

Off-Key

Part 3 (Silent Songs)

-Chromosome

[-Previous Chapter-](#)

“You really are amazing, Fiddlestick!” congratulated Vinyl as they tried to find a spot to talk without interrupting the flow of students trying to get to class. “Where did you learn to play like that?”

“Mah grampa taught me everythin’ he knows!” said the brown earth pony, grinning at the attention she was receiving, “Ah was playin’ the fiddle when it was taller than I was! Well...more like poking the strings, but ya get the idea. I was born to play, and it’s gonna make me famous, Ah tell ya!”

“Well,” questioned Octavia, squeezing past an irritated Opera to join them by the window where they stopped to talk, “how come you don’t have a cutie mark yet?”

Fiddlestick stammered, her eyes shifting back and forth uncomfortably: “Uh...Ah dunno, but what the hay is it to you, huh?”

“Well, it’s just that, to me, I’d think you’d have a cutie mark by now, considering how good you are!”

“Gettin’ a cutie mark ain’t no contest, missy,” Fiddlestick informed hotly, “It takes time, like grampa said, but the wait’s always worth it! So maybe ya should focus on yer own rather than buttin’ into other folks’ business!”

“Well jeez, you don’t need to get so def--” started Octavia, riled, before being cut off by another wailing complaint from her stomach, shortly echoed by Vinyl’s.

“Lovely,” quipped Opera as the two fillies blushed awkwardly, “Although it pains me to miss out on this...*enthralling* discussion, I would rather get to class...” With an arrogant sway in her hips, she joined the stream of students and vanished.

“Thank goodness she’s gone,” said Octavia dryly, watching her go.

“Oh, I don’t know how I’m going to survive another class if I don’t get something to eat soon. My stomach feels like it’s chewing on my guts!” moaned Vinyl, “I can’t believe I had to miss breakfast on the first day of school.”

“Um...” started Falsetto.

“Well why in Equestria did you fillies get up so darn late? Didn’t you set some sort of alarm or somethin’?” questioned Fiddlestick.

“I have...”

“Well...maybe we forgot it in the bustle of things...” admitted Octavia, loosening the collar of her uniform sheepishly.

“Guys...?”

“Bustle?” Vinyl scoffed, her hunger starting to wear on her nerves. “You were *literally* laying in your bed when I came in! It’s not like you were exactly swamped with work. And then you had the nerve to call me a lazy slob!”

“Guys, could you please...”

“Now hang on a minute! We are *not* starting this again!”

“Guys, I’ve got...”

“Oh, I am so starting this again! All I’ve heard from you since we got here is nothing but--”

“*Guys!*” finally shouted Falsetto. His sudden outburst drew the attention of everypony in the hallway, turning his face into a surprisingly vivid shade of red despite his cobalt fur.

“I...uh...” he resumed in a far more subdued tone as the students continued their business, and pulled something out of his saddlebag. He meekly offered two halves of a sandwich to the surprised Octavia and Vinyl Scratch. “I always keep a little something with me from breakfast...just in case.”

“Wait, you have food? Why didn’t you say so earlier?!” said Vinyl excitedly. Falsetto frowned slightly.

“Oh my goodness...” whispered Octavia, longingly eyeing the toasted bread and grass, complete with a toothpick and olive, “Is that daffodil...? I love daffodil.”

“Does it have onions?” asked Vinyl with a sideways glance to Octavia. She blushed.

“Um...I don’t think so.” said Falsetto shyly, his hind leg scratching the back of his front.

“You...uh...do you want them?”

“Oh, yes please!” Octavia nodded eagerly as she took a half and bit into it. Closing her eyes as she chewed, a soft moan escaped her lips. “Mmm...heavenly. I don’t think I’ve ever had a more delicious sandwich in my life.”

Vinyl Scratch couldn’t agree more as she sank her teeth into the sumptuous treat and let the flavors melt on her tongue.

“You’re welcome...” muttered Falsetto with a slightly bitter tone, lowering his head.

