



Oh, Octavia!

By ScoopDaily

# Table of Contents:

Prologue	3
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2	25
Chapter 3	43
Chapter 4	64

# Prologue

It was a bright and beautiful day in Canterlot. The weather ponies had cleared the skies of clouds and taken the rest of the day off, allowing Celestia's sun to bathe Equestria in its light. Golden beams shone down on the marble and cobblestone streets, brightening the entire city by several lumen.

No structure in Canterlot, however, was accentuated more by the sun's rays than the Equestrian Ministry of Music. The stunning columns of stone forming its outdoor atrium reached skyward, ascending so high they appeared to bend inwards as they climbed. Stunning statues of famous musical ponyalities decorated every alcove and open space in the stunning courtyard. Fountains filled with glittering water cast wavering light effects wherever the sun's rays had struck them and bounced off. Curved marble steps ascended from the courtyard to a row of polished wooden doors set deep in the side of the main building. Above the doors was an impressive, golden coat of arms emblazoned with Celestia's crest. Beneath the sign, carved into the stone, was the Ministry's motto: "Music is Magic".

Scoop took all of this in with a glance as he approached from the street. The Ministry was truly an impressive building, crowned on top by a shining glass cupola. He would have enjoyed taking in his surroundings for awhile longer, but Scoop had more important things on his mind. He clopped up the steps and pushed open one set of doors marked "Unlocked".

Scoop found himself in a dimly-lit anteroom. Left and right were the other entry doors, but these ones were heavily barred from the inside. On busier days, every door would be propped open to allow the masses to enter; today, however, only a few ponies were either visiting the ministry or studying the various musical arts.

Mahogany furniture and accents adorned his surroundings, and luxurious velvet upholstery cushioned every chair, couch, and stool in the room. The walls were a deep scarlet speckled here and there with gold

images. The predominant theme was, of course, music; the images were of instruments, musical notes and symbols, and other musical fanfare.

Scoop took a seat in the nearest chair and began to wait; he could hear the hustle and bustle of the street below through the three arched windows on the west side of the room. Light filtered down and accented the deep burgundy of the plush carpet, turning it to a burnished bronze. Rich, flowery odours permeated the room. Scoop found it somewhat hard to bear the overpowering smell, but he had an incredible sense of smell. Other ponies may have found the aroma intoxicating.

Time passed very slowly as Scoop ticked off the minutes. He had arrived promptly at 1:50 p.m., and it was now well past 2:30. Had the illustrious musical minister forgotten their appointment?

As Scoop wondered this, a soft hissing sound signaled the opening of the large, mahogany door opposite Scoop's chosen alcove. A mousy pony in a pinstriped business suit shuffled through the door, scuffing his hooves on the carpet.

"P-pardon me, Mr. Daily," he began. "Crescendo will see you now."

Scoop took a deep breath and exhaled an exasperated sigh. "About time," he mumbled under his breath. Scoop's facade seemed to impress the mousy pony, but in reality, Scoop was quite nervous; this would be the *first* interview anypony had ever had with Equestria's most famous musical prodigy.

Scoop followed the mousy pony through the doors and into a corridor lined with the same rich tapestries and brass fixtures with which the room behind had been decorated. They walked for what seemed like miles before reaching a rather ornate set of doors inlaid with stained glass. A plaque above the door summarized the Ministry's message: "Music is the Page Upon Which the Text of Life is Written."

*Indeed,* thought Scoop. *Music is Equestria's forte, it's soul; without music, this fair kingdom will be plunged into a night far blacker than that brought on by Nightmare Moon. This night would be a night unending; an eternally soundless void where no rescue would arrive and no hope of escape could be harboured. But, thanks to her...*

Scoop shook off this momentary lapse in his ordinarily rigid objectivity. *Can't let my personal feelings get in the way of being a good reporter.*

As the mousy pony heaved open one of the massive doors, another wave of aromatic perfume washed over Scoop; this time, however, the perfume had a light, rosy odor mixed with the scent of musty paper.

The large room was a cylinder of sorts, and seemed to bore straight up through the building like a massive drill; the winding staircase in the center of the room simply added to this comparison. Scoop remembered seeing the large, glass dome at the very peak of the Ministry of Music's roof.

Scoop had come all the way from Manehattan to meet Equestria's resident Mistress of Music. Sadly, her busy schedule had kept him from seeing her dozens of times before. Scoop was a good reporter; all of Equestria had read his articles on the events of Nightmare Moon, the Parasprite Invasion, and of course the hostile takeover of the Grand Galloping Gala by six misfit ponies from a little town called Ponyville. Even so, the Ministry had refused him an audience for months, even going so far as to send an emissary to reject him in person. Discouraged, Scoop had sent out one last letter, swearing to give up should this one not yield a success.

Almost one year to the day after Scoop had begun his attempts, an official-looking letter arrived. It was not the letter, however, that captured Scoop's attention; it was the seal of Crescendo Rigoberto, the Ministry's president. Scoop tore the letter open eagerly, almost ripping it in his excitement. Shaking with anticipation, Scoop had begun to read:

"Dear Mister Daily,

"We here at the Ministry of Music strive hard to protect our acolytes from the prodding ears, eyes, and worst of all pens off the press. It is no secret that great musical talent breeds publicity, and some ponies just can't handle being in the public eye.

“However, the particular pony you are interested in happens to be our pride and joy, a pony without equal. We have recognized her talent from a very young age and, therefore, have taken a special interest in preparing her for a life in the spotlight. Although we are loathe to allow any press within the guarded confines of our walls, we have been very impressed with your articles on the recent events and happenings in Equestria. We believe that you have done a fair job of staying objective and seeing both sides of any issue and have, therefore, decided to acquiesce to your requests for an interview.

“Please be at the Ministry of Music Main Hall by 2 o’clock p.m., Equestrian Standard Time. You will be escorted into a private room where you will be given an audience with Miss Pie for exactly 2 hours. Please think about what you would like to say beforehand, as she is quite a busy pony. We feel we are being more than generous.

“Regards,

“Crescendo Rigoberto, President of the Equestrian Ministry of Music”

Scoop had cheered when he read that they were *actually* giving him an interview. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that other famed reporters, some far more accomplished and well respected than himself, had tried to obtain a similar interview and had failed. Most had given up after a few tries, but not Scoop Daily!

Still, his reporters spark had kicked in, and he had quickly penned out a list of the most important experiences he could think of. Over the next week, this list had been revised, replanned, and finally rewritten as he thought of the amazing article he would write.

*I just can’t believe it, he thought to himself. How could I get so lucky?*

Now, here he was, standing in the Ministry’s inner sanctum.

At the apex of the massive cylinder was a glass dome, held together by burnished bronze struts. The glass was curved over these struts to give it a bubble-like feeling, and yet it was graceful, sophisticated, even antique.

All of this caught Scoop's attention as he now stood beneath the dome, bright light filtering down through the struts, criss-crossing the room with a web of shadow. The room was a large circle with a central staircase. Stretching out from this central staircase like the spokes of a wagon wheel were shelf upon shelf of tomes which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be orchestral works.

The entire room was, quite literally, filled with music. Bookcases lined every wall, guard rail, and even the coffee tables in the reading areas were covered with musical works and books of musical theory.

Soft chairs were arranged here and there to create reading areas where any interested pony could satisfy his love for music, learn a new piece, or even practice. Scoop noticed that several music and instrument stands had been arranged in these reading areas. Not only was practice allowed in the library, it was encouraged. *This is truly a Mecca to fine music*, Scoop mused. *A pony can find their calling here.*

The mousy pony appeared beside him and pointed towards the staircase.

"Climb the stairs all the way to the top. There are four levels; this level and the next two levels are the library levels. Once you reach the top of the staircase, have a seat in the waiting area next to the doors; someone will be there to escort you shortly."

*Great*, Scoop thought. *More waiting.*

Scoop began the long climb up the staircase, feeling the warmth of the sun against his coat. The sounds of pages turning and a few softly-played instrumental pieces were the only sounds in the library. Ponies from all walks of life sat about with their instruments, probing the endless musical library for undiscovered secrets; a few were writing music as they went, which would no doubt be added to the library's extensive collection.

Finally reaching the top of the staircase, Scoop realized it was devoid of the musical students that had populated the lower levels; indeed, it was devoid of anypony at all. The walls were a deep, burnished oak. It was an atrium of the higher echelon; no tables, no lamps, nothing to ruin the perfect aesthetic beauty of the circle. Directly ahead was a set of twin

doors, these ones far simpler than the ones downstairs had been. Yet, they were much larger and were fitted firmly into the wall. Scoop would hazard a guess that these doors made no sound when opened, so perfectly were they set upon their hinges.

Scoop sat down in one of the hard-backed chairs in the small waiting area. Apparently, those who made it to this level of the building had to want it bad; if he didn't know any better, Scoop would guess that nopony had been up here for years. A thin layer of dust floated through the shafts of sunlight, and Scoop felt the sudden urge to sneeze.

Scoop heard a click as the handle on the massive door turned and both doors swung inward. Two white Pegasi in tuxedos walked out and flanked the door on either side. An elderly pony in a burgundy suit, his mane slicked back with copious amounts of hair product, walked forward and stuck out his hoof.

"Mr. Daily," the pony said, just as nice as you please. Scoop thought he detected a note of sarcasm under the pony's pleasant demeanor. "We corresponded by letter. I am Crescendo, President of the Ministry. Welcome."

Scoop shook the pony's hoof. Crescendo hung on for just a second too long, clutching Scoop's hoof tightly before letting go.

"I hope I was very clear in the letter; the interview was to begin promptly at 2 and is still to end at 4. Mrs. Pie's schedule is very strict, and I won't have a reporter taking any of her valuable time." Crescendo had put a little too much emphasis on the word *reporter*, tipping Scoop off to the fact that he didn't think too highly of Scoop's profession. "Please, follow me."

Crescendo lead Scoop down a dark hall lined with lanterns. In stark contrast to the old-yet-modern stylings of the atrium and solarium, this hall felt like a medieval castle. Soft flame flickered from the walls illuminating the gold weave in the carpet beneath his feet. Burgundy tapestries hung in the space between torches, and a pervading odor of musk and cinnamon filled the air. Crescendo hummed softly to himself and swished his tail back and forth. Scoop had to slow down to avoid stepping on it.



Reaching the end of the corridor, they came to another set of oak doors. This set was darker than the first with aged bronze accents and fittings. Crescendo rapped on the door with his hoof and a jingle from the other side signaled the use of keys to unlock the door. Crescendo looked over his shoulder with a smirk.

“We keep our prized possessions under lock and key, Mr. Daily. My apologies; it’s just a matter of security.”

Scoop scowled back at the pompous earth pony, who stepped back as the massive doors swung inward. A rush of cool air and beams of light shot from within, and Crescendo motioned him past. “She’ll be waiting for you. Please, remember your time constraints. She’s a very busy pony, Mr. Daily.”

Walking through the set of doors, another pair of Pegasi latched them closed and locked it. There was an air of finality in the way the twin Pegasi moved, and Scoop found himself feeling nervous once again.

His nervousness quickly dissipated, however, when he took in his surroundings. This room was much more inviting than the rest, and with the glory of the solarium, that was saying something. Soft, plush carpeting padded his footfalls as he moved towards the center of the room. Simple yet sophisticated oak furniture, upholstered in soft purples and whites, adorned every corner and the center of the room. He could smell incense and a rich perfume wafting from somewhere in the room, but looking around yielded nothing.

It was the sound, more than the sights and smells, that invited Scoop. A low, moaning sound reverberated off the walls, changing in pitch and tune ever few seconds. Suddenly, the notes sped up, creating a faster harmony, crescendoing to a final, high-pitched finish. Scoop found himself applauding in obvious wonder. He wiped tears from his eyes with both hooves.

“Please, please, hold your applause until the interview is over,” said a voice in front of him. Scoop looked into a darkened corner of the room...and there she was.

She was short. This didn't surprise Scoop, as he had seen many pictures of her and had noticed her small size. What surprised Scoop was the size of her instrument. Cellos are, by nature, very large. Coupled with the fact that this particular Cello was the largest in all of Equestria, and was famed for being so, it made poor Octavia look even shorter.

Octavia laid her bow on a stand next to the instrument and dropped to all fours. She padded forward, her footfalls muffled by the plush carpeting. Her lavender eyes sparkled with a hidden mischief, and yet she carried herself gracefully, almost as if she were making sure each foot were absolutely stable on the ground before taking another step.

"Miss Octavia," said Scoop, rubbing the back of his neck with a hoof. "I, unfortunately, am unable to hold my impartial edge in the presence of such a great artist. Journalists are supposed to keep an objective view of things, you know."

Octavia laughed daintily. "Well, Mr. Daily, music in itself is impartial. Does music pick or choose who hears it? Does it become offended when you choose one side of its personality over another? Does it try to guard itself when you begin to dig into it for a deeper meaning? I would say, Mr. Daily, that music, in itself, breeds impartiality."

Scoop was awestruck by Octavia's intellect; ordinarily, famous musicians were good for one thing and one thing only: music. Outside of the hallowed concert halls, amphitheatres, rock venues, etcetera, they were as useless as newborn babies. He found himself at a lack for words.

Sensing his apprehension, Octavia saved him the trouble: "I hear you're a very special reporter, Mr. Daily. Many people say there's magic in your articles that they can find nowhere else. Yet, you are obviously not a unicorn; what type of magic could you possibly hold?"

Scoop found his voice. "Miss, I've been given a very special gift: the gift of good journalism. I had that gift long before I was given any others. I can pull out any notepad in my vault of such notepads and recreate the article exactly as I did years back. This isn't to say that more 'recently acquired' gifts aren't useful as well, but all magic has to start somewhere; usually, it's with raw ability."

“Humble little thing, aren’t you?” Octavia chided. Scoop blushed, and Octavia giggled. “Oh, please don’t be embarrassed, Mr. Daily; I was only having a little fun at your expense. Don’t take offense to it; you see, since I’m quite isolated here, I have to ‘get my licks in’, as it were, however I can.”

Scoop nodded. “Well, then, now that the introductions have been made; you know who I am, I know who you are, etcetera, why don’t we get down to brass tacks?”

Now it was Octavia’s turn to nod. “Alright, but remember, we’re on a schedule. I myself could stand to be interviewed for hours by a reporter such as yourself, but Crescendo sees my life as a possession of the Ministry. My time is his time, and he will not have his time wasted. He defines what waste is, as well.”

