BLACK AND WHITE

By Melionos

Special thanks to:
Lauren Faust, for obvious reasons.
Daetrin, for his ever-helpful criticisms
Mixup, for being such an inspiring friend and brony through-and-through
Affixiation, for proofreading the entire thing every time I revised something
Sethisto, Cereal Velocity, Phoe, and all the pre-readers that run Equestria Daily
Everypony in the MMO-Champion MLP thread, for being such a warm and open community
And lastly, thank you to every brony out there for proving that friendship can exist on the internet.

Twang.

Lyra winced at the sound. The last time her lyre had been this out of tune was when it had been knocked off its stand by the footfalls of a rampaging Ursa Minor, landing on the floor only to have several pieces of furniture collapse upon it. The damage her lyre had suffered made the Ursa's rampage look like a particularly weak practical joke. It had taken her weeks to repair the scratches and dents, not to mention the countless hours afterwards she had spent retuning the instrument to restore its pitch-perfect precison. And now it was parasprites. The little buggers had just stopped eating food and started eating everything else—houses, lumber, café tables, dresses, books, anything and everything they could touch that wasn't supposed to be edible, they consumed. She had only just managed to get back to her house and magically shield her lyre before the insects could completely destroy it. They had managed to chew through at least half of the strings, though the frame was thankfully unharmed. It still took several days before she could lay her hooves on replacement strings. The music store manager kept dropping hints that it would be cheaper to just get a new one, but Lyra would have none of it. This lyre—her lyre—had been in her family for generations, a legacy of her musical heritage, and she was not about to let that legacy be tainted because it was *cheaper that way*.

She sighed, shook off her reverie, and resumed tuning the last string.

Twang. Too high. A small turn of this key, about five degrees counterclockwise.

Twang. Too far. A couple degrees back.

Twang. Perfect.

CRASH.

The door burst open as a dull grey pegasus slammed into it, sliding along the floor on her front and coming to a stop, her mane mere inches short of the stairs. Lyra didn't even blink.

"G'morning, Derpy," she said, eyes still on her lyre.

"Mornin', Lyra!" Derpy bubbled, clambering to her feet. She pulled out a light brown package. "This just came for you, it's stamped 'Urgent', so I brought it straight here as fast as I could!"

"Thanks, Derpy," Lyra said. Derpy was looking around the room curiously.

“Bon-Bon still running all your errands, then?”

Lyra started. “I—um—what?”

Derpy somehow managed to look shrewd despite her wandering left eye. “She hasn’t been here in the morning for the past three weeks, but you have. Two and two.”

Lyra silently berated herself for forgetting how perceptive the mailmare could be. She picked up on a lot because of her mail routes. Bon-Bon often said that Derpy would notice if a single blade of grass went missing, and though Lyra couldn’t help but be skeptical, she was slowly coming to the same conclusion.

“Yeah,” she said finally. “She’s been really understanding about me and my lyre. She always has been.”

Derpy giggled as she laid the parcel on the table, her true nature disguised beneath the girlish laughter. “That’s sweet of her. I wouldn’t expect anything less of a pony who has candy as her cutie mark,” she said.

Lyra couldn’t help but smile at that. “Yep, that’s her, all right. Anything else?”

Derpy shook her head. “Nope!”

Lyra levitated a muffin out of a cabinet and tossed it to the mailmare, who caught it deftly in her mouth.

”Ank oo!” she said around the muffin. “Goo eye!”

“Thanks, and see ya,” Lyra said. The mailmare gently pulled the door closed behind her, leaving the musician in peace once more. Well, as much peace as one can be at when there’s an unusually stiff package on your table stamped “URGENT” in bold red letters. Lyra sighed again and pulled the package towards her. It was addressed simply to *Lyra, Ponyville*. She pulled off the wrappings, and a book tumbled into the table. Its plain grey cover was adorned with a large purple treble clef, and it was absolutely pristine, the cover gleaming with the morning sun.

Curiousity got the better of Lyra, and the newly-bound spine protested in crackles as she opened it.

~ ♫ ~

The morning is beautiful. Celestia's sun always looks beautiful. I can't remember when it didn't. All of its oranges, reds, and pinks painting the open canvas of the sky. I love sunrises. I always have.

