don't craft some sort of caricature. I simply play the music I'm given. Like a professional."

"Exactly!" said Vinyl, hitting the table. "That's your image: professional. Gotta say, it works pretty well. Octavia's got the same thing going."

"I would certainly think so."

"So, have you decided?"

"Huh?"

Frederic looked up and saw the waitress standing there, ready to take their orders. In front of him was his cup of coffee, and Vinyl was already drinking her milkshake.

"Yeah," said Vinyl. "I'll have a waffle and some toast. Sourdough toast, I think."

"And you, sir?"

"Umm..." Frederic hadn't had time to think about his order, as Vinyl had distracted him with her conversation. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another waiter walking past their table. He watched as the waiter stopped at the stall Vinyl had formerly occupied. The waiter stood there, confused and a little dejected, before walking back to the kitchen.

"I think..." Frederic resumed. "I think I'll have the same thing. But with wheat toast."

"Alrighty, you two, I'll be back with your orders," said the waitress, floating their menus away from them.

"I mean, the whole 'professional' thing," Vinyl continued. "That's an image you put forward for ponies to see. And I figure the ponies who like classical music like ponies like that. I mean, could you see a pony like me playing one of those concert-O's?"

"Can't say I can..." Frederic said.

"Ahh, but you *do* have a personality," said Vinyl. "It's the whole..." She straightened her back. "Oh, *my*, I am ever so intellectually posh and my wit is razor-fine such that even my insults are polite."

Frederic was drawn to the conclusion that Vinyl was a great deal more intelligent and astute than her taste in music implied.

"And that's cool, you really put that into your music. That image suits it," she continued.

"Come again?"

"I mean, you have that whole 'stiff upper lip' thing going, so you play 'stiff upper lip' music," said Vinyl. "I mean, the music you play comes from that."

"I don't see why it should," said Frederic. "Just because I don't have a stormy 'image' doesn't mean I couldn't play a stormy piece."

"Well, then," said Vinyl. She took a sip from her milkshake. "I'm not sure what the point is. I mean, music is all about expressing yourself."

"Hardly," said Frederic. "I express the music that is on the page. I express the composer. If I want to express myself, I will compose. As it is, I am a musician, not a composer."

"Hey, that doesn't mean you have to be an automaton," said Vinyl. "I'm just saying you can put some feeling into what you play."

Frederic gave a weak laugh. "Feeling. That doesn't work very well for me." He sat back, holding his cup of coffee. "Let me tell you something. I've been playing piano my whole life, since I was a little colt. I'll never forget what happened at my first recital. I was working on a little piano sonata, nothing too difficult, but still, I practiced it for hours every day, just playing it over and over and over again. I loved that piece, and I couldn't wait for the recital, to share it with everypony."

"Well," said Vinyl, trying to piece together what his point was, "that's what I mean. I mean, what's wrong with that?"

"I'm not finished," said Frederic. "I played that piece as though it was coming out of my soul. And you know what? I was pretty proud of myself. At the next lesson after the recital, I asked my teacher what he thought of it." He looked at her, giving another weak laugh. "I asked for his honest opinion."

"And... what was that?"

Frederic took another sip of his coffee. This was the part he would never, ever forget. "I played it too fast. The tempo was inconsistent and it didn't match what the composer had written. I flat-out forgot about most of the dynamic markings. I got all the accents wrong. I was sloppy on the pedal, making all the notes run together. It was too rushed and too sloppy." He set down the cup. "That's what I got for playing with feeling."

Vinyl paused. She peered at him for a while, taking another long sip of her milkshake. "Honestly?" she asked. "Sounds more to me like your teacher was a bit of a jerk."

The waitress returned, floating their plates. "Well, here we are," she said. "Two waffles and two orders of toast. Now..."

"The wheat's mine," said Frederic.

"Figured you more for a white-bread type," said Vinyl as her order was placed in front of her.

"No," said Frederic, examining the jelly tray. "Wheat bread has more fiber."

Vinyl soon lost interest in the conversation as she began lathering her waffle with butter. Frederic did the same, though he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Vinyl was a lot less subdued. Frederic was not at all surprised when she took the pitcher of syrup and proceeded to drench her hapless waffle in it. However, he did not expect her to do the same with her toast. Vinyl remained oblivious as he stared at her.

"I loooove maple syrup," she said.