“Okay...now, if you’ll just have a seat here, we can get started,” said Scoop, motioning to one of the velvet chairs in the center of the room. Octavia settled in, daintily crossing her forehooves and tossing her hair over her shoulder. Scoop pulled another chair directly in front of Octavia’s. “Now,” said Scoop. “I am the only reporter in the whole of Equestria who has to ask this question regularly: Do you mind if I violate your personal space for the sake of this interview?”

Octavia smiled knowingly and shook her head. “I had heard,” she began, “That your power required some kind of touch...I had prepared myself for this. At first I was apprehensive, but when I learned that you would not only be seeing through my eyes, but feeling and thinking through me as well...I was sure this had to be the only way an unbiased account of my life could be given. You will see it as I saw it, won’t you?”

Scoop nodded quickly. “Yes indeed, Miss, and that leads us to question two: Are there any parts of my life you would like me to skip over? I mean, for the sake of this interview I would prefer not to, but you will be reliving your past as I relive it. Some memories are painful, and I’m not a monster; I will be sensitive to that. If something starts to feel particularly uncomfortable, just pull away from me. We’ll wait a second for you to recover, and continue at the next available memory.”

Octavia sighed. “I suppose there are a couple things that may be uncomfortable for me, but the past is the key to the future, as they say.

Perhaps a second look at my life will shed some new light on things I regret. In addition, I'll have a second opinion as well. You may see things differently...help me sort out some details, you know."

"Yes," said Scoop. "So, are we ready to begin?"

Octavia looked about ready to give her assent when a look of curiosity spread across her face. "I must say, I am wondering where you GAINED this ability. Are you perhaps at liberty to tell me?"

Scoop smiled. "Let's just say that I have friends in very high places; those friends owed me a favor at one point, and this is what I asked for."

"You simply must tell me all about it some time," said Octavia. "How such a marvelous gift could be garnished is no doubt a story worth hearing."

"I'm a reporter, Miss Octavia," said Scoop. "I listen to other peoples stories. Maybe one day I'll tell my own, but for now, I'm satisfied learning others'."

"Then let's begin," said Octavia.

Scoop sat in the chair in front of Octavia and placed his hooves on the sides of Octavia's head. "Now, to make this easier," Scoop began, "Think back as far as you can remember. Take me as close to the beginning as we can go."

Octavia exhaled deeply and closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed as Scoop whispered soothing encouragement to her. "That's it," he said. "Imagine a time machine...let's go back as far as you can remember..."

# Chapter 1

As Octavia lapsed into near-unconsciousness due to Scoop's relaxation methods, Scoop allowed a look of dread to come over his face. Reading another's thoughts was easy; he could do that effortlessly. Seeing another person's memories was quite different; it required you to give a piece of yourself to them for a while. It sounded simple at first, but Scoop had found it to be a painful experience.

Scoop felt more than heard the rushing of his own consciousness through a swirl of emotions and memories, and with that, he was falling rapidly down a tunnel of swirling colors, voices, tastes, smells, and textures. "Shoot!" Scoop exclaimed! "I forgot to explain the exit strategy."

He had to think fast; there were only a couple more seconds between him and hitting the bottom of Octavia's memory bank: her very first memory. Normally, this wouldn't be an issue, but at the speed Scoop was travelling, slamming into the memory could rip it to shreds, leaving nothing but a void of scattered sensations.

"Octavia!" Scoop shouted! "Octavia, I need you to slow down! Coast through your memories to find the one you want! I'm in no hurry!"

Scoop heard nothing, and the memories continued to speed by. "Octavia, if you can hear me, you need to slow down! If I enter your memory at this speed, there is a serious danger of me tearing it from your mind! You wouldn't be able to remember it anymore!"

"I'm trying!" a voice echoed back, distant and seeming to come from the bottom of the memory bank. "Hold on!"

Scoop felt himself begin to slow, but not by much. He was still speeding past so quickly that the mixed stimuli flowing through his senses were giving him a headache. He began to feel lightheaded and, losing his precarious balance, flipped over, his back to the bottom of the hole.

Realizing the position he was in, Scoop began to flail to regain his upright position, but it was no use. He was traveling headfirst down a shaft of memories so deep that time itself couldn't possibly fill the cracks in between. "I hate this part," said Scoop, just before he slammed headfirst into a hardwood floor.

---

"Scoop..." he heard the distant voice say. "Scoop...are you okay?"

Scoop opened his eyes and pain flashed in his head. He clamped them back shut, groaning as his head pounded. Octavia had, apparently, seen him open his eyes.

"Ah, good! I was very worried there for a moment, but you seem to have pulled through alright. Get up; we're here."

Scoop opened his eyes again, this time forcing them to stay wide as the pain flashed again. As light blinded him, he began to use his other senses to get a feel for the world around him. He was laying on a rough surface, not solid enough to be concrete, stone, or marble, but not soft enough to be dirt or grass. Perhaps a rough-hewn wood floor? Reaching a hoof out, he brushed it across the surface of the floor. Yes, it was wood, ancient and solid by the feel. It had once been very smooth, but was worn to this state by many years of hard use.

He could smell must and other pungent odors. A family meal, eaten hours ago; a moist, earthy smell, possibly mud or fresh-cut grass; and the sterile, sharp smell of alcohol. Not drinking alcohol; there must have been some medical application.

As his vision cleared, he could see he was in a large room, furnished humbly in the same wood of which the floor consisted. Unlike the floor, the wood furniture had been sanded smooth time and again to remove splinters. A tall, sturdy table, more utilitarian than beautiful, was surrounded by five or so matching wooden chairs. On one end of the table was a highchair.

Scoop lifted his head off the floor and saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning to face the source, he heard a sigh of relief. "Oh,

good. You seem to be moving about just fine. Get up this instant and tell me where we are! I haven't the faintest idea of how to leave, in the even that we should need to, of course."

Octavia stood before him, looking perplexed, excited, and...nervous? Scoop was normally a very good judge of ponies, but Octavia was hard one to read. Her elegant demeanor often foiled the attempts of the press to scrutinize the way she felt about things, and Scoop was the best of the best at seeing past her facade.

Rising onto his forelegs and pushing off the floor, the pain in Scoop's head subsided, and he found he was able to move without discomfort. Octavia stood next to the table, huffing silently in frustration. He found it was necessary to calm her.

"You tell me, Octavia. It's your memory, after all; if I've done everything right, it's your first memory!"

Octavia looked surprised, then began to scrutinize the room. Her eyes widened almost to the size of saucers and she gasped. "Of course! I cannot believe I hadn't recognized it! This is my parents' home! This is where I grew up! And that means..."

Before she could finish, they were interrupted by a small voice, coming from the fore of the room. "Is mommy okay, Inky?"

Turning to search for the source of the voice, Scoop spotted a door at the far end of the room, next to which were two chairs, pushed up against the wall. In either chair sat a filly, one slightly older than the other. The one to the right was a dark gray-brown with a light gray mane and tail; the one to her left was clearly recognizable as a very young Octavia. It was her whose voice they had heard.

"Mommy is fine," the elder pony said. "She's just having a foal. That takes a long time."

"She sounds like she's hurting," the young Octavia squeaked. "Let's go help her."

"We can't help her, Tav. Daddy and the doctors are doing a good job. We just have to wait out here like Daddy said."

Octavia then slumped back into her seat and began kicking her legs, causing the chair to bang against the wall. The door cracked open a bit and, in a hoarse whisper, one of the occupants shushed Octavia. Blushing in embarrassment, she straightened up in the chair again and folded her forelegs between her knees.

Scoop almost laughed at young Octavia's antics, but the elder Octavia shot him a cold look. "I was three, Scoop. I most certainly didn't know any better, and Inkette was not doing anything to alleviate my boredom. If I recall correctly..."

Again Octavia was cut off by her young self, who this time climbed off the chair and walked to a low bookshelf on the other side of the room. "Isn't she going to see us?" the elder Octavia asked.

"Of course not," Scoop assured her. "This isn't time travel; all we're doing is reliving your memories. They can't touch us, see us, or hear us. We're just omniscient observers."

This seemed to relax Octavia, and she studied her young self closely, even daring to take a few steps towards where Inkette was still sitting. Noticing her sister's movement, Inkette whispered harshly: "What are you doing, Tav? Daddy said to stay in the chair! I'm telling!"

Tav turned a cold stare on her sister, face tinged with a mixture of boredom and frustration. "I'm just getting my book!" she hissed. She pawed through the books on the shelf and her face cracked into a grin when she found the one she was looking for.

Taking the hard cover children's book into her mouth, she trotted back across the room and climbed onto her chair. She folded the cover back and brushed a hoof across the title page. Scoop couldn't see the page from where he was standing, but the elder Octavia squealed in excitement.

"It's *The Music Pony*!" she gushed. "I haven't seen that book in ages! My parents must still have it; it used to be my favorite book! It's the reason I'm..."



“Shhhh!” Scoop cut her off; Octavia huffed indignantly. “Look!”

The young Octavia was looking down at the cover and back up at Inkette, studying her sister’s face. Inkette noticed Octavia’s imploring gaze. “No, Tav. Just be quiet.”

“But...” Octavia began; Inkette shushed her. “Inky, please. Just this once.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“I know, but I promise this time! Just while we wait for the baby!”

Octavia had grown a little louder with this request, her voice slipping into the whiny tone so common among young fillies. Finding it easier to just read the book than to shush her sister again, Inkette sighed and her shoulders sagged.

“Fine. But you have to promise to be quiet the rest of the time if I read this. ‘Kay?”

Octavia smiled brightly and nodded rapidly. “Promise!” she said.

Inkette took the book and set it in her lap; Octavia scooted closer, snuggling into Inkette’s side. The elder Octavia moved to within a hair’s breadth of where her younger self sat, trying to gain a better view of the book. Scoop could tell that Octavia was trying to maintain her graceful air; even so, she was nearly buzzing with excitement.

“The Music Pony,” Inkette began. “By H. P. Hoofwell.”

She turned the cover page and dug into the story.

“There once was a magical pony. He traveled far and wide across the land. He pulled a cart behind him wherever he went. His cart was filled with musical instruments.” Another page turn. “Banjos, violins, guitars, mandolins, dulcimers, lumberjack pianos, piccolos, flutes, and all manner of musical contraption were his.” As she read off the list of instruments, Inkette pointed to the instruments on the page, getting into the story herself.

“What’s a dul-sim-ber?” said the young Octavia; the elder Octavia had to stifle a laugh, not wanting to spoil the mood.

Inkette giggled. She pointed to an oblong, guitar-like instrument with long strings and a narrow middle. “It’s played like a guitar, but it makes funny sounds!”

“Oh!” said Octavia, smiling brightly. “Okay, keep reading!”

---

Scoop and Octavia watched as Inkette wove a tale of music, friendship, and a magic rooted firmly in the hands of earth ponies. Sure, pegasi and unicorns *could* learn music; in fact, some became quite proficient at it. Yet, earth ponies had a natural affinity for all musical, and many earth ponies could pluck out a tune on a guitar without ever having touched one before. It was a magic Scoop himself was quite proud of, he being an accomplished flautist.

The elder Octavia wiped tears from her eyes as the story came to a close. At several intervals, they had been interrupted as a quavering moan rent the air. Even Inkette, normally composed and sensible, had looked more and more worried each time they heard their mother’s cry. By the time the tale had come to a close, the young Octavia was nearly in hysterics.

“They’re hurting mommy, Inky! I hear them hurting mommy!”

Inkette hopped down from her chair. “Where are you going, Inkyyyyy?!?” squealed Octavia, clambering off her own chair and plunking down behind Inkette. “Don’t go! Let’s go help mommy!”

“Whaddya think I’m doing, Tav?” she queried, pounding on the door with a small hoof. “Daddy, is mommy okay?” she yelled.

The door creaked open and, for the first time, the young Octavia caught a glimpse of her father’s face. “Mommy’s fine, girls,” he said sternly. “Sit down and be quiet. If you make any noise, mommy will hurt worse.” He

shut the door a little harder than he needed to, nearly catching Inkette's nose in the crack.

Inkette's face was a mask of conflicted emotions. If they stayed silent, mommy would keep hurting. If they made noise, mommy would hurt worse. A child's drive to aid its parent finally won out against her curiosity, and Inkette looked into Octavia's eyes. "We have to help mommy by being quiet," Inkette whispered. "Daddy says mommy will hurt worse if we make too much noise."

Octavia looked horrified, then nodded rapidly. "Okay!" she whispered hoarsely, turning and nearly hurling herself onto the chair.

At this point, the memory wavered. Scoop looked at the elder Octavia, who was sobbing at this point. She was trying desperately to compose herself, wiping her eyes on her foreleg, but the tears refused to stop as sobs wracked her body.

"So sorry," she said, trying to smile. "I remember this...all of it. I don't like the next part."

"We can stop," said Scoop. "I can pull out now. It will all be over."

Octavia shook her head. "No. This memory will haunt me as long as I live. I can't escape it by expelling you. Just...don't put anything about this in the article, please."

Scoop nodded as another scream split the air. A clattering sound came from the door, followed by the splashing of water into a pan. The voice of the doctor, a deep, gravelly baritone, thrummed for a few seconds. Then, the door creaked open and Octavia's father's face appeared again. This time, he was smiling...or, what could pass for a smile on his ordinarily stony features.

"Girls," he said. "Come and see your new sister."

The young Octavia's eyes grew wide, and she squealed with excitement. "A sister, Inky!" she shouted. "We have a sis..."

“Shhhhhh!” whispered her father harshly. “You still have to be quiet! Little ponies don’t like a lot of noise!”

Octavia clapped her hands over her muzzle, still smiling brightly. She nodded rapidly and her father lifted her off the chair and set her down. She rushed through the door and into her parents’ room.

On one side of the bed stood the doctor, stethoscope around his neck. His mane was slicked back with copious amounts of mane-gel, supposedly to keep hair from falling into his work. The midwife stood to the other side, a large smile plastered onto her face.

“She’s a little...” said the midwife. “Unusual.”

Inkette, who had snuck past Octavia to the other side of the bed, laid a hoof on her mother’s foreleg. “Mommy...are you okay?”

Mrs. Pie weakly nodded her head, smiling faintly. “Mommy is fine, sweetie, and look!”

Octavia scurried around to the other side of the bed. “Awww,” cooed Inkette. “Tav, look!”

Placing her forelegs on the side of the bed, Octavia hoisted herself off the ground, balancing her back hooves on the bed frame. There in her mother’s legs, wrapped in a plush blanket, was a soft pink pony with a vibrant magenta mane.

“Isn’t she cute?” Inkette cooed again. The young Octavia said nothing.