“Uh, not to interrupt yer ‘culinary experience’, but we’re going to be late to class,” said Fiddlestick, nodding to the rapidly emptying halls. Blinking in surprise, the fillies rapidly finished their very late breakfasts.

Thankfully, their next class was not only in the same wing, but very close by. Octavia, Vinyl, Fiddlestick, and Falsetto managed to slip inside the crowded classroom; the desks now full of students unpacking their quills and parchment in preparation for the upcoming lesson. Thanks to the stadium-like arrangement of the seats, they were all able to find places next to each other and with a clear line of sight to the front of the classroom.

Unlike the Applied Music room, there were no instruments here, and instead there was simply a green-black chalkboard with “Professor Smooth Song - Music Philosophy” written upon it. The professor in question, whom Vinyl recognized from yesterday, was seated patiently on the floor behind an oak desk as he waited for the dull hum of voices to slowly fade. Absentmindedly running his hooves through his dark brown tail, his sharp purple eyes flitted from face to face. Vinyl noticed whispers and glances directed towards Smooth Song’s particular outfit.

“What’s with that dish rag on his mouth?” whispered Octavia as she finished placing her quill and ink in front of her. Vinyl shrugged. The professor, still remaining silent up to this point, was finally joined in his quietude by the rest of the class. Pleased, the professor stood and walked about the classroom, looking upwards at the array of awaiting students. His expression indiscernible behind his bandanna, the only indication of his good humor came from his eyes as they sparkled in the warm sunlight. He spoke.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all, students,” he said amicably, “My name is Professor Thmooth Thong. Welcome to Muthic Philothophy.”

There was a shocked silence in the classroom that lasted for what seemed an eternity. Then, one by one, stifled giggles broke out amongst the juveniles, which eventually escalated into full-on, uproarious laughter. Fiddlestick completely lost all control, burrowing her head in her hooves, her back shaking as she was wracked with choking bouts of laughter. Vinyl, despite herself, put a hoof to her mouth and giggled. Octavia and Falsetto looked at each other uncomfortably, as Professor Smooth Song’s eyes changed to a look of pained acceptance.

From the back of the room, there was the slam of hooves on wood as an indignant voice shouted over the chorus of mocking students.

“How *dare* you all!? Compose yourselves immediately you...you...you *foa/s!* Have you no *shame!*?” reprimanded Opera Gusto, furious. Her outburst silenced the a students around her, but the rest of the classroom carried on laughing at the poor stallion’s bizarre lisp.

Professor Smooth Song didn’t say a word, nor did he attempt to silence the class. Instead, the unicorn strolled to his desk, and retrieved a weathered electric guitar. Lifting himself onto his hind hooves, he held the body in one hoof, and the neck in the other. His horn glowed with a pale aura the same color as his dusty brown fur, and the same light began emanating from the guitar’s steel strings. Calm and composed, he strummed a single chord.

Vinyl felt a slight electric charge zap through her spine, setting her fur on end and her ears twitching. For the slightest moment, all was deafeningly silent, with only hum of the guitar vibrating in the vacuum of sound. It lasted only a moment, and then it was gone. Dazed, she shook her head, trying vainly to clear her mind from the peculiar sensation. By the looks of it, she wasn’t the only one struck by the sound. The entire room had gone dead quiet, and the students were now all staring at Professor Smooth Song in a transfixed awe. He seemed to smile behind his black-dotted red bandanna.

“Now then. Do I haff your attention?” The classroom nodded rapidly.

“Well then,” he said, lowering himself back to all fours, and placing the guitar back where he had taken it from, “Let’t’h get thtarted. Yeth, my voithe doeth indeed thound ‘funny’. Howefer, that doeth’t mean I don’t ethpect your full attention and complianthe. Can we agree on thith?”

The class nodded again, terrified to say a word.

“I’m thorry...I didn’t hear that,” he said whimsically.