Today's sunrise finds me standing in Ponyville, in front of a house. Her house. I've been standing here for at least 45 minutes. My cello's carrying strap is cutting into my neck. I'll have a welt for sure. But then I look at the letter in my hoof for the millionth time, and the pain vanishes again.

Forgive me, where are my manners? I am Octavia.

Hello.

Yes, that Octavia. The grey-coated cellist who played at the last at the Grand Galloping Gala, the last one before Princess Luna's mysterious return. Not that anypony ever pays attention to the music, though, there's far too much snobbiness in the air to hear it anyways.

I guess I should be thankful. I got to play at the Grand Galloping Gala, not exactly the smallest royal gathering. You'd be amazed at the number of ponies that came up to talk to us afterwards. I've never had this many fans. I'm not quite sure what to do with them or even how to respond to their praise. It's not like I've practiced public interactions. Most ponies don't like or appreciate classical music. Or even good literature.

In the end, that makes me appreciate the ones who do. There aren't many, but I count myself among them. Music may be my talent, but that doesn't stop me from appreciating a good book now and then. A well-written story can pull heartstrings and induce tears just as easily as a beautiful violin solo, and believe me, I've seen ponies break down in public during concerts, and I don't mean just teary eyes and wobbly lips. An honest-to-Celestia breakdown, wracking sobs and shaking shoulders, the whole nine yards. Music and literature can speak to your soul. The only difference is how they do it, and sometimes, that makes all the

difference in the world. It can be the difference between black and white.

Ponies only ever talk about extremes, like the day and night. The dawns and dusks in between are almost always forgotten. I should know. I've been grey my entire life. Caught in the middle and forever in the background.

I'm sorry. I'm rambling now. I've been told I do that a lot. More often than I should.

This letter I'm holding…well, let's just say my happiness depends on where it ends up.

I'll be honest with you.

If it ends up being read once and thrown into a garbage can, I'll be happy. If it ends up ripped to shreds, thrown into Froggy Bottom Bog, burned, or enshrined in a glass case for all eternity—I don't care. As long as it's read by the one pony sleeping inside this house, I'll be happy.

…I think.

Truth is, I don't know. There's a lot of things I don't know. One thing I do know is that if I walk away from this house and I still have this letter, then I will probably never be happy.

But I can't do it. A vow I made almost decade ago stops me.

It'd be so easy to take a single step forward and slip the envelope through mailslot.

But I can't.

It's been at least an hour now, and I'm still standing here. Her house and the

question that's loomed on the horizon for nearly a decade both tower over me.

Should I slide this letter under the door, or should I just walk away?

Should I break my vow forged during an emotional turmoil, or should I stay true to my word?

It's been almost ten years now, and I still don't have an answer.

~ ♫ ~

Lyra snapped back into reality as the front door opened and Bon-Bon stepped in, a few carrots and stalks of celery protruding from her saddlebags.

"Hey," she said, closing the door behind her. "What's that you're reading?"

"Oh, this? It's…um…a book from…erm…an old friend," Lyra said evasively.

"Really? Who?"

"Octavia."

"Oh…okay," Bon-Bon said, tossing her saddlebags onto the table and unpacking. Lyra watched her, expecting her to show subtle hints of anger at the mention of the cellist, but Bon-Bon merely hummed cheerily as she pulled the groceries out and sorted them. Lyra eyed her suspiciously for another moment before returning to the book.

~ ♫ ~

I suppose knowing what's brought me to the steps of this house might help. I'm sorry. Playing music is my forté, not composing or writing. I did think about composing a song to tell this story, but music can be so vague sometimes, and I don't want to write a musical or opera, or even give it lyrics. Music should be able to work its magic without those, if you ask me, and like I said, my talent is playing, not composing. Music can only convey vague—if powerful—emotions, but literature can be far more specific. So I'm writing my story instead. I can do that,

at least. It won't be the most elegant story, and I can only hope that those who read this can enjoy it for what it is; a snippet of my life story. The rest of it has yet to come.

This part…this part of my life stands out. I have a lot of fond memories that I will have forever, and a lot of bad ones that I'd rather forget, and this part…this part is both. If that makes any sense. It is neither sad nor happy, it is both. Us musicians call that kind of music "bittersweet." That's the best I can describe it.

