

# The Sound of Sunlight

By Chicken Vortex



# Table of Contents:

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>The Sound of Sunlight</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Friends and Enemies</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Striking a Chord</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Intermission</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Precious Gifts</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Encore</b>		<b>74</b>

# Chapter 1

## The Sound of Sunlight

Octave: The interval between one musical pitch and another that is either half or double its frequency. There are eight notes between each octave. C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. This simple fact is the key to every great composer's work from Beethoofen to Woldemare. It's not magical, or spiritual. It's math. A simple formula used to make noise that boring adults listen to while sitting around reading dusty old books or talking about boring old work. The cello has six octaves, all of them unpleasant. Octavia hated the cello.

"Octavia."

She tried to ignore the voice calling her name. Instead she continued to saw away at her cello with her bow as if it were possible for her to eventually cut her way through it and be rid of it forever. The sound it made was somewhere between a cat getting its tail stepped on and a pony dragging their hooves across a chalk board.

"Octavia, stop."

Maybe if she tried hard enough she could get the bow to fray apart. Then it wouldn't be usable anymore and her parents would have to buy a new one, allowing her a few wonderful days without having to practice. She knew it was a spiteful thing to do, and that bows were expensive, but she didn't care. She was spiteful after all. If they were going to force her to do this then let them suffer the consequences.

"Octavia!"

Suddenly a hoof reached down and grabbed her arm, halting her sad attempt at sabotage and snapping her out of her daydreams of free time. As she looked around. The other fillies in her class had all stopped playing as well, and were staring at her with looks ranging from worry to excited anticipation at the scolding she was sure to receive. She huffed loudly, holding back tears of frustration before looking up at her teacher, who in turn was looking down at her sternly.

*"What?"* she asked coldly.

"Octavia Adagio Concordia. Be careful with that instrument," the teacher replied, then gave her a quick slap on the wrist, causing her to yelp in surprise. "You know better."

The other students giggled mischievously at her squeak, causing her to blush as she tried to massage the sting away. "That hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Well maybe it will remind you to be more careful from now on."

"I can't play the cello with my wrist hurting this much!" Octavia whined, but her teacher just glared at her.

"I know perfectly well that you can play just fine. Much better than you were a moment ago, as a matter of fact. Now apologize to the class for making them all have to stop just for you."

"What?! But it wasn't my fault!"

"Octavia...." The tone in her teacher's voice was critical. Octavia had heard it plenty of times before. Almost daily as a matter of fact. This was too much though. Everyone was looking at her now. She could feel the heat of their stares. In a last ditch effort she leaned in close, a look of distress on her face like never before.

"But mooooom!"

"No buts. And it's Mrs. Concordia when we're in class. Now apologize."

"But you wouldn't make any of the other foals do this!"

"Well you're my daughter, and I hold you to a higher standard. Now go on."

The coolness in her mother's voice made Octavia feel even worse. It was like she didn't understand at all. She looked pleadingly into her mother's eyes a moment more, but it was useless. Slowly turning toward her class, her head hanging low, she almost inaudibly whimpered, "I'm sorry."

"What?" shouted a voice from across the room. "I couldn't hear you!" The other fillies began laughing again.

"Speak up Octavia," ordered her mother.

"I said I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"I still couldn't hear you!" came the same voice. She was having a very hard time holding the tears back now. Stomping her hoof in frustration, Octavia raised her head and looked across the room at the tan pony sitting at the piano who was mocking her.

"I *SAID*-" but before she could finish her sentence, she felt a hoof fall firmly onto her shoulder, silencing her.

"Octavia is sorry for her interruption, class," said her mother. "Now please take your positions and let's try it again before-"

This time it was her turn to be interrupted as the school bell blared through the halls. She sighed as all the fillies began packing up their instruments before it had even finished, and were soon attempting to shove their way out of the room all at once.

"We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow! Remember to practice your parts!" she yelled after them.

Soon the room was empty. All the fillies and colts were heading home to play with their friends and do other things that little ponies do. All except for Octavia of course, who was still sitting in her chair, her head once again hanging down and her cello lying uselessly on its side next to her. Her mother walked over to her desk to finish up her work, then after a few minutes walked back over to Octavia.

"I could have apologized loud enough by myself."

"I know. I just didn't want Frédéric to tease you anymore. I'll be sure to talk to him about it tomorrow, but for now I want you to tell me what's gotten into you lately."

"I don't want to play the cello..." replied Octavia, hanging her head.

"Now don't be silly," her mother responded. "You have an amazing gift for music. You're lucky that your father and I were in the position to get you into this school so you could learn it so well!"

"But I don't like it!" Octavia blurted out. "I'm *not* good at it, and nopony else plays it and they all make fun of me because of it and it's heavy and I don't like carrying it *all* the way here and *all* the way home every day!"

Suddenly Octavia found herself looking at her mother, her head being held up by her mother's hooves. "Don't say that," she said in a harsh tone. At first she looked angry, but upon seeing her daughter's face, her expression quickly softened. "Don't you ever say that about yourself. You're my daughter, and you may not see it now, but you really do have talent. Just keep practicing, and someday it will shine through, and everypony will see just how amazing of a pony you are. I love you."

Even though Octavia wanted to stay mad, and still hated the cello, she couldn't help but smile at her mother's words of confidence. Something about the way she said it made her believe it. For a moment she imagined herself standing in front of a crowded auditorium, the audience before her applauding and calling her name. It felt good... but she still hated the cello.

Octavia leaned forward and gave her mom a hug. "Love you too."

Her mom squeezed her tight and nuzzled her before letting her go and standing up again. "You're the best daughter that a mother could ask for. Now gather your things. Let's go home."

Octavia nodded and hefted her cello off the floor, tossing the strap over her shoulder and tugging it onto her back. She had to fold the strap over and hold it in her mouth to prevent it from dragging on the ground, but eventually she would be big enough that that wouldn't be a problem anymore. Until then she would just have to make due.

## **Chapter 1: Solo**

"Hey Octavia! Were you coming to my birthday party tonight?"

Octavia spun around gracefully at the sound of the voice. Her cello drifted safely along behind, several inches above the hard dirt road. The blue pony that had called to her had been in her music class for years now. She played the sousaphone. What was her *name* though? Despite all her efforts, Octavia couldn't remember. For the millionth time she thought to herself that she really needed to get out more.

"Um... what time is the party?"

"It's at four o' clock."

"Oh. Sorry... uh..." Octavia paused, trying again to remember who's invitation she was rejecting. No luck. "I'm supposed to be practicing then."

"OK. Well have fun with that," the blue pony replied dismissively.

"Thanks for the offer though!" Octavia called, but it was too late. The blue pony had already started walking away. Apparently she hadn't really expected her to say yes in the first place. That wasn't much of a surprise. Even though she had lived in Manehattan all her life she had never had more than, what, two friends? After she had gotten her cutie mark (a garishly bright pink treble clef, not that it mattered to her) her parents made it even harder to have a social life. They were always making her go to music tryouts and auditions. As much as she wanted to deny it, the fact that she had spent the majority of her life alone in her room with nothing but her stupid cello as company had made her quite good at it. Her future as a musician certainly seemed bright. Octavia hated the cello.

A short while later Octavia was starting to feel better. Off in the distance, between her old school where her mother worked and her house, was a large stone bridge. As she walked under it she saw a familiar face and called out happily.

"Mr. Bridge! How are you today?"

That wasn't his real name of course, but it was what everypony called him. Mr. Bridge was an old pony. Even older than her parents. He was also the nicest pony that she had ever met. He had dusty yellow fur, green eyes, and a dark gray mane that had just a few wisps of blue still in it from when he was younger. She had never learned what his cutie mark was, due to him always wearing the same long, patched up coat, but she didn't like to pry.

As far as Octavia could tell, Mr. Bridge was homeless. Under the bridge was where he lived, and every day when she walked to and from school, she would pass him. At first she ignored him like everyone else did, but one day when she walked by he suddenly spoke up.

"So you play the cello do you?" he had said.

"Um... yes, I do," she had replied.

"Well, let's hear it then."

Octavia had been shocked by his request, but he had waited patiently, and she had quickly felt pressured into complying. She clumsily removed her cello from her back, removing the bow from the harness on the side, and began playing. She had simply played the basic scales (quite poorly at the time), but after she was done Mr. Bridge stood and applauded for her.

"Very good," he had said. "Very good indeed. Your left arm seems a bit tense though. Perhaps if you were to lower the cello a bit it would be easier for you?"

Octavia hadn't been expecting advice from the homeless pony, but not wanting to be rude, she had tried what he said and played the scales again. To her surprise it was much easier. That day Mr. Bridge had taught her something that no pony else had in all the time she had been playing on her own. She had thanked him for his help and quickly headed home, but she had never forgotten. She was often too busy to actually stop and talk, but from then on she would always make sure to say hello to him when she passed. Today as she walked by, Mr. Bridge slowly climbed to his feet.

"Hello Miss Octavia!" he said in his normal happy tone. "Any exciting plans for today?"

Octavia laughed. "Hardly. My parents have an audition planned for me this evening. Some sort of contest. I'm going to be spending the rest of my free time today practicing."

"Ah, well at least you get to spend the day doing something you love," he replied.

"Doing something I love? What do you mean?"

"Why, playing the cello of course!"

"But I don't love playing the cello. As a matter of fact it's one of my *least* favorite things. Whatever gave you the idea I loved it?"

"Well, you talk about it all the time for one. How couldn't you?"

"I *complain* about it all the time. It was my parent's idea. I've never been interested in music."

"But your cutie mark! I remember the day you got it. Surely you can't say that that's just a coincidence as well!"



"My cutie mark never stood a chance Mr. Bridge," said Octavia with a smirk. "Playing the cello is literally the only thing I've been allowed to do. It was bound to end up being music related in some way, whether I wanted it to be or not."

"But you're so good at it!" Mr. Bridge said as enthusiastically as ever.

"Yes, well... that's an unintended side affect," said Octavia, laughing pessimistically.

Mr. Bridge took a deep breath and sighed. "A masterful hoof and an unwilling heart I see. It's like painting a picture using only black paint. All shadows and no substance."

Octavia gave Mr. Bridge a sidelong stare at his odd comment. "If you say so."

Suddenly Octavia caught a spot of tan out of the corner of her eye. She spun toward it, quickly realizing who it was. At the top of the hill where she had just come from was the same pony that made fun of her all those years ago in class. The same one that bullied her to this day. Frédéric Horseshoepin. His green eyes glared down at her angrily from under his well groomed white mane. She could feel his hatred all the way from here. Octavia blushed, partially due to him catching her talking to Mr. Bridge (which she was sure that he would bring up at the worst possible time) and partially out of shame for being embarrassed of being caught talking to Mr. Bridge. She really didn't think poorly of him in any way, and she wouldn't have been embarrassed if it was any other pony that saw her, but *him*. Why did it have to be *him*?

"Um... I have to go," Octavia quickly muttered, turning away from Mr. Bridge and beginning to walk toward her house.

"Alright Miss Octavia..." he called after her, glancing suspiciously up at the pony she had been staring at. "I hope you find your passion someday."

Octavia didn't respond. She just continued walking. Quick steps, straight forward, head low.

+++++

Octavia opened the front door of her house as quietly as she could. She quickly looked around. The entryway of her home had high ceilings,

with a large glass chandelier hanging right in the center of it. On the far side of the room was a spiral staircase that led up to the second floor where her room was located. No pony seemed to be around. As she walked across the cold white stone that tiled entryway, her hoof clops echoed loudly through the entire house. She cringed as she heard some pony approaching from the hallway to the right that led to her parent's offices. A few seconds later her father appeared around the corner. He was a grey pony like her, but with a silver mane and golden eyes. Octavia had her mother's eyes.

"Where have you been?" he bluntly asked. Octavia kept walking.

"I stopped to talk with a friend is all."

"Well I hope it was worth it. It's cut in to your practice time."

"I know dad," she replied flatly as she began to ascend the staircase.

"You've got an audition in just over an hour, you know! The Canterlot Board of Music is going to be judging it."

"I *know* dad."

"Well don't waste any more time!" he called as she disappeared up the staircase. "Make sure to get as much practice in as you can before we go!" She rolled her eyes at his advice. What else was she going to do?

As Octavia entered into her spacious bedroom, she unceremoniously threw her cello onto her bed and walked over to the window. Her room was located on the back of the house, and through her window she had a view of the mountains and hills that lead to the city of Canterlot. They said it was a city unlike any other. Certainly unlike Manehattan at least. All the buildings were old, but well looked after, ponies were civilized to each other, and every morning Celestia would use her magic to raise the sun. Octavia loved the sunrise. She was often up early enough to see it break over the horizon (it was one of the only time of the day that she was specifically told *not* to play the cello). Maybe someday she could go and see it in person. She would like that.

Octavia jumped as there was a sudden knock on her door. "I don't hear playing!" her father's voice called from the other side of it. Octavia frowned grumpily as she walked over to her closet and removed her music stand. She slammed it down in the middle of the floor and picked her cello

up off the bed. It wasn't until the first note sounded that she finally heard her father walk away.

*It's like a prison.* She thought to herself. As she played, Octavia continued looking out her window. She had gone over this particular number so many times that she practically had it memorized. She only had to glance back every once in a while when she forgot something or reached a particularly complex string of notes.

Yes. This was her life. Wake up, watch the sun rise, play the cello, go to school, play the cello, walk home, play the cello, go to an audition, play the cello, go to sleep. It was only by sheer willpower that she didn't play the cello in her dreams. She wasn't sure that she would be able to stand *that*. As she continued to play said cello, her mind began to wander. Her muscle memory taking over the task at hoof. She wondered what other ponies were doing right now. If anypony was having an adventure somewhere far away. She hoped they were. She hoped that not *all* of Equestria was as boring as her house.

*"Bluenote!"* Octavia suddenly exclaimed, rolling her eyes in annoyance. That had been name of the pony that had invited her to her birthday party earlier that day. It was wonderful how these things occurred to her hours too late. Octavia grumbled to herself as she repositioned her cello. She wondered if the party had been any fun. Personally she never liked parties, but she would have taken anything over practice. She wondered if it was still going....

All she could do was wonder though. She would never actually find out. Instead she was doomed to sit in her room, alone, forever practicing, never having any fun. When Octavia reached the end of the song she would start over, attempting to fix any little mistakes she made. After that she would do it again, and again. Eventually the repetition caused her to zone out completely. She must have lost track of time, because it only seemed like a moment later that somepony once again knocked on her door. This time it was her mother's voice that she heard.