“Yes, Professor Smooth Song,” echoed Vinyl Scratch along with the rest of her classmates. The tingle had left her, replaced only by shame and a dull headache . Their professor shook his

head and chuckled. His eyes aglitter once more, he pointed to a filly in the front row, a surprised looking earth pony with blue and white mane.

“You there, young filly. Tell me...what it’s muthic?”

The filly’s eyes darted side to side in panic, hoping that the professor was asking somepony else. Sinking in her seat, she tried to stammer an answer.

“Uh...muth--I mean music is...um...sound?” she squeaked. Professor Smooth Song’s brow creased curiously as he seemed to ponder this answer.

“Yeth...muthic is thound, that much it’s true. But maybe we can be more thpethific. You up there, 4th row, with the green mane. What do you think?”

“Er...is music is a way to express yourself?” ventured the colt.

“Interthting theory...”

A hoof rose up in the back of classroom. Leaning so as to get a view of the volunteer, Smooth Song raised a quizzical eye brow. Vinyl twisted around to see Opera with a smug grin on her face as she waited to be called on.

“Yeth, in the back.”

“Music,” she stated pretentiously, “is an art form involving sound and silence, based around the elements of pitch, rhythm, and harmony, and is performed by a musician either with an instrument or vocally.”

“Fery well informed, Mith...?”

“Opera. Opera Gusto,” replied the unicorn with a smile, prideful smile. Fiddlestick snorted in irritation.

“Very well informed then, Mith Gutt. And altho completely wrong.” The crestfallen look on Opera’s face was enough to make Vinyl decide that Professor Smooth Song wasn’t so bad after all.

“Howefer, you do mention thome fery interthting wordth,” added the eccentric earth pony in condolence, “Mainly the word ‘art’. What ith art?” This time around, nopony was willing to volunteer, which made Smooth Song chuckle once more. “Alright. Let’t go back. Way back to the ageth of antiquity.” Stepping over to his blackboard, he levitated an eraser and swept his name off its surface. Vinyl took this opportunity to exchange an overwhelmed glance with Octavia, who seemed as much at a loss for words as she was.

“Now then!” announced Professor Smooth Song, waving a hoof at the name he had written: “Aristrotle”. The name seemed vaguely familiar to Vinyl, but Octavia seemed to have a better idea.

“Aristrotle? You mean the philosopher, right?” she said, curious.

“The very thame! Arithtrotle was one of the most influential philothophers of all time. He went againtht hith predethethors who thaid that art wath not thomething to be admired, but rather thcorned. To the ancientth, the phythical world wath a rotting, decaying copy of the perfect ideal world. Art wath an attempt to copy that phythical world. Tho what did that make art?”

Hesitant, Octavia scratched at her mane. “Wouldn’t that make art a copy of a copy, then?”

“And do you agree with that?”

“No...I don’t,” said Octavia honestly, trying to explain herself, “Music isn’t just a copy...and neither is art. Because some things aren’t physical, right? Like emotion. Would music about love or struggles be considered a part of the physical world? It just doesn’t seem right. Music is about more than making a copy, it’s about...” Her voice trailed off as words failed to describe the ideas.

“What ith your name, little Mith?”

“Octavia, sir.”

“Funny. I would haff thought you were Arithtrotle,” said the professor wryly, “for that’tth exthactly what he thought. Muthic ith far more than the tangible world, it’tth the heart and the thoul, it’tth ethenthe of life with all it’tth thtruggleth and toilth. You’re going to learn many thingth in the inthtitute, fillieth and gentlecolths. And I’m going to pick apart every latht one of them, making you queththion eferything you know.” He was silent as he let his words sink in. With a prodding note of humor in his voice, he added:

“Now then...let the pain begin.”