"Well, obviously."

"Here."

Vinyl floated the jug over to Frederic. He narrowed his eyes as he saw that there was only a thin line of syrup at the bottom.

"Look," said Vinyl, "if I could just suggest, maybe once you should cut a little slack. Loosen the bowtie and let everything out. Don't be afraid to indulge yourself."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Frederic. "You took all of the syrup."

• • •

Frederic stood at the door of Octavia's apartment. It was five minutes before two in the afternoon. He was regrettably early. He liked being early to rehearsal sessions, but arriving early to somepony's house was simply awkward.

He knocked at the door and waited for an answer. Tucked in his saddlebag was the piano score for the cello concerto Octavia was working on.

The door opened.

"Frederic! Glad you could make it," Octavia said. She held the door open. "Come in."

"Thank you kindly."

Frederic entered into Octavia's apartment. He looked around; it wasn't very different from his own place. Everything was neat and in order, though the upright piano in the corner didn't appear quite as worn from use as his. This was understandable, given that Octavia was a cellist and not a pianist. Said cello was propped up on a stand next to a chair.

"How have the rehearsals with the orchestra gone?" he asked, walking over to the piano.

"Miserably," she responded. "It's just what I was afraid of. I make one mistake and the whole thing stops. Then one of the trumpet players decides that it's hilarious to play his part up an octave."

"That's always annoying," said Frederic. He set down his saddlebag and took out the score. "So, where should we start from?"

Octavia sat down and readied her instrument. "Right at the beginning of the development," she said.

Frederic turned the score a few pages in. Frederic set his hooves on the piano and began to play. Octavia joined in on her cello. Obviously, Octavia wanted to make the practice as efficient as possible, opting to work on sections that had both of them playing.

Part of him wondered why she thought she needed to practice at all; she was so deft with her instrument that it seemed as though she was spontaneously perfect. The more practical side of him, however, knew that this was not true. No musician was worth anything without practice, and lots of it. Still, he admired her more than he could say.

They reached the cadenza, and Octavia stopped playing.

"It doesn't sound like you're having any trouble," said Frederic.

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Thanks," said Octavia. "Vinyl seems to think I always play perfectly, too."

"You know, I saw her earlier today," said Frederic. "She's quite, um..."

"She's special," said Octavia, smiling softly. "Very special. You're going to her club tonight, right?"

"Yes," said Frederic. "Hopefully I can survive it."

Octavia laughed. "Hey, Vinyl's music isn't bad. It just takes some getting used to."

"Does 'getting used to' it mean lowering my own intelligence?"

"Now, *Frederic*," said Octavia, "you need to broaden your horizons."

Frederic turned around in his seat to face her. "My Celestia," he said, "what has that mare *done* to you?"

Octavia laughed. "Honestly, Frederic, you're an awful snob sometimes. But really, even aside from music, Vinyl's a great mare. I think we might have something special."

"I see..." said Frederic. She raised an eyebrow at him. For a minute, Frederic was afraid that she'd realize the way he felt.

"Have you... ever *been* in love?" Octavia asked.

"What?" asked Frederic, caught off-guard. "I mean... Pah, you know me," he laughed. "I have the personality of a rock. No pony goes for that."

"Well, still," Octavia said. "There has to be somepony you like."

"Well," Frederic said uneasily, "there was once... *one* mare." He shook his head. "But nothing ever happened."

"The one that got away?"

"Something like that," said Frederic. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Let me guess," said Octavia, "it was one of those things where you had a crush, but never told her?"

"Well... something like that, yeah," he said.

"Tell me about her," said Octavia.

"Why?"

"Well, no reason. Just... curious, I guess. But we don't have to if you don't -"

"No," said Frederic. "It's alright. Just a little pointless. Nothing happened, and nothing ever *will* happen." Frederic paused. "But she was smart. She was sophisticated, and she was incredibly talented and skilled." He took a breath. "And... and she was the most beautiful pony I've ever known in my life. And she understood what beauty is and what beauty means." He gave a weak laugh. "But I never had a chance with her."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find your girl," said Octavia. "I think that there's somepony for everypony."

Frederic gave a weak smile and turned the score back a page. "Not for me, I'm afraid."