I'll start at the very beginning.

During music school, I met somepony who ended up changing my life forever, though I would never realize it until long after it happened.

My best friend during music school, Vinyl Scratch, was, like me, a fillyfooler.

Yes, I'm a fillyfooler. I probably should've explained that. It's hard not to be when the mare/colt ratio is somewhere in the range of twelve to one.

We had been friends for so long and knew each other so well that neither of us wanted to be with each other. Not in that respect, anyways. She had had…oh, I can't remember now. At least three? Yes, I think so. At least three fillyfriends by then. She was always popular. She was the cool one, and I was just the odd little pony that just followed her around. Nopony was ever interested in me unless they were trying to get closer to her. She always kept me around, though, always wanted to hang out with me and always confided her secrets in me. She trusted me, and I trusted her.

Nopony else saw that, though. Every other pony in school was a bright, vibrant color, usually pastel and most of the time with a mane to match. And even so, Vinyl stood out. Other ponies just saw her, and next to her pure white coat, two-toned neon blue hair, and slick amethyst sunglasses, who would ever look at

little old Octavia?

Nopony would. I was grey.

Black and white are boring enough on their own—combine the two and you just get twice as much boring. Nopony would ever spare more than a second to look at a dull-shaded plain Earth pony such as myself.

Well…somepony did. Eventually. It took a long and lonely year, but for the first time in my life, I had a fillyfriend.

She was adorable; she had a pale green coat with a dark brown mane and deep emerald eyes, and her name was Cannoli. Funny name, I know. A Cannolo—Cannoli is the plural form of Cannolo—is a strange pastry, a sort of flaky crust wrapped around a cream filling. She had two of them as her Cutie Mark. They're simple, but very tasty. I think of her every time I see one now. She was first-chair clarinet in the top orchestra—she was good, very good, especially as young as we were, but she knew her future wasn't in music. That's the way she was with everything she did. She strove to be the best. Me? I was a couple bands lower and thought I was terrible, but in hindsight, we had an unnaturally large amount of excellent cellists, and I didn't practice nearly as much as I should have.

I remember spending nights building up the courage to ask her out, only to have it shrivel up pathetically whenever I saw her. This went on for several weeks, until one day, a certain something rolled around.

November 6th, 2007.

My sixteenth birthday.

I'm not exactly proud that I tried to get myself a fillyfriend for a birthday present, but I learned a lot.

At any rate, she said yes, so there's that.

Okay, she actually said "I guess," but we started dating regardless.

And for a while, I was happy. Nervewrackingly happy, but happy.

See...I'm always nervous, because I'm always afraid of something. Afraid of being embarassed, afraid of loss, of rejection, of failure. I wanted to be that one filly she would fall in love with, and I was always afraid I would fail.

I find the oddest things to be afraid of.

One time, I found myself afraid of going to get a manecut. No, I won't say why. I don't even want to think about it.

Over time I've developed a mask I can hide behind to disguise those fears—a mask of icy indifference. I used to only wear it during concerts and social gatherings, but now I wear it everywhere. I wear it so much I'm becoming convinced that that's who I am—a soulless, heartless pony. I even wear the mask around my mother.

Like I said, there's a lot of things I don't know, and why I felt the need to wear that mask near my mother is one of them.

I wore a different mask around Cannoli, one of love and humility. I loved her. We would somehow conquer the odds and be that one music school couple that lasts forever, breakups be damned.

That's what I told myself. I can be extremely stubborn sometimes.

What I didn't realize is that however much I enjoyed being with her, I was still wearing a mask, and therein lay my downfall. If we were meant to be together, then I wouldn't be wearing any mask. I would just be myself. I might

have to change, but I wouldn't have to hide.

But still, I was happy. We went to dinner several times, we laughed, we hung out together, we exchanged "I love you"s, we hugged all the time. I remember I spent my first date—our first date—silently chewing my way through pumpkin ravioli. I didn't say anything the whole date outside of placing my order and "Thank you".

I'm such an idiot sometimes.

We went on four dates, probably more, but it's the third I remember the most clearly. After all these years, I've never kissed anyone other than my mother, and that night, I blew the one chance I had.