"Octavia? Get you things, it's time to go."

"Alright. Coming." She called back.

Gathering her things really only consisted of sheathing her bow, tossing her cello over her shoulder, and grabbing her music stand. After the

three second that that took she walked over to her door and opened it, stepping out into the hall where her mother was waiting.

"Here, put this on," her mother said, handing her a small pink bow tie.

"What? Really mother? You want me to wear this thing in front of everyone?"

"Well you want to look respectable in front of the board don't you?"

"This will make me look like a clown!"

"Oh don't be so dramatic. It matches your cutie mark! You'll look stylish. Now come on, your father is waiting at the carriage."

Octavia cringed as she clipped the bright pink bow tie around her neck. It was her least favorite color. She had given up trying to argue with her parents a long time ago though. Now she just obeyed.

"Come on dear!" her mother called from half way down the stairs.

"Coming!" she called back (with just a hint of frustration) as she picked up her things and stumbled forward. Octavia hated the cello.

+++++

"Everybody out!" called Octavia's father from the front of the carriage. As she and her mother stepped out, and he undid himself from the harness, he suddenly looked over at her with a look of distaste on his face.

"Where on earth did you get that bow tie?" he asked.

"I gave it to her," replied her mother.

"Oh... well in that case it looks very nice." Octavia nickered in irritation as she walked past him and readjusted her cello strap.

"Now don't be nervous dear," said her mother, keeping pace with her.

"I'm *not* nervous. I've played this piece a thousand times. *At least.*"

"We know sweetheart, but this is a big audition. There's going to be some tough competition, and your father and I just want to make sure that-

"I'm *not* nervous mother! It doesn't matter what the competition is like. I'm going to play the same as I always do. I don't think I could change that if I *tried*."

"I know dear! Your father and I just want to let you know that we have the utmost confidence in you, alright?"

"Fine," sighed Octavia, then added, "thank you," as an afterthought.

As the three of them entered through the double doors of the building, Octavia looked down at the large stage below them. It was empty at the moment. Bright white stage lights were shining down on it from all directions. In front of the stage was a long table with several ponies sitting behind it, whom Octavia assumed were the Canterlot Board of Music, and behind them an entire stadium of empty seats. Looks like she would get to play for an empty house once again.

"Good luck," said her mother, giving her a quick hug. "We'll be watching from the balcony with the rest of the parents. Just follow the stairs down and go backstage. They'll give you your number. Try to get as much practice in before you go on as you can, alright?"

"Yes mom," she replied, heading down the stairs. As if she hadn't done this exact same thing hundreds of times before.

Once backstage, Octavia saw all sorts of ponies standing around with their different instruments. Some looked worried, some excited, some bored. As she took in the familiar scene, a busy looking stage worker carrying a clipboard walked over to her.

"Name?"

"Octavia."

Without even looking up he scribbled something on his clipboard and quickly handed her a number before walking away. Octavia flipped it over to see what she had gotten.

"Thirteen! Lucky me."

"Well isn't that interesting," said a voice from close behind her.

"Ah!" she yelled, quickly spinning around and slamming her cello into a chair, causing it to make an unpleasant twanging sound. "Frédéric?"

“Oh look! The shut in remembers my name,” he replied with a sneer.

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” he asked incredulously. “I’m *Frédéric Horseshoepin*. What are *you* doing here? This is a contest for talented ponies.”

“My parents made me come,” replied Octavia, immediately regretting it. She didn’t need to give him any more information to work with. Trying to quickly change the subject, she asked, “What’s so interesting about my number?”

“Oh, I just find it interesting that you’re going to be performing right after I am... what’s wrong? Nervous?”

Octavia was blushing again.

“Well there’s no need to be,” he continued, looking down at her. “I’m sure that the judges won’t even notice you and that shabby piece of driftwood you call an instrument after I’m done. Then you can crawl back home with mommy and daddy and cry yourself to sleep, or whatever it is you do after losing. I wouldn’t know.”

Octavia wanted to talk back to him. She wanted to *so bad*, but she couldn’t. She was sure that in a few hours she would come up with something perfect to say, but right now she couldn’t even breathe properly.

“And what’s with the pink bow tie? You look like a clown.” He smirked. “Tell me, does it feel a little... tight?”

Octavia blushed even harder. “I... need to go practice,” she muttered.

As she walked away she heard him laughing his familiar condescending laugh. “It won’t do you any good!” he called.

Octavia sniffed loudly and wiped a tear from her eye as she closed the door to a small prop room of some sort and locked it. This was the last thing she needed right now. Going onstage with puffy pink eyes to match her puffy pink bow tie. She needed to get control of herself. She took a deep breath and shook her head, but it didn’t help. She just kept crying.

Why did he have to be so mean?! She had never done anything to offend him, and all he had done in return was insult and belittle her until

she was scared to even walk past him to get to her seat in class. It just wasn't fair! His insults didn't even make sense! *Does your bow tie feel tight?* What did that even mean? And driftwood? Her cello was made of solid spruce and maple and ebony. If he thought it was low quality he didn't know what quality was.

Octavia suddenly gasped, remembering that she had slammed it into a something when she spun around. The horror of the situation crashed down on her. If she had cracked it... oh please say she hadn't cracked it. She quickly flipped it over her shoulder to inspect it, but suddenly lurched forward as the strap caught, causing her to fall to the ground. As she scrambled to her feet she looked to see what had happened, and flushed with embarrassment as she saw what it had snagged on. Apparently in her rush she had clipped the bow tie around both her neck *and* the cello strap. She was so used to the feel of the strap that she hadn't even noticed.

"So that's what he meant," she grumbled, quickly ripping the collar off. Her only consolation was that Frédéric hadn't been there to see her make an even bigger fool of herself. After managing to remove her cello (much more carefully this time) Octavia was relieved to discover that there was only a small scrape. She had a polish at home that could take care of that easily enough. Now her only concern was not looking pathetic in front of the judges.

Taking another deep breath, Octavia stood up on two legs as straight and tall as she could. There was a small mirror in the prop room. She looked into it (a wave of relief washing over her that her eyes were still white for the most part) and tried to put on the most professional face she could. Eyes straight forward, chin up, mouth curled down slightly, one eyebrow raised just a bit higher than the other. Perfect.

Maintaining this look, Octavia began to play with a determination that she very rarely bothered to muster. If the cello was good for anything, it was good for calming her down. The control and accuracy involved in making the notes smooth and the tempo pleasing was something she could put all her attention into. As the notes droned out of the instrument, she felt her emotions dull. She was like a machine. A computer, running through calculated motions with precision and grace. She didn't care about Frédéric Horseshoepin. She didn't care about anything. She was going to go out there and play her part perfectly, because that's what she always did. She was Octavia Adagio Concordia, the clockwork cellist.

+++++

“Everyone please take a seat,” a dignified looking gray unicorn announced to the group of musicians. Octavia recognized him as one of the ponies that had judged her performance. He had looked so serious the whole time that she begun to wonder if he didn’t like her for some reason. Seeing him with the same expression now gave her an odd bit of comfort.

Everypony quickly quieted down at his words. As he slowly looked over the group, it seemed like he momentarily paused when he looked at her. She wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not.

“This has been a very impressive display by all of you,” he said in his low, monotone voice. “When you all entered into these auditions, you were told that there would be one winner. This winner would go on to play at the Manehattan Music Festival.”

An excited murmur swept through the group. Octavia remained silent. This was actually a surprise to her. The Manehattan Music Festival was one of the biggest events of the year. Ponies came from all over Equestria to take part in it. Even Celestia herself would come on occasion. Apparently her parents had forgotten to mention that detail on the way here. She looked over at where Frédéric was sitting, only to see him leaning back in his chair with a smirk of superiority on his face. As the other ponies quieted down again, the gray judge unicorn continued.

“Such an honor can only go to the best, which is why the results of this audition are so surprising.”

What did that mean?

“I say this because you were all told that there would be one winner, but this year, due to receiving top marks in *every* category by *all* the judges, there are two.”

Oh.

“Would Frédéric Horseshoepin please step forward?”

As the group of musicians around her began to voice their joy, or protest, Octavia noticed that Frédéric was no longer smiling. Now his smirk was replaced with a sneer. He was alternating between glaring angrily at the ground, and threateningly up at the rest of the group. Good. It was



about time that somepony showed him that they were just as good as he was.

“And would Octavia please step forward?”

Suddenly the room seemed to get very quiet. Frédéric’s eyes widened in surprise, and he immediately locked on to her position. She didn’t dare move as all the eyes in the room slowly followed his gaze to where she was sitting. She instantly regretted what she had just thought. She was *not* the pony that should show Frédéric anything. How had this happened? She hadn’t done anything differently!

“This must be some mistake!” insisted Frédéric.

“There’s no mistake,” said the unicorn. “Please step forward Octavia.”

As Octavia stood from her seat she could feel her blood rushing to her face again. She wished more than anything for a way to hide her face right now. Without a word she walked down the small staircase in between the rows of seats backstage, and over to the judge’s location. Frédéric looked so mad that she was afraid he would lunge at her. The gray unicorn started speaking again.

“All of you are exceptionally talented for your age,” he said, “but now I would like you to join me in honoring the best of the best with a round of applause.” The unicorn walked forward a short distance, then turned around to face them along with the rest of the crowd. Without a moment of hesitation he began to stomp his hooves on the ground in applause. Slowly the rest of the musicians joined in.

As the two of them stood there, only one thought was going through Octavia’s head.

*I hate the cello! I hate the cello! I hate the cello!*

# Chapter 2:

## Friends and Enemies

“You’re going to be sorry!”

That’s what he had yelled at her as the two of them walked down the long hallway to meet their parents outside.

“Why would you even want to play at the Festival? Who’s going to be impressed by you? Your parents and your stupid homeless friend under the bridge?! No pony tries to upstage me. *You’re going to be sorry!*”

Octavia had cried all the way home. Her parents asked her what was wrong, but they refused to understand. They thought she was crying because Frédéric had yelled at her, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. None of this would have happened if she hadn’t been forced to go to that audition, if she hadn’t been forced to wear that stupid bow tie, if she hadn’t been forced to learn to play the stupid, *stupid* cello!

Now she was lying in her bed with her door locked, hugging a tear soaked pillow, just like he said she would be. Just like a *loser* would be. The worst part was that this, ironically, wasn’t the worst part. Tomorrow she would have to go to school with him. Then again the next day, and the next, and the next for... months, until the festival arrived. It would be a living nightmare. He had always been pointlessly cruel to her, but now he actually had a reason. She couldn’t even imagine what he was going to do. And all the time she would still have to *practice the cello!*

The Manehattan Music Festival would be her biggest performance ever. Literally thousands of ponies would be watching. She had no idea what she would play. Nothing she knew seemed good enough. Learning something completely new well enough so that she wouldn’t be afraid to play it would be extremely difficult and far too stressful for her to manage. There was no good option. No matter what she did, it was going to be horrible, and no pony understood.

Octavia continued to cry for hours over the futility of her life. She had no friends, she was doomed to do something she hated, and yet things just

kept spiraling downward. Why? That was all she wanted to know. Why her? As horrible memories, and that great, unanswered question, continued to press down on her, she began to feel tired. So tired as a matter of fact, that the only thing she could do in the end to feel even the slightest relief, was to finally fall asleep.

+++++

*She was standing on a platform. A very high platform. It was so high that she could see the entire planet as a little dot far below her. She looked up and could see only stars. She wanted to reach out and touch them, but they were too far away. She wanted to drift among them, free from her world below. She jumped. She felt so light. Maybe if she just tried a little harder....*

*Octavia jumped again. This time she focused. This time instead of falling back down she continued to move upward. The stars were so far away, but she was getting closer. Making progress. Wonderful, fulfilling progress. As she swam towards them she suddenly realized that she had forgotten something. She wasn't sure what, but she knew she couldn't leave it behind. She turned and looked down. The platform she had been standing on was hardly visible now. She wondered if it would really be worth it to go back, but when she looked up again she realized she didn't have a choice, because now she was falling.*

*As she fell she reached up toward the stars. As she fell past the platform she began to cry. They were so far away. She would never reach them now. Her sadness quickly turned to fear as she slowly spun around. The planet was so big. She was going to hit it, and it was going to hurt. She tried to focus and steer herself away, but the more she thought about falling, the more she lost control. As she passed through the clouds, the world below her truly came into view for the first time.*

*She was above Manehattan. She recognized Canterlot in the distance, and was surprised to be able to so clearly make out the lands beyond. She had never seen them so clearly before. As she fell she looked down again and saw her house directly below her. The sound of somepony playing the cello echoed out of it.*

*No. No it didn't. Not here. Octavia glared at her home below her and the sound stopped. Suddenly she felt light again. As she approached the roads below, she turned her gaze upwards, and felt the elated sensation of*

*going from falling to flying. Instead of plummeting down at the ground, she was plummeting over it, soaring forward again, then up. Up toward Canterlot, then beyond to lands unknown. The feeling that she was forgetting something important returned, but she didn't want to feel it anymore. She wanted to fly.*

+++++

Octavia opened her eyes. It was dark.

She sat up in her bed, discovering that she felt much better than when she had fallen asleep. What a wonderful dream.

Stretching, she slowly climbed to her feet, then walked over to her window and opened the curtains. The sun hadn't come up yet, but a faint blue glow could be seen over the horizon. It looked like she was just in time to watch the sunrise. She leaned forward in anticipation, resting her head against her hooves on the windowsill. She always enjoyed the deathly silence right before the sun rose. It made the effect all the more impressive. When it would soar into view over the hills it was like a wordless signal that would cause the world to come to life, filling it with color and movement and sound. She wondered how Celestia felt when she did it. All she knew was that she would love to have that sort of power.

Octavia's eyes widened at a sudden flare of light. She smiled and shielded her eyes as the sun rushed into view, stopping just over the horizon and settling into its methodical path across the sky. She continued to watch a little longer as the ponies far below her window began to move. She watched as they passed by their windows, exited their front doors to get their morning papers and wave to their neighbors, then go back into their houses and emerge a short while later to begin their daily walks to work. It was almost as if it were choreographed. A massive yet subtle dance brought on by the opening of the sky and the light streaming in.

"Octavia?" called a rough morning voice from the hallway, accompanied by a loud knock on her door, "are you awake?"

"Yes dad!" she called back, rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of the question. How could she answer if she wasn't awake?

"Are you feeling better?"