• • •

Frederic could hear the thumping "beats" from outside the club. He was not looking forward to this. *The Purple Horseshoe*, he thought, *that doesn't sound tacky at all.*

It wasn't a particularly large establishment: just some bar in a cheap end of town, but it did its best to dress itself up as a classier joint, up to the inclusion of a bouncer.

"And you are?" he asked.

"Frederic Horseshoepin," said Frederic.

"You a member?"

Frederic sighed. "No, but –"

"Can't you read the sign?" The bouncer pointed to a "MEMBERS ONLY" sign.

The door opened and a mare's head poked out. "Hey! Freddy! Glad you could make it!"

The bouncer looked at her.

"It's okay, Baller," she said, "he's with me." She looked back at Frederic. "Glad you could make it. Wish is dropping some maaaaad beats."

"Wish?" Frederic asked dubiously, but Vinyl was in no mood to explain. She threw open the door and dragged him inside. Inside it was almost completely dark, save for a few flashing lights. The noise that Frederic suspected was supposed to be music filled his ears, making it nigh-impossible for him to hear anything.

Up on a platform there was a unicorn with outrageous sunglasses standing at a turntable. Frederic suspected that this unicorn was responsible for the deplorable amounts of bass pulsing through the room. Around him ponies were dancing haphazardly.

"Vinyl?" Frederic asked, looking around. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Get offa my stage!" boomed a voice over the music. Frederic looked up and say that Vinyl had stepped onto the platform and was confronting the other unicorn.

"Whaddya mean, *your* stage?" answered the other unicorn, smiling slyly after her.

"*This* is what I mean!" she shouted, moving to the turntable in the center. "Who wants to hear some *real* music?"

The crowd shouted back in affirmation.

"I can't *hear* you!" Vinyl shouted back.

And I can't hear anything, thought Frederic as the roar from the club-goers nearly deafened him again.

"Well, you asked for it!" Vinyl threw a switch, and the music changed. The club went very quiet and Frederic wondered for a minute if he really *had* gone deaf. Then he heard a cello playing: Octavia's cello. He listened to it and came to the realization that this was the piece that Vinyl had asked her to play for. He smiled, admiring the music.

Of course, Vinyl had to ruin it by throwing in electronic sounds and a low bass beat. The cello was still there, but the DJ had thrown layers upon layers of electronic instruments over it, making some sort of bizarre hybrid. The crowd resumed its normal level of noise, dancing around Frederic as he just stood there, listening.

He couldn't figure out why these other ponies would want to make their own distractions when music was playing. *Doesn't that get in the way of listening to the music?* he wondered.

Frederic pushed his way through the crowd, trying to find a seat. He found a chair near the back that was unoccupied and sat down, letting out a relieved sigh.

The other unicorn, of course, barged back onto the platform at the end of the song. Frederic watched in his usual detached way, thinking about their relationship. Obviously they were performing partners, and they were carrying on some kind of "act."

"Booooooring!" shouted Vinyl's partner. "You call that real? Yeah, real *lame!*"

The crowd booed.

"Hey, she got nothin' on this!"

He started playing another song, one that was faster and louder. Frederic predictably cringed, both at the blast of music and from the realization that Vinyl Scratch apparently had a male twin. The crowd, on the other hand, seemed much more appreciative, as their jeers had turned to cheers.

After several songs, Frederic had to concede that the songs were "catchy" – not something he'd be caught dead playing, but it could pass for background noise. He laughed at himself as he could almost imagine Octavia chiding him for his snobbery.

He ordered a glass of milk and kept to himself while the club members continued with their high-energy partying.

• • •

The act continued for hours, until most of the ponies in the club had left. Frederic groaned, knowing that he was up far later than he should have been. He had by that point consumed what must have been a gallon of milk and was starting to feel a little sick from it.

"Well, how'd you like it?" Vinyl asked. "Wait, let me guess, you're going to say it was 'interesting,' right?"

"Saw right through my charade, didn't you?" said Frederic.

The other unicorn walked up.

"Ah, Frederic, this is my performing partner, Neon Lights, also known as MC-WISH."

"Heyo," said Neon. "Say..." He looked at Vinyl. "You didn't tell me you were into guys."

"Pfft," Vinyl said with a playful dismissive air, "don't get your hopes up."

"Oh you," said Neon. "So what do you do?"

"I'm a concert pianist," said Frederic.