Slipping off the side of the bed, Octavia turned and seemed to be examining her back. Mr. Pie stood nearby, grinning down at the bundle in his wife’s arm. “What do you think, girls? Should we keep her?” he cracked, in a rare glimpse of good humor.

“Yes!” said Inkette. Still, Octavia was silent, now running a hoof through her mane.

“Octavia?” said Mr. Pie. “What do you think?”

The young Octavia looked up into her father's eyes. Tears ran down her cheeks and her bottom lip quivered. She seemed on the verge of sobs.

Scoop noticed this and looked over his shoulder at the elder Octavia, who was loudly humming an orchestral piece. At first he figured it to be a nervous reaction, but it seemed forcefully loud...the puzzle pieces clicked into place. She didn't want to hear her young self's next words.

Mr. Pie's smile had vanished and he bent his neck to see at his daughter's eye level. "Octavia, what's wrong?"

Octavia burst into a fit of tears and sobs, wailing loudly. Her father grabbed her and held her close. "Octavia! Stop this now! Tell me what's wrong!"

The memory wavered again, and this time began to fade. The blackness at the end, much like the credits of a movie, began to roll across the surface of the artificial world, swallowing light and sound alike. The memory ended, but not before Scoop had heard Octavia's wailed answer.

"I wish I had a pink coat!"

---

Slamming back through the memories, hurtling upward through Octavia's subconscious, Scoop heard the sobs of a distraught mare. Octavia's entire psyche seemed to be permeated with grief, and he couldn't figure out why.

The next thing he knew, he was back in the chair. Pulling his hooves from the sides of Octavia's head, she collapsed onto her side, and Scoop saw that tears were streaming down her cheeks and soaking her chest.

Reflex took over and Scoop stood quickly, rushing to her side and gently lifting her upright. Octavia's eyes opened, red and puffy. She wiped at them frantically, trying to regain her composure. "So sorry!" she sobbed. "You shouldn't see me like this!"

Scoop nearly shook her. "Octavia, it's okay! It's a happy memory! Why does it bring you so much pain!"

Octavia was racked with sobs to the point that communication with her was impossible. Throwing professionalism to the wind (impartiality be damned!), Scoop wrapped Octavia in a warm embrace, immediately regretting the decision. He shouldn't have...this was far too intimate...what if she didn't...?

Scoop's fears were quelled when Octavia returned the embrace, throwing her legs around Scoop's shoulders and burying her face in his shoulder. She cried long and hard, soaking Scoop's pelt with salty tears. Finally, her sobbing subsided, Octavia untangled herself and sat back on her haunches.

She said nothing for awhile, and Scoop was content to let her remain wordless. Shortly, she tried to explain herself. "I was so young, and yet...what kind of pony, upon seeing her filly sister, can only think about her own pelt?"

Scoop began to answer, but was cut off as Octavia pressed on.

"I was jealous! Not happy for my mother, not excited, but jealous! My first memory is of how *jealous* I was of Pinky's coat! Can you believe it?"

"You were young..." Scoop began.

"I *know* that!" Octavia insisted sternly. "Youth is no excuse. My first memory is horrible...ruined by my selfishness!"

Scoop waited as Octavia's sobs renewed, though this time they were much shorter. "Octavia, it's a beautiful memory."

"How can you say that?!?" Octavia cried.

"Sure, you were jealous. I would be too. Your pelt was so...common. You didn't know where you fit. Your parents hadn't been paying attention to you very much for months before the birth. And suddenly, here's this new little filly with the most vibrant, unique coat you've ever seen! How could you not feel jealous?"

“It doesn’t...excuse...”

“It doesn’t have to be excused, Octavia! The rest of the memory is lovely! Your bond with Inkette is wonderful! You can remember her reading to you. I didn’t have any siblings to read to me; I didn’t learn to read until I was in foalergarten! My parents were always busy, and I didn’t make friends very easily. Here, you had this great relationship with your sister! You love each other so much!”

“But...I was...”

“And your concern for your mother! Your desire to help! That’s wonderful too! You were only three; how many three-year-olds do you know who are self aware enough to think of anyone but themselves? Huh? None! And it was *your* idea to help your mother! Sure, you weren’t all that successful, but it’s the thought that counts! Your mother would appreciate it if she could see this memory; I’m sure of it!”

Octavia chuckled quietly. “I guess it is a bit silly...to put so much pressure on my young self...”

“You were a wonderful filly, Octavia. So you were jealous; so what? No one blames you for it. Your father did it. Deep down, you know how much you loved that little filly, even through your jealousy.”

“How do you know that?” Octavia inquired.

“It’s one of my gifts. I can read your desires, your emotions, your deepest needs and wants. You *loved* Pinkamena, Octavia, from the minute she was born! How wonderful is that?”

Octavia smiled. “You are right. I did.” She cleared her throat and straightened her bow. Running her hooves through her mane, she settled back on her haunches again. Scoop sat back down in his chair, facing her again.

“Thank you, Scoop...for helping me see that memory in a different light. Maybe...having someone see all my memories isn’t such a bad thing.”

“Are you willing to continue?” Scoop said, checking the clock on the wall. “We’ve more than 45 minutes left...we weren’t under for that long.”

Octavia nodded. “Please. Though, as far as I can remember, the next few years weren’t all that exciting.”

“I want to know every detail,” Scoop said, extending his hooves again. Octavia rested her head between them, and Scoop began his soothing words again.

“Take us back again. What’s your next memory? Pull it out of the fog...a party...with your little sister...”



# Chapter 2

As Scoop hurtled through Octavia's memories a second time, he focused on the task ahead. He wasn't alone this time, luckily; Octavia hovered beside him, seeming suspended in air as Scoop tumbled end over end.

"For someone who claims to have done this before, you are *not* very good at it," Octavia teased. "I guess you cannot physically hurt yourself by colliding with my memories, but I also cannot imagine that it would be very pleasant."

Scoop frowned and tried to right himself, biting his lip to keep from responding to Octavia's jab. Flinging his hooves outwards and jerking his head backwards, he managed to correct his tumbling and sail through the vertical shaft as if he were skydiving.

"Everypony's mind is different, Octavia, and some minds are harder to navigate than others. For example, during my last interview, the pony's memories were arranged as a hallway with all the memories along one side. All I had to do was walk up and touch one, and I was inside. Most ponies have memories arranged like that; it's why it takes us a while to remember things. We have to think down a long, dark tunnel before we can pick out a certain memory"

Octavia nodded understandingly.

"You, on the other hand, have your memories arranged in a 360 degree cylinder, far deeper than it is wide. You can easily access multiple memories at once, giving you near instant total-recall. This makes it easy for me to read your mind, but not so easy for me to access memories in your early life."

"Would it help if there were a way to rotate the cylinder?" Octavia queried.

Scoop placed a hoof to his chin thoughtfully. "Now there's an idea. Try spreading the memories out to create a path, and then rotate the cylinder quickly sideways. It will create a tunnel instead of this vertical shaft."

Octavia closed her eyes and focused. Slowly, memories directly below Scoop spread away from each other and left a black path, a waterfall of darkness. "Good!" he said. "Now, just rotate it towards me..."

SMACK! Scoop blacked out again.

---

This time, Scoop woke of his own accord. Struggling to his feet from where he had been faceplanted, he heard dainty laughter from somewhere nearby. "You are not going to insist on making a habit of that, are you?" Octavia chided. "You shall not survive very long if you do!"

Scoop tried to shake off his dizziness. "Riiiiight...it should be easier now that you've made your memories... more accessible. Now, where's the, uh, party memory?"

Octavia pointed to a brightly lit memory panel.

Scoop trotted up to the pane and peered through into the memory, which was not currently moving.

"Why isn't it playing?" Octavia asked.

"We have to be inside the memory in order to activate it," Scoop replied. "Or, you do, anyway. You see, you have to be actively recalling the memory for this to work properly. If you don't, the memory will stay frozen like that."

"What are we waiting for?" Octavia said, sashaying through the panel. Immediately, the memory began to move.

Scoop stumbled through after her and gawked as a tiny, pink pony bounced around a colorfully decorated room filled with balloons, streamers, and various party foods. The pony, unmistakably Pinkie Pie, tied ribbons

into bows, making sure everything was absolutely perfect... or perfectly imperfect, as the case appeared to be.

Octavia squeed excitedly. "Oh, wonderful!" she said, clopping her forehooves together. "This is a lovely memory... for the most part, anyway. It is one of my fondest memories of me with my sisters!"

Scoop was uncharacteristically silent. He had been pondering Octavia's breakdown in the last memory. The more he considered it, the more Scoop realized that Octavia wasn't the sort of pony to be distraught over something so small, so insignificant... could there have been another reason for the cascade of tears which had nearly ruined the trip through Octavia's first memory?

Octavia gently cleared her throat. "Scoop, are you feeling alright? You seem to have drifted off a little."

Scoop turned and gave her a grim smile. "I'm fine. We should observe," he said, motioning towards the ongoing party preparations.

Octavia nodded and turned to watch her seemingly helium-filled younger sister. Pinkie had propped herself on her hooves and seemed to be inspecting a large cake. Turning, she bounced in time to a rousing polka tune blasting from a nearby phonograph. As she bounced, she hummed and giggled in equal parts. "They're going to love it!" she squeed.

Her reverie was broken by the terse voice of an unseen mare from outside. "Pinkamena Diane Pie, is that you?"

Scoop watched as the pink pony's hair deflated (!) just a little, a look of fear and guilt shaping her features. Just as quickly, her hair poofed back to its full springiness (possibly to even greater springiness than it had before) and she opened the door of the circular room. A cloud of streamers and balloons escaped through the opening.

"Mom, I need you and dad and the sisters to come in here, *quick!*" the pink pony shouted to someone outside, quickly slamming the door shut to prevent any more party implements from escaping.

Scoop turned to look at Octavia, trying to gauge her reaction. Octavia looked confused. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"It's probably nothing to be concerned about, but I don't actually remember any of this. From what I recall, I was outside the silo during Pinkie's party preparations. How then are we seeing any of this?"

Scoop sighed in relief, worry over Octavia's breakdown dissipating a little. "I'm sorry. I may have forgot to mention something about my memory-invading skills. You see, if I have seen the same memory from multiple viewpoints, the memory will play out from a mixture of ALL the views... and, I have seen this memory before."

Octavia looked up questioningly.

"Pinkie and I had a lengthy discussion about her obsession with parties," Scoop explained. "She insisted on telling me the story of her Cutie Mark. I told her I would oblige her if I were allowed to see it for myself. I can say honestly that it's one of *my* favorite memories as well."

Octavia furrowed her brow. "But we're in my mind. You should only be able to see my memories."

Scoop shook his head. "No, *I* am in your mind. We are focusing your memories through the catalyst of my consciousness. While you have a deeper connection with these memories even now, if we were viewing them from your memories, they would be from your viewpoint only. First-pony. And everything you chose to forget would be invisible to us. This is a much cleaner way to access memories. In essence, *you* are in *my* mind. It's a give and take."

Octavia's confusion seemed to deepen and she readied another question, but at that moment the door to the silo swung inwards and four ponies walked into the room, casting about furtively. A young Octavia was first through the door. She was bigger than she had been in the first memory; she and Inkette were nearly the same height. Papa Pie looked about curiously, while Pinkie's mother stared straight ahead at the pink pony.

"Surprise!" Pinkie shouted enthusiastically. "Ya like it? It's called a 'party'!" Finishing her jovial introduction, Pinkie blew on a noisemaker.

The ponies at the door simply gaped, Papa and Octavia standing openmouthed while Sue and Inkette simply stared in shock at the disarray befalling their silo.

Pinkie's smile faded as her family's faces began to quiver comically. Their lips moved in waves, and Scoop found it hard to contain a guffaw. With the quivering of their mouths, the ponies made the most adorable squeaking noises. "A-are they s-sick?" Scoop asked, stumbling over his speech in his effort not to laugh.

Pinkie turned and hung her head. "Oh, you *don't* like it," she said, seemingly on the verge of tears. No member of her family responded, and Pinkie turned to look at them. Simultaneously, their faces burst into wide grins. Pinkie's grin returned and she ran to grab her mother's hand. "You like it!" she shouted! "I'm soooo happy!" No pony but Scoop and the elder Octavia noticed as Pinkie's flank glowed and an image of yellow and blue balloons appeared.

Scoop observed the young Octavia dancing enthusiastically with her father as Inkette pirouetted about the room by herself.

---

Having laughed and enjoyed themselves (as much as was possible without interacting with the memory), Scoop and Octavia shook themselves off and took in the rest of the party. The previously dull ponies had quickly pummelled the room into further disarray, shoving food into their faces in a most Pinkie Pie-like manner (maybe she wasn't so different from the rest of her family after all). The cake was gone, and the punch bowl had been overturned, spilling the ice that remained onto the floor.

Inkette had not stopped dancing since the party had begun, not even pausing when she was blindfolded to take her turn at pin-the-tail-on-the-pony. She still managed to pin the tail exactly in the middle of the pony's flanks, netting her the prize of an extra cupcake from Pinkie Pie.

Octavia and her mother had retreated to a corner and were now sprawled across their chairs looking exhausted, but happy. Papa Pie had remained standing, dancing for the family's entertainment. Pinkie continued to bounce around from pony to pony, making sure that everyone was still

having the most fun possible. She bounced to a position directly in front of Scoop and stared him directly in the face.

“Are *you* having fun, Mr. Daily? I know you can’t taste any of my delicious cupcakes, but the party and dancing are still fun, right? Oh, I just know that you love it!” Scoop nearly fainted as the pink party pony bounced off towards the snack table.

Noticing his shock, Octavia said, “Remember, this is Pinkie Pie we’re dealing with.” She shook her head and sighed happily. “Thank you, Mr. Daily. I haven’t laughed like that for a long time. I can’t say it was very dignified of me, but you know; doctor patient confidentiality and all that.”

Scoop laughed. “I’m not a doctor, Octavia, but your secret is safe with me. It’s your memory after all.”

Octavia turned to look at her younger self, sitting in the corner with her mother. They had leaned forward in their chairs and were having a hushed conversation. At some point during the party, the young Octavia had noticed her sister’s Cutie Mark and, being very intelligent from a young age, had deduced that it had appeared as a result of this party. When she had pointed it out to her mother, the conversation had turned to the future and to Octavia’s own Cutie Mark, still yet to appear.

“Don’t worry, Octavia,” Sue said in a soothing voice. “You’ll get your Cutie Mark soon. You *are* going off to school and all. You’ll learn so many fun things; you’re bound to find out what makes you special!”