"I'm fine."

“Well good. Have you picked what you’re going to play at the Festival yet?”

“I *just* woke up dad!”

“Alright, alright! No need to be grumpy. Just start working on it. You’ll need to know it forwards and backwards by the time the festival comes around.”

“I know.”

“Glad to hear it. Your mother’s making breakfast. It should be ready in a few minutes.”

“OK.”

Octavia listened as her father walked away. She sighed, turning away from her window and grabbing her cello and music books from the floor. She slung the burdensome instrument over her shoulder as she opened her bedroom door and began down the hall.

After she had made her way down the spiral staircase, Octavia entered into the kitchen, setting her cello down near the table and pulling over a chair. Her mother slid her over a plate covered with what looked like fried alfalfa and tofu squares. She was always making experimental food like this. Octavia turned her nose up at it, but her father gave her a look, and she began to eat. She much rather would have had a simple bowl of wheat flakes.

“So any interesting dreams?” her mother asked, sitting down next to her father and pouring herself a glass of apple juice.

“I dreamed that I was falling from space down to Equestria, then when I got near the ground I was able to fly. I flew toward Canterlot, then past it to somewhere new. It was nice.”

“My that sounds lovely,” replied her mother, “I never remember my dreams, and even when I do they seem so boring compared to yours. Honestly Octavia, I don’t know how you can have such a creative mind and still be so quiet.”

“I geff I don’f huv much to fay,” she replied through a mouthful of alfalfa.

"Please Octavia, manners," said her father from the far side of his paper.

Octavia swallowed, then repeated herself. "I said I guess I don't have much to say."

"Nonsense," said her mother. "Somepony as bright as you should always speak her mind. Imagine what it would be like if all the world's intelligent ponies kept to themselves as much as you. Wouldn't that be awful?"

Octavia shrugged, not saying anything. Her mother rolled her eyes.

"Well you better be on your way," said her mother, grabbing her empty plate and carrying it to the sink after Octavia had finished. "You don't want to be late."

"I'm always early for class. Why such a rush today?"

"You'll need plenty of extra time to practice for the Manehattan Music Festival. Now off you go," she insisted again, giving Octavia a quick hug, then a soft push toward the front door. Octavia raised an eyebrow as she grabbed her cello and trotted out of the kitchen.

"Goodbye!" she said as she stepped outside.

"Have a good day!" her mother called back.

"Work hard!" her father added.

"I will!" she called back, quickly closing the door behind her. Once she was outside she let out a strained groan. Today was going to be a stressful day. She could feel it....

+++++

"Hello Mr. Bridge!" Octavia said as she passed under the old stone overpass.

"Good to see you Miss Octavia!" Mr. Bridge replied. "You seem to be in a bit of a rush today. Something going on?"

"I'm going to be playing in the Music Festival this year."

"Oh well congratulations! That's very exciting news!"

“Not exciting, just stressful. I’m hoping to get to school a little early today and try to figure out what to play before class starts.”

“Well I’ll be looking forward to hearing what you’ve chosen. You try to enjoy yourself, alright?”

“I don’t see how I could, but I’ll do my best,” she replied. Mr. Bridge waved pleasantly as she walked around the corner and out of sight.

After several more minutes of walking through the city she pushed her way through the glass doors of her school. It was five story tall, very artistically designed building in the middle of town. Fluid metal support beams and skylights ran all throughout it. She had found it all very interesting the first time she had seen it, but now it didn’t impress her in the least. Her classroom was at the complete opposite side of the building on the lower floor. She quickly made her way there, not even pausing to look at the many abstract paintings she passed on the way.

Octavia was usually the first pony in class, but as she approached the door today she heard noise from inside. It sounded like somepony playing the piano, but doing so in such a way that it reminded her more of a construction site than any music she had ever heard. Opening the door as quietly as she could, she stepped inside.

As Octavia entered the room she saw a pony sitting in front of the piano, hammering on the keys so fast it was hard to follow. She couldn’t tell the mistakes from the intended notes, but apparently he could. Every time he would get something wrong he would let out an angry whinny. He was doing it quite a lot. Octavia suddenly yelped as the door unexpectedly slammed shut behind her. As she did, the noise stopped. Frédéric looked up from the piano and toward the door. His mane was tossed over his face haphazardly and he was breathing heavily. It looked to Octavia like he had been battling the piano more than playing it. When he saw who was standing there he quickly brushed his mane back and sat up straight.

“Oh, it’s you,” he spat.

“S-sorry to interrupt.”

“Yes well you should be,” he replied.

“What were you doing?”

He looked at her like she was stupid. “Playing the piano *obviously*.”

“Well, I know, but... what were you playing?”

“It’s a little piece called The Death Waltz. You might have heard of it, although I doubt it. They say it’s one of the most complicated pieces ever composed. I’m going to be playing it at the Manehattan Music Festival, assuming of course that I can get the *idiotic! Chords! Right!*” Frédéric slammed his hoof down on the piano with each emphasized word, causing a jumble of notes to spray out of it each time. Octavia cringed as he did so. She had never seen him so... distraught.

“So, have you decided what to play yet?” he asked, once it had finally quieted down.

“No, well, not really. I have some ideas, but-“

“Of course you haven’t,” he interrupted, turning back to the piano. “Why would an ingrate like you ever think that far ahead?” He began to play again, but it wasn’t ten seconds before he made another mistake and slammed his hooves down with an angry neigh.

Octavia just stood by the door, completely silent. She didn’t know what to do. Admittedly she wasn’t Frédéric’s biggest fan, but seeing him like this just made her feel... *bad*. Going against her better judgment, she slowly crept over to the piano bench where he was still sitting with his hooves on the keys. Leaning slightly forward, she asked as nicely as she could manage, “Are you OK?”

Frédéric didn’t look up from the piano. He just kept staring ahead with his jaw clenched. A vein in the side of his head was visibly pulsing. “Don’t talk to me,” he finally growled.

Now that Octavia was closer she could see what he had been trying to play. The sheet music had more black on the page than white. So many notes were crammed so close together that she wondered how he could even read it! No wonder he was having trouble.

“It’s just that you seem really stressed and... I don’t know. Maybe you should take a break and calm down a little or something? Maybe?”

“Stressed?!” he suddenly yelled. “You don’t even know what it means to be *stressed!* Get away from me and let me practice!”

Without another word Octavia ran to the other side of the room. Frédéric watched her go with an angry glare. Once she had enough



distance between her and him, she stopped running and turned around. He let out one more agitated huff before once again turning to the piano and beginning to play.

“Well *that* went poorly....” She muttered to herself.

Looking up at the clock, Octavia saw that there was still a bit of time before other students would start showing up to fill the many empty seats in the room. Not knowing what else to do, she removed her cello from her back and began to play the basic scales as quietly as she could.

+++++

It felt like far too long before other students began to arrive. One by one they began to file in and take their seats. Frédéric thankfully stopped the Death Waltz as they did, and returned to acting like his normal self. Octavia continued to absentmindedly play the old piece she played at the audition. She was more interested in watching the students entering the room. There was one in particular that she was looking for. She had to watch for a long time, because it wasn't until the last second before bell rang that she finally bolted into the room.

“Hello Bluenote!” called Octavia. She felt slightly embarrassed when Bluenote looked around in confusion, obviously not recognizing her voice. Octavia set her cello down and waved, not really blaming her. Once Bluenote realized who had said her name, she quickly walked over.

“Hi Octavia. It's a good thing Mr. Hill isn't here yet isn't it? Otherwise I might have been marked late!”

“Yes. You certainly were cutting it close,” Octavia replied as cheerfully as she could as Bluenote sat down next to her.

“So what do you need?” she asked, out of breath. It was obvious that she had been sprinting to make it into class on time.

“I just wanted to say thanks again for inviting me to your party.”

“Oh?” asked Bluenote, once again looking confused. “Why's that?”

“It's just that I don't get invited to many things is all, so... I just wanted to say thanks.”

“Why don't you get invited to things?”

“Oh. Well....” Did she really have to say it? “I guess... because nopony knows who I am. I don’t really get out much, as you might have noticed. Lots of *cello* related things to do.”

“Yeah. I did notice that,” she responded. Octavia sighed. She was so *very* grateful that her lack of social life was easily recognizable. Bluenote continued.

“I’m pretty good with names, but even *I* didn’t know yours until just last year when you got called to the office. You’re *really* quiet over there in your corner of the room. Have you ever even talked in class before?”

“Not really.”

“Huh. That’s kind of sad isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Kind of,” said Octavia, cringing at the unpleasant realization.

“Well I’ve got to go get my sousaphone set up, but you’re welcome for the invitation. I’ll be sure to invite you if I have another event sometime. Do you want to hang out after class and talk more?”

Octavia was a bit surprised by Bluenote’s bluntness, but she *would* like that. “S-sure! How does that work? Do you want me to wait here, or should I go look for you? Should we set up a time?”

“I’ll be standing one row behind you. I’m pretty sure we’ll be able to find each other.”

“Oh. Right.” Octavia once again felt embarrassed by not just her complete lack of social skills, but also by the fact that she had never realized where Bluenote (or any of her other classmates for that matter) sat in relation to her. “See you then.”

“Yup!” replied Bluenote, getting up from her chair and walking to the back of the room to retrieve her sousaphone from the large instrument lockers. Octavia had always wanted to just leave her cello at school instead of lugging it home, but her parents wouldn’t allow it.

The general talking and other such noises suddenly died down as Mr. Hill walked through the door. He was a tall Pegasus with brown fur, an orange mane, and silvery-blue eyes. His cutie mark was a brass key, which Octavia had always found a bit strange. To her he always seemed distracted and a bit rough around the edges, like being a teacher wasn’t his

full time job. He was a good teacher though, so she tried to ignore those facts.

“Good morning!” he loudly exclaimed.

“Good morning,” the class echoed back.

“So where did we leave off last time? I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’m sure at least one of you knows. Make sure to play extra loud today to make up for the lack of our pianist and cellist.”

The class stared at him in silence for a moment before looking over at Frédéric, before turning back to Mr. Hill in confusion. Octavia wondered if her classmates hadn’t checked on her due to Frédéric still obviously being there, or if they simply didn’t know who she was. It took a moment before Mr. Hill realized everyone was waiting for an explanation.

“Oh! Right. Frédéric and Octavia? Gather your things. Out you go,” he said, motioning toward the door.

“If I may ask,” said Frédéric, “is there a *reason* you’re having us leave?”

“Of course there is Fred. As the winners of the Manehatten Music Festival auditions, you two have been given a personal tutor to help you practice. She’s waiting outside for you.”

Octavia and Frédéric both exchanged surprised looks at this announcement. Well, Octavia did. Frédéric just glared at her, but nonetheless it was obvious that he was caught by surprise by this as well. The two of them slowly got up from their seats and began walking toward the door. As Octavia walked she glanced behind her at Bluenote, who shrugged at her and waved goodbye. Wonderful, one more opportunity to actually interact with another living being ruined.

Mr. Hill followed them over to the door. “Good luck!” he said, before quickly slamming it closed behind them. As they turned around they saw an older unicorn standing before them. She was wearing a pair of thick rimmed glasses and smiling at them in a very businesslike way.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Mrs. Reed, and I’ll be helping you prepare for the Manehatten Music Festival. Please come this way. There’s a room set up for you on the second floor.”

As soon as she had finished talking she turned around and began to walk away. Octavia took a step forward, but Frédéric shoved her out of the way and took the lead. He soon caught up to Mrs. Reed and began asking questions.

"Excuse me," he began, "but why wasn't I informed of this? Who exactly *are* you?"

"I'm sorry you were uninformed, but it was a bit of a rushed decision. We'll be sure to let your parents know as soon as we can. Like I said, my name is Mrs. Reed. I've been teaching music in Canterlot for over ten years now, and due to the importance of this year's event, it was decided that I should come here and tutor the two of you personally to make sure that everything goes well."

"*Canterlot?* Why would Canterlot send one of their teachers here just... out of the blue? What's so special about this year's-"

Even before the words left his lips, Frédéric and Octavia's eyes began to widen as they put two and two together.

"Why Celestia will be attending of course!" said Mrs. Reed. "I do hope you two are planning something impressive for her."

"Actually-" began Octavia, but Frédéric cut her off.

"I am doing a solo number, and yes, it will be very impressive. As far as her," Frédéric motioned toward Octavia as dismissively as she had ever seen somepony motion, "I'll leave that mess to you."

A few minutes later the three of them entered into a small room on the second floor of the building. A grand piano was setting in the far corner. Frédéric immediately walked over and began inspecting it while Octavia quietly set up her music stand. Mrs. Reed entered last, following Frédéric over to the piano.

"It's already been carefully tuned," she said as she watched him open the top and peer inside. "Now let's not waste time. Let me see what you're working on."

"Here," he replied, shoving his sheet music toward her as he began to test and adjust the piano bench. As she flipped to the first page, she began to look worried.

“The Death Waltz? Don’t you think that’s a bit... advanced for you?”

Octavia cringed. That was a very bad way to put it.

“What?!” yelled Frédéric, who was suddenly very close to Mrs. Reed’s face. “Don’t you *dare* say that this piece of music is above me! Don’t you even think it! I’m Frédéric Horseshoepin, and I am a *prodigy*! Do you hear me? Now I would appreciate it if you would stop treating me like a *simpleton*,” he looked over at Octavia at the word simpleton, then back to Mrs. Reed, “and do your job!” Frédéric roughly snatched back his music and sat down at the piano. Mrs. Reed looked shocked.

“A-alright. If you say you can play it then I’ll believe you. Just... spend a few minutes warming up while I help Octavia and I’ll be right back.”

Frédéric huffed angrily.

Still looking back at Frédéric, Mrs. Reed walked over to where Octavia had set things up. “And what exactly will you be playing?” she asked, just a bit shakier than she had been speaking before.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Octavia replied, a bit embarrassed. “I was thinking Ponychelbel’s Canon, but I’m not really sure. It was just an idea.”

“Ah, well that sounds like a very... reasonable piece,” by reasonable Octavia assumed she meant boring. “A classic in every sense of the word. Start practicing that dear, and I’ll be back to answer any questions you have in a few minutes.”

Octavia nodded, opening her music book and taking her usual stance. Meanwhile Mrs. Reed walked back over to Frédéric. She asked him something very quietly that Octavia couldn’t hear over the sound of her cello, but Frédéric nodded in response, then immediately began to once again hammer his hooves across the grand piano to the tune of The Death Waltz. From that point on Octavia couldn’t hear anything.