"Cooool, that's neat, really neat," said Neon. "Vinyl, I swear, you keep picking up these classical music types. Like that violinist last week." Vinyl's face bore an uneasy expression.

Frederic might've expected him to get something wrong. This needed a correction. "Cellist."

"Huh?" asked Neon.

"She's a cellist, not a violinist," corrected Frederic.

"Ohhhh, no no no," said Neon. "That was *two* weeks ago."

Vinyl froze. It took Frederic a few seconds to put two and two together, but the embarrassed expression on Neon's face told the rest.

"*Excuse* me?" asked Frederic.

"Oops," said Neon. "Proooooobably shouldn't have said that..."

"Look, look, it wasn't..." Vinyl said, trying to cover herself. "She was an ex... we..."

"It doesn't concern me," said Frederic, standing up. "I should go. Thank you for inviting me. I'll be sure to compliment Octavia on her cello playing for that... piece of yours."

"Are you going to tell her about..." Vinyl asked nervously.

Frederic paused, mulling it over. He wondered if he might have a chance. If Vinyl was indeed cheating on Octavia, then perhaps their relationship wouldn't last. Then maybe, just maybe, he'd have a chance with her.

"No," he said at last. "But," he added, before Vinyl was able to let out a sigh of relief, "I think you should." He turned to leave, looking at the clock on the way out. "Good morning."

Frederic's job at the bar was a steady one. He was good at what he did and the regulars liked him well enough. It was fairly easy – all he needed to do was play tunes with the occasional request, and while sometimes it got a little dull, he was always happy to be at the piano with his thoughts.

His thoughts were still on Octavia and Vinyl Scratch. From what Neon said and Vinyl's reaction, it seemed that she'd been cheating on Octavia.

Figures the DJ would be the type. He snorted at the thought.

Still, he wondered what would happen. For a moment he had a thought: he could have gone straight to Octavia and told her that her girlfriend was cheating on her. What might that have done? Maybe she'd dump her. Or maybe she wouldn't believe him and would be mad at him for trying to break them up. He stopped playing as he thought about that. *Trying to break them up...* It was true: he wanted to tell Octavia about it in the hopes that maybe, just maybe, she'd break up with Vinyl and he might have a chance. But he couldn't do that – actively try to break them up just so he could get what he wanted.

"You alright?" asked the bartender.

"Oh - Yes, I'm fine," said Frederic, before he resumed playing.

Instead, he'd decided to give Vinyl the chance to come clean of her own accord. That, in the end, seemed like the right thing to do.

"Hey, piany," called one of the patrons. Frederic wondered how "piany" existed in any slang at all. "You take requests?"

"I certainly do, if I know the piece," said Frederic.

"How about 'My Love and Hers?'" asked the patron.

"I suppose," said Frederic, failing to hide his lack of enthusiasm.

"Hey, something wrong with my taste in music?" demanded the patron.

"No, no, nothing like that," said Frederic. "If I don't like your taste in music I'll be sure to tell you." He laughed. "It's just subject matter, really."

"Don't like sad songs?"

"I don't like love triangles," he said with a shrug. "Someone always ends up unhappy."

The bartender placed a malt on top of the piano, as usual. "Sounds like you're in a bit of a fix like that, yourself. She pretty?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," said Frederic.

• • •

The coffee was steaming, sending inviting little white wisps into the air. Frederic took a sniff, enjoying the scent. Softly, he blew onto the coffee, which was ostensibly to cool it off but was in reality little more than a force of habit.

Octavia sat across from him, with her own cup of coffee.

"So, what did you think of Vinyl's club?" she asked.

"I didn't," said Frederic, attempting to take a sip. *Still too hot*. He looked at Octavia and saw that she had raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I couldn't – it was too loud."

"Didn't like it?"

"Hmm," he mused. "Some of the tunes were... catchy. Vinyl's partner had a nice light show."

"Neon?"

"Yes," said Frederic. "He's a bit of a lout, really."

"Well, he's friendly."

"I guess that's one way of putting it," said Frederic. He tested his coffee for another sip. "I heard the song she did with your cello playing."

"Oh?"

"It was..." Frederic searched for a word. "Interesting. And – don't use that one 'witty' quip of hers."

Octavia laughed. The bell to the coffee shop opened and she looked up.

"Good afternoon, Vinyl."