Vinyl had never had a bigger migraine in her life. Her head buried in the hefty textbook distributed by their Music Philosophy professor, she groaned as she struggled to grasp what in the world the pony was talking about. None of the concepts seemed to add up, and every single time she thought she was starting to understand, Professor Smooth Song would open his mouth and dash those hopes with his incessant lisp. Every basic word she thought she knew was being redefined, and it was driving her crazy. Staring intently at her book as Professor Smooth Song droned in the background, the whisperings around her vied to tear her attention away from figuring out what the definition of “knowing”. Reading fiercely, her eyes suddenly lit up in revelation as it suddenly made sense! *Knowing is based on faith*, read the book in elaborate script. Finally, something she could understand, thought Vinyl, brimming with pride. Then she read the next sentence.

This is actually a common misconception.

Vinyl’s forehead collided with her desk with a loud *thunk*.

“Clath dithmited, thudents,” whistled Professor Smooth Song, “Enjoy your lunchtime.”

The room was instantly filled with the clamor of excited youths as they collected their belongings

and pushed their way towards the hallway. Octavia, concerned, poked Vinyl.

“Ehm...you alright?”

“Just leave. Go on without me!” whined Vinyl with a melodramatic air, not lifting her head from the desk. Her gray-maned friend sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on. It isn’t that bad. Heck, I don’t get it either. What about you, Fiddlestick?” she asked the southern earth pony as she stuffed her textbook into her saddlebag. She gave Octavia a sheepish laugh.

“I dunno. I kinda fell asleep halfway through.” Hauling her bag onto her back, she trotted towards the exit along with Falsetto.

“You see? You’re not alone!” assured Octavia.

“No!” suddenly shouted Vinyl, standing in her seat and facing the purple-eyed filly. “I will *not* fall behind this early. It’s the first day! I can’t afford to already be completely lost in a class, I just can’t! I’m going to talk to the teacher. Meet you at lunch.” Before Octavia could say a word, Vinyl had packed up and was trotting down the steps towards Professor Smooth Song, who was humming as he swept the numerous definitions he had written off the blackboard. Octavia hesitated, then sighed as she turned and joined the rest of the students in heading for the dining hall.

Vinyl felt her frustrated determination dissipate step by step as she approached the professor who, only recently, managed to hypnotize the entire classroom with a single stroke of his hooves. By the time she was behind his desk, she was shuffling nervously as sweat trickled down the back of her neck. Swallowing hard, she spoke:

“Uhm...Mr. Smooth Song, sir?”

The dusty-brown stallion jumped slightly in surprise, turning around. His eyes scoured the empty seats, and then lowered to find the meek filly, who awkwardly avoided his gaze.

"Hrmm." said Professor Smooth Song, probing his memory, "Finyl Thcratch, correct?" When she nodded affirmatively, he blushed slightly, remembering their prior meeting. "Thorry about the drumth and whatnot. Anywayth, how can I help you?"

"I...um...Mr. Smooth Song, I think I'm not...well, I don't think I'm really getting the material," stammered Vinyl Scratch shamefully, "I really don't want to fall behind, and I'm scared that if I start now, I'll be lagging the entire time."

Professor Smooth Song scratched his chin, a bemused twinkle in his eyes. "Ith that tho? And what exthactly don't you underthtand?"

"Everything . None of it adds up!"

"Well, of courthe. You think I exthpected any leth?"

Vinyl blinked in surprise at this answer, and the teacher elaborated, "Did you think that a clath that ith going to challenge eferything you'fe learned up to thith point in your life ith going to be thimple to underthtand? It'th a gradual proceth, and it'th going to be difficult."

"But...what about exams?! And essays, and quizzes, and--"

"Calm down, calm down," said Vinyl's teacher, patting her on the head, "You haff two yearth ahead of you. That'th more than enough time to learn far more than thimply thilly Muthic Philothophy." He paused, giving her what would have been a warm smile if not for his bandanna. "And you're a clever filly, Mith Thratch, with quite a lot of heart in you. That much I can tell. I'm thertain that you'll do jutht fine."