That was how the rest of her day went. Although she continued playing, she didn’t make any progress due to the fact that she didn’t know how she actually sounded. Mrs. Reed came over once or twice and helped her for a few minutes, but there was no point. She could hardly hear Mrs. Reed’s responses to her questions, and usually just ended up nodding and continuing along exactly like she had been before. It was ridiculous. At one point Frédéric even had the gall to say that *she* was distracting *him*.

When school was over Frédéric huffed out of the room, still obviously frustrated over how little he had improved. As Octavia packed up, Mrs. Reed promised her that she would find more time to help her tomorrow, but Octavia knew that wasn't going to be the case. Frédéric simply demanded too much attention, and trying to compete with him was a hopeless effort. It looked like she would have to spend even *more* time practicing at home now.

As Octavia was exiting the school she had begun to feel a little bit better, if only for the reason that she was free of stress for a few short minutes on the way home. That feeling immediately vanished though, when she rounded a corner and a shadow crossed her path. She jumped as she suddenly realized that somepony had been walking alongside her this whole time.

"Eep!" she squeaked in surprise. She really needed to look up more! "H-how long have you been there?"

"Too long," said Frédéric. "I was going to say something, but I was curious to see exactly how much time it would take for you to quit daydreaming and actually pay attention. I about got bored enough to leave. No wonder nopony likes you."

"What do you want?" asked Octavia defensively, once again not able to think of a good comeback.

"I want to make sure you understand our situation," he replied. "That fact that you forced me to share the stage with you was bad enough, but now that Celestia is going to be watching, I'm not going to let you ruin *my* chance to impress her any further. You are going to go home, and tell your parents that you're not going to be performing at the Festival, agreed?"

Oh how Octavia wished that she could do that. She really *really* wished she could, but there was no way her parents would let her. Not in a thousand years. "I... I can't," she mumbled.

"You can't, or you won't?" Frédéric asked accusingly.

"I *can't*! They never listen to me."

"Well you make them listen!" he yelled, grabbing her arm. Octavia attempted to free herself, but he wasn't letting go. "There is *no* way that I will let myself be compared to you in front of thousands of ponies. In front

of *Celestia* herself! If you don't find a way to get yourself out of the Festival, then I *will*!"

"It's a fine evening for a walk! Very relaxing!" a voice suddenly called from down the street. "How odd then, that you two look so distressed!" Octavia turned around to see Mr. Bridge quickly walking toward them. At the sight of him she couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"We're just talking!" Frédéric called back.

"Oh, I find that hard to believe. Is that true Miss Octavia?"

"No!" she yelled before she had a chance to think about what she was saying. Frédéric glared at her.

"Well then I suggest you let her go," said Mr. Bridge, now much closer.

Frédéric's mouth twisted down into a snarl, but this time he complied. Giving Octavia one more meaningful look that very clearly showed he was serious about what he had said, he quickly turned around and walked away. By the time Mr. Bridge had reached where Octavia was standing Frédéric was long gone.

"Nice fellow," Mr. Bridge said sarcastically. "A friend of yours I presume?"

"A classmate," she responded. "He's...." Octavia couldn't think of an adequate word to describe him. "Thank you Mr. Bridge," she said instead.

"Of course my dear! I'm always there for my favorite cellist. Speaking of which, how was school for you today?"

"That's a long unpleasant story," she replied. "I'm sure you wouldn't be interested."

"I most certainly would," he replied in a reassuring tone. "Now go on. You can tell me while I walk you home."

"Oh you don't have to do that," said Octavia, but she didn't mean it at all. Mr. Bridge must have picked up on this, because he just laughed and waited patiently for her to begin walking again.

"Now, tell me how it all began," he said, dramatically waving his hoof in a wide arc in front of them.

"Where it all began?" said Octavia. "My, this is going to be a longer story than I thought."

They both laughed as they walked side by side down the road.

+++++

On the walk home Octavia had told Mr. Bridge all about the audition, and Frédéric, and school. He had listened politely and given advice occasionally when he thought it helpful, which it always was. Once she had finished her story they had started talking about music. It was almost startling how much he knew on the subject. Now that they were approaching her house, Octavia was feeling much better.

"Thank you again Mr. Bridge!" she said as she opened the front gate.

"It was no trouble at all Miss Octavia. Remember, don't let that Frédéric push you around anymore. You've got just as much right to perform at the festival as he does, and even more reason to, seeing as he's trying to stop you."

Octavia walked down the small path leading to the front door and stepped inside, waving at Mr. Bridge one more time before shutting it behind her. She had planned on going straight up to her room, but when she turned around she saw her mother looking at her from the living room.

"Who was that man outside?" she asked, waving for Octavia to come sit down with her.

"That was Mr. Bridge."

"Who's he?"

"He's... a teacher at school. The music theory teacher," Octavia lied. She had never really told her family about being friends with a homeless pony either. She was sure she would get around to it eventually.

"Why was he walking with you?"

"We were just discussing a project I'm working on."

"Well that's nice of him. Come over and tell me about it."

"I can't mom. I've got a lot of practice to do."



Octavia's mother gave her a suspicious look. Octavia had never volunteered for practice before.

"Alright," she eventually said. "I wouldn't want to interrupt your practice. I'd love to hear about it another time though!"

"OK mom!" said Octavia, rubbing her sore arm as she quickly walking up the stairs and out of view.

# Chapter 3

## Striking a Chord

Over the next few weeks things only got worse. Although Frédéric was improving, he was doing so at a snail's pace. The teacher was spending practically every minute of class just trying to get him to listen to her advice. Meanwhile Octavia, with her much simpler number, was improving at a much faster rate. This of course infuriated Frédéric.

Another annoying factor was that Octavia had only ever gotten to see her new friend Bluenote a few times in passing since the first day. All this preparation was keeping her too busy even for light conversation. It was at the end of a particularly long day, when Frédéric said he was staying after to practice a certain part of The Death Waltz, that things first started getting serious. Mrs. Reed agreed, and left the two of them in the room alone. As soon as she exited the room though, instead of going back to playing, Frédéric stood up from the piano bench and approached Octavia.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded.

"Why am I doing what?" she replied, guessing that she already knew the answer.

"Why are you still practicing? Why are you still *here*?"

Octavia took a deep breath. "Because... I want to be."

"I don't care what you want!" Frédéric said angrily. "I *told* you to drop out of the Festival!"

"You can't tell me what to do Frédéric!" Octavia yelled back, catching him by surprise. This was the first time she had ever raised her voice at him... or at anyone for that matter. It left her feeling a little shaken, but she pressed on. "It's just a performance! Why can't you just leave me alone?"

For a moment Frédéric just stood there, but he recovered quickly. All of a sudden he swung his hoof forward, striking Octavia's music stand and sending her papers flying through the air in a cascade of white. "You don't get it do you?!" he yelled.

"No I don't!" Octavia yelled back, not quite as loud as before. "Why is this so important to you? Why are you being this way?"

*"Because you're the only one that can compete with me!"*

Now it was Octavia's turn to be surprised.

"You think you're so special. So impressive with your little cello. You've had your parents supporting you every step of the way. On your own you wouldn't be anything. *Me* on the other hoof, I've worked my whole life to get to where I am today. Nopony has offered to help me, and that fine, because I don't need any help! I've had to fight and struggle for this, and here you are alongside me. You *useless. Pathetic. Nothing.* Threatening to ruin me and acting like you don't even care! How dare you?!"

"R-ruin you?" squeaked Octavia. "I d-don't want to-"

"Don't lie to me!" Frédéric hissed, taking a threatening step forward. "I'm not going to tell you again. Get out now, while you still have the chance." Without another word he quickly turned and left the room. Octavia watched him go.

*Does he really think that?* Octavia asked herself as she picked up her scattered music sheets and wiped tears from her eyes. She thought she could stand up to him, but she was wrong. She never wanted to be here in the first place. The only reason she was still here was because she had to be. Could he really think that she was doing it to spite him? To make herself look better than him? Octavia just didn't know. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take.

"Octavia?" said a voice from the doorway a moment later. Octavia stood up quickly and tried to look like she hadn't been crying uncontrollably for the past few minutes. It didn't work very well. Standing in the doorway was Bluenote.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" Octavia asked, sniffing loudly. Even though they had talked a few times she didn't think that Bluenote counted her as a friend yet, so her appearance was rather unexpected.

"We saw Frédéric storm out of the building a minute ago. We just wanted to make sure you were OK.... *Are you OK?*"

"I..." Octavia began, but she couldn't make herself say yes. "I don't know!"

Dropping her music sheets, Octavia fell to a sitting position on the floor and began crying harder than ever.

"Come on," said Bluenote, looking behind herself for a moment before running over to Octavia's side. A rather handsome purple pony with a blue mane whom she didn't recognize followed in after her. Octavia tried to look away. The last thing she needed was for her first impression on him to be her sobbing pathetically on the floor surrounded by sheet music.

"This is Harpo," said Bluenote.

Harpo waved nonchalantly, then as if reading Octavia's mind, said, "Not the best circumstances for a first meeting, but don't worry. I understand."

"T-thanks," muttered Octavia, as she watched him walk over to the piano and plink away at the keys. He silently nodded in response.

"So what's wrong?" asked Bluenote, once Octavia had calmed down a little.

"Just Frédéric being Frédéric," she sighed. "He actually told me that he thinks I'm trying to outdo him at the Music Festival to make him look bad!"

"I don't doubt it," said Harpo. When Bluenote shot him a harsh look he added, "That he would think that I mean. Not that you're actually trying to do it. Sorry."

"Well you shouldn't let *that* get you down," said Bluenote. "I mean, you should know better than anypony that Frédéric likes to make himself look like the best thing ever, whether or not he actually is. If you're doing better than he is then that's his problem."

"But he's making it my problem!" insisted Octavia. "He keeps warning me that if I don't drop out of the Festival then he's going to force me to."

"What?" Harpo suddenly exclaimed. "I would have expected him to be angry that somepony other than him was getting attention, but threats? That's just going too far!"

“Um... how exactly do you know Frédéric?” Octavia asked Harpo.

“Oh right,” Bluenote answered. “He and Frédéric have been friends for a long time.”

“And how do *you* two know each other?”

“Harpo’s my brother,” answered Bluenote again.

“Oh. I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“Well, she didn’t until last year,” said Harpo. “Our parents met at a concert. It was kind of funny actually, because Bluenote and I knew each other from class long before then.”

“What class did you know each other from?”

Harpo gave Octavia a strange look. “Music class of course.”

“You’re in our music class?” Octavia asked in surprise.

“He’s been in class for as long as I have,” said Bluenote. “You *really* need to get out more.”

“In her defense, I’m not exactly the most noticeable pony,” said Harpo. “Plus we sit on opposite sides of the room. We can’t even see each other when everypony is in place.”

“Oh...” said Octavia, feeling somewhat embarrassed. She felt bad for having been so ignorant of him this whole time. “What instrument do you play?” she asked, trying to make up for it just a little.

“The harp,” he said, opening up the top of the piano and running his hoof along the strings inside. Octavia should have guessed.

“Well don’t worry Octavia,” said Bluenote. “We’ll make sure that Frédéric doesn’t give you any more trouble.”

“How?”

“I... well I don’t know. If you want we can wait for you outside the room every day after class. I doubt he’s serious about his threats, but if he knew we were waiting for you then I’m sure he wouldn’t do anything. Also Harpo could talk to him about what he said, right Harpo?”

"I could try," Harpo replied. "Frédéric hasn't been in the best of moods lately, as I'm sure you've guessed. I'll be sure to let him know that he's way out of line this time though, you can be sure of that."

"Thanks guys," replied Octavia. "Although at this point it might be easier to try and convince my parents to let me give up playing at the Festival. That way everyone would be happy. Everyone except my parents that is...."

"Don't say that!" Bluenote exclaimed. "The Manehattan Music Festival is one of the greatest opportunities a pony our age could have! Tons of important ponies attend it each year. Especially in the music business. It might be your chance to really take off as a musician."

"I don't want to be a musician...."

Both Bluenote and Harpo seemed stunned by this announcement. Octavia couldn't understand why everypony always reacted that way.

"You... really? You don't want to be a musician?" asked Bluenote.

"No I don't. I hate playing the cello."

"But you're so good at it," said Harpo. "It's like you were born to play it. If I had the same talent for the harp as you do for the cello then I would be set for life!"

"Well that's easy. Just stay locked in your room and play it for the next fifteen years by yourself, never going outside or making any friends. That's what I did."

There was an awkward silence as Bluenote and Harpo tried to find something comforting to say. Finally Harpo cleared his throat and spoke.

"I'm sorry that's how you feel Octavia, but even if that was the case, you've still got a special talent for it."

"I find that very hard to believe."

"Well it's true."

"It really is," added Bluenote. "Listen, have you talked to anyone about Frédéric? Somepony you can trust? Your parents maybe?"

“My parents don’t understand the problem. I’ve tried.” Suddenly Octavia raised her head slightly. “There is somepony that I mentioned it to, though. An old friend of mine. Maybe he can help me.”

“Good,” said Bluenote. You go talk to him about what you’re thinking. Meanwhile we’ll go talk to Frédéric. We’ll all meet up after class tomorrow, OK? Hopefully everything will have been worked out by then.”

Octavia smiled and wiped her eyes one more time. “OK,” she said. “That sounds good.”

Bluenote and Harpo helped Octavia to her feet, then the three of them exited the school together. They wished Octavia luck as they parted ways, and Octavia thanked them in turn for all their help. As she slowly walked down the dirt road leading to her house she fidgeted with the strap on her cello. It would still be a little while before she reached the bridge. What would she say? She had never asked anyone for advice like this before.

“Um... hello!” she rehearsed. “Do you remember that one colt? With the face? The mean face?” No, that wouldn’t work.

“Hello again! Lovely weather isn’t it? Yes. So I was attacked today, anything interesting happen to you?”

Octavia groaned at her own lack of subtlety. She sounded like a crazy pony. She wasn’t good at speaking, especially when she was upset, and the last thing she wanted to do was come across as unstable. What if she started crying again? Oh that would be so embarrassing!

No. Octavia shook herself out of her rambling thoughts. She wouldn’t cry. She would be fine. She just needed to practice more. If she knew anything as a musician, it was the importance of practice. Taking a deep breath, she tried a few more opening lines. Everything she came up with sounded cheesy, or resentful, or unintentionally lewd. As the bridge came into view she decided that she would just have to speak slowly and think carefully about what she was saying. Knowing her though, to make even one meaningful sentence would take her all day. She hoped that her parents wouldn’t be too worried if she got home late.