Fred's ears pricked up as he turned around to see Vinyl Scratch walk awkwardly into the coffee shop, as though she had taken a deep breath just before opening the door.

"Hey, Octa."

Frederic found himself wonder again just what kind of pet name was *Octa*?

"Is something wrong, Vin?" Octavia asked.

Frederic stood up. "I have to use the bathroom," he said, stepping away from his seat. "Be back in a minute." He gave a blank look to Vinyl, who sat down in the seat next to his.

"Octa, I have to tell you something..."

Frederic didn't listen. He didn't *want* to listen. He just marched straight into the bathroom, shut the door, and walked right up to the sink. He put his hooves on the counter and stared at himself in the mirror.

So, he thought, she took my advice. I wonder what that means now? Will Octavia leave her? Will she forgive her? What if Vinyl cheats on her again? What if...?

He saw another pony standing next to him, also staring at the mirror. Frederic turned and looked at him, wondering just what he was doing.

"Um," said Frederic.

"Is this one of those 3D mirrors where if you stare at them for a long time you see a cool picture?"

"I don't think those exist."

"Oh..." The stranger paused and then turned to exit.

Frederic looked back at himself in the mirror. Dull, pathetic, self-pitying himself. He shook his head, mentally berating himself for the lovesick stupor he'd gotten himself into.

Gathering himself and taking a deep breath, he walked out of the bathroom. He stood in the doorway for a while, looking over at the table. Vinyl's head was low, and Octavia's

hoof was on her girlfriend's shoulder. Any hopes Frederic had of having what he wanted were dwindling by the second.

Or perhaps those hopes were never there. Just dreams.

He walked back up to the table, his expression as vacant and unflappable as ever.

"I'll do anything, Octavia..."

"It's okay," said Octavia.

"I want this to work," pleaded Vinyl, "I want *us* to work. I'll never... I'll never lie to you or go behind your back ever again. I swear."

"I know," said Octavia, putting her hoof on Vinyl's. "We'll make it work."

"Sorry about that," said Frederic, sitting down. He pretended to ignore them and returned to his coffee.

• • •

Evening came again, and he was back at the bar. There was one thing he was grateful for: his paycheck.

"Thank you," he said.

"No problem," said the bartender. "Glad ta have you working here."

"I'm glad to have a job," said Frederic.

There were fewer patrons tonight than there usually were. They were likely at the Wonderbolts show. Frederic had never bothered with them as he wasn't much of a sports pony. Athletic displays bored him.

Frederic played out on the piano. He was a bit more lethargic than usual, though, lazily plunking out a melody with simple block root position chords beneath.

"Something wrong, buddy?" asked the bartender. "You seem a bit tired."

The pianist looked up, surprised and a bit irritated that he'd let his composure slip.

"I'm fine," said Frederic. "Just got a lot on my mind."

"I'll bet," said the bartender. "Like that concert thing with the Brams."

"Brahmas," corrected Frederic. "And no, that's been cancelled."

"Naaaaaw," said the bartender in disbelief.

"Yaaaaaaaw," replied Frederic. "Things just don't always go my way," he sighed. "There will be other performances, anyway. I'm giving a recital at the Canterlot Music Conservatory in a few weeks. Maybe I can do the Brahmas there. Of course, that'll mostly be attended by bored music students looking for their concert attendance credit. Still, at least they applaud."

"Well, here's hoping for good luck," said the bartender.

"Here's hoping."

• • •

Frederic walked out of the theatre side-by-side with Ovation, who was high-strung, muttering rapidly to herself and shaking.

"Think I did okay?" she asked.

"I think so," said Frederic.

"I hope I get called back. And that I get the part."

Frederic chuckled. "Well, we'll hope for that. Just don't get the hopes up *too* high."

Ovation looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Just what does that mean?"

"Nothing," said Frederic. "Just... don't get your hopes up too high. It's just a safeguard against disappointment."

"Well that's a pretty crummy way of looking at things," she said. "I mean, we wouldn't be in this line of work if we didn't have our hopes up."

Frederic stopped. He had to pause and think about that. "I suppose..." he said, resuming his walk. "But really, you did well. I think you practiced a lot more than those other mares, which gives you an advantage."

"Well, thanks," said Ovation. She looked at him. "You're real big on the 'not getting disappointed' thing, aren't you?"