We had walked back to my house after a late-night party, just chatting happily about how stupid one of our mutual friends looked with a lampshade on her head. We stopped at my door, and I pulled out my keys but didn't open the door.

We stood there, facing each other, as I fiddled with my keys. She was silent, and so was I.

We stared into each other eyes.

I got lost in her eyes. Those deep, green eyes.

We moved closer. Just the tiniest bit.

I wrapped my forehooves around her, pulling her closer, feeling her beating heart against mine, smelling her sweet herbal shampoo, our cheeks brushing against one another as we embraced…

Then I unlocked my door and went inside.

Such an idiot.

It wasn't long after that that she realized what I had been blind to the whole time; I was unsure of myself, afraid of everything, not prepared to commit, and above all, I was still wearing that mask. We broke up after six months of being together.

We were walking to our next lecture when she did it. Just said we should stop seeing each other. Horror rooted me in place until the bell rang and the fear of detention drove me into my classroom.

I know that technically she broke up with me, but even through my disbelieving stupor I could see the logic in her decision, so I never blamed her. That's why it's "we broke up" instead of "she broke up with me".

Six months after I had my first fillyfriend, I had another first.

For the first time in my life, I felt heartbroken.

When I got home, I hurled the stuffed moose she had given me across the room, then collapsed sobbing onto my bed. My tear-soaked pillow had long since dried up by the time I fell asleep.

I got over it eventually. We remained distant friends, but it would never be the same. It couldn't.

~ ♫ ~

Lyra barely registered the door opening and closing as Bon-Bon left the house again. There was a mug of steaming hot chocolate on the table, which she gratefully lifted up and sipped, absorbed in thought. Music may have been her special talent, but Octavia certainly knew how to write. A smile touched her lips

as she remembered the grey Earth pony, who generally remained mute and unmotivated until seized by an idea; then she would instantly develop tunnel vision and approach the idea in a manner scarily reminiscent of a stampeding cow, though with considerably more class and finesse. Any obstacles that threatened her progress made about as much impact as a fly would to said stampeding cow in the face of her single-minded determination.

An image of Octavia armed with a quill and seated at a mahogany desk having a staring contest with a blank piece of parchment floated across Lyra's mind, and she chuckled momentarily before flipping to the next page.

~ ♫ ~

Twelve months pass and I find myself alone in my third year.

You see, most of my first year was spent hanging out with Scratch, until I realized that her friends were not mine.

A year after that, I spent most of my time with Cannoli's friends. But then we broke up, and I could never talk to them the same again.

What if I were to start dating one of them?

Would Cannoli be hurt, jealous, indifferent?

Would I?

That's another thing you can add to the list of things I don't know. It must be pretty long by now.

Then another year passed, and I was alone. Friendless. The one quarter note in a sea of rests, the treble clef on an empty staff, devoid of even a key or time signature.

If “lonely” was what I felt when I entered music school, then “soulcrushingly isolated” must have been what I felt when I entered my third year, when I became a machine.

Wake up, go to school, play cello, listen to old teachers ramble on about musical theory, go home, do homework, practice cello, sleep.

Wake up, go to school, play cello, fall asleep in class, go home, do homework, practice cello, sleep.

Wake up, go to school, play cello, play in a concert, go home, do homework, practice cello, sleep.

Wake. School. Cello. Class. Home. Homework. Practice. Sleep.

Every day, that little bit of defiance grew inside me, the part that hated being lonely, that wanted friends, that didn’t want to be lassoed into routine. I fed that bit to my music, weaving sorrow and regret into songs I played in school. They were beautiful, or so I thought. Nopony else so much as noticed when I closed my eyes while playing a solo, making even the most cheerful pieces melancholy.

But then, that’s me. Li’l old grey Octavia. Forever in the background.

Wake. School. Cello. Class. Home. Homework. Practice. Sleep.

It went on like that for an eternity. Every day was routine.

Routine, routine, routine.

And just in case, every ‘tomorrow’ was more routine, as if I would suddenly drop dead if it stopped.

I can only liken the process to that of natural erosion, when entire hills are

leveled completely over centuries by nothing more than wind and rain. And so it was that my hope and willpower was chipped away by life's storms, bit by bit and piece by piece, until a meager pile of once-formidable dust was all that was left.