“What’s wrong Miss Octavia?” asked Mr. Bridge as soon as she approached. She didn’t think that her feelings were that readable, but apparently she was wrong.

"Hello Mr. Bridge. Do you think I... do you think we could talk for a little while?"

Mr. Bridge seemed a bit surprised by her request, but he politely nodded. "Why of course dear. Come, have a seat." Mr. Bridge did a fancy bow and ushered Octavia over to the wall where he had been sitting a moment before. Octavia removed her cello and sat it down carefully. Mr. Bridge looked at her expectantly, but she didn't know where to begin.

"I'm... thinking of giving up my chance to play at the Music Festival," she said, nervously rubbing her arm.

"Whatever would make you want to do that?" Mr. Bridge asked, then looked angry. "Is that colt giving you trouble again?"

"Well yes, but... that's not the problem. Well it is, but it's not the real problem. It's..."

Even though she had been using Frédéric as an excuse, she knew it was more than that. All her life she had wanted to be something else. Something better than what she was, but nopony seemed to understand. All that anyone ever saw when they looked at her was her cello. Nopony seemed to see the lonely, sad pony behind it.

To Octavia the world seemed so small. Sometimes she would gaze up at the stars like in her dream, longing to leave everything behind. It felt to her like she was a foreigner in a strange land, and that she belonged somewhere else. She would never admit it, but sometimes the strange sense of loneliness was so strong that she would have to scream into her pillow just to feel a little bit better. Was something wrong with her, or was it everypony else? She just didn't know.

For a long time Octavia was silent, trying to think of the right thing to say, but all her eloquence was stifled under the one question that kept forcing its way to the top of her mind. Finally she just blurted it out.

"Why am I so different from the others?" she asked Mr. Bridge, breaking down into sobs. Octavia wrapped her hooves around her head as she continued to cry. So much for her plan.

Mr. Bridge put his hoof on her shoulder, and answered in a soft voice. "Why do you have to be like the others?"



Octavia looked up at Mr. Bridge, not sure she had heard him right. "What do you mean?"

"I know you're different Octavia. I've seen it since the first day we talked. Do you remember that day?"

"Yes," she replied. "You wanted me to play the cello for you."

"That's right. And you did a very good job, and since then you've only improved. Will you play again for me now?"

"I don't want to play the cello," she murmured.

"I know you don't," said Mr. Bridge. Octavia hadn't expected to hear that either. "You've never wanted to play the cello, but would you humor an old man just this once?"

Octavia took a deep breath. She didn't understand why, but she picked up her cello. At least it was nice being asked to play instead of being ordered to for a change.

"What do you want me to play?"

"Whatever you enjoy playing the most."

"I don't enjoy playing anything."

"Well what *do* you enjoy?"

"What do you mean?" Octavia said in confusion.

"There must be something in life you enjoy. Something that makes you happy."

Octavia thought for a moment. All her recent memories were sad, or fearful. There was one thing though. One thing that always made her feel better, even now. "I enjoy watching the sunrise," she said.

"Well then play that."

Octavia stared blankly at Mr. Bridge for a moment. This must be some kind of joke. "You can't *play* a sunrise. It's not music."

"I beg to differ," he replied. "Can you see it in your mind Octavia? Can you feel its light? Music is more than just sound. It's a living thing. You can feel it and touch it and see it!"

"You're making no sense Mr. Bridge." Octavia snapped. "*I can't play a sunrise!*"

Mr. Bridge looked at her somberly for a moment, then said, "Give me your cello."

"What do you need my cello for?"

"Just trust me."

Octavia very slowly and reluctantly handed her cello to Mr. Bridge. "Just... be careful," she said. Mr. Bridge nodded. To Octavia's great surprise, he quickly adjusted the cello to his height and held it in position, then, without a moment's hesitation, he began to play.

The first notes were high and quick. Happy. Almost like a bird's song. There was something about them though. Something Octavia couldn't quite place. A subtle wavering, or the slightest change in pitch. She couldn't quite tell.

Mr. Bridge's hooves moves quickly along the strings, and soon the tone had become much lower. As it did Octavia felt as if she was sinking down with them. With every rise and fall, every trembling chord, Octavia felt herself drifting along. She had never heard anything like it. It was so different than the music she was used to. It was heartfelt and organic. Deep and meaningful. It was... poetry.

As Mr. Bridge continued to play he swayed back and forth like a sapling tree in the breeze. The notes were light, yet strong. Octavia imagined a bright blue sky with just a few small clouds drifting along through it. Suddenly and without warning the image changed as Mr. Bridge dropped down to the lowest note possible. The sky darkened. He quickly plucked at the strings, and it began to rain. The sweeping dirge he now played made Octavia's heart weep. It went on like this for quite some time, the music becoming softer and softer. At last he finished, quickly rising back up through every octave and finishing with the musical equivalent of a long, drawn out sigh.

As Mr. Bridge handed the cello back to the now completely dumbstruck Octavia, he looked sad. She accepted it from him graciously, as if it were something new and foreign. Not the old, boring cello that she had owned for all these years.

"How... how did you do that?" she asked pleadingly. She needed to know.

"That was music, the way it should be."

"I... if there was anything I would play at the Festival, I would want it to be that. Can you teach me Mr. Bridge? Please?"

Mr. Bridge laughed softly and smiled, but the sorrow never left his eyes. "I'm sorry Octavia, but I can't."

"What? Well why can't you?" she asked. He had just played it after all.

"That song isn't for me to teach, only to share."

"Well, if you won't teach me, then will you at least write down the notes so I can learn it on my own?" she asked, slightly offended.

"No no, you don't understand Octavia. I can't teach you because nopony can be taught that song. What I just shared with you wasn't a simple string of notes. It was *me*. My story. My life displayed in musical form."

"Your... life? You mean it was impromptu? Why Mr. Bridge that's amazing! Where did you -" suddenly Octavia thought back to what she just heard. The light and happy tune that suddenly and abruptly change to one of despair. If that was the story of Mr. Bridge, then....

"Oh, Mr. Bridge. I'm sorry."

Mr. Bridge let out a mirthless laugh and looked into Octavia's eyes. "Now you're getting it."

+++++

"What happened to you Mr. Bridge?" Octavia asked, once the two of them sat back down.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "I lived in a town called Ponyville with my wife and daughter. We were very happy." Mr. Bridge started to tear up slightly at the memories. "They were both so wonderful. White as the lightest clouds. My daughter had the same blue mane as me. I couldn't have been more proud. There was a park near the edge of town that we would go to every day. We would watch our daughter play, and my wife

and I would just sit, and talk, and enjoy it. We were perfectly content. I honestly believe that things couldn't have been any better. But then...."

Mr. Bridge's voice trailed off. Octavia tried to be polite, but she was dying to hear the rest of the story. "Then what?" she meekly asked.

"Then..." said Mr. Bridge, seeming to have some trouble getting the words out, "I had to leave."

"Leave? But why?" exclaimed Octavia.

"I just had to." Mr. Bridge laughed in the way somepony might laugh if they had just learned they were dying. "I made a terrible mistake. The kindest thing I could do was to leave them."

"What... what did you do?" Octavia asked, worrying that she was overstepping her bounds.

"That's a story for another time. A time that may never come. It's funny when you look back on things at my age. There are so many events that seemed so insignificant, yet when placed side by side you can see that they were connected all along. Links in a chain, binding you to the past and inevitably leading to where you are today."

At first Octavia thought that Mr. Bridge had started to laugh his unnatural laugh again, but she was wrong. This time he was crying, pure and simple. Octavia was as well. Crying for him, and all the pain that he had suffered so long ago. She wanted to help him somehow. To make the pain he had endured go away, but she knew she couldn't. No pony could. The best she could do was a simple hug, from one friend to another.

Mr. Bridge wrapped an arm around her. "Thank you," he said shakily. "Thank you for being the wonderful pony you are, Octavia."

"You don't need to thank me for anything," Octavia replied.

"You remind me of my daughter in a lot of ways..." said Mr. Bridge, smiling again. He was silent for a long time, but eventually he let Octavia go and climbed to his feet, helping Octavia up in the process.

"You're a natural at playing the cello Octavia, but you're keeping your talent wrapped up like an arm in a sling. Don't let the choices of others stop you from making you own. You mustn't hold back. Free yourself."

"I'll try Mr. Bridge," she replied, nodding quickly.

"You know Octavia, you're the reason that my song ended on a high note," said Mr. Bridge, giving her a pat on the shoulder. "When you come by tomorrow maybe I can help you more. For now you best get home before it gets dark though."

"Alright. And thank you again, very much. For everything."

Octavia saw Mr. Bridge smile and wave goodbye as she started walking the rest of the way home. She smiled back, but didn't slow down. She needed to get home quickly. For the first time in her life she actually wanted to practice.

+++++

From then on things started getting better for Octavia. The next day at school she met Harpo and Bluenote. They said that they had talked with Frédéric, and that they had made sure he understood that the two of them were watching out for her. After that he had kept to himself much more, only sparing the occasional seething glance at Octavia from across their practice room. Every day after class would end, Harpo and Bluenote would be waiting for her. It was always fun to meet them, and even though he never said much, Octavia would catch Harpo looking at her every once in a while. When she returned his gaze he would always look away, blushing slightly.

She kept playing Poryhelbel's Canon in class, but every day she would stop and talk with Mr. Bridge. He would show her little secrets to make her cello sound better, and help her get in touch with her music, and sometimes if he was particularly happy he would even tell her stories about fun things that he and his family had done together. Over the next few months Octavia actually began enjoying the cello for the first time in her life, and it showed in her playing.

It was early one morning before school, only a few days before the music festival, that somepony knocked on the front door of Octavia's house. Octavia looked up from her cello at the sound. Hardly anyone ever came to the house, let alone this early in the day. Curious, she quietly exited her room and stood at the top of the stairs. She heard her father talking to somepony. Suddenly he shouted her name, causing her to jump in surprise.

“Octavia!” he yelled, “Get your school things and come down here please!”

“Why?” she called back. “Who is it?”

“A friend of yours! He wants to walk you to school!”

*A friend?* Octavia thought. Who could it be? As she walked back to her room she wondered if for some reason Mr. Bridge was stopping by to say hello. That didn’t seem likely however. He wasn’t the “stopping by” type. Maybe... maybe it was Harpo then? He was always with Bluenote when she saw him though, and her father hadn’t mentioned a second pony. Perhaps he wanted to walk her to school by himself? Octavia smiled with happy anticipation at the thought as she picked up her cello and music stand before quickly heading down the stairs.

“OK! I’m ready!” she called, trotting up to the door. Suddenly she skidded to a stop. In front of her was not the purple pony she was hoping to see at all. Instead Frédéric Horseshoepin was standing on her doorstep, chatting casually with her father. He looked well groomed and professional as always, but something seemed off about him. Even though he sounded and acted the same, it was like he wasn’t really paying attention to what he was doing. His movements were too deliberate. His sentences too clear. Octavia noticed that his eyes seemed to be slightly red.

“Ah, there you are!” said her father. “Well don’t let me hold you two up. Have a good day at school dear.” Her father gave her a quick hug before Octavia walked out the door, then abruptly closed it behind her. As soon as she heard the *click* of the lock, she started feeling uncomfortable.

“Um... is something wrong Frédéric?” she asked.

“No. Not really,” he responded a little too carefully. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s your eyes. They seem... have you been crying?”

“Crying? Of course not. It’s just these allergies. The pollen is... never mind that. I need to talk to you.” Frédéric quickly turned and began walking down the front path of Octavia’s house to the street. She reluctantly followed.

Frédéric didn’t speak for a long time. Octavia didn’t know why, but something about his silence was even worse than when he was throwing insults at her. As the two of them neared the dip that lead under the bridge,

he suddenly changed direction, walking along a road that lead up and over the bridge instead of under it.

"Where are you going?" Octavia asked.

"A different way," he replied. Octavia looked down her normal path. She could see Mr. Bridge in his usual spot. He was still asleep.

Octavia ran to catch up with Frédéric, who had continued walking around the bend that lead to the bridge without her. "Frédéric, what's going on?" she asked as she ran up to his side. He still refused to respond. Instead he walked over to one of the short stone walls running along the side of the bridge and leaned against it, looking out at the city in front of him.

"What do you dream about Octavia?" he suddenly asked.

"Wh-what?" she responded. That wasn't what she had expected at all.

Frédéric just waited.

"I... dream about all sorts of things."

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do," he said rather insistently. "I know you do. Tell me something specific that you've dreamt about."

"I... um..." Octavia didn't know what was going on. Frédéric had never taken any interest in her before, and this question was more personal than most. "I dream about flying sometimes."

"*Flying*," he scoffed. "What use is flying?"

"It has lots of uses actually. Pegasi use it to move clouds, or fly carriages-"

"I know *that!*" Frédéric interrupted. "I meant what use is it to you?"

Octavia had never really thought of this before. She had always just... enjoyed it. "I'm not sure," she said truthfully. "I guess it's just nice to

feel free sometimes. To not be stuck on the ground. Why? What do you dream about?"

*"I don't dream,"* he said sourly. Although he didn't seem to acknowledge it, Octavia saw his eyes beginning to tear up. Now she was starting to worry.

"Would you just tell me what's wrong Frédéric?"

Fredric was silent for a long time again. So long as a matter of fact that Octavia started to think that he had forgotten about her. After what must have been one of the most awkward pauses in history, he finally spoke up.

"I used to dream," he said, "when I was very young. I dreamed of all sorts of things. My mother always said I was creative. That I would be great someday. That I would make her proud. The last dream I had, I saw myself sitting in front of a piano. She was in the audience, and as I played she smiled at me and waved. When I was done she cheered for me... I never told her about that dream."

"Why not?" asked Octavia.

"Because she died," said Frédéric emotionlessly.

Octavia gasped and took a step back. "I-I'm sorry Frédéric. I had no idea." Frédéric acted as if he didn't hear her.

"It was her heart. They weren't certain why, but it just... failed. Ever since then my sleep has been empty. All these years I've tried to hold on to that dream, but it's fading. Now when I look back on it I can't even see her face. I thought that playing the piano would help me remember her. I'm not sure if it has. Perhaps the memory is just doomed to fade over time. I vowed to make her proud though. I vowed that no matter what, I would become the best musician in Equestria... there's one problem though."

"What?"