"I've always been fond of the philosophy of stoicism," said Frederic. "I don't let emotions get to me. It keeps me from getting angry, or upset, or let down..."

"That can't be healthy," she said, "letting all those emotions bottle up without letting them out..."

"Actually," said Frederic, "it's not healthy to lash out if you get angry. It just makes you more prone to doing it."

Ovation paused and thought about that. "Well... I guess," she conceded, "but still..."

"We'll see if you get the callback," said Frederic. "Be sure to let me know, okay?"

"Sure thing, Fred," said Ovation.

"Hey!" shouted a loud voice. "Fred!"

The two ponies stopped and turned around to find a very cheerful black earth pony beaming at them.

"Heya Fred!" called Ritardando again.

"Hello," said Frederic.

"Friend of yours?" asked Ovation.

"...Yes," said Frederic.

Ritardando trotted up to them. "I was hoping I'd bump into you!" Then, as though he'd forgotten what he was about to say, he turned to Ovation. "Hi, I'm Ritardando."

"Ovation," she said. "You a singer?"

"Yep!"

"Me too," she said. "Just auditioned for a musical."

"Ooh, which one?"

"Princess Rose."

"Ooooooh," said Ritardando, "I love that one." He took a breath and started to sing. *"I had a dreeeeam..."*

Ovation laughed. "Yeah, I actually auditioned with that song."

"And if it wasn't for me, then where would you be, miss DJ Pon-3?"

"What?" Frederic asked.

"Sweet Harmony," said Ritardando. "She..."

"Oh, okay..." Frederic blinked and shook his head, not sure what just happened. "I think I need to get home. Get some sleep." He looked at Ritardando. "So I'll be seeing you at your usual time next week?"

"Oh yeah, that," said Ritardando. "No."

Frederic stopped walking. "No?"

"Well, yeah," said Ritardando. "I mean no. I'm leaving."

There was a round of silence as he stood there, cheerful as ever, while Frederic tried to process the bluntness of that statement and Ovation didn't know him enough to care.

"Where to?" she asked.

"I dunno," said Ritardando. "Just gonna get on that road and go. Or maybe the train. Trains are fun."

"What, you're just gonna pack up and wander out of town?" Frederic asked.

"Uh-huh," Ritardando said. "So yeah, no coaching this week, okay?"

• • •

Patrons were asking for slightly 'edgier' songs, which was fine by him. With Ritardando inexplicably leaving town, that was another dent in his income. Granted, coaching sessions didn't amount to much, but that was another new gap in his schedule where he wasn't doing anything and he wasn't making money, and it was yet another frustration amidst other frustrations – the cancelled concert, Octavia...

"Hey, gimme one of those cranapple things. That's a funny word."

Frederic looked up. *No, not here...*

Vinyl Scratch had just walked into his usual place of work, alongside Octavia. She looked over and waved at Frederic.

"Heya, piany," she said.

"Good evening," said Frederic. "Never expected to see you two here," he said.

"Oh, friends of ol' Freddy here?" asked the bartender.

"Yes," said Octavia. "I'm a close colleague of his."

"Well, ain't that fantastic?" asked the bartender.

"I'll say," said Vinyl.

"Yes..." said Frederic. "Fan-tast-ic."

Octavia and Vinyl ordered their drinks as Frederic continued to pound out the patron's requests. Vinyl seemed to have struck up a lively conversation with a fellow patron as Octavia mostly kept to herself, drinking cider. As Frederic played, she looked over at him.

"Why don't you play one of your sonatas?" she asked. "You've got some memorized, right?"

"Hey, that sounds like a neat idea," said the bartender. "Show us one o' your fancy things?"

"Sure, I can take fancy," said Vinyl.

Frederic looked from them back to the piano. Figures that the classical musician would ask the other classical musician to, well, play classical music. He wasn't sure why, but he felt slightly uneasy about that. Still, a request was a request.

He decided to play a Most Art sonata. It was fairly typical, it started off bright – simple, but flashy, sure to impress a casual crowd. Lots of running notes, scales, things that

sounded impressive but weren't particularly difficult, especially with practice. He finished on a V-I cadence, and the other ponies applauded.

Frederic's expression, however, remained unchanged, and he simply moved on to the second movement. It was the slow movement, less impressive than the first, but more lyrical. Rather than giving a dazzling display of fast notes, it gave off a feeling of serene calmness that silenced the entire room.