That was it. In that pile lay all my determination to make something of myself…

…To be different and unique…

….To bring something to this world that nopony else could and leave a master's legacy behind…

…all my hope that one day, I would no longer be grey.

Then it, too, was whisked away by the wind.

It was all too much to bear. I had to let it out somehow.

So I stayed after school one day and went onstage in our empty auditorium with my cello. I played. Oh, how I played. I could feel my loneliness echoing through the hall as I fed my one defiant bit to the strings, each stroke pulling my misery from my heart and floating it into the air, ringing in the auditorium's silence for the empty audience to hear.

Only it wasn't empty.

Of course, I didn't find that out until the next day of dreary routine.

That was the day I met her. The one who would change my life forever.

Remember Cannoli? My first-ever fillyfriend?

She's also my last. First, last, and only.

A part of me wants to be happy because I've remained loyal, and the other half wants to be depressed because I haven't moved on and found anyone else yet.

Either way, Cannoli wasn't the one who changed my life forever.

I met the one who did that day. She was in one of my classes in my first year, and I knew her name was Lyra, but I never thought much of her until that day. She just came up to me, told me she heard me playing in the auditorium. Said she knew how I felt and if I ever needed to talk, she would be there to listen.

Cannoli may have been adorable, but Lyra was beautiful. Her coat was a sea-green that always reminded me of mint. I loved the way her green and white mane spiked out adorably, the way her golden eyes always shone with a radiant sort of happiness that infected everypony nearby whenever she smiled.

She was always smiling, but she had so many smiles, and there wasn't a single pair of them were the same. Some were genuine, and those were the ones I loved. The other ones were just masks that she wore to hide what was underneath.

Yes, masks. See…

With these kinds of masks, your eyes are still visible. So while the rest of you might appear joyous or genial, your eyes say otherwise.

That's what I saw when I looked at her. A filly in pain, hiding underneath a mask of happiness.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Our masks might be different, but they're still only masks.

Only thing is, I've been wearing mine so long, I'm not sure what I'm hiding

underneath anymore.

I didn't want to intrude on her life any more than I had to. I had no right to bring my sorrow and regrets and dump them upon another pony solely for my benefit. She was sad enough as is, that much I could see, even if she was trying to hide it. She looked happy to others, charging blindly into situations with her own little motto, "No regrets."

It didn't fool me. I saw her pain.

She didn't need my help to be sad, and I wasn't about to give it to her.

But once again, that's only what I told myself. I'm awfully good at lying to myself.

Wake. School. Cello. Class. Home. Homework. Practice. Sleep.

Wake. School. Cello. Class. Home. Homework. Practice. Sleep.

Wake. School. Cello. Class. Home. Homework. Practice. Sleep.

I know that practice makes perfect, but I did not want my life to consist only of a routine as plain, dull, and mundane as my grey coat. Even if it *was* perfect.

No, I would gallop down this dreary path to its very end, no matter what, and I would make something of myself. I had to.

I must.

Empty words.

I used to think of myself as a pony with resolve, but now?

I can't. I know better.

The monotone droning of uneventful days…

The hope for something brighter nothing more than powdery snow before a searing inferno…

The crushing despair of neverending loneliness…

And the path twisting out of sight at every turn, its end tantalizingly close yet so far…

I couldn't keep it in anymore.

But this time, I had somepony who would listen.

I hadn't spoken to Lyra since that day, but she still came without saying anything when I asked her to come to the auditorium with me.

I played out my loneliness again, and she listened and watched from the front row.

She may have been the only one listening, but her diligent attention was potent enough to fill every single vacant seat.

I was playing for a full house.

Then halfway through my solo, she got up onstage with me, pulled out her lyre, and played right along with me.

I wish I had a recording of that duet. It's the sweetest thing anypony has ever done for me. Our melodies wove seamlessly together, two sides of the same coin. It wasn't perfect by any means, but that didn't stop it from stealing my

breath away.

That was the happiest moment of my life.

I had planned on leaving right afterwards, but then she laid a hoof on my shoulder, and any semblence of logical or reasonable thoughts in my head flew out my ears.

“Y’know, ‘Tavy,” she said quietly. Her voice felt like Equestria’s finest silk on my eardrums. “Music is great and all, but it has its limits, too.”