The young Octavia beamed, then seemed to deflate. “But I’ll miss you, mommy! I’ll miss daddy and Inky and Pinkie! Will I be able to see you every day?”

Sue sadly shook her head. “I’m afraid not, dearest. But we will come visit you every chance we get. Nine months seems like a long time, but remember, you wanted to learn all about music. This is the best way to do it; the Earth Pony Academy of Music is renowned for its treatment of musically-inclined ponies!”

Octavia seemed to brighten at her mother’s words. “I can’t wait!” she squealed. “I’ll get to meet music ponies from all over Equestria! Do you

think the princess will come to see us at the school? Inky told me she likes music!”

“Oh, yes,” said Sue, smiling brightly at her daughter. Scoop could tell that the entire family was reveling in the gift Pinkie had given them; smiling and laughter go hand in hand. “The princess comes every year for the opening and closing celebrations at the school. Sometimes, ponies who learn to play an instrument very well get to perform for her!”

The young Octavia smiled even wider, her face nearly split in half by the grin. “I’ll be the best music pony ever, momma! I’ll play for the princess and for everypony in Equestria! I’ll have my own concerts and music albums!”

Sue laughed. “I’m believe you will, sweetheart. I have faith in you. Just remember, if you ever get lonely, that your family loves you. We want you to live your dream, Octavia; you’ve been given a love for music. Now it’s time to see if you’ve been given *The Gift*.”

Scoop turned to his companion and raised an eyebrow. “The gift?” he questioned.

“The earth pony affinity for music,” Octavia said. “Contrary to popular belief, not every earth pony can just pick up an instrument and play it like a Goddess. We still have to practice and learn just like anypony else. The major difference is, our connection with the earth allows us to feel the vibrations in the instrument. It makes it a lot easier for us to hear notes and associate them with different chords and vibrations. Some earth ponies are born with it; others have to learn it over time.”

Scoop was taken aback by Octavia’s assessment. “You had never played an instrument prior to this memory?” he asked.

Octavia shook her head. “No, I hadn’t. I was going to music school under the pretext of *learning* an instrument; in reality, I just wanted to meet the princess. I did love music, of course, but not enough to leave my family behind.”

The rest of the memory slid by as Papa Pie wound down the party and insisted the girls return to their labor. Scoop and Octavia followed the

three fillies about as they performed rock-related tasks. Apparently, they had been right in the middle of rotating rocks between fields when Pinkie had suffered her “break”. Noticing her sister struggling with a particularly large boulder, Octavia attempted to push it; her shoulder and part of her head passed right through the rock.

“Well, this certainly is frustrating,” she huffed, trotting back to Scoop with her muzzle in the air. “Being able to see but not being able to interact with memories that *belong* to me is simply unfair.”

Scoop snickered. “Octavia, this isn’t time travel, like I said before. We aren’t even in your head. We’re in a construct that I have created; a parallel plain of reality. It doesn’t actually exist, so you can’t actually interact with it.”

Octavia huffed again and began observed her young self, who was struggling to push a large rock. The rock rolled onto its flat side and refused to budge. “Celestia,” prayed the young earth pony. “If you help me move this boulder, I promise I’ll play you the most beautiful song you’ve ever heard.”

Mustering her strength, she pressed her shoulder against the boulder and scrunched her eyes closed. She didn’t see as the rock began to glow softly, a golden light enveloping it. It hovered barely an inch above the ground and Octavia was able to effortlessly push it forward. Her eyes popped open in surprise and the rock slammed back to earth. “Wha...” she began, but was interrupted by a call from her father.

“Octavia! Dinner time, darlin’! Leave the rock; we’ll get it tomorrah!”

The young earth pony beamed and scampered off towards the house.

“Did you see that?” Octavia gasped, pointing to the rock. “It just... floated!”

Scoop *had* seen, and was utterly astounded. “Have you made good on that promise yet? If not, you may want to soon; Celestia doesn’t take things like that lightly.”



“I don’t know. If it is possible, we may wish to move forward to the day I leave for the Academy. It’s the next most significant memory I can recall.”

Scoop nodded and closed his eyes. The memory blurred around them as they shot forward through the undeveloped construct, slowing quickly as they approached the memory. The front porch of the Pie ranch house was decorated with streamers and a big banner bidding Octavia farewell. The pink party pony bounced around the porch notifying all the members of her family how happy she was that her sister was going to be a great musician.

The young Octavia stood next to a large suitcase which had been crammed to the point of bursting. The corners of various items of clothing stuck out between the seams of the suitcase, and Inkette seemed to be trying in vain to force them back through the cracks; not an easy task with hooves.

“When are they gonna get here?” whined Octavia, folding her legs beneath her as she lay down next to the case. “We’ve been standing out here for hours!”

“Octavia, it’s only been fifteen minutes,” Sue chided. “And are you in that much of a hurry to leave your family behind?”

Octavia looked abashed, her face flushing red. Scoop saw out of the corner of his eye that the elder Octavia did so as. He turned and smirked at her.

“What?” she asked. “I was excited! First time away from the family, and I was going to be a great musician!”

A deep-throated voice pierced the air; the Pie family and their unseen guests turned and spotted a pony-drawn carriage rolling up the trail to the ranch house. “Well, Tav, it looks like your ride is here!” said Inkette, throwing her forelegs around her little sister. Octavia returned the hug, her eyes moist.

“I’ll miss you guys while I’m gone!” she said. “But I will write you every single day! I promise!”

Sue's face was already streaked with tears as a burly, brown pony slowly plodded up to the house. "Well howdy!" he said enthusiastically. "Which one a' you is 'Tavia?"

Octavia raised a hoof.

"Goodness gracious, you got so big I didn't even reconize ya! Well, hop in, darlin'! We're on our way to Ponyville, then onto Mane-hattan!"

Octavia quickly hugged every member of her family goodbye (save for Pinkie, who wouldn't hold still long enough for a hug). She lingered in her father's arms, feeling conflicted. "What if I don't get to come back?" she whined worriedly.

Her father chuckled. "Of course they'll let you come back! 'T ain't a prison, it's just a school!" he said, nuzzling his daughter.

"I'll miss you, papa!" she said, sliding out of his arms and clambering up into the wagon.

"Thanks for coming to get her, Arlet," Sue said. "How's the Apple family?"

"Oh, they're just fine, ma'am," the pony drawled. "Mah little girl Applejack just returned from Manehattan herself! Got her Cutie Mark too! Three little apples, plain as day! Shucks, Ah just knew she was gonna be the one to run the family business!"

Sue smiled brightly. "And how are Scarlet and Macintosh doing? Last we heard, you had another on the way!"

Arlet nodded his head. "Ayep. Macintosh is gettin' right big; why, he's nigh as tall as his old man now! And Scarlet, well, we've been tryin' for a long time... she wants anoth'r little girl so gosh-darn bad, but... maybe Ah'm just gettin' too old for that."

"Nonsense!" Papa Pie interjected. "Yer in the prime o' life! Why, just look at me! Sue's nigh on fifty, and I'm a sight older than her, and we had Pinkie not but three years back!"

“Well, I guess we best just try again, eh?” mused Arlet. He turned to Octavia. “We best be hittin’ the road if we’re gonna get ta Ponyville by nightfall. You ready back there, Octavia?”

“Mmhmm!” Octavia *mphed*, her mouth full of an overly-frosted cupcake which Pinkie had given her as a goodbye present (Goddesses knew where she had gotten it). She gulped the rest of the cupcake. “Ready when you are, Uncle Apple!”

“Righty then! Let’s git ta goin’!”

---

Scoop had taken Octavi’s suggestion and decided to follow the wagon to Manehattan, hoping to glean some more information about Octavia’s childhood years from her conversation with Arlet. Sadly, Octavia had fallen asleep in the back of the wagon, and Arlet simply plodded along in silence.

“Mrs. Pie, is it really integral that we follow this wagon all the way to Manehattan? He hasn’t even passed through Ponyville yet. Why must we view the memories that not even *you* want to remember?”

Octavia smiled knowingly. “Something very important to my musical development happens in Ponyville... I think you’ll find the encounter interesting.”

As Octavia finished speaking, Arlet rounded a hill and Scoop could hear the sound of rushing water signaling their arrival in the earth-pony haven of Ponyville. They crossed a bridge over the water and plodded through the silent streets; it was late in the evening and most ponies were asleep or curled up in the comfort of their own homes. One little unicorn, however, sat in a most peculiar position on a park bench holding a stringed instrument nearly half her size. She was plucking at it with her hooves, trying in vain not to touch more than one string at once.

“Well, look who it is! Howdy, Lyra!” said Arlet, his booming voice awakening the young Octavia. “What’re ya doin’ out here this late all by yer lonesome?”

Lyra sighed. "Hi, Uncle Apple. I'm trying to learn to play the Lyre, but it's so hard! I keep touching more than one string at once! I don't think ponies are supposed to play stringed instruments with hooves!"

"Well, ya don't have to play it with hooves, Lyra!" Arlet said, chuckling softly. "Yer a unicorn!"

Lyra looked confused. "Even unicorns have hooves, Uncle Apple," she said in a slightly condescending voice. She huffed and slumped against the backrest, letting the lyre drop to the ground beneath the bench. "I'll never be good at an instrument; it's an earth pony thing!"

Arlet scratched his chin with a hoof. "Ah didn't mean you didn't hafta play it, Lyra. Ah said ya didn't hafta play it with yer hooves! Yer a unicorn, and y'all can play it with magic!"

"Oh..." Lyra looked up and her countenance brightened considerably. "OH!!! I can pluck the strings with my magic! I don't have to touch them with my hooves!"

She grabbed the lyre in her forehooves and began to focus, her horn glowing a soft, minty green. At first nothing happened, and she began to look depressed. "Don'tcha get upset, darlin'," said Arlet. "It's gonna take some practicin', but you'll get the hang of it."

Lyra redoubled her efforts, focusing on one string. With a soft twang, the string vibrated, the sound of a single note filling the air. Lyra cheered victoriously.

"It works! Thank you, Uncle Apple!" She plucked a few more strings, creating a discordant yet somehow harmonious melody. Octavia looked down from the back of the wagon, long since having abandoned any thought of returning to sleep.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to Lyra's instrument. Lyra was startled by the new voice then, spotting the filly in the back of the wagon, she held up her lyre.

"It's a lyre!" she said proudly. The instrument glittered in the light of the stars, reflecting a golden glow. Octavia's eyes sparkled as she reached

out a hoof to touch the strings. "My grandmare gave it to me! She says it used to belong to a famous musician, but I don't know if I believe her or not! She's gone kinda crazy in her old age, if you know what I mean!" Lyra emphasized her grandmare's craziness by rotating a hoof beside her head. Octavia collapsed in a fit of giggles.

"Octavia here is on her way ta music school!" said Arlet. "I reckon you'll be followin' along shortly if ya get any better at that there instrument, eh Lyra?"

Lyra nodded enthusiastically. "Mom and dad said, if I get good at it, they'll send me to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns in Canterlot! Music is a rare gift for unicorns, you know," she said, smiling proudly and placing a hoof on her chest. "I'll be the best musician ever!"

Arlet laughed. "Ah'm sure you will, Lyra, but you kin bet your horn you'll get a fair bit o' competition from Octavia here! She's already said the same thang twice!"

Lyra extended a hoof to Octavia. "Then it's a challenge!" she said.

"Right!" Octavia shouted, leaning out of the wagon and clopping her hoof against Lyra's. "May the best pony win!"

With that, Arlet and Octavia bid farewell to Lyra and made for the Apple homestead.

Scoop stood aghast as Lyra scampered off the bench and made for a nearby house. She tried to walk on her back hooves for a few steps, but decided this wasn't such a good idea as she faceplanted into the dirt. Magically lifting herself off the ground, she rushed up to the door and let herself in, slamming it behind her. "Was that... *the* Lyra?"

Octavia nodded proudly.

"You knew Lyra before the Ministry?" he asked a smirking Octavia.

"Why of course! Lyra and I have been friends since this very moment; I still make it a point to see her whenever I'm in Ponyville. She and Bon

have become some of my closest friends. I send them tickets to all of my concerts, but they're so busy that they can only attend a few."

"Lyra's pretty renowned in her own right, but I think it's clear who won that challenge."

Octavia shook her head. "Lyra is indeed a great musician. There is no comparison between us; she plays with magic, I play with my hooves. We're both Equestria's greatest musicians, in our own way. I think everypony who picks up an instrument can lay claim to the title; without inspiration for future generations, music would die. Who knows? Maybe this generation's Lyra or Octavia will be the next generation's Celestia."

---

"Do we have to watch this?" Scoop complained as young Octavia bedded down in the Apple farmhouse. "As entertaining as it is to watch Applejack harass Macintosh, I would much rather be watching *your* adventure."

Octavia shook her head. "Unfortunately, another *very* important thing happens tonight. So, we simply cannot skip this single boring portion of my life."

Scoop huffed and hung his head, his hat tipping down over one eye. 'What could possibly be more important than her Cutie Mark?' a voice in Scoop's head asked. Scoop perked up as that thought crossed his mind, a bright smile breaking across his stony face. "OOOOH!!!" he gushed excitedly. Octavia turned to him with a smirk.

"It *isn't* my Cutie Mark, Mr. Daily."

Scoop *harumphed* and returned to his slumped position. Octavia giggled.

What seemed to Scoop like hours later (but was, in actuality, about 15 minutes), the young Octavia began shifting and grumbling in her sleep. Her grumbling quickly escalated into moans and she began kicking beneath her blanket.

Scoop swiveled his ears forward, observing the tiny pony on the bed. Her struggles caused her blanket to tighten around her. The moans became more and more audible as the blanket bound her legs to her body, and her moans turned to screams as it tightened about her neck. At this point, Scoop was sure she was awake, as her eyes were wide with terror.

“Oh, Celestia!” Scoop exclaimed, attempting to loosen the blanket. His hooves simply passed through the pony as if she were made of cloud. “Octavia, do something!”

Octavia shook her head and pointed a hoof at the door, which burst open. A streak of orange and gold catapulting itself through the air to land on the bed. “Don’t worry yourself, ‘Tavia! Ah’ll protect you from them night monsters!”

Octavia’s screams subsided as Applejack struck a protective stance, balancing on one hind leg and holding her other hooves aloft. “Come and get me, ya hairy varmints!”

“Wha...?” the young Octavia began, but was cut off as Applejack flew into a flurry of kicks and bucks. She quickly lost her balance and tumbled to the floor.

“Ah, dangit!” she yelled. “They knocked me offa the bed! Quick, ‘Tavia! Save yerself! Ah’ll hold ‘em off while you run fer the door!”