Frédéric looked over at her, his expression remaining unnaturally neutral. *"You."*

"Me? What... what do you mean me?"



"I'm not stupid Octavia. I'm not going to deny that you're better than me. I don't know how you've managed it, but even though I've been doing everything I can, you're just *are*. The Festival is in three days, and when it comes everyone will applaud *you*. Even though I've worked harder, even though I've suffered more, even though I *deserve* it, you're going to outshine me, unless...."

"...Unless what?"

Suddenly Frédéric lunged forward, grabbing on to the neck of Octavia's cello. "Unless I stop you!"

"No!" yelled Octavia, trying to escape his grip. She struggled backwards, but the cello strap prevented her from getting free. Frédéric yanked her forward, causing her to stumble to her knees.

"I can't let you do this!" he yelled. Octavia couldn't see his face at the current angle, but she heard his strained voice cracking. "I can't let you take this away from me!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry Frédéric! Just please don't!" yelled Octavia as she tried to struggle back to her feet, but he wouldn't let her. He just kept pulling on the cello, tossing her off balance and dragging her toward the edge.

Suddenly somepony ran past her. There was a sudden tug on the cello so hard that the strap around her torso broke, tossing Octavia forward roughly. It took her a few seconds to climb to her feet and see who the new pony was.

"Mr. Bridge!"

Mr. Bridge and Frédéric both had one hoof on the cello. Mr. Bridge was using his other to try and shove Frédéric away, but Frédéric was stronger than he was, at least right now, when he was being fueled by fear and anger. Frédéric used his free hoof to hit Mr. Bridge solidly across the face, dazing him for a moment. He stumbled back, but even then refused to let go. Frédéric attempted to rip it away from him, but instead he swung Mr. Bridge around, causing him to collide with the stone wall, and to Octavia's horror, go tumbling over it.

"*NO!*" Octavia screamed as Mr. Bridge fell. He still refused to let go of the cello, and Frédéric was forced to release it at the last second or be

pulled over the edge himself. There was a moment of horrid silence, followed by a sickening *thud* and the sound of splintering wood. Octavia ran to the edge and peered over. Mr. Bridge was lying in the middle of the street, the remains of her cello by his side. She looked back up at Frédéric, who was staring at her with a look of horror on his face.

"I... I didn't," he muttered. "Oh Celestia... what have I done?"

"Get help!" Octavia cried. "*Please!*"

Frédéric didn't respond. He only looked at her a moment longer, then turned and galloped away. Octavia didn't know what he was going to do, but she didn't care. She dashed down to Mr. Bridge as fast as she could and laid down next to him. The neck of her cello was still held tightly against his chest.

"Oh please be alright," Octavia begged. "Please be alright. Please be alright. Please be alright...."

# Chapter 4

## Intermission

It had been two days since the accident. Octavia hadn't left her room.

She didn't know how long it had taken since Frédéric had run away, but at some point Harpo and Bluenote arrived with an ambulance carriage. They said that Frédéric had come and told them what happened. Oddly enough this didn't bring her much comfort.

After that the paramedic ponies had taken Mr. Bridge and carefully lifted him onto the carriage. They had tried to take her cello from him, but he refused to let them. Rather than risking him hurting himself, they decided to let him keep it for the time being. Octavia went straight home after that. Her parents had hugged her and comforted her, and even offered to let her friends stay over for the night, which was a first in her household, but she declined. She needed to be alone and think.

That night was the first night that she could remember where she didn't practice the cello.

The next day her friends had come over. Bluenote and Harpo told her how sorry they were, and that they understood if she couldn't forgive Frédéric for what he had done, but for some reason Octavia wasn't mad at Frédéric. She felt sorry for him actually, because even though he had hated her all this time, he had only felt that way because he hated himself more. She didn't tell her friends this of course. She wasn't so sorry for him that she didn't want him to spend a few days of his own wallowing in guilt.

Without the cello and school taking up her time, Octavia realized how little else she had to do. Her friends had offered to take her around the city and show her what it had to offer, but she once again declined. She didn't want to feel better just yet. Bluenote said that she understood, and the two of them had gotten up to leave, but Harpo said he wanted to talk to Octavia in private for a minute. Bluenote looked at him suspiciously, but agreed and said she would meet him by the front door.

Once Bluenote was gone Harpo walked back to Octavia and sat next to her. "I can't honestly say that I know what you're going through," he had said, "but I want you to know... I... I want you to know that..."

He paused a moment and took a deep breath.

"I want you to know that I care about you," he said very clearly a few seconds later. As he did Octavia had slowly looked up at him. It was as if she had been dead and just now her heart had started beating again.

Over the last few months Octavia hardly ever saw Harpo smile. This fact remained true even now, but behind his very serious, almost stern expression, his soft green eyes gave away how concerned he felt.

"You act quiet and timid, but when you speak, it's impossible for me not to see what a brilliant pony you are. The way you describe things, the way you think. You understand things in such a unique, magnificent way that I don't know how you can stand to keep it all hidden inside you. You're rare Octavia. Impossibly rare." Harpo gently placed his hoof on hers. "Whatever feelings you're feeling right now, know that loneliness doesn't need to be one of them. If there's every anything you need, I'll be here for you, whenever you want, for as long as you want. Not just now, but forever. That is... um... if you want me to be of course," he finished a bit embarrassingly.

If it had been any other time Octavia would have jumped up and screamed with joy, but now she could barely force herself to smile. She softly nodded as she looked back down at the ground.

"Thank you Harpo."

Harpo nodded curtly, as if he and Octavia had just made some sort of formal business deal. He began to get up, but paused for a moment, then suddenly leaned over and gave her a clumsy kiss on the cheek. They had both blushed terribly at this, and he quickly walked out of the room without another word.

That night Octavia had an odd dream.

*Frédéric was playing at his piano. The Death Waltz, as usual. He didn't seem to notice her as he hammered away on the keyboard, but when she reached out to touch him, he began crumbling to dust. A look of horror came over his face as his hooves began slipping through the cracks*

*between the keys. He pounded on the keys harder and harder, but the more force he used, the faster he fell apart. Soon his arms were completely gone. He stood up from his piano stool and stumbled backwards, then fell to the ground as his legs dissolved underneath him. Lying on the floor, he noticed Octavia for the first time. He mouthed words that she couldn't hear, but she knew what he was saying nonetheless.*

*"Help me! Please don't leave me like this!"*

*Octavia walked forward. She knew she should feel bad for what she had done, but she didn't. Frédéric screamed in silent terror as the rest of him crumbled away and disappeared between the planks of the stage. Once he was gone, Octavia looked back over at the piano. It was gone as well, replaced with her cello. Walking into the spotlight, Octavia bowed to the invisible audience. She reached down to grab the bow from its holster, but as she did her hoof passed through it. She tried again, but failed. She tried a third time. Finally she succeeded, but she felt as if she would drop it at any moment. Her playing was shaky and terrible.*

*Suddenly all the lights in the theatre went out. It surprised Octavia and she dropped her bow. She tried to feel for it in the dark, but she couldn't. She couldn't find her cello either. She had lost her bearings. She tried to get the lights to turn back on, but for some reason it was out of her control. She was scared. She wanted to go home, but how could she find her way home in the dark like this?*

*Octavia caught a glimmer of light out of the corner of her eye. It was below the stage. Peering through the cracks, she saw the remains of Frédéric. They were glowing like powdered sunlight. If only she hadn't let him fall through the stage, maybe she could have found her way out then!*

*As she watched, the light began to dim. What once glowed like the noonday sun quickly became evening, then dusk. Soon it was gone, and Octavia was left in the dark, by herself, lost forever.*

*"Frédéric!" Octavia cried out as she awoke. Her room was pitch black. She must not have slept long. Why had she just yelled Frédéric's name? Octavia took a moment to try to remember her dream. As she meditated it slowly began to come back to her.*

*Why would I dream about him of all ponies? She thought to herself. He certainly wasn't her top concern at the moment. Speaking of her top*

concern, Octavia wondered how Mr. Bridge was doing. She cringed as she remembered the ambulance ponies assuring her that she would be informed as soon as she could visit him. This was the beginning of the third obsessively worry filled day since he had fallen and she still hadn't heard a thing.

Getting up from her bed, Octavia walked over to her window. It was still at least an hour before the sun would begin rising, but she didn't care. There was nothing else for her to do. Pulling over a small chair that she kept in her room, Octavia took a seat. Until the sun would start rising she would have time just to think. Most ponies didn't seem to understand when she said she liked "thinking". She found it hard to believe that they had never in their lives just sat somewhere peaceful and pondered things, but it turns out that not many ponies had.

Now Octavia did. In the quiet dark of her room, still relaxed from just waking up, she closed her eyes, leaned back, and simply... thought. And as an uffish thought, she sat, and time gracefully drifted by, until a brilliant streak of light cut across the inky sky. At the sudden flash Octavia opened her eyes. It must have rained last night, because there were several patches of thick clouds overhead, and the air was heavy with fog. Octavia shook herself, trying to clear her mind and enjoy the moment despite her worries.

The deep red and orange light bounced off the clouds, causing them to look like streaks of red paint smeared across the indigo blue. The fog in the air added a strange, distant feel to the whole scene, like looking at a faded painting. The fact that it was real yet so surreal at the same time filled Octavia's mind with wonder, and for a moment she really did forget her worries, fully engrossed in the scene before her.

*A good start to the day, she thought. If only the rest would follow suite.*

Octavia continued to watch the sunrise for a short while longer, but soon it was too bright, and she was forced to look away. She heard her parents waking up and moving about downstairs, and soon smelled her mother cooking breakfast. Perhaps she would go down to eat today instead of eating in her room again. Octavia silently walked over to her door and opened it. It felt oddly out of place to step into the hall and leave her lair behind. She shrugged the feeling off however, and continued down the stairs. When she reached the lower floor she saw her father standing next

to her mother by the stove. They were both facing away from her and talking quietly.

As Octavia got closer she could make out some of the words. They were saying something about the Festival, and about Frédéric. Curious, she approached as silently as possible.

"...already been through enough. We don't want to cause her any more trouble," said her father.

"We can't just ignore this," replied her mother. "What's done is done, but she still has to make the decision herself."

"She can't make that type of decision now. We need to give her more time!" her father argued back.

"What decision?" Octavia finally interrupted. Both her parents jumped in surprise.

"Octavia!" her mother yelled, clutching her chest, "don't do that! You nearly scared us to death!"

"What were you two talking about?"

"It's nothing to worry about right now," said her father. "It's nice to see you out of your room again. Go and sit down and we'll bring you your breakfast in a moment."

"Would you two please stop trying to hide things from me?" she said insistently. "What's going on that I need to decide?"

For a second her parents were silent. Finally her mother glared at her father and said, "Just tell her already."

Her father cleared his throat uncomfortably, then walked over to the table. "Come sit down Octavia," he said. She followed him over. Once she was seated he continued. "After the... incident the other day, your friends, Bluenote and her brother, told the police about what Frédéric had done."

"They what?!" said Octavia in surprise. "Why would they do that?"

"A pony is in the hospital, dear. Somepony had to take responsibility. That's not what's important right now though. When the police went to talk with Frédéric, he confessed. They took him to the penitentiary."

“When did this happen?”

“It happened the same day as the accident. He’s been there ever since.”

“Why didn’t anypony tell me?”

“We didn’t want to worry you.”

“But what about the festival? What are they going to do to him?”

Her father paused again, trying to find a good way to put it. “They’re going to let him out to play at the Manehattan Music Festival. Due to Celestia attending this year, they said they wanted to have at least one young musician there....” Her father paused a moment to let her absorb the information, but she had already assumed that she would have been removed from the Festival, not having an instrument to play and all, so this wasn’t really a surprise. She simply nodded and waited for him to continue.

“After that... after that he’s going to be tried for what he confessed to. He may end up going to prison for quite some time. There’s only one thing they need for him to be found guilty.”

“And what’s that?”

Her father reached over and grabbed her hooves, looking concerned. “They need your witness.”

“Wh-what?” stammered Octavia.

“You were the only one other than Frédéric that actually saw what happened. If you confirm what he said, then that’s all there is to it. Ultimately, whatever happens to Frédéric in the future will be up to you.”

Octavia was in utter shock. This couldn’t be right. It didn’t seem logical to leave something like this up to her. Even as she thought about the implications of her position, she wasn’t sure what she would do.

“What if I say he was innocent?” Octavia asked. Her mother walked over and wrapped a hoof around her shoulder.

“Then that would be lying,” she said. “I taught both of you for years. Frédéric isn’t going to change his mind about things, and trying to protect him will only make things worse. You’re both adults now, and if you say he didn’t do it, then he’ll never be punished for what he did to you and your



friend, and you'll have it on your conscience forever, and I don't want that to happen to my daughter." She gave her a hug. "I didn't want *any* of this to happen to my daughter."

"The directors of the Festival have offered to give you a free seat if you want to attend. You can handle the situation then and there if you wish, after Frédéric has finished his performance," said her father.

"Attend? I don't want to *attend!*" exclaimed Octavia. "I'm not going to make Frédéric perform for me before I-" she stopped. Before she what? That was the question.

"We understand," her mother said reassuringly. "It's just an option. You don't have to attend if you don't want to."

There was an awkward silence where no pony knew what to say next. Octavia's parents looked at each other nervously as Octavia shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Finally her father leaned forward.

"We're both *very* proud of you Octavia," he said. "We have the utmost confidence in you, and no matter what you decide to do we'll love you just the same. We want you to know that, alright?"

Octavia nodded weakly.

"Well... what would you like for breakfast?" her mother asked.

"I'm not hungry," Octavia replied. Her parents gave her worried looks again, but didn't question her.

"Alright," said her father. "You let us know if you're hungry later and we'll make something for you. If we hear any more news you'll be the first to know."

"OK," she muttered, getting up from her chair. Her mother and father both gave her hugs before she left. Once she had climbed the stairs she walked back down the hallway and into her room again. Bright white light was streaming in. The sun had risen all the way above the horizon now, causing the thick clouds to begin to burn away and reveal the powder blue sky above.

Walking over to the window, Octavia quickly shut the curtains.

# Chapter 5

## Precious Gifts

Octavia continued to sit in the dark for hours, trying to think of what she could do. Trying to find some solution that wouldn't ruin somepony's life forever. She cringed as a small part of her mind said that maybe somepony *deserved* to have their life ruined. All of this thinking, combined with her lack of sustenance was giving her a headache. Octavia hated headaches. Perhaps she should take a break. Just a few minutes to go get something to eat, then she would get back to thinking.