I didn’t say anything. She stepped closer and looked into my eyes.

“You need to talk.”

It wasn’t a question.

I remained silent.

“I’m not leaving until you do.”

Those golden eyes. I looked away. They were blinding me with an attentiveness that I’d never been on the receiving end of before. I couldn’t look any longer.

And still, I said nothing.

I can never remember how long the silence lasted. It might’ve been ten seconds. It might’ve been two hours.

“’Tavy...what is it? Please tell me.”

I swear to Luna, Celestia, and any other alicorns out there, if you ever heard

Lyra say “please”, you would have to literally be made of stone all the way through to not do whatever it is she asked of you.

The floodgates burst.

“I don’t know!” I blurted. “I never do! There’s so much I don’t know and never will…are my friends ignoring me because they don’t like me? Is it because of something I did? Or didn’t do? Is it just me being a stupid little filly all over again? I don’t know! Maybe I did something that they didn’t like? Maybe I didn’t do something that I should’ve done? I just—*don’t*—*know*!”

Black and white. Caught in the middle.

And let me tell you, if I had a bit for every time I said “I don’t know” or one of its myriad variants, I’d be able to buy the Celestial Palace.

I think I was crying, but I can’t remember.

If I was, then I never felt the tears as I met her bright golden eyes with my own violet pair.

“I guess that’s why I really admire you,” I told her quietly. “You just…leap headfirst into anything life throws your way, and walk away with no regrets. I wish I could be like that…but instead, all I find in myself is hesitance and regret. I feel...lost…alone. I don’t know anypony, I don’t know why I wear a mask around my mother, I don’t know why I can’t feel emotion half the damn time, I don’t know what to do, I don’t know where I’m supposed to be headed, *I don’t even know who I am anymore*….”

I ran out of words, and now it was her turn to look away and say nothing. She did so.

Did I ever mention how beautiful she was?

…Well, it must be multiplied by at least a hundred whenever she's worried. Maybe a thousand.

I think my heart stopped.

She was silent for the longest time.

I went back to contemplating the floor so I wouldn't die from heart failure.

"You know, 'Tavy," she murmured. "There's this one quote I like…"

I've always found it strange that I could never recall the quote, but over the years, I found something stranger.

…I don't mind.

I don't mind not remembering. You can add "Why Octavia doesn't mind not being able to remember" to the list.

What I do remember is that after she fell silent, it felt like the world had righted itself. As though it had been upside down the whole time without me knowing, and she had simply reached out a hoof and flipped it back.

In that moment, all I wanted was to be with her forever. To be at her side, to catch her when she falls, to harbor her when the seas of life grew stormy, to tick away into eternity as the metronome that keeps her beat. And just like she is now, she would be there at my side whenever hope abandoned me or I could no longer handle my pain on my own.

Then I heard her say something.

"'Tavy, this is Cloudburst."

Oh, hayseed.

Standing next to her was an ice-blue pegasus with stunningly blue eyes and a rainy cloud for a cutie mark, who shook a scruffy snow-white mane out of her eyes before offering a hoof to me. My hoof rose up and returned the hoofshake before I could do so much as blink; her entrance had been completely soundless.

"Hey," she said in a voice not unlike light raindrops on a wooden rooftop. "Glad to meet ya!"

"Hey," was all I could manage.

They were standing close to each other. Too close.

"Well…we'd better be going," Lyra said finally.

She'd said '*we*'. No denying it now.

"Just remember I'm always here if you need to talk, okay?"

"Sure," I said weakly.

The auditorium disappeared.

The room suddenly grew very warm.

Any thoughts I entertained of decking Cloudburst right then and there vanished instantly.

It took me a moment to realize that the auditorium had been replaced with a faceful of a mint-green pony, and that the warmth was because of two forelegs wrapped around me.

I was being hugged. By Lyra.

A second later, I realized that my own grey forelegs had involuntarily returned the gesture. I could feel her warmth seeping into my heart, melting the frigidity within.

It felt right, with her in my hooves and me in hers. Nothing else existed.

I wished the hug would never end.

I wished we could heal the wounds of each others' hearts.

I wished we could shield each other from the horrors of this world.

I wished we could perform duets for every corner of Equestria.