The young Octavia seemed convinced by Applejack’s antics that there was indeed some type of malevolent monster lurking somewhere in the room and quickly rolled off the bed, still wrapped in the blanket. As she untangled herself and tossed the blanket backwards, Applejack let out a squeal.

“There ya are, ya thievin’, murderin’ coward! Come back here!” Once again, Applejack lept off the ground and sailed through the air towards the blanket, which had spread out in its flight, mimicking a pair of shadowy wings. Applejack bounced off the bed and into the blanket’s folds, swiftly becoming entangled therein. She thudded onto the bed, wrestling to free herself. “Ah’ve got him distracted, ‘Tavia! Run and get Pa!”

This proved unnecessary as, at that moment, Arlet and Scarlet pushed through the door, nearly trampling Octavia in their haste. "What in tarnation?" Arlet yelled, grabbing the writhing mass on the bed. "Applejack, what in Celestia's name are ya doin'?"

"Ah got 'im, Pa! Ah told ya there was giant bats in the attic, didn't Ah? Just lookit the size of him! Git him offa me afore he starts suckin' mah blood!"

"*Bats?*" Scarlet shrieked. Arlet's head swiveled as he tried to determine where the "bat" ended and where his daughter began. As realization dawned on him, he chuckled, untangling Applejack from the blanket.

"*This* bat, Applejack?" he said patronizingly. Applejack's eyes widened, and she quickly looked around the room.

"Drat! Little varmint's gone and tied me up with a blanket and escaped! Ah'm goin' after him!" She darted out the door of the room. "C'mon, 'Tavia! Iffen we split up we'll find him twice as fast!"

Octavia darted out the door after Applejack. "I'm right behind you, AJ!"

Scoop hadn't lasted past Applejack falling off the bed. He had collapsed into guffaws and was now rolling about on the floor holding his sides. "This is just *too good*, Octavia! Giant bats! Oh, Celestia, save me!" he laughed, tears rolling down his face.

Octavia was having trouble maintaining her own composure. "I th-thought you'd enjoy th-that!" she said, trying to keep herself from bursting into laughter as well. "I r-remember th-this being funny, b-but seeing it myself is... *priceless!*" she gasped, no longer able to contain her mirth. Her laughter joined Scoop's, creating a cacophony of guffaws and whinnies unheard by the house's residents.

"Sh-shouldn't we follow them?" Scoop asked, picking himself up off the floor, having finally managed to gain control of himself. Octavia cleared her throat, running a hoof through her mane and looking flustered.



“Yes, I believe we shall!” she said, turning and trotting out the door. They followed Arlet, who had darted out the door after Applejack and Octavia. They could hear the sounds of breaking glass somewhere in the house.

“Drat!” shouted Applejack from somewhere below them, her voice clearly audible through the wood floor. “The rat bastard’s broke a vase!”

Somewhere in front of them, they heard Scarlet gasp. “Applejack! Where did you learn that word?!?” Scoop laughed again. They followed the noises through the hall and down the stairs. Chaos greeted them as they rounded the bottom of the staircase and trotted into the Apples’ kitchen.

Applejack was standing on her hind legs on a counter, holding a curtain in her forehooves and tearing at it with her teeth. Arlet was trying furiously to light the lanterns on the wall, and Scoop spotted Octavia under the table, peering out at something crumpled on the ground. Scoop was able to identify it as the matching curtain from the other half of the kitchen window.

“Applejack Golden Apple, you git down offa that counter right now!” Arlet bellowed, and Applejack quickly complied. The light from the lantern had revealed the error she had made, and she now looked sheepish.

“Ah guess... the bat flew up them stairs again,” she said. “Didja get ‘im, Pa?”

Arlet seethed. “There *is no bat*, Applejack! Just lookit this mess y’all made!” Arlet motioned to the counter, which was covered in spilled flour, Applejack having broken a nearby jar. “Now, y’all are gonna clean this up and then *git back ta bed!*”

Applejack grabbed a nearby cloth and wet it in the sink, quickly getting to work. Octavia, as of yet unnoticed by Arlet, slunk quietly back up the stairs to her room. Scoop and the elder Octavia followed her.

Climbing onto her bed and snuggling beneath the blanket, Octavia mused to herself. “I sure am glad that AJ’s around to protect me from giant bats. Too bad it got away. It’s nice to have a strong filly like her protect me...” she said as she drifted off to sleep once again.

---

Having received permission from Octavia, Scoop cycled through the rest of the memory, coming to a halt as Octavia climbed aboard Arlet's wagon. She turned and waved a hoof at Applejack, who was standing on the porch of the Apple house.

"Y'all come back real soon, y'hear?" Applejack yelled; Scoop had noticed that the pony had a hard time controlling her volume. "We'll go up into the attic and show that bat what happens when ya mess with us!"

"Promise!" Octavia yelled back. Arlet had already hitched himself to the front of the wagon, and he turned a wary eye on Applejack.

"Y'all be good now, Applejack. Don't make no more problems for yer ma, hear me? Do what she says." Applejack nodded quickly and dashed off into the house. A soft thud reached Scoop's ears and he heard Macintosh yell in pain.

"Applejack!" came Scarlet's piercing voice. Arlet shook his head and looked over his shoulder.

"Are ya ready, Miss Octavia?"

"Ready!"

"Alrighty then! Next stop, Manehattan!"

# Chapter 2

## Octavia's Song

Octavia and Scoop trotted behind Arlet's wagon, growing tired of their long trek through the featureless countryside. Octavia was having noticeably more trouble than Scoop.

"*How* can walking around in a memory be so positively *tiring*?" she complained, plopping down onto her haunches. "It does not make any sense! We are *not* actually walking, so why would I be tired?"

Scoop nodded, sweat beads streaking his coat. "It's the amount of time that we've been under. Memory invasion is, let's face it, tiring. More so for me than you, I'll have you know, but it is *very* tiring. I think we need to come up for a break."

"I do *not* understand why you insisted on following Uncle Apple's wagon in the first place!" Octavia said, stamping a hoof on the ground. "What a waste of time!"

"Do you get crabby when you're tired, Mrs. Pie? Besides, it was *your* idea to follow Arlet's wagon, not mine."

Octavia scowled in Scoop's direction.

"Alright. All we need to do is destroy the construct."

Octavia sighed. "And *how* in Celestia's name are we going to do that?"

"Easy," Scoop said. "Through my death."

Octavia blinked incredulously. "Wh-what?" she stuttered.

"Kill me. My mind is supporting the construct."

"Wouldn't you... die?"

“Not in real life, no. The only negative connotation would be the actual pain death in this construct would cause. Still, this wouldn’t be the first time it has happened.”

“There simply *has* to be a better way.”

“There is; we wait for Crescendo to shake me loose. If he can interrupt the link between our minds, both of us will awake. Usually, I have a third pony handy to pull me up every fifteen minutes, but my fortitude at memory-diving has increased by leaps and bounds in the last few months. I thought that I’d be able to handle a couple hours.”

Octavia huffed. “Well, if we are down to either me killing you or us waiting for Crescendo to interrupt our interview, I believe I shall choose the second option!”

“It isn’t that simple,” Scoop explained. “If we aren’t awakened soon, we’ll get more and more tired. Soon enough, sleep will overtake both of us. You don’t want to fall asleep in somepony else’s mind; dreams cannot be controlled.”

“Falling asleep is dangerous?”

Scoop nodded. “I’ve only made the mistake twice. Once while practicing on a friend, and again during a more... personal interview. It’s not pleasant; dreams can be haunting and confusing. We *need* to be out of the construct before sleep overtakes either of us.”

Octavia looked panicked. “What are we going to do? I cannot possibly kill you! Wouldn’t my hooves pass right through you even if I tried?” Octavia waved a hoof through Scoop to prove her point. Scoop’s image wavered and shuddered, then re-stabilized.

“Well, there is a chance that I would be able to kill myself,” Scoop said. “If we can find... a ledge, or get up onto a high building, I may be able to jump off and hit the ground hard enough to kill myself. If you hit the ground in a dream, you wake up. It’s a lot like that.”

Octavia shook her head. "You have already hit the ground hard *twice* since we started this interview. In both cases, you simply lost consciousness within the memory. Neither time did you awaken in the real world."

"I've done it before."

Octavia balked. "You have killed yourself in somepony's memory more than once?"

"Of course. I mentioned that you don't want to fall asleep while inside of somepony else's mind, right? I wasn't kidding. You *really* want to avoid that at *all* costs."

"Can it really be so bad?"

Scoop sighed. He stopped following the wagon and slumped back onto his haunches. Octavia trotted over and sat beside him. "I mentioned earlier that I fell asleep while practicing on a friend. That friend's name was Silver Mane. She was... somepony very special to me. My mate. When I gained my abilities, she was one of the first to know. She found it exhilarating and amazing, being inside my mind, and I loved learning more and more about her. We would spend lots of time in each other's memories, just kind of hanging out.

"I had an assistant who would awaken us if we were under for too long. He was a good colt; he would just sit there and watch us until our fifteen, thirty, forty-five minutes were up. Then, he would just gently shake us awake. He was diligent. I liked him a lot.

"His mare had a filly, and he had to quit. I gave him a large monetary gift to get him started, and then I hired a new assistant. Another good colt, but... he was a little scatterbrained. I should have paid more attention and scolded him, but I was getting better and better at memory diving and... well, I got overconfident.

"One day, I enlisted my assistant's help while Silver and I were memory diving. He was supposed to bring us up every twenty minutes to make sure we didn't fall asleep. Time goes way slower in memories, you

see; hours in here could be seconds out there. My assistant wandered off at some point, forgetting his duty. Silver and I were under for 45 minutes.”

Scoop didn’t continue; he simply stared off into space as if the story had ended there. Octavia didn’t want to prod; the pain in Scoop’s voice and eyes were evidence that this was a hurtful topic. She waited, and Scoop mustered enough strength to persevere.

“We fell asleep around the 26 minute mark, I think. When you fall asleep, the construct is warped and twisted. It becomes something fluid and changing; in the construct, you have four solid walls and the memory plays out in between those walls. In a *dream* construct, there is no defined shape or reason. Time travels as fast or as slow as it wants to. Worse yet, you can be split up. I was lucky; I spent two days with her family in Torontrot. She... relived four minutes of my life thirty-one thousand, three hundred twenty-six times.”

“How dull. Was she angry enough to leave you upon awakening?” Octavia taunted. She had not been looking at Scoop when she said so. She heard Scoop’s sharp intake of breath as he attempted not to sob. Turning to look at his face, Octavia noticed tears running down his cheeks. “Scoop?” she asked, her voice tainted with worry.

Octavia’s words had cut Scoop like a hot knife, but he needed to tell his story; it had been on his chest for way too long. “I... I... my powers were given to me for defeating a great darkness,” Scoop explained, choking on his own words. “That darkness was horrifying... a nightmare from a world beyond our own. Alm... the darkness and I fought, and she attempted to defeat me by scaring me, quite literally, to death.

“Silver relived the four most harrowing minutes of my life; the minutes where the darkness overwhelmed me and tore into my mind. I was in sheer terror for those four minutes as... the darkness enveloped my mind and tricked me into believing I was surrounded by creatures more fearsome than any in the Everfree Forest. It...” Scoop’s voice broke and he sobbed.

“What happened?”

“It killed her. She went into Cardiac arrest during the memory. I awakened just in time to watch her hit the floor. I held her as she died in my

arms... screaming. She spent the last minutes of her life living my nightmare, not even able to feel my forelegs around her... I can't..."

Scoop choked on the last sentence, trying to keep from further weeping. Octavia reached a hoof to touch Scoop's shoulder, conflicted; was it too personal to comfort the reporter?

Saving her from having to make a choice, Scoop swallowed the lump in his throat and wiped the tears from his eyes with a foreleg. "I'm not worried about me being trapped in your memories. I'm worried about *you* being trapped in *mine*."

"We have to..." Octavia began, but at that moment the memory began to waver. The wavering gave way to shuddering as a voice cut through the silence left by Arlet's passing in the wagon.

"...Daily! Your time is up! Snap out of it!"

-----  
-----

Scoop awakened to Crescendo shaking him, as expected. Apparently, nopony had come up with a better method of waking a sleeping pony in the thousands of years ponies who could sleep had existed. Go figure.

Octavia sat before him in a trance, her eyes wide open and unblinking. Scoop reached out to touch her forehead. "Time to wake up, Mrs. Pie."

Crescendo batted Scoop's hoof away. "Do *not* deign to lay a hoof on her, *Mister Daily!* Especially when she is in such a position; why, I ought to have you reported for trying to take advantage of her in such a way!"

"Cress, it's fine," Octavia had said. Crescendo's shouting had been the trigger needed to awaken her from her stupor. "He has to touch me; it is the only way to access my memories."

"Access your... what in the name of Luna's hindquarters are you talking about? He managed to invade your memories?"

Scoop blushed. “Crescendo, were you not aware when you offered me this interview that I am able to access a pony’s memories through physical contact? It’s not a secret; I mention it in most of my articles.”

Crescendo blustered for a moment.

“You’ve never actually read one of my articles, have you? All that stuff you said about my talent as a reporter was just... falsehood!”

“Yes, well... I as well as anyone know of your *rep-u-tation*, Mr. Daily, and it is a positive one! After this scandalous behaviour, however, my disdain for reporters has been affirmed! Never again shall anypony be allowed to interview Missus Octavia, and it’s all your doing, Mr...”

At this moment, he was cut off by a slap to the face from Octavia. Fire burned in her eyes. “Missus Pie... this type of behaviour does not become you! Why... ?”

“How *dare* you! You do not own me! The Ministry does not own me! What right do you have to say who interviews me? If anyone should be reported it is you, Crescendo, and that is just what I am going to do! The tale of your actions shall undoubtedly find its way before the Council of Ministries before week’s end! As for our business relationship, it is *through!*”

With that, Octavia grabbed Scoop’s hoof and dragged him into the hall. Outside the imposing doors, she immediately broke into a grin and tried to suppress a giggle. “I’ve always wanted to do that! Come on! Let’s get out of here!”

“Wait...” began Scoop. “Where are we...?”

“To my home, Mr. Daily! To la maison d’Octavie Pie!”

-----  
-----



Having been dragged through the streets for nearly an hour by Octavia, who had declined a ride from a royal transport waiting outside the Ministry, Scoop was now completely disoriented.

“Where *is* your home exactly, Mrs. Pie?”

“Octavia, Mr. Daily, just Octavia! I’m sick of all this respectful speak. You’ve been inside my mind for Celestia’s sake! There’s really no call to be formal anymore!”