Finally came the third movement – more like the first, fast and dazzling, but with a stronger punch to it, more challenging, more punishing if one were to miss a note. It was the true climax of the sonata. When the ending came the room was filled with silence. Then, applause.

He looked down at the keys. "Not good enough," he said. "Haven't played that in a while. Rusty. Missed some things."

"Naaw," said the bartender, "that was great!"

"There's a difference between modesty and selling yourself short, you know," said Octavia. Frederic looked at her with a pained expression.

"I don't like... 'tooting my own horn,'" he said, "it's not proper."

"Doesn't mean you have to beat on yourself," said Vinyl. "Like, man, you should sue that piano teacher of yours for psychological damage and stuff. That can't be healthy."

"Maybe..." said Frederic.

"Dude, you've been really down in the dumps lately," said the bartender. "Something eating you?"

"Nothing 'eats' me," said Frederic, displaying a distaste for figurative language.

"Come on," said Vinyl, "play another!"

Frederic grimaced, but it was still his job. So he played another piece. When that was over, the patrons requested another, and another, and another. Frederic wondered why he wasn't enjoying it more, though. Classical piano was infinitely more satisfying to play than usual pop fare, and the pieces were longer, meaning they made the time pass more quickly.

Maybe it was the fact that *Vinyl Scratch* was the one making him do it. That was it. It was the fact that the last pony he wanted on his mind was the one coming into his place of work. And she was *appreciating his craft* of all things. He knew it wasn't true, but in some self-loathing corner of his mind he felt like he saw her sneering, taunting at him, rubbing it all in.

After the fifth piece, he found that most of the bar patrons had left.

"Hey, what about those ballads?" asked Vinyl.

"*Ballades*, Vin," said Octavia.

"Why do you classicalist ponies all pronounce things differently?"

Frederic rolled his eyes and leaned over to his bag. He grumbled quietly to himself as he rummaged through all his loose sheet music. Finally, he found the Brahmas book...

"Oh, dirthorn!" exclaimed Vinyl, having finally found the clock. "I'm late to meet with Neon!" She scrambled to get up. "Love ya Octa," she said, kissing her on the cheek before bolting out of the door.

Frederic sat there, staring at the cover of the Brahmas book.

"See?" asked Octavia, "She can appreciate the music we play." Frederic, however, didn't respond. "Frederic? Are you alright?"

Frederic slowly opened the Brahmas book to the beginning of the first Ballade. "When do I get my turn?" he asked.

"Frederic, it's not your fault they cancelled the concert..."

"But you got your concert. Ovation is getting her musical. Vinyl doesn't seem to be hurting for gigs. Harpo, Brass, Pizzicato, they all seem to be doing fine. Where does that leave me?"

Octavia wasn't sure how to respond. With a pony this mopey, careful wording was needed.

"Look," she said, "this isn't an easy line of work. But we don't do it because it's successful." She walked over to him, reading the music over his shoulder. "We do it because it's beautiful and we love it."

"Because we love it..." Frederic repeated. "I don't like loving things."

"That's absurd, Frederic."

"Easy for you to say, you're happy with what you love," said Frederic. "But I don't get anything out of it. It just hurts. What's the point of loving if it only hurts?"

Frederic silenced himself, just staring at the music. Everything was coming together – the music, the mare he loved, everything that made him feel let down. He and Octavia sat there in silence for a few minutes.

"I think," said Octavia at length, "that sometimes we have to hurt a little. It's the only way we can grow." Frederic didn't say anything. "This isn't just about that concert, is it?"

"Well, it's part of it..."

"You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"No."

Octavia sighed. "It'll get better, Frederic. You'll get your turn. It might not be for a while, but then it might be sooner than you think. In the meantime you have your piano and you have your friends. You'll always have those. Hey..."

Frederic looked at her.

"Smile once in a while, okay?" she asked, smiling gently at him.

"I'll try," he said, closing the book and looking down at the cover, still stewing in his self-pity. And he thought to himself that maybe there was a reason that Vinyl had won and not him.

"I haven't been honest with you..." he said. "Octavia, I love you."

There was no response. He looked up and found that the bar was empty; Octavia had left.

A cheerful bit of whistling broke the silence as the bartender came out of the bathroom.