Sweet duets, sour duets, bluesy duets, cheery duets, bittersweet duets, black duets, white duets…

…And maybe even some grey ones.

I…wished.

Cloudburst coughed softly.

Lyra tightened the embrace briefly before releasing me. I could still feel her coat against mine, but she was already walking away.

"Please remember," was the last thing she said before Cloudburst shut the auditorium door behind them.

Don't worry, Lyra, I said to myself. I'll always remember. And ten years

later, I still do.

I remember walking the whole way home in a haze; the whole thing seemed unreal, like it was all a dream that never really happened. But you don't feel a tingle in your coat for an hour in a dream, and you certainly don't feel a Stradivarius cello strapped to your back, either.

As I lay in bed that night, I wasn't sure if I wanted to cry or not. I had found the one, I was sure, but she was taken. I couldn't have her.

Not yet.

The meandering path of routine I had been following became infinitely more bearable with that little spark in my heart that meant Lyra was with me in spirit. She may have been with Cloudburst, but she was there for me if I ever needed her. Twice now, and the first time I wasn't even aware of her vigilance.

No, I could wait. I *would* wait.

I would wait *forever* if it meant I could have a single day with her.

In hindsight, I guess it was about time for me to have a lucky break, because *forever* turned out to be about five weeks.

I overheard them break up after rehearsal one day. I wouldn't've if I hadn't lost my music folder, and even then I almost missed it, it was so quiet. It wasn't like most young-love breakups I'd witnessed. It was just a tranquil separation of ways, a diverging of roads in a yellow wooden room. There was no yelling or screaming, no crying or drama. Just mutual understanding on both faces as the ice-blue pegasus parted from the mint-green unicorn.

This was it. This was my chance. My shot at being with the filly—no, mare—of my dreams, the only pony who'd ever stopped and stared through my

mask to see the real me.

No, wait.

She's hurt.

I could see it in her glassy eyes.

It's not huge, but it's there. She's hiding it, of course, but that's never fooled me.

No, I would wait. I'll give her time to recover. It'd be hasty and inconsiderate of me to make my move now.

I would wait until tomorrow, at least.

I told myself the same thing the next day, too. Surely she just needed some time alone.

Yeah, right.

I'd suggest starting a list of lies I've made myself believe, but I'd rather not tie up anypony for their entire life like that. It'd be too cruel.

Two days after they had separated, a new smile adorned her face. It wasn't any of the ones I usually saw plastered on her face, either. It wasn't even a genuine smile.

Not one that I'd ever seen before, anyways, because…

It wasn't a mask.

No, this smile came from her heart, and I wasn't the only one who saw that.

If she was radiating happiness before, then now she was a walking beacon of pure joy, beaming rays of concentrated elation into even the darkest of corners and casting a tranquil solace over everypony that so much as looked upon her luminous form.

It wasn't so much because of the fact that she was free from Cloudburst, but rather that she was now with another filly. A beige-ish one with a two-toned mane, half of it pink and the other blue, whose cutie mark was three pieces of wrapped candy. Fitting, considering how positively joyous she was making Lyra. I later learned her name was Bon-Bon.

No matter.

I did say I would wait *forever*, and I meant it. Even if *forever* keeps horsing around and fooling me into thinking it's far shorter than it actually is.

So I waited.

And waited.

…and waited.

…and…waited.

…and then…

…I waited some more.

I kept trying to get her to hang out with me at a few casual get-togethers that Vinyl put together. Not on a date or anything. Just as friends. So that I could see if any of my love had even the slightest chance of reciprocation.

Nope.

She wouldn't even come.

Or reply whenever I asked, not verbally, not even with a shake of the head or twitch of the ears to indicate that she'd heard me.

That was it.

It was over.

I had my chance already.

A one-day window through which I could've passed into a veritable paradise.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

No, I remember telling myself.

You're strong enough to stand on your own.
It's not your place to use her as an emotional anchor.
You've dragged her down for long enough.

I promised myself—and her—that day that I would never, ever talk to or contact her, ever again.

No longer would I hamper her with a burden all my own.

I must walk this path alone.

I can see it clearly now.

To my left is nothing but white—a pure, shining white light composed of all things virtuous.

Loyalty.