Scoop smiled. “Alright, Octavia, but under two conditions: one, you let go of my hoof, and two, you call me Scoop.”

“Deal and deal!” she laughed, releasing his hoof and darting into an alley to the left. Scoop had to brake hard and skidded on the cobblestone street before regaining traction and following her into the alley. She ran straight to a brick wall at the back. The wall seemed blank, but Octavia pressed a small brick in the middle of the wall and a section slid away to reveal an impressive metal door. In the center of this door was a keypad; Octavia pressed a series of numbers and the door swung inward.

She turned and smirked at Scoop. “Security! Don’t want all the fans knowing where I live!” She faced into the dark doorway and stepped inside; Scoop followed.

“Scratchy, I’m hooome!” she called. Scoop nearly squeed in delight.

“Vinyl’s here?”

“She lives here, silly!” Octavia giggled. “Wow, I feel good!” she said, to no one in particular.

“Do you really?” said Vinyl, appearing from out of nowhere and tackling Octavia to the ground. She pressed her hooves into Octavia’s shoulders, effectively pinning her. “Well, how about I make you feel *great*?”

“Wait, Vinyl, we...” she was cut off as Vinyl smothered her with a passionate kiss. Octavia’s eyes grew wide and then slid closed as she lost herself in the moment of intimacy.

Scoop was immediately struck with the awkwardness of the situation and tried to back out the door; to his chagrin, it had closed behind him. The sound of his hooves on the tile floor of the entryway alerted Vinyl Scratch to his presence. She broke the kiss and turned to look at him, blushing a bright red; her irises seemed to disappear as her coat became more brilliantly cherry-colored than her eyes.

“Oh, um... I’m sorry! I didn’t... uh... hi, Scoop!”

Encouraged by Vinyl’s own awkwardness, Scoop chuckled. “Hi, Scratch! Good to see you again!”

“Um, yeah!” Vinyl said, climbing off of Octavia, who lay on the ground panting for a moment. “What... um, brings you here?”

“He was following *me*, stupid!” Octavia said teasingly, rolling onto her belly and pressing herself up off the floor. “We need to continue our interview, and Cress had another fit.”

Vinyl made a *pfft* sound. “That schmuck? I told you, babe, you need to get a new manager. Someone cool, collected, not some old classical-music junkie who doesn’t even know what a record is!”

Octavia laughed. “Can I have your manager?”

“What, Platinum? Yeah, he’s all yours. I don’t need that tool anyways; my music wants to be free!”

With that, Scratch hopped onto a small stage where a set of turntables waited and began turning dials and flipping switches. “Oocty, you *gotta* hear this new song I made! It’s totally the bomb! I should open at your next concert! Ooo, or we could do a duet! We could make a single! Hell, a whole record: *Octavia Scratch: Classic Pop Rock Grunge Cello Explosion!*”

Octavia hopped up beside Scratch and planted a second kiss on her lips. “Not on your life, Scratchy! I’ll listen to it later; right now, me and Scoop over there have some ‘business’ to take care of!”

Vinyl leveled her piercing red gaze at Scoop. “You keep your hooves offa my mare, capice?”

Scoop blushed, and the two mares collapsed in a fit of giggles.

---

After hours of Octavia's weird home-life antics, she and Scoop were finally seated on a leather sofa. Scratch was sprawled across the coffee table in a drunken stupor, having emptied the liquor cabinet and thrown "the biggest party ever" (entailing herself, Octavia, and an awkward-looking Scoop downing glass after glass of various alcoholic concoctions). Octavia reached over and poked Vinyl in the ribs with the edge of her hoof. Vinyl stirred and moaned.

"Scratch, you have to stay awake while S-scoop and... *hic*... I go under. If you don't, I might just die of a heart attack. You understand, babe?"

Vinyl rolled onto her side. Her bloodshot eyes looked even more red than usual. "Can't we just skip the memory-diving for tonight, Tav? I'm tired. Scoop can stay in the gueshtroom, can't he? It'll be a regular shlumber party!"

Octavia clopped her hooves. "Oh, joy! Won't that be fun? Scoop, you wanna spend the night, don'tcha?"

Ordinarily, Scoop was a reserved pony who followed a strict code of business ethics. Sure, he would cut loose and have some fun when with his friends, but on the job he was as serious as a heart attack. Sadly, after being tempted into binge drinking and cavorting with Octavia and her mate, he had lost a goodly portion of his better judgement.

"Sh-shure, Octavia... and while you and Vinyl are meshin around in bed, I can getsh me some mush needed shleep!"

Octavia and Scratch both collapsed in giggles again. Octavia rose from her seat and attempted to lift Scratch off the table; she only succeeded in stumbling over the debris on the floor and crashing on top of Vinyl.

Scoop rose from the couch and stumbled across the room. “Whish room ish mine?” he asked. Through her laughing, Octavia managed to point to a door on the other side of the room.

Stumbling up to the door and placing a hoof on the knob, Octavia gave a strangled screech. He turned and saw that Vinyl’s head was nestled between Octavia’s legs. He blushed, turned, and slammed the door behind him.

-----  
-----

Scoop was awakened by a crack of thunder... or, so he thought. The thunder was followed by a neon light show outside the window of the bedroom. A multi-hued corona of light slid across the sky lead by a streak of rainbow-colored light.

“When does she sleep?” Scoop wondered, pulling the covers up over his head. What was Rainbow Dash doing up in the middle of the night anyway?

-----  
-----

The next morning, Scoop awakened to the sounds of shuffling outside his door. Whispers and barely-suppressed giggles signaled him that Octavia and Scratch were already awake and were cleaning up the mess in the living area from the night before. Scoop rubbed his temples; he had a headache to beat the band, and even the soft giggles from the other room were enough to set his ears ringing.

“Celestia, what was I thinking?” he queried, rolling out of bed and landing on the floor with a soft *whumpf!* He pressed himself off the floor and plodded to the door. He turned the knob and stumbled into the living area.

“Well, good morning, sunshine!” said a too-enthusiastic Vinyl Scratch. “How are we feeling this glorious Celestia-given new day?”

Scoop scowled at her and mouthed “f-you” to her. Vinyl simply smirked.

Octavia approached him holding a glass of some brown, syrupy liquid. When he asked what it was, she explained that maple syrup mixed with bourbon would help take the razor edge off of his hangover. He downed the glass in one gulp.

“Ok, I think we should get to work,” he said. “After last night’s unprofessional actions, I need to do some extra hoofwork to make up for my indiscretion.”

Octavia looked crestfallen, but she understood Scoop’s code of ethics. She motioned for him to follow her. “Scratch, you okay cleaning up by yourself?”

“Hell yeah!” said Vinyl. “You don’t get to be a party pony without learning to clean up after yourself!”

Octavia shot her a grateful smile and opened the door into a quiet anteroom. Two chairs faced each other opposite a music stand weighted with too many texts. “Sorry about the mess,” she said. “A genius is always disorganized.”

Scoop snickered. “Whatever you say. Where should we start today?”

“Hmmm,” said Octavia, putting a hoof to her chin. “What if we skip the wagon-following and just start at the opening ceremony for the Earth Pony School of Music? That’s the next important date I can think of.”

“Okay,” Scoop nickered, taking a seat in one of the chairs. Octavia took the one opposite him, and Scoop placed a hoof on her brow. “Now, relax.”

After several minutes, Octavia had drifted off and Scoop enacted his magic. The warp-like feeling of being sucked from his body pervaded for a few moments, and then he was inside Octavia’s memory selection chamber. Strangely, Octavia herself had yet to appear.

Without Octavia to guide him, Scoop wandered down the cylindrical corridor surrounded by images of people and places from Octavia’s past. One in particular drew his attention.

Scoop stepped in front of the moving image; this memory had already been activated. He took a moment to observe and then stepped through.

On the other side was a large, semicircular auditorium filled with ponies both young and old. Ages range from colts and fillies barely old enough to speak all the way up to elderly, gray teachers, most in wheeled contraptions allowing them to walk using only their front legs.

Amidst the crowd he picked out several familiar faces: a young Strings, clutching his trademark violin; the now-deceased Allegrazza Treble, a great modern composer whom Scoop had the pleasure of interviewing before his death; and, most prominently, a very excited, young Octavia just stepping through the auditorium doors. She was flanked by Arlet on one side, and an older version of herself on the other.

Scoop pressed his way through the crowd of ponies (literally walking few a couple of them) and made his way towards the trio. It was then that Scoop heard the thumping of a hoof against a microphone. "Alright, my little ponies, please find your seats. The opening ceremony has begun!"

He turned to look at the speaker; it was a middle-aged, rather portly mare with her mane pulled back into a bun. She was wearing a suit coat over a white, lacy blouse which was obviously two sizes too small for her. Her Cutie Mark was a nondescript green music note... two quarter notes joined by a bar.

"Welcome, fillies and gentlecolts, to another wonderful year at the Earth Pony Academy of Music! I see a lot of new faces in the audience, and I would like to welcome you! We are an all-ages academy focused on the discovery and cultivation of all earth pony musical talent! Every year, we have a grand opening celebration with Her Majesty the Princess as guest of honor!"

The crowd exploded into thunderous applause, and the portly mare on the stage raised a hoof to silence them. "Sadly, her majesty couldn't make it this year. She has recently taken a personal student, a Unicorn whose magical abilities are unrivaled in the world... or, so I'm told. Nevertheless, our opening celebration will be better than ever this year!"

Half-hearted applause and groans of disappointment mixed in the audience. Scoop finally found the young Octavia seated in the audience and found himself wishing he could comfort her; the look of disappointment on her face was enough to melt even the stoniest of hearts.

“So, without further ado, I would like to call to the stage a pony we all know and love! He is in his eleventh year in this Academy and will be graduating at the end of this school year! Please give a warm welcome to Harmony Strings!”

The familiar brown colt sauntered onto the stage, his head low to the floor. His violin poked out of his saddlebags. The portly announcer moved away from the microphone and Strings took his position. As he drew his bow across the strings, all shyness melted away. He poured his soul into his music, his eyes closed and a smile curling up at the corners of his mouth.

As the song moved through it’s faster and slower movements, Scoop kept one eye on the young Octavia. Her eyes glittered as she watched Strings deftly work his instrument, coaxing the most beautiful medley of notes she had ever heard into being. He could tell she was finding it hard not to move to the sound of the music.

“One day,” he whispered, leaning over to her. “You’ll play like this. In fact, you’ll be better.”

The moment and the piece over, Strings took a deep bow. When he rose, his face was beet red; he was back to his old, shy self again. The portly pony moved back into the spotlight and Strings hustled off the stage.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it? This is what we strive for here at the Academy; the union of a pony with his or her instrument. This intertwining doesn’t happen to all of us, but with dedication, hard work, and a lot of practice, you can do great things whether you are the most talented of earth ponies or the most confused of pegasi!”

Several snickers in the audience caught Scoop’s attention. He noticed a single gray pony wearing a dark gray trench coat crouched low in his seat. Several ponies around him were pointing and motioning in his direction; Scoop noticed why. Beneath the trench coat on either side of the

pony's body were two swollen lumps. The pony was obviously a pegasi in disguise.

Octavia leaned over to him, speaking barely above a whisper even though no one in the audience could hear them. "That's Cloudy Notes. He was kicked out of Junior Speedsters Flight Camp for smuggling in contraband; in his case, a flute. What the Junior Speedsters and most of the pegasi elite call a distraction, the musical community called a gift. When he applied for acceptance into the academy, he was initially turned down; after further investigation and several more tries, however, he was allowed to attend. This is the beginning of his first year here. Just like me."

"How old is he?" Scoop asked.

"Now or then?"

"Then."

"In this memory, he's probably about 12. He became famous about the same time that I did. He's not... as well known as me, but in some circles, he's quite revered. He's one of only three pegasi ever to make a career out of an instrument."

"Who were the other two?"

"Believe it or not, Cloud Kicker started out as a musician. She ended up in Ponyville on weather patrol after an injury robbed her of her abilities, but she used to be the lead guitarist in a band called Pony's Head."

"That death metal band from the 80's?"

"Yeah!"

"That's really cool. Who's the other pegasus?"

"Her name is Satin Song. I just met her the other day. She came here with that band of refugees from... well, I forget what their homeland is called, but she can play the mandolin!"



It was at this point in the discussion that a pony dressed in black fatigues and wearing sunglasses hushed the ponies giggling at Cloudy Notes, and the matron on the stage proceeded.

"I believe I have spent enough time up here; after all, this school is about YOU, not about me. So, have a wonderful year, and once again, welcome!" The crowd applauded as the mare strolled off the stage, and the young Octavia bounced out of her seat.

"Now Octavia, honey, ya know where yer first classes are, dontcha?" Arlet said, smiling down at the little pony.

"Yes sir, Uncle Apple! I have Music Theory first, and then Music History, and then it's free time! I have to find which instrument I'm going to play!"

"Okay then. You stay safe, now. Don't be afraid to write us ifen things go wrong. We'll be happy to come on out here and getcha as quick as we can."

"Thanks, Uncle Apple! Tell Applejack hi for me!"

Arlet nodded his head, then joined the large line of ponies streaming towards the exit. The young Octavia looked about her, pulled a map out of one of her saddlebags, and scurried off in another direction. Scoop and the older Octavia followed her.

She took a left out one of the auditorium's rear exits and followed a narrow brick walkway to a door marked "Thought Garden". She pressed through the door and found herself in a beautiful arboretum surrounded by flowering trees, leafy trees, and various fruit bearing trees. The smell of the place was enough to make anypony hungry; lush plants and foliage lined every corner of the area. Posted on a tree as a joke (or not) was a sign that read "Please Do Not Eat the Foliage". Situated about the area were benches only long enough for one pony; apparently, thought was a solo process at the academy.

Octavia followed a winding dirt path through the area. The open sky above their heads shone down between the brick walls. The arboretum appeared to be some kind of inner courtyard, open on one side but blocked

there by a tall iron fence with no gate. The only way in or out of the orchard was through one of the three doors built into each of the walls lining the courtyard. Octavia walked straight ahead into the door opposite the one they had exited and pushed it open.

Scoop and the older Octavia continued to follow her as she entered the main school building. The arboretum had been surprisingly empty; the halls, however, were crammed with ponies streaming to their first classes. Doors to either side of the hall were clearly marked with class names and numbers. Octavia hadn't looked up once since entering the building; she focused intensely ahead of herself down the hall.