"Well, everypony's gone," he said. "Time to pack up." He stopped, noticing Frederic's forlorn expression. "Hey, buddy, you okay?"

"I-I'm fine," said Frederic.

"You sure? I gotta lock up."

"R-right, right..." Frederic hastily shoved the book into his bag and marched out the front door.

He stood out in front of the door, staring out into the dark, cold Canterlot night. The streets were empty, with not even a breeze to betray life in the city. For the first time he found himself rattled and scared by the night.

What's wrong with me? he wondered to himself. As his heart began to race, all he wanted was to get home. He galloped through the streets, not paying attention to anything but the path right in front of him, straight back to his apartment.

When he finally arrived home, he threw open the door and looked inside. Everything was still, calm, the only noise being his breathing and heartbeat. He leaned against the door, slowly sliding down to the floor.

What's wrong with me? he asked again. *Oh, no... I'm having a meltdown...* He clenched his eyes shut and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

He had come so close to... something. He wasn't sure what it was, and it scared him. It shook him and made him feel like he'd never get a grip on his thoughts again.

He'd nearly told Octavia how he felt. If she hadn't left she'd have known everything, and then what? Frederic didn't know.

He opened his eyes again. There was his apartment, and there was his piano. Realizing that he looked like an utter fool, he stood up and closed the door, bolting it shut. Slowly, he approached the piano. He sat down at the bench, opened the lid on the keys, and looked at the empty stand. He looked down at his hooves already at the keys.

He wondered to himself if there was some sort of revelation there. Maybe there was. Maybe he'd figure it out. For now, however, he had his piano, and somehow that clunky little upright gave him a sense of grounding.

"And so the jerk says that what I make isn't 'real music,'" said Vinyl. "What does that even *mean*?"

"I take it to mean that your acquaintance is an awfully pretentious pony," Octavia replied. They were sitting at their usual table in the coffee shop at that usual time when Octavia had scheduled for coffee. She found herself looking towards the door, though. Frederic was usually supposed to come around now, and she was worried about him.

"Y'know, it's like," Vinyl said, "okay, I don't know about all the music stuff you know about. And you don't know all the music stuff I know about."

"I'll have to admit that."

"But the thing is, we're smart enough to know this, and so we're also smart enough to not open our big dumb mouths. This guy? He doesn't."

The door opened, sounding the chime, and Octavia looked to see Frederic enter. He didn't walk the same way he usually did. He seemed a little rattled, a little nervous, as though he were unsure of what he was doing. Oddly enough, he also had his bag with him. He went to the counter and ordered himself a coffee and a croissant, before approaching their table.

"Hi," he said. "Nice to see you."

"Heya," said Vinyl. "Y'know, I should learn to play keyboard better. I mean, all I can do is plunk out a tune."

"Are you okay?" Octavia asked. "You seemed a bit..."

"I'll be fine," said Frederic. "It's just I wanted to say..."

"Hey, coffee!" said Ritardando as he trotted up to the counter. "...I don't really like coffee. Can I have juice instead?"

Vinyl raised an eyebrow at the odd basso.

"Thanks!" said Ritardando, before trotting over to Frederic with a juicebox in his mouth.

"This a friend of yours?" asked Octavia.

"Hhh-hh!" mumbled Ritardando through his juice box. Realizing how silly he appeared, he set the box down. "Yeah! Freddy is buying me a train ticket! And then he's coming with me!"

"What?" asked both mares simultaneously.

"I..." said Frederic. "I'm leaving. Just for a little, though. Ritardando said he was leaving town and, well, I think I should be outside Canterlot. Just for a while. I'll get on the train and then I'll come back later."

"Heh. Pretty neat," said Vinyl. "Didn't think you'd be all spontaneous like that."

"But when will you be back?" asked Octavia.

"I don't know," said Frederic. "I probably won't be very long. Just until I've had some time to think."

"Welp, gotta go!" piped Ritardando.

"Goodbye, Octavia."

"Goodbye, Frederic."

"Well, see ya," said Vinyl.

The two mares watched as the two stallions walked out of the coffee shop.

"Dude," said Vinyl. "What's up with him?"

"I'm not sure," said Octavia. "I think something happened to him, and it broke him a little. I think he's a little scared."

"Eesh..." Vinyl muttered.

"But I think that's life," Octavia concluded. "He'll be alright. He just needs some time."