Getting up from her bed, Octavia once again opened her door and ventured down the hall. When she reached the bottom of the stairs she was surprised to see that the sun was setting already. Sitting in the dark must have caused her to lose track of time. By now the Music Festival had already begun. She wondered if they kept Frédéric shackled until right before he performed, or worse yet, *while* he was performing. Nothing would be more humiliating for somepony like Frédéric than having to stumble through a complicated piano routine in front of an enormous crowd with his hooves locked together.

As Octavia walked to the kitchen once again, she noticed that it was oddly quiet. Looking round, she was unable to locate her parents. Usually at this time of day they would be sitting in the living room talking or reading, but not today. Had they gone to the Festival without her? As Octavia grabbed a bagel out of the breadbox she dismissed the thought. It didn't matter. They could go have fun if they wanted and leave her alone. She was just going to go back up to her room and think anyway. At least, that was what she had thought she was going to do.

Suddenly the front door burst open. Her mother stood there, looking a bit panicked.

"Octavia! Come quickly. Your father is pulling the carriage around."

"I'm not going to the Music Festival mother," Octavia sternly reminded her.

“We’re not going to the Festival!” she exclaimed. “We’re going to the hospital! Mr. Bridge has requested to see you!”

Without another word Octavia dropped the bagel and ran to the door. Her mother rushed her though and closed it behind them as her father quickly opened the carriage for them, then began reattaching himself to the harness. Once her and her mother were inside the questions started flowing.

“Is Mr. Bridge alright? How long has he been awake? How long ago did you hear the news? What room number is he in?”

“Calm down Octavia,” her mother said pointlessly. She was going to do nothing of the sort. “We found out just a few minutes ago. The messenger just left and I was actually running inside to get you when you came downstairs. We haven’t heard anything about his condition, just that he wanted to see you right away.”

Octavia tapped her hoof nervously on the seat as they rode. This was what she had been hoping to hear for three days, and now that she had, all she could do was worry that something was horribly wrong. Why would he want to see her immediately? What could the reason be?! The worry must have been visible on Octavia’s face, because her mother moved over to her side of the carriage and wrapped her tightly in a hug.

“It’s going to be *fine* Octavia,” she said in a comforting motherly tone. “You’ll see.”

As soon as they arrived at the hospital Octavia kicked the carriage door open and leapt out of it, running straight for the hospital entrance. She heard her father calling for her to wait, but her mother interrupted him, saying “just let her go.” She didn’t stop running until she reached the reception desk, and even then only long enough to get Mr. Bridge’s room number so she knew where to run next. By the time she had gone up the two flights of stairs and down the hall, bursting through his door, she was quite winded.

“Mr. Bridge?” she wheezed.

“Octavia!” Mr. Bridge replied cheerily from his bed. “I’m so glad to see you’re alright!”

"Me alright? What about you?" she asked loudly. Despite his attitude, Mr. Bridge wasn't looking very well. Half of his face was bruised, and he had an IV running into his arm. He had a blanket over him, but Octavia spotted some bandages wrapped around his ribcage peeking over the edge. His heart monitor was beeping a steady, rhythmic beep though. That was good.

"Me? Well I'm much improved now that you're here. Come over and sit down. I have exciting news!"

Octavia immediately did so, grabbing the nearest stool and carrying it quickly over to his side. "Are you going to be OK?" she asked.

"Oh quit worrying about me," he replied, smiling. "You should be worrying about yourself. You've got a performance tonight, if I'm not mistaken."

Octavia laughed slightly at his optimism. "I'm afraid you *are* mistaken Mr. Bridge. If you've forgotten, my cello was destroyed. Even then, I doubt I would be up to the task."

"You're one of the best cello players I've ever heard. What would make you think that?"

"Because... because it was never meant to be," she said. "Tonight was always supposed to be Frédéric's night. I say let him have it."

"Ah, so they're letting *him* play, are they? Well I hope he enjoys it. Someday he'll get what's coming to him." Octavia cringed on the inside at his words, knowing that Mr. Bridge didn't realize how right he might be. "That doesn't mean he should be able to get away with it though. There's always room for another great pony on the stage, and nopony should stop you from trying."

"Alright Mr. Bridge, you've convinced me," said Octavia. "I still can't though. No matter how much I will it to be, my cello is *gone*."

"Oh is it now?" replied Mr. Bridge. Octavia raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes. It is."

Reaching over, Mr. Bridge pushed a button near his bed. "Nurse? Would you bring the surprise in now?"

“Surprise?” asked Octavia, but he didn’t answer. He just leaned back in his bed and smiled smugly. A few moments later a young nurse entered the room. Octavia’s jaw instantly fell to the floor. In her arms she was carrying Octavia’s fully repaired cello. It had been fixed using nothing but hospital supplies. She walked over and handed it carefully to Octavia, who accepted it in awe.

“What... how...” she stammered as she inspected it. The neck had been reattached with surgical tape, the main body was held together with staples and some sort of glue. The bow (which had apparently broken in two) had been glued back in place and then had a piece of surgical tubing wrapped around the stick to secure it. It wasn’t the prettiest thing, but the skill needed to make it at all functional after what it had been through was immeasurable.

“So what do you think?” Mr. Bridge asked.

“How... how....”

Mr. Bridge chuckled and sat up in his bed again. “I think there’s something that you should see.”

Mr. Bridge threw back his blanket, and for the first time Octavia caught sight his cutie mark. She gasped in surprise as she did. On Mr. Bridge’s haunch was the elegant outline of what else, but a cello.

“There was a reason I talked to you that first day we met,” he said, smiling.

“You were a cellist?” Octavia asked in amazement. “Of course you were. I should have known!”

“Oh, but I wasn’t a cellist!” he said. “I was a cello *maker*. Quite a good one if I do say so myself!”

“A cello maker... well you must have been good to do this!” said Octavia, looking over her cello again. “I still just... can’t *believe* it!”

Mr. Bridge laughed. “Well if it makes you feel better, it certainly wasn’t easy. I knew it would be worth it though, because you would make me proud.”

Suddenly Octavia realized what was going on. “Wait, you want me to play at the Manehattan Music Festival with this?”

"I think it would last through at least one performance, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, but I haven't gotten enough practice! I don't even have my music! What would I play?"

"Play the sunrise."

Octavia paused.

"Mr. Bridge... I couldn't."

"Yes you can!" he said encouragingly. "You have it inside you Octavia. A rare gift to express yourself in ways other ponies can't. You can use music to speak for you, and share all those amazing things that are inside your head with everypony around you. You just have to trust in your abilities is all!"

"But all those ponies watching me... Celestia herself!"

"When you become your music, not even all those ponies and Celestia herself could stop you."

Octavia was silent. She looked at her cello. She knew its every detail and nuance. It was like an extension of herself, but she just wasn't sure.

"Octavia." said Mr. Bridge.

"Yes?" she replied.

"I want to tell you why I left Ponyville."

"Why you left Ponyville?" Octavia repeated questioningly, still trying to take in all this new information. She wasn't sure what Ponyville had to do with this, but Octvia wasn't going to decline Mr. Bridge's offer. "Alright," she said.

Mr. Bridge took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Octavia was mildly impressed when the beep of his heart monitor slowed. A moment later he opened them again and began.

"When I was young I had always loved music. It was my dream to someday be able to share my passion with others. I apprenticed as a cello maker for years, and thanks to my hard work I was one day able to open up my own music store. It was in that store that I met my wife.

“For a long time we lived happily. When my daughter was born I began to teach her about my trade. She was a brilliant little girl. Every day she would surprise me with how quickly she learned. She was just... absolutely wonderful. I planned on giving the store to my daughter when I was gone, but one day something happened. Something that crushed my every dream for the future. I never discovered the cause of it, but there was a fire. The store burnt to the ground along with everything I had. I’ve never felt so lost as I did that day, so hopeless and empty.

“My family urged me to cheer up. They wanted to move on, but I refused to do so. I was determined to regain everything that I had lost, no matter what the cost. I spent every bit we had. *More* than every bit we had, but it was a futile effort. There were too many problems. Complications arose at every turn, impeding my progress. My wife tried to make me see the truth; that things would never be the same, but I didn’t listen to her. What a fool I was. I regret that to this day.”

Mr. Bridge stopped for a moment. It looked to Octavia like he was thinking about something painful. She waited quietly until he continued.

“By trying to ‘fix’ things, I ignored my family, and my responsibility as a father. To them I was no longer the loving pony I had been. I was a madman, searching for a solution that wasn’t there in order to save something that didn’t need saving. I ruined us, and in my madness I dragged them down with me. I remember one day, when I reached toward my daughter to give her a hug, or tousle her mane, and she shied away from me, scared. That was when I first realized what I had become. It was only a matter of time before my dear wife simply told me that I had to go....”

Mr. Bridge hung his head low as his words trailed off. Octavia sat in silence for a moment, then stood up and walked over to Mr. Bridge’s bed. “You’re not that pony anymore,” she said resolutely, reached down and giving him a hug.

“I know,” he said, flinching slightly at his injuries, but keeping quiet about it. “I’m just sorry that I had to become him in order to finally learn the truth.”

Releasing him, Octavia looked up and asked, “What truth is that?”

“That life is hard,” Mr. Bridge said simply. “Bad things will happen, but never let that hold you back! Never give up! Be the best pony you can be,

and try and help others do the same. Life is too wonderful a gift to let it be used in any other way.”

Octavia took a moment to consider what Mr. Bridge had just said. “You’re right Mr. Bridge,” she eventually replied. As she did it seemed as if a weight suddenly lifted from her shoulders. She knew what she needed to do.

“Glad to hear it! So, would you be willing to play a song for me before you go?”

Octavia smiled. “I would love to. What would you like to hear?”

“Oh anything is fine. I just want to hear you play.”

“Alright then,” she replied. “How about Johorse Sebastian Buck’s cello suite number one prelude? It’s one of the first pieces I learned.”

“My favorite,” said Mr. Bridge, sitting up with anticipation.

Standing at the end of his bed, Octavia made a few small adjustments to her cello, then, taking a moment to position herself, began to play.

The song was short, but performed magnificintely. When she was done Mr. Bridge applauded and she took a mock bow. The cello sounded wonderful despite its condition. It looked like they were both impressed with each other’s work.

“Whatever happened to your family?” asked Octavia.

“Oh they’re fine. Wife remarried last I heard. My daughter’s made quite a name for herself as well.”

“Did she become a musician?”

“A musician of sorts,” Mr. Bridge said with a smirk. “Now you’d better hurry if you want to make it to the festival in time!”

Octavia’s eyes widened. She had completely forgotten about the time! Thanking Mr. Bridge one more heartfelt time, she turned around and ran out the door. Her parents were sitting outside in the hall, talking with a doctor. When they saw her reconstructed cello they both reacted in a similar manner as she had.



"Where on earth did you get that?" her mother asked.

"Mr. Bridge fixed it for me! There's no time to explain though. We need to get to the Music Festival!"

It dawned on her parents agonizingly slowly what was going on, but when it did, the both gave her proud looks and smiled.

"Alright dear," said her father. "Let's hurry. If we leave now we should be able to make it just in time."

Octavia's parents thanked the doctor, who nodded politely in response, then the three of them began to gallop down the hall toward the exit. This was going to be a night to remember.

+++++

The trip had taken longer than they had thought. Octavia's father didn't bring the carriage to the front doors like normal. There wasn't enough time. Instead he brought it around to the backstage entrance and let her and her mother hop out. He wished them good luck as they burst through the backstage doors. On the stage, through the closed curtain, Octavia recognized the frantic tune of The Death Waltz. To her slight relief she didn't hear the clank of manacles going along with it.

"Um... may I help you?" Said a flustered looking mare with a clipboard who had been standing just inside.

"My daughter Octavia was supposed to perform this evening at the Music Festival!" her mother said quickly.

"Yes? And?" said the other pony, picking up on the urgency of the situation.

"And this is her!" replied her mother, holding both her arms out toward Octavia a bit too dramatically.

"Um... hi," Octavia said.

"Oh my," said the mare with the clipboard, "I'm sorry, but there's no time! Frédéric was to be the last number, and he's nearly done!"

"Well go out there and tell them there's one more!" Octavia's mother said very insistently. The mare looked hesitant, but her mother just kept staring at her until she broke.

“Fine!” she exclaimed as The Death Waltz finished and the crowd began to applaud. “If I get in trouble for this I’m denying everything though.”

Turning around, she quickly pushed the curtain aside and walked to the center of the stage. Octavia caught a glimpse of Frédéric dressed in a formal tuxedo as he walked down a set of stairs on the opposite side, meeting two guards at the bottom who were waiting for him. They walked along with him, one on each side, as he headed up the isle toward the front doors of the building. Half way to the exit the announcer began to speak, and he suddenly stopped.

“Um... sorry,” the flustered mare began. Not the best first words. “We appear to have one more performance for you tonight.” One of the guards put a hoof firmly on Frédéric’s shoulder, trying to get him to move again, but he violently shook it off.

*Defiant as always*, Octavia thought. The mare onstage looked over at her and motioned for her to come out. Her mother gave her a mini-hug and whispered, “I love you!” as she stepped into view.

It was completely silent. Octavia blushed as the crowd stared at her. Some light glinted off the line of staples running through her cello. She looked up at Frédéric for a split second, but saw that he was, of course, also staring straight at her as well, and quickly looked away. Up in the balconies sat Princess Celestia, looking majestic. A look of sly amusement covered her face. What did that mean?!

“Octavia...” the mare began to introduce her, but stopped when she realized that she didn’t know her full name.

“Just Octavia is fine,” Octavia Whispered. The mare nodded and turned back to the audience.

“Octavia,” she said resolutely. As she passed by Octavia she whispered, “Good luck, kid,” before disappearing backstage. Now it was just her. The crowd stared at her expectantly. The spotlight shone down on her. It was at this moment that Octavia realized how unprepared she really was. What was going to happen? She had no idea. She felt like she should say something, but she didn’t know what to say, so instead she mustered all her courage, stood her cello up in front of her, closed her eyes, and began to play.

+++++

At first the music sounded familiar. Ponychelbel's Canon. But then it started to change. With her eyes still squeezed shut, she imagined a dark sky. She felt the anticipation building, then suddenly the first bright rays of light rushed over the horizon. She felt the heat, the intensity as the beams widened and connected into one constant plain of light that rose above, then crashed down into the valleys below, breaking into a million brilliant shards over the dew covered grass.