With that, he turned back to his chalkboard, levitating the eraser and resuming his cleaning. The pale blue-maned filly felt a warm glow in her chest that she hadn't felt in a long time. It was from pride. But as she watched him silently, and his encouraging words tugged at something in her mind, she felt a lump build in her throat and her ears drooped slightly. It was from shame.

“Mr. Smooth Song...I’m sorry,” said Vinyl Scratch quietly. Finishing, Professor Smooth Song lowered the eraser and turned, giving her a quizzical look.

“Whatefer for?”

“For...you know...laughing at you earlier. With everypony else. It was wrong and mean, and I’m sorry.” She was silent for a while, and then she felt a reassuring hoof touch her shoulder.

“Already forgotten, Fynyl. I’m fery used to it. But...thank you for apologithing. I apprethiate that,” he said honestly. Emboldened by his acceptance, she looked up and asked him the more obvious question:

“Why though? Why is your voice like that?”

Professor Smooth Song seemed genuinely surprised by the query, his thin eyebrows raising. Coughing uncomfortably, he walked away from Vinyl, his gaze drifting between the now empty rows of desks as he paced back and forth.

“It’th a...uh...it’th a birth defect,” tried to explain the professor, “I wath born with a mithappen palette. Tho my tongue can’t reach the roof of my mouth. And well, I talk like thith. I’fe gotten uthed to it. It’th really no big deal, it doethn’t efen bother me...”

Before Vinyl Scratch could ask more, both their heads snapped to the door as it was kicked open, and familiar figure staggered forward.

“Urf...Smooth Song, I have the last of your confounded books. Seriously, couldn’t you make these poor little ponies read something a little lighter?” grunted Legato, the recording technician pony, as he fought to keep his knees from buckling under his hefty saddlebag bursting with hard cover books. Collapsing to the ground, he rolled onto his back, letting the textbooks pour out his bag in a cascade of bindings and papers. He wheezed: “I’m too old for this, Smooth Song. You’re killin’ me.”

The professor galloped to the top of the steps, and gave Legato his hoof to help him up. “I

apologithe,” he said weakly. His horn glowing, he quickly levitated and organized the stack of book before the indignant purple stallion.

“Unicorns. Completely unfair, I tell ya.” He then noticed Vinyl Scratch, and gave the filly a light-hearted salute. “Ello there, Vinyl. How’s your first day going?”

“Better than expected, sir,” chirped Vinyl, sitting in front him, “Are you alright?”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. Just a little winded is all,” reassured Legato, getting his breath back. Professor Smooth Song coughed weakly as he returned from storing the books, bringing with him another tall stack.

“Um...could you altho return thethe bookth, Legato? They’re latht year’th.”

Legato frowned as he imagined the cumbersome load on his back. “I swear, if I get my hands on those movers, I’m gonna--”

“I can help you carry those books, Mr. Legato!” piped up Vinyl, an idea forming in her head.

“That’s very kind of you Vinyl, but these are far too heavy for a young filly to carry...” started Legato. His voice trailed off as her horn glowed, and she magically lifted half the stack of books into the air. He pouted again, his green eyes set into a scowl.

“Unicorns...”

Opening the door to the recording studio, Vinyl bounced inside, the mass of books enveloped in a white glimmer trailing behind her. Smiling gaily, she looked behind her as she placed the books down beside the array of electronic instruments and computers that dominated the room.

“Come on, sir, you’re lagging behind again!” scorned the filly playfully, and Legato finally staggered into the room, panting from the strenuous walk.

“The nerve of some fillies. No respect for elders, I tell ya!” snorted the recording technician in mock offense. Dropping to his haunches and letting the weighty saddlebag slide off his back, he breathed in relief, wiping the sweat on his brow.

“Sir, can I say something?”

“Shoot.”

“With all due respect, you’re *really* out of shape.”

“You brat,” he sniffed, collecting himself, “I am *not* out of shape, I’m simply not used to this sort of exercise.” The red-eyed filly look up at him, raising an eyebrow doubtfully. Legato frowned. “Oh, lay off me. All I do is sit in this darn room. Now instead, why don’t you help me put these books into that closet over there?”