Finally, she reached a door at the end, having passed several corridors that lead deeper into the school. The ponies in the hall had thinned considerably and were now populated by a few late-comers and miscreants, most of whom were galloping to get to their classes before the bell rang. Octavia studied the door marked with an ornate plaque reading "Private Auditorium". She shouldered the door open and stepped inside.

The large room sloped gently downwards towards a stage. It wasn't as large as the main auditorium and would have been considered a "small venue" by anypony seasoned enough in the musical arts to have played at more than one concert. The stage was cramped; it was only about 8 feet wide and 4 feet deep. There was no curtain; the stage backed against a solid concrete wall, giving it an environment more conducive to stand up comedy than music making. Situated in the middle of the small stage was a bulbous instrument.

The instrument's hourglass body curved out and down from where the neck joined it. These curves reached their apex and gently sloped in again. They then took a sharp turn downwards and began to curve in again, if only slightly; it gave the instrument the appearance that somepony had taken a bite out of either side. The bottom curved out from the "bite marks" in much the same way that the top curved out from the neck. At the bottom of the instrument was a large metal rod holding it off the ground. The head of the instrument was carved into ornate loops and whorls; knobs stuck out on either side. Strings stretched from these knobs down the neck of the instrument to a small chunk of wood, as thin as a wedge, jammed under the strings; it appeared the wedge was held to the instrument solely by the tension of said strings. They were anchored close to the bottom by

several metal pins. The front panel was shiny and smooth, with small *f*-shaped holes carved on either side of the strings.

The older Octavia inhaled sharply. “I... had forgotten this moment. This was, of course, the first time I had seen a cello outside of pictures in storybooks. I remember looking at it now; I felt a deep connection in my soul, as if a puzzle piece had clicked into place.”

Scoop nodded. “Destiny.”

The younger Octavia hurried down the middle aisle and up onto the stage. Scoop’s face registered surprise. “What are you...”

“I don’t know,” the older Octavia admitted. “I don’t even think I knew then. Like I said, it was a magical feeling; I just wanted to touch it.”

The young Octavia place one hoof on the neck of the instrument and one hoof at the base near where the wedge held the strings off the face. She slid a hoof across the strings, miming how one would play a guitar; a growling sound filled the room. Scoop swiveled his ears and folded them back against his head. “Ugh! Why would you do that?”

Octavia blushed. “I... didn’t know how it was played. I figured it out soon enough.”

Scoop and Octavia sat as the filly onstage fiddled with the strings and the knobs. Naturally, she discovered a bow lying on a music stand near the cello and looked at it inquisitively. At first she tried holding it as one would a longbow or hunting bow, but after several failed attempts to elicit any reaction from the instrument, she grabbed it by one end and drew it across the strings.

The cello *hummed* a menacing, low mixture of notes; they didn’t sound half bad. Apparently, Octavia was a natural with the instrument; or, so they thought. In the next moment she had totally destroyed the pleasant sounding hum with a wailing screech as she drew the bow back and forth, filling the air with the sound of hooves-on-chalkboard horror. The door to the auditorium burst open... and a young Bass Wind walked through the door.

“Holy buck, is that Bass Wind?” Scoop said, sitting forward in his seat. Octavia grinned from ear to ear knowingly.

“Yep! I bet you, like most ponies, had no idea that my personal cello instructor, mentor, and friend was none other than Princess Celestia’s *private* chamber musician... though, not at this point of course. He doesn’t become her servant until about 6 years forward of this moment.”

Bass trotted up to the stage and stared down at a frightened-looking Octavia, who was cowering in the cello’s shadow. Bass didn’t say a word; he simply scooped up the bow from where Octavia had dropped it, grabbed the neck of the cello, placed the bow against the strings and a hoof near the pegs... and coaxed the most beautiful sounds Octavia had ever heard from the instrument.

Her young, inquisitive eyes glittered and a smile as wide as the sky brightened her face. She clopped her hooves at the climax and finish of the piece, respectively, and Bass gave a slight bow; he then shoved the bow back into Octavia’s hoof, pulled a stool out of nowhere, picked her up, and slammed her down on top of it. She looked frightened, but he offered her a reassuring smile. He tilted the cello toward her and grabbed her hoof, placing it on the neck.

“‘Old it like zis, Madame,” he said, his strong accent sharpening his words to a point. “Don’t force ze bow across ze strings; move it light and smooth, jou know?” He held Octavia’s bow hoof in one hoof and drew it gently back and forth across the strings, making much lighter and less screechy notes. “Now, use ze other hoof to prezz down on ze stringz, yez?” He moved Octavia’s hoof where it needed to go, and a simple melody wafted from the cello’s reverberating bulk.

“Zee? It iz easy, onze you get ze hang of it, no? Perhapz I can teach you a zing or to, yes?” The young Octavia nodded fervently, and Bass clopped his hooves together with a grin. “Exzellent. First, however, we muzt find you a more appropriately zized instrument.”

---

Octavia stood on a stool beside Bass, clutching the neck of a smaller cello. It had been roughly a week in Scoop’s memory, and only a few

minutes had passed outside. The week had been wholly satisfying; Octavia's many firsts served to keep Scoop sated and Octavia interested.

"Now zen," Bass began. "You muzt feel ze muzic wizzin you! Let it flow down your armz and into ze bow, zen through ze bow and into ze inztrument!"

The young Octavia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She moved her hoof on the strings near the head and gently slid the bow across the same strings near the wedge. A soft, deep, melodious tone filled the air.

"You zee? Very goot, Octavia! You will be an exzpert in no time, ya?"

Octavia beamed at the praise. She closed her eyes and started to play. More notes hummed through the air, harmonizing and mixing with the notes played beforehoof. Soon it sounded like the room was filled with liquid music flowing too and fro like the waves of the ocean. Octavia was the moon, directing her gravity towards and away from the notes to bring them crescendoing higher and lower, softer and louder, deep and high. The concert of notes came to an end, and the young Octavia took a dramatic bow.

"Zat iz very good! Very goot indeed! Now ve must find some suitable muzic for you to play! Or, zhould I teach you to play firzt?"

Octavia nodded enthusiastically.

"You already sound very goot! You simply need to string ze notes togezzer! In a pattern! Oh, ve must teach you how to read muzic!"

As Bass launched into a complex description of notes and bars that, by some miracle, didn't seem to go over Octavia's head, Scoop's mind began to wander. Recalling Octavia's strange reaction to the Pinkie Pie memory, he studied her as she watched Bass pointing out different clefs and bars. She was watching intently as if this were her first time learning this information. He detected a trace of sadness in her features.

He looked down at the floor, half wishing he hadn't spent the night with her and Scratch. Although things hadn't been awkward, he had compromised his professionalism and proven himself a foal. Octavia hadn't

said a thing about it, and he wondered if her opinion of him had been compromised in any way.

Finally rousing his courage, Scoop turned to her. "I think we need to talk about your reaction to the Pinkie Pie memory, Octavia. It's not like you to overreact. You've proven that by your discretion over my unprofessional actions with you and Scratch. Reporters aren't supposed to drink with their subjects and are *not* supposed to spend the evening with their interviewees! If my paper found out... but, I'm getting off subject.

"You overreacted to that memory. There was no sadness in that memory. Sad memories are tainted by gloom... rain that didn't happen in real life, darkness, gray skies. Sad memories *seem* sad. That memory was a happy one, and yet you left it in a gale of tears. What gives?"

Octavia sighed and hung her head. "My discretion is assured... if not because it was my fault that you compromised your professionalism, than because you saw Scratch... well, when she had me in an uncomfortable position. I'm not the kind of pony who would ever tell your paper. Your reputation is safe as long as mine is."

Scoop nodded his thanks.

"As for the memory... I'll be honest. It has to do with the birth itself, not with the memory."

"The birth?" Scoop inquired, a perplexed look playing across his solid features.

"Foals. I... want foals. It would be easy if I were a Unicorn. Scratch and I, we could..."

Scoop nodded again, this time in understanding. "Magically-Induced Reproduction."

"R-right. But I'm not. I'm an Earth Pony. I'm unable to procreate with my wife. It's put her and I somewhat at odds. Now, every time I think about... foals, or birth, or... or anything to do with the two of them..."

Tears rolled down Octavia's cheeks, leaving glistening streaks behind. Her soft gray coat sparkled where the tears left their trail. She rubbed a foreleg across her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Scoop. I seem to... cry so much lately. I'm not... ordinarily this emotionally unstable. But, even you must admit, I've been through a lot lately. All these memories, and my troubles at home, and Cress... I just can't handle it all at once."

Scoop, once again compromising his objectivity, placed a foreleg around Octavia's thin shoulders, pulling her close in a compassionate hug. "Tav, there are other ways to have foals. There are colts and fillies out there without parents who would... love you, just as your own foals would. And have you thought of IF?"

Octavia nodded. "I don't want... I want, if not to adopt, then to have a foal with Scratch. I don't want some unknown stallion's seed getting in the way!"

"Is that how Scratch feels?" Scoop asked.

"I-I don't know. I should ask her. Maybe, if Scratch isn't bothered by it..."

Scoop thought for a moment, and then a light bulb blinked on above his head. "Hey! Here's an idea! Why not ask the Princesses?"

"C-Celestia and Luna? What c-could they possibly do for me... for us?"

"They're Goddesses! They can do anything, as far as we know! Perhaps they could... come up with some way to give you a foal that's yours and Scratch's alone!"

"Mmm..." Octavia said, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes. "It... couldn't hurt, to just ask, could it?"

"That's the spirit!"

# Chapter 4

## Where We Find Our Happiness

Yes.

Never had there existed a word more filled with power and positive energy.

Yes.

So many dreams had come true, so many lives had been saved, so many loves had been born just by the usage of that one little world.

Yes...

But then, why in the *hay* was it so hard to say that word *now*?

"I... uh... listen, Octavia, this is..." Luna stammered as she was backed into a corner by the gray earth-pony. "I mean, this is just so... well, I've never in my very, *very* long life been asked t-to... well, you know how... I mean, it's just... not natural, you know?"

Her rump hit the angular stone corner in the wall and, thanks to her now-addled state, she failed to remember that she could easily teleport away. Blocking her into the corner were two ponies with whom she was *very* familiar and one whom she did not recognize, thanks to the mask covering his face.

"Listen, *Princess*," said a very earnest looking Octavia, and her partner leveled her gaze at the Alicorn, as did the masked pony, his or her gleaming eyes piercing straight into Luna's soul. Those eyes... were so familiar. "We know it is *well* within your means to grant this *humble* request, and we aren't leaving until we are given a solid answer. An audience with your most glorified sister was denied us on grounds that we do not have the right to 'demand' an audience with her highness, so we've come to you in our hour of need. How can it be within your most gracious heart of hearts to turn us down?"



“Well, you see, it would, um... take *both* of us to grant your request and... even then, there will be no guarantees as to the success of the... *operation*, for lack of a better word.” Luna shrank even further into the corner as Octavia pressed her snout to the princess’s own.

“Then how about we go *talk* to Celestia? I promise that, if *she* denies our request, we will leave you in peace.”

Luna hung her head and sighed. “Fine... but you know that Celestia is a sucker for sob stories. You’re not being fair.”

“Exactly,” said Octavia. The masked pony chuckled, then clapped a hoof over his muzzle.

‘Hmmm,’ thought Luna. ‘Definitely a stallion, then... but why would he feel the need to mask himself?’

Luna led the way down the corridor and right up to the huge doors of the royal court. The sound of voices and hooves against the cold stone floor reverberated from within the room. Without a hint of decorum, Luna pressed her forehead against the door, nudging it wide open.

Seated on the throne was the Solar Princess herself, mane and tail billowing in a wind nopony but her could feel. Warmth and kindness radiated from her like the sun’s rays, bathing the room in a golden glow that could be felt in one’s bones. The sun: ponyfied.

“Welcome, sister! Court is in session; if you would, please take a seat near the door! I will be with you once I have resolved Fancy Pants’ dispute,” she said, turning her radiant smile on the high-class pony who stood in the middle of the Solar Crest emblazoned on the floor.

“Quite so,” he said. “As I was saying, your majesty, I had thrown one of Canterlot’s premier events, the Canterlot Garden Party, which was crashed by several rowdy residents of Ponyville. I’ve given it some thought and I believe I would like to avoid taking legal action against them. Things worked out in the end, and I do believe the party was *far* more lively when they showed up than it had ever been before!”

“Very good, Fancy Pants. No legal repercussions will be brought against them. Thank you for your kindness.”

Fancy Pants bowed at Celestia’s hooves, then turned and left the court. His entourage of high-class socialites followed him out and the door swung shut behind him.

Luna and her party of three had taken their seats at the rear of the court, and she rose and trotted down the aisle. She wrapped her sister in an embrace, which Celestia returned with overmuch affection. “Luna,” she said; a single word filled with all the love in her soul. By simply speaking her sister’s name with the right inflection and tone, she had managed to communicate all her love and affection for her sister Alicorn. She turned inquisitively to her sister’s entourage. “Who are your guests?”

Luna turned as well. “Sister, you will remember Vinyl Scratch and Octavia, of course,” she said. “Their associate has chosen to remain anonymous.”

Celestia gave the masked pony a knowing smile as the three knelt before the twin princess’ thrones. The faceless pony raised his head and smiled, giving Celestia a wink before lowering his face to the floor once again.

Octavia was the first to speak as Celestia motioned for them to rise. “Thank you for seeing us, your highness. Vinyl and I have come to you with a most important request. As you know, only female Unicorns may bear children together; this has been an area of contention for months between her and I. I have expressed my desire to start a family, and she has agreed on the grounds that we should not adopt. Instead, she suggested that we have a surrogate mother for the child. This is not something I feel comfortable with, your majesty; I would like to carry my child within my own body to ensure that it receives the love and care that only a mother can give, even before the child is born.”

Celestia nodded for her to continue.

“We have, therefore, remained childless for a long period of time. It has lead to many arguments, and I find myself becoming sensitive to the topic of foalbirth and foalrearing. We have been unable to agree on a

solution, or to come up with one that even makes sense. Recently, a new friend suggested that our benevolent Goddesses may have the solution to our most pressing problem. Is there any chance that you, in your infinite wisdom, power, and grace, could offer a resolution to our quandary?"

With this, she once again bowed before Celestia's throne, and Vinyl followed suit. The masked pony remained standing, emphasizing his disassociation from this issue.

Celestia remained speechless for several minutes and Octavia began to feel nervous. Could she not help? Was there no way for her to grant them a child? Had Octavia requested the impossible, or was Celestia simply reluctant to stray from the natural order of things? Finally, a knowing smile returned to Celestia's face, and she spoke.