Octavia could feel herself playing the cello, but she ignored it, letting her years of familiarity with the instrument guide her hooves. Instead she ran through tall stalks of glittering grass, feeling the icy pricks as the cold dew soaked through her fur. She felt the warm light coming down from above, warming her to her very core. With the light came life, waking from its slumber. Graceful insects danced around in the air, little animals, brushing the tiredness from their eyes, greeted each other in the morning light. Looking to her sides, she saw others running along with her through the fields.

She saw her friends. Bluenote, who was willing to selflessly be kind to somepony she didn't even know, though she gained nothing from it. Harpo, with his deep eyes and serious look, but brimming with bravery and passion underneath like no pony she had ever known. Always determined to be honest and kind and loyal, and to be there for her. Just for *her*. She trusted him unconditionally.

Then there was Mr. Bridge. The weathered old pony who had lost so much. Sacrificed so much and felt so much pain, yet still smiled. Still cared for those around him and did all he could to help them no matter what the cost. Her parents were there too, running ahead of her, leading her to high mountains and still waters. A tear fell from Octavia's eye as uncontrollable feelings of gratitude for all of them welled up inside her. This group of ponies. She loved them. She could never repay them for all that they had done for her. As the herd ran together through the ocean of swaying, supple blades, the sun began to set. Instead of dimming however, the light grew brighter. There was a sudden bloom of gold, illuminating everything around them, letting Octavia see it all in its perfection for a fraction of a second.

She smiled, then it was dark.

+++++

Octavia opened her eyes. The echo of her last notes still reverberated through the chamber, but everything else was silent. She looked down at her cello. Her bow was horribly frayed. Dozens of hairs had snapped and were hanging loosely from its ends. She looked up at the crowded auditorium. No pony moved.

The looks on their faces were hard to read. Many of them had their mouths hanging open. Their eyes so wide they looked like they would fall out of their heads. Even Celestia, still as a statue, looked shocked. Octavia cringed and waited. She had done what she could. There was nothing else to do.

As she stood there being blinded by the stage lights, she finally heard a sound other than her pounding heart. She looked toward its source, and saw a pegasus with a red mane and eggshell white fur standing and applauding her among the army of paralyzed ponies. After a few seconds he reached down and whacked the pony next to him on the shoulder, startling him back to life. He quickly stood up as well, clapping loudly.

Octavia watched in amazement as the entire theatre soon followed. The clapping became applause, and the applause became thunder as every pony before her rose from their seats. Some even cheered. Octavia jumped as a loud whistle cut through the noise, and was surprised to see that it was Celestia who had done it. She winked and continued to applaud Octavia with a knowing smile. Octavia smiled back meekly and bowed. As she stood there, feeling happier than she had ever felt before, she suddenly remembered something that jolted her out of her reverie. She looked up to where Frédéric had been standing a few moments before.

He was gone.

Octavia must have looked ridiculous as she carefully laid her cello down, then clumsily hopped off the stage and started running toward the doors of the theatre. She didn't care though. She needed to find Frédéric before he left. She needed to explain herself before it was too late. She passed Bluenote and Harpo on the way out, but she didn't have time to stop. As she pushed the heavy doors out of the way and stumbled into the cool night air, she spotted him a ways off, climbing into a carriage accompanied by his guards.

"Wait!" Octavia yelled, running towards it. Either the guards didn't hear her or they were just ignoring her as they attached themselves to the

carriage and began pulling it away. Octavia was feeling bold though. She wasn't going to stand for that. Quickly intersecting it as it passed by, she smacked the closest guard on the back of his helmet, producing a loud *clang* and causing it to fall over his eyes.

"Hey!" he shouted in surprise. "What do you think you're doing?!"

After the guard had finished fumbling with his helmet to get it back into place he looked over at Octavia angrily. "Well?" he asked expectantly. Octavia gave him a condescending look.

"I said *wait!*"

The guard looked a little embarrassed by the simplicity of her answer. "Well you could have just said it again..." he muttered.

"I need to talk to Frédéric," she said. "I'm Octavia, and it's important that I talk to him right now." Apparently the guards had been informed of the situation, because their attitudes changed when they recognized her name.

"Oh. I'm sorry ma'am. I didn't realize it was you," said the guard in a more official tone. He quickly unattached himself from the carriage and walked around to the side. Retrieving a key from a small box on the carriage's outer wall. He used it to unlock the door and opened it up then stuck his head inside and said, "Octavia wants to speak with you," in a very authoritative tone. A moment later Frédéric got up and stepped out, looking bitter.

"So you've decided to add insult to injury have you?" he scoffed. He was wearing the same fancy tuxedo he was a moment ago, but Octavia saw that his legs were now all chained together with sturdy manacles that limited his movement quite a bit. It was an odd combination of looks.

"No Frédéric, not at all. I'm here to-"

"What? Tell me why you ruined my life? Well I'm sorry *Octavia*, but you don't get that opportunity. Look at me! You did this to me. You and you horrid cello drove me to the edge of my sanity. I know you hate me, but I thought that after all that happened you would at least have the equine decency to *leave me alone!* Apparently I was wrong though. This was to be my final performance. My last moment of freedom, but then you come in with... with *that*," Frédéric motioned toward the theatre as best he could,

“and take it away from me! How am I supposed to compete? Nopony is going to remember me now Octavia. Are you happy with yourself? Are you happy now that you’ve *utterly destroyed me?!?*”

Frédéric screamed the last few words as tears of rage started forming in his eyes. The guard began to move forward, but Octavia shook her head.

“Wait,” she said, both to the guards and Frédéric. “Just let me talk.” Fredric looked behind him at the guards, who gave him looks of warning. He whinnied vehemently as he turned back to Octavia.

“Well, it doesn’t look like I have a choice.”

Mustering up her courage, Octavia looked at Frédéric very seriously. “I know you think I did this to hurt you Frédéric, but I didn’t. I did this for a dear friend of mine. I’m sure you know who I’m talking about.”

Frédéric looked just the slightest bit ashamed, and for a moment Octavia thought he might even apologize, but he clamped his mouth shut and remained silent. She continued.

“After what happened, Mr. Bridge fixed my cello for me. He told me that you should never hold ponies back, and that you should try to help them in any way you can. It was because of him that I came here. He taught me that I needed to stop holding myself back, and I took that advice to heart.”

“You’ll get no sympathy from me,” Frédéric muttered. “Mr. Bridge deserved what happened to him. Just tell the guards the truth and you’ll never have to see me again.” Octavia cringed at Frédéric’s harsh words. She wasn’t mad though. She knew he was just trying to upset her so he could go.

“I never expected any sympathy,” she replied. “I needed to tell you what Mr. Bridge said though, because you’re an amazing pianist. The best I’ve ever heard, and I think... I think that if I were to send you away like this, then I would be holding you back.”

Frédéric’s expression suddenly changed. Apparently it had never occurred to him that she would do anything other than condemn him. “I want to help you Frédéric. I want to forgive you, but I’m not sure I can. Not until I know something first.”

“Wh-what?” Frédéric asked, still trying to act angry, but having a great deal of trouble doing so in the new light of the situation.

Octavia leaned in close and practically whispered. Whatever Frédéric’s response was going to be, she was sure that he would want to broadcast it as little as possible. “I know you’re strong willed Frédéric, but that doesn’t mean you have to be unfeeling. Are you sorry for what you did? Do you feel bad all?”

Frédéric swallowed hard, doubling over almost as if someone had hit him in the stomach. He clenched his jaw tightly and squeezed his eyes shut. Tears started rolling down his cheeks. He didn’t immediately answer though. He was using all his effort to suppress his sobs so the guards wouldn’t hear. It took him a few minutes to calm himself, but when he opened his eyes again, Octavia saw genuine emotion in them. She could see the fear of not knowing what was going to happen to him, and guilt from the all pain he had caused. For the first time that Octavia had ever seen, Frédéric was no longer hiding himself. He looked up, staring her straight in the eyes.

“Yes.”

Frédéric squeaked the word so quietly that at even at this distance she could barely hear him. That was all she needed though. She smiled reassuringly and stepped back.

“Guards?”

“Yes Miss Octavia?”

“I don’t hold Frédéric responsible for anything that happened on the bridge.”

The guards both looked surprised at this announcement. “Are you… sure?” one of them asked.

“Yes. Yes I am,” Octavia said confidently. There was a long pause. “Um… what happens now?” she asked.

“Well,” said the other guard, “If that’s the case, then I guess he’s free to go.”

The guard walked over and undid the manacles around Frédéric’s hooves. Once he was free he stood up on two legs for a moment, partially

to stretch, and partially just because he could. The guards looked at him and Octavia, then at each other and shrugged. "You two have a pleasant evening."

The guards reattached themselves to the carriage and pulled it away. Frédéric watched it until it was out of sight. As it disappeared from view he looked back at Octavia. He seemed to suddenly become aware that she was watching him, and he tried composed himself as best he could. His cheeks still had tear stains lining them, but his face returned to its normal, regal expression and his voice to its normal, regal tone.

"Good riddance," he said. "So what now?"

"Do you want to go back inside?" she asked. "My parents probably don't know where I went, plus it's kind of cold out."

"Yes, alright, and... thank you, I suppose," he replied somewhat awkwardly. Octavia smiled slightly. She wondered if he had ever said those words before.

As Octavia turned around, she saw Bluenote and Harpo standing near the doors. She ran over as quickly as she could to meet them.

"Is everything alright?" asked Harpo, looking past Octavia at Frédéric.

"Everything's fine," she replied. "Better than fine."

When Frédéric reached the group, Harpo nodded at him. He nodded back. "No hard feelings?" asked Harpo.

"No. Of course not," replied Frédéric.

"Are you sure?" asked Bluenote hesitantly. "We did get you arrested after all."

"You insult me," said Frédéric, looking smug. "I'm *Frédéric Horseshoepin*. You did what you needed to do, and if I say I harbor no resentment then I mean it. Now let's get inside. I hate perfect weather."

Harpo chuckled slightly, and Bluenote just shrugged. The four of them turned around and began to head back toward the Theatre.

"So, school's almost over," said Harpo. "What are we going to do then?"



"I think we should stick together," said Octavia. "We make a good team."

"Hey!" exclaimed Bluenote. "Why don't we form a musical quartet? We would be great together."

"A piano, a harp, a cello, and a sousaphone?" said Frédéric skeptically. "We would need a full procession of moving vans just to get to our performances!"

"Next stop, Canterlot," said Octavia.

For the first time, and far from the last, the four of them all shared a laugh together. As they stepped through the theatre doors, Octavia thought to herself that this was the start of something good. She could feel it.

*--THE END--*

# Encore

Octavia sat alone on the edge of the city. The large golden sun monument that Celestia visited each morning was directly behind her. The night had gone horribly. When the group had been informed that they were chosen to play at the Grand Galloping Gala, they had been nothing but ecstatic for days, but then a bunch of delinquents had barged in and ruined the whole occasion. Oh well.

It was still a long while before Celestia would arrive to raise the sun. Octavia didn't mind though. After everything that had happened; the pink pony knocking her over in front of everyone; the blue Pegasus nearly crushing them with a falling pillar; the yellow pony letting in a stampede of animals; it was the worst show of their careers. A bit of time alone to cool off and think was much appreciated. These plans were immediately foiled of course, as Octavia heard somepony approaching her from behind.

"Sorry," she said, trying to shoo the pony away. "I'm done for the night."

"You and me both," replied a familiar voice. Octavia breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh Frédéric, it's just you."

"*Just* me," he said, as if the word was offensive somehow. He sat down next to Octavia and looked over the grassy field in front of them.

"So how are you doing?" she asked.

"I *would* be much better if you hadn't run off. Every corner I walked around while searching for you had a depraved pair of teenage unicorns squirming around behind it. It's an infestation I tell you!"

Octavia laughed. "Well it *is* a celebration. Just be glad it's only one night long."

"One night *too* long if you ask me."

"Where are the others?"

“They’re wandering the streets like I was. Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll find their way here eventually. Harpo comes running like a puppy dog whenever you call him these days after all.”

Octavia gave Frédéric a playful shove. “You’re one to talk. You practically begged me to put you next to Bluenote in our lineup tonight, even though you knew it would mess up the harmonics.”

“I assure you that anything between Bluenote and I is strictly professional,” Frédéric stated very clearly. Octavia was impressed. She had never seen anypony look so unfazed while blushing that hard.

“Well if anypony could make ‘head over hooves in love’ professional, it would be you Frédéric.” Frédéric huffed sternly in response, but she could tell that he wasn’t actually offended. As a matter of fact for him that might be a compliment.

“Can you believe that we’ve been together for almost three years now?”

“Is that *all*?” replied Frédéric, groaning.

“Oh stop that,” said Octavia, laughing again. “How do you manage to joke around so much while remaining completely serious?”

Frédéric gave her a rare smile, “A lifetime of practice. I suppose you’re right though. It’s been quite the three years hasn’t it? What do you think will happen next?”

“Next?” said Octavia. “I think I might take a short trip to Ponyville next.”

“Ponyville? Talk about high class to low class...” Frédéric muttered. “What for?”

“There’s somepony I’d like to meet. A friend of a friend.”

“A musician?” asked Frédéric.

“A musician of sorts,” Octavia replied.

“Well I hope you have a good visit, because if not then all you have to look forward to is a town full of crazy ponies and the smell of manure. You do know that those filthy hooligans that caused all the chaos were from

Ponyville, don't you? Another run in with them and the only thing you'll want to do next is take a long shower."

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see how things go."

It was short while later that Harpo and Bluenote found them, just like Frédéric said they would. For a long time they all talked, and laughed, and reminisced about old times. So long as a matter of fact, that they were ordered by a guard to move off of the monument because the sun raising ceremony was about to begin. The four of them embarrassingly apologized and moved out of the way as a crowd began to gather. Soon Celestia arrived. Octavia couldn't help but think how tired she must be, having stayed up all the previous night. Nonetheless she put on an impressive show. Her horn glowed brightly and she took off into the air just as the sun rose above the field, silhouetting her in its brilliant light. To Octavia it brought back memories of her performance that night at the Manehattan Music Festival. So much had changed since then. Now she watched the sunrise from Canterlot, like she had always dreamed of doing. It was even more amazing than she had imagined.

*A brand new day*, Octavia thought to herself, draping her arms over her friends, who smiled back at her cheery attitude and returned the gesture. Perhaps the Gala hadn't been that bad after all.