“Sure thing!” Vinyl nodded eagerly, swinging the door open with a zap from her horn and tossing the pile of books inside with a loud thump. Legato blinked.

“Uhm. Maybe a little more carefully then that?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sure you can do it so much better than me, sir!” she said quickly, giving him a wide smile, “After all, you’re such a smart pony!”

Legato looked as if he were about to question Vinyl’s bizarre behavior, but instead simply shrugged, agreed with her, and walked into the closet, turning on the light inside. Vinyl waited patiently for him to start stacking books on the shelves, then discreetly shut the door behind him. A mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she turned to a shelf full of the cardboard sleeves and rubbed her hooves together. Pushing a stool that was sitting nearby, she scrambled onto it and reached upwards for the records that were neatly stowed alphabetically.

She ran a hoof across the line-up, thinking back to the haunting sound she had experienced the last time she was here. *Does the kind of music even matter*, she wondered? Deciding to be safe

rather than sorry, she selected a record she recognized, *Coltztart's Symphony No. 41*. It was one of her father's favorites, she remembered, crawling onto the audio interface and pulling the record from its sleeve with her teeth. Cautiously, she slid it onto the built-in record player. Gingerly placing the arm onto the disc, she then stopped, searching the sound board for something that looked like an "on" button. Groaning in frustration, she scoured the unfamiliar dials and switches. Back home, they had an antique gramophone that Vinyl had been explicitly told to never even *think* of touching, but she had seen her parents use it often enough to guess how they worked. Unfortunately, that knowledge wouldn't help her here. Taking a gamble, she pressed down on a green square button next to the record player. To her relief, there was a fine crackle, and the harmonious quavering of the violin filled the room. She stared at it, immobile, as if the slightest motion would scare the disc away. Summoning her courage, Vinyl licked her lips nervously and brought her hoof above the record as it spun freely. How was it that he had done it? Should she just touch it or...? A static charge seemed to trickle from the disk as, gently, she lowered her hoof and--

"Vinyl, what are you doing?"

With a yelp, Vinyl sprang away from the record, knocking into the shelf and crashing to the floor as records engulfed her in a wave of cardboard. Poking her head out of the pile, the filly looked up at the questioning recording technician with a sheepish grin.

I...um...wanted to put on some music?" she explained feebly.

"Could you try that with less collateral damage in the future?" said Legato, taking note of the mess.

"I'm so sorry...let me clean it up, sir! It's my fault, I wasn't paying attention," she admitted, pulling a disc out of her straight-cut mane.

"No need! I think you've done quite enough, Ms. Scratch. Get on out of here. It's lunchtime after all, and you *did* help me with the books. I think that's enough for one day, eh? Now go on, get to the dining hall and...mingle or something."

Vinyl opened her mouth in protest, but before she could even say a word, she was pushed outside the door, and it quickly closed behind her. Dusting herself off, she gazed longingly at the doorway. She snorted, stomping a hoof in frustration. She had been so close! Her tail dragging behind her, she slouched as she walked down the abandoned hallways. Suddenly, she remembered something...

Legato opened the door, and looked down to find Vinyl scratch meekly smiling at him.

“Umm...which way is the dining hall again?”

-To be continued-

Author's Notes:

Want to know when the new parts are ready as soon as they drop? You're best off visiting my personal blog [The Nucleus](#). You'll even be able to read new chapters before they get to EqD! You should also check out the [SALT](#) homepage. These guys help me do proofreading and editing, so give them some lovin'! Side note, I'm going to be busy working on a new story for my ["Black Genre Challenge"](#) over the next week, so I *probably* won't be updating then. Be sure to look out for more in the future, though!

A big thanks to RavensDagger and DeRockProject for their proofreading and input!

Of course, if you want to contact privately me for any reason at all, you can do so at arkane.521@gmail.com.