"Rise, my little ponies," she said, the same warmth and love that she had shown her sister evident in her voice. "Your request is unorthodox, yes, but it is not the first time that two mares or stallions have desired a child of their own bodies. In the past, we have been unable to help. Due to a recent spike in Equestria's magical energies, however, we may find it possible to grant your petition."

Octavia felt tears rolling down her cheeks as she dared to hope. "How, may I ask, would this be possible?"

Celestia descended the steps from her throne and stood in front of the trio. "I'm going to have to ask that Octavia and Vinyl leave the room at this time. Scoop, you may be allowed to consort with us in their absence." The pony in the mask groaned and pulled it off with a hoof. Scoop's mop of mane fell loose and hung low over his eyes. Luna tried hard to suppress a nicker and failed. "Powerful magics... far greater, even, than our own may be required to create life. We must consult with the powers of those from beyond our own world."

Octavia and Scratch nodded in unison, rose, and trotted to the large doors. "Please, Princess... do not deliberate. I mean you no offense, but I have waited... for so long." Celestia nodded at Octavia's words and they exited through the doors.

“How’d you know?” Scoop queried jovially. “I thought I was doing a good job hiding my identity!”

Celestia laughed heartily. “You should probably have covered your Cutie Mark if you wished to remain anonymous. The fact that Luna didn’t notice disappoints me as much as it amuses me.”

Luna snorted derisively. “My mistake. You’ll never let me live this down. Thanks a lot, Daily.”

Scoop cringed at her sarcastic jab, then turned to face Celestia. “Solaris?”

Celestia nodded. “Sol, you may enter.” With a flash brighter than the sun itself, a radiant white Alicorn stood in their presence, mane and tail billowing as towers of red, orange, and yellow flame. His Cutie Mark shimmered dynamically; a glowing orb surrounded by small rings. If one looked closely, the rings appeared to represent orbits, as tiny dots travelled along their trajectory. Scoop once again felt awed in Solaris’ presence, and not just because of his stature and brilliance; his most startling trait was that both his horn and his wings were transparent. They appeared as clear, orange-tinged constructs, almost as though they were made of stained glass. Had he not retracted his outstretched wings upon his entry, Scoop could have been convinced that they were fake.

The majestic Alicorn then did something far more amazing; he knelt at Celestia’s feet, stretching his wingtips as far as they could go on either side and flattening himself out as prostrate as possible in abject worship of the Goddess. “My Princess,” he said.

Celestia giggled. “Come, Sol. Have we not progressed past the simple subject-royalty relationship by now? You are practically family!”

Sol rose back to his full height. He stood nearly a head taller than Celestia, making him unarguably the tallest pony in Equestria. Well defined muscles rippled beneath his pure white coat as he plodded majestically forward. Scoop observed that he was noticeably uncomfortable in the Solar Princess’ company. “You have given me more than everything, Princess. You have given me a home in my hour of need, supported me in my every

endeavor; you have given me my very life. I will, in turn, give you this praise each and every time I am in your presence; I am eternally in your debt."

Celestia smiled again, and Scoop could almost swear there was a hint of a blush in her cheeks. "Sol, we need your help."

"Anything, my Princess. Say the word and it shall be done."

"Octavia Pie and Vinyl Scratch have requested they be given a child. They do not want to adopt or involve a surrogate parent; they would like a child of their own bodies, one which is truly theirs."

"I will bend the very fabric of this reality to your will, Princess. It shall be done." With that, the glassine, orange horn on the Alicorn's forehead began to glow and he recited a low incantation under his breath. Scoop could barely make out the words spoken in a tongue more ancient than Equestria itself. "*M'waan ift'il arewan instel. Meo'w'en morow'en emred.*"

His horn ceased to glow and his mane, which had burned higher as his magic flowed freely, returned to a short smolder. His coat continued to gleam with an unEquestrian light. "It has been done, my Princess. The next time they make love, a foal shall be conceived."

Celestia and Luna nodded in agreement, the former radiating with raw emotion. Scoop thought he detected... a look of pride in her eyes? Or something stronger?

"Thank you, my Princess. Now, if your every wish has been fulfilled, I fear I must return to my compatriots. We have much to learn as of yet, and I fear a few among our group have mounted an insurrection."

Celestia's brow furrowed and her radiant smile dimmed by several magnitudes, but it remained in place. "If you must," she said. "Go to your friends, Solaris."

He bowed once more, and with a flash, he was gone.

It took several minutes for Scoop to overcome the feeling of awe that still resided within the room upon Solaris' departure, and even longer for him to regain his voice. He noticed Luna looking at him, and he approached

her. "It is done, I guess," said Scoop, chuckling half-heartedly. "I can never crack a joke after that guy's been here."

Luna forced a smile. "He's such a downer," she said. "I fear..." she trailed off, looking back at Celestia. The Princess of the Sun was staring longingly at the space Solaris had just recently vacated.

Her sister distracted, Luna turned to Scoop, her look of concern replaced by one of stern resolve. She grabbed Scoop's head in her hooves and, bringing her muzzle to within inches of his, she hissed, "Don't forget who gave you this interview, Daily. Do your job. A little personal involvement is fine... it's what makes us ponies... but don't get distracted. You have a mission to complete."

Scoop looks startled, but he nods. "I... haven't forgotten. If you say she remembers something of the other bipeds, then I believe you. I have yet to encounter any memories of them, though."

"Celestia said it occurs shortly after she gains her Cutie Mark. Do *not* skip any memories around that time. It's so important."

Scoop nods and twists his head to escape Luna's grasp. Luna puts on a hurt look. "We aren't... close anymore, Luna. You can't hold me like that. I... you might give me ideas."

Luna nods sadly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm or offense. I just want you to understand. Please, do as we ask. I'm not trying to threaten you, but it's important we recover those memories. It's a matter of national security."

"I won't fail you, princess," says Scoop, turning and walking up the aisle toward the door. "I promise."

As he slips out, Luna takes a step forward as if to go after him, but she stops short. 'It's over... but why do I feel... like this?'

-----  
-----

'The Tunnel', as Scoop had taken to calling Octavia's memory bank, glimmered with thousands of frozen memories as Scoop and Octavia strolled together down its dark length. This time, however, a third set of hooves joined in the silent clopping.

"Oh, this is *neat!*" Vinyl gushed, peering through one of the 'windows'. "I can't believe I've never tried this before! Scoop, we *totally* should have done this instead of that boring old interview after the Spring Wind celebration!"

Scoop shook his head and shouted over his shoulder. "Vinyl, we *did* do this after your concert! You were just too wasted to remember!"

Vinyl giggled and cantered to catch up with the other two ponies. "Sounds like me!"

They walked in relative silence for several minutes as Vinyl *oohs* and *aahs* over nearly every memory they pass. Finally, they come to a stop before a brightly-glowing pane filled with an image of a young Octavia on a large, circular stage. Dressed in a shimmering, frilly dress of purple and deep gray, she radiates confidence and prestige even at such a young age.

"Here we are!" sighs Octavia, pointing a hoof at the memory. "My Cutie Mark! The single *most important* memory of my early life! Now, Vinyl, I expect you to behave. We can't have you messing up Scoop's interview."

"Relax, Tav, we've got all the time in the world. Besides, Scoop is chill. Right Scoop?"

Scoop grudgingly smiles at Vinyl. "Sadly, Scratch, I'm going to have to agree with Octavia on this one. We can't afford any interruptions during such an integral memory, and the *Daily* is going to print on the 1st of Winter. That's less than 6 days away. I need to get this story wrapped up, and we've got a lot of ground to cover."

Vinyl huffs and bows her head, dejected. "Oh, poor filly," Octavia croons. "If you're good, I'll give you something *really nice* when we're done. Okay?" Vinyl perks up immediately at Octavia's words.

“Hells yeah!” she shouts. “Now *that’s* the kind of offer I can’t possibly refuse!”

“Good!” says Octavia. “Now, if you don’t mind, it’s time for insertion.”

Vinyl nickers and Octavia tries to ignore her. Scoop frowns, but they step through the pane and into the memory in single file.

Immediately, their auditory canals are caressed by sweet caramel notes, so soft and sweet as to be nearly inaudible. Surrounding the stage are silent ponies listening to the low, melodic piece as it is coaxed into existence by Octavia’s hooves and bow. The strings hum and vibrate as the notes grow progressively louder; they do, however, maintain their harmonic progress and pleasure floods the senses of everypony present.

“Oh, Octavia!” Vinyl squees. “How... I never knew you could play like this!”

The corners of Octavia’s muzzle droop at Vinyl’s admission. “That’s... because I can’t. Not anymore. This is my moment. This is actually the big one. Look up there... in the box on the south wall.”

Scoop and Vinyl turn and there, seated among velvet folds and soft pillows is the Goddess of the Sun herself. Not yet having experienced the return of her sister, her face is hard and her mane and tail do not flow as freely. She is, nevertheless, smiling and Scoop can only guess that she is enjoying herself.

“It was so long ago, and I was so young. I wanted the Princess--my Goddess--to be proud of me. So, I played from my very soul. I couldn’t hear the music I was playing. I could only hear the song of my heart as I allowed it to flow up my forelegs and into the Cello.”

As Octavia’s final notes rise and meld together into a harmony so angelic that the audience dissolves into tears, her flanks begin to glow. A soft purple treble clef appears through the glow, which slowly recedes. The audience does not take notice of this through their tears, but the Solar Princess clops her hooves together in applause as Octavia’s song winds to its finish.



The young Octavia takes a deep bow, and her mane brushes the stage. It is at this moment that the more hardened of the audience members, having wiped the tears from their eyes, begin to point and whisper to one another. Soft calls of “Cutie Mark” and “destiny” sigh among the rafters, and the young Octavia looks up from her bow in confusion.

“Aaaaand... there it is,” says the elder Octavia as her young self turns to examine her flanks. She rubs her eyes in disbelief once, then twice and, upon having complete the third attempt to clear her eyes, it is Octavia’s turn to cry.

Scoop almost missed it as the Solar Princess leaps from her balcony seat and takes wing across the auditorium and onto the stage. Her previous stony smile is replaced by one of genuine warmth and happiness. “Congratulations, my little pony,” she says, smiling down on the teary-eyed young Octavia. “This is a momentous occasion.”

Octavia squeaks and flattens herself against the stage. “P-Princess...”

“Rise, Octavia. No need to be afraid. I enjoyed your performance immensely, and I hope to see you grow and learn more at the Academy. Your music is wonderful.”

“Th-thank you, P-Princess,” squeaks the young Octavia as she stands, and Celestia nods to her. Octavia brightens at the Princess’ approval. The Princess then turns and looks scoop directly in the eyes. “It’s here. The moment you’ve been waiting for is here.”

“Princess?” the young Octavia burbles. “Who are you talking to?” The Princess turns and smiles at Octavia.

“Someone you know. You will find out soon enough.” Celestia then turned and, giving Octavia a wink, walked down the aisle and out the exit.

The concert winds down as the audience recovers. Somepony orders another round of applause for Octavia, and the audience obliges accordingly. The auditorium is filled with whoops and calls of “Bravo” as Octavia takes another bow. She is then escorted from the stage as the audience is dismissed.

“Well,” says the elder Octavia. “There you have it. Now, on to the next important memory! How would you like to see my graduation?”

Scoop seemed not to hear her as he followed the young Octavia down the aisle. “Scoop?” said Vinyl. He turned to look at them.

“Hm? Oh, the next memory? Well, I would like to observe you in the aftermath of the concert for a while, if you don’t mind. Professional curiosity and all that.”

Octavia’s brow wrinkled in confusion, but she nodded her head. Scoop turns to follow the young Octavia again.

At the door, her escorts abandon her to speak with an Academy bigwig, and Octavia hurries into the night air. She trots down the walk, adoring audience members greeting her and telling her how much they adored her music. Octavia nods politely, but she is obviously in a hurry. Scoop finds himself having trouble keeping up.

Octavia rounded a corner into an alley between the auditorium building and the main hall of the school. Scoop nodded his head. ‘This is it. This is the memory I have been waiting for.’ Scoop heard Octavia and Vinyl calling his name and requesting that he slow his speed, but he hurried ahead.

Inside the alley, the young Octavia is accosted by four large, seedy-looking stallions. “Well, if it ain’t one o’ them fancy music ponies,” sneers the tallest of the group. He snorts and spits a wad of something repulsive at Octavia’s hooves. “Why dontcha make some music with us, music pony?”

Octavia seemed far too scared to scream, and Scoop watched in anticipation. ‘Any second now.’ At that moment, a crackle split the air at the end of the alley. A phone booth appeared, its door sliding open. Out spilled a powder-blue pegasus, a very drunk-looking purple pony, a gray pegasus with divergent eyes, and a brown earth-pony with a jagged mane and tail. The powder blue pegasus popped up immediately and pointed a hoof at the attackers. “Stop right there!” he yelled. “Any attempt to harm the innocent will be met with deadly force.”

The gang of seedy ponies, shocked at the appearance of the time-traveling phone booth, recovered quickly and the leader snickered. "Yeah? And what are you going to do about it?" he sneered.

The two pegasi launched forward, front hooves outstretched. The sound of hooves hitting soft flesh echoes off the walls of the alley, and two of the seedy ponies were spent sprawling. The other two took one look at the earth ponies, one stumbling drunkenly about with a bat and the other holding some type of futuristic gun, and fled out the other end of the alley.

The powder blue pegasus landed next to the young Octavia just as her older counterpart and Vinyl passed the exiting villains and screeched to a halt in the alley. "I remember this!" said Octavia. "I remember almost... those ponies smelled horrible!"

Vinyl collapsed in a fit of giggles, and Octavia joined her. Scoop, however, watched the pegasus as he held Octavia's hooves in his own. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?" The young Octavia shakes her head. "Good. Then our job here is done. Whooves, back into the time machine!"

"Aw, do we gotta go so soon?" the purple mare whined. "I wanna lay down. Time travel makes me sick."

The pegasus planted a heavy kiss on the drunken mare's muzzle, and she went limp in his strong-looking forelegs. "Berry, we have to continue. We have three more ponies to rescue before Sol gets back. Equestria will never be the same again."

"Oh, alright," she said, blushing heavily as the young Octavia stared at them. "Ditzy, couldja help Chase here carry me, please?" She batted her eyes at the frowning, gray pegasus, but Ditzy obliged.

The older Octavia and Vinyl recovered from their laughs and looked at Scoop as the Tardis disappeared again. "Daily," said Octavia, breaking her pact to be on a first-name basis. "Do you want to tell me what the *buck* just happened?"