Courage.

Duty.

Honor.

And to my right, all is black—a chaotic medley of emotions.

Rage.

Joy.

Grief.

Love.

And before me, a grey path stretches into the distance, barely wide enough for a single pony as it meanders its way through black and white, inadvertently defining the very boundaries of vice and virtue.

A grey path for a grey pony.

At long last, I knew…

…this is the path I must walk.

Alone.

~ ♫ ~

Lyra blinked as a cream-colored hoof brought a pink towel to her face, gently wiping away the tears she hadn't noticed had escaped. This was her fault. She was why Octavia was so distant, wary of even the idea of getting closer to someone. She was why the cellist pushed ponies away before they ever got the chance to know her…it was all her fault.

Lyra paused in her reprimands.

Octavia was grey, cold as stone and just as stubborn. She wouldn't let it get to her…

…would she?

Lyra brushed the towel aside and turned the page.

~ ♫ ~

And so I did. I walked the path of vice and virtue. I learned that neither side is "correct", so to speak. Both have merits and faults, yet to embrace one is not to eschew the other, as so many ponies believe. Mix the two, and you just get grey. Nothing wrong with grey. But there's an infinite number of grays. Light greys and dark greys and all the greys in-between. I'm just one shade of the union of black and white.

Yet for all my philosophical revelations, for all my concerts and performances, for all my awards and earnings, I still feel empty. Unfulfilled.

And with every passing day, it grows easier to think that Lyra is the only pony who could ever fill that void. And just to balance it out, every day it grows harder to keep the promise I made to myself and to her—the vow that I would never again taint her purity and joy with my dull shades of grey.

For ten years, I have kept my promise. However hard it has become to resist the urge to snap my wafer-thin oath and return to her side, I have stood firm and unrelenting.

But now…

I stand in front of her door, letter in hoof and hesitance in my heart.

Should I do it?

Or should I not?

Once again I find myself teetering on the fence between black and white.

I tuck the letter into my case's carrying strap and walk away.

~ ♫ ~

As Lyra closed the book, a piece of parchment fought its way free of the pages and drifted to the floor. She picked up and read it, completely unaware of Bon-Bon reading it over her shoulder. The handwriting was, unlike the book's refined typewritten text, smooth and flowing.

Lyra –

I hope this book finds you well. It's the first copy ever printed, and I autographed the back cover. You can sell it if you want—as long as you read it first. It probably won't be worth much, but I think you, of all ponies, deserve to know the truth. And Bon-Bon too.

I am sorry to say I will be leaving Equestria soon. I'll be back for most of the Grand Galloping Galas, but probably not much apart from that. I can't stay here anymore. There's nothing left for me. There was, once, but no longer. That's fine. I'm not blind to how happy you are with Bon-Bon. If you'd like, there's an old cherry tree right on the edge of—

She didn't bother reading the rest. The note dropped out of Lyra's magical grasp and fell to the floor as she bolted to the door, flung it open, and galloped away at top speed.

~ ♫ ~

The sun was just peeking over the horizon, tinging the dull grey sky with red and pink.

Lyra skidded to a halt in Ponyville's park and looked around; Octavia, her ever-present black case strapped to her back, was standing beneath the snow-covered branches of the cherry tree that sat atop the tallest hill in the park. Her head was turned to the rolling snowy meadows that stretched out before them, her back to the rest of Ponyville and the just-as-extensive orchards of Sweet Apple Acres. She said nothing and did not turn around as Lyra trotted up the hill and stood at her side.

"Hey, 'Tavy," Lyra panted.

The cellist did not reply.

"'Tavy?"

Octavia remained mute.

"I'm sorry."

Octavia turned towards her and regarded Lyra with stony violet eyes. And still, she said nothing. Lyra looked at her for a moment before gazing elsewhere; there was a lifetime of pain, sorrow, and regret in those eyes. A decade of agony and torment, all because of her…and no matter how much she wanted to go back and undo it, she couldn't. But, maybe…

"'Tavy…you don't have to say anything. I'm...so, so sorry," she repeated, raising her golden eyes to meet Octavia's. The cellist's eyes were hard, but Lyra pressed on. "I know I can't take it all back, but I want to help you, even if it's just a little. Please?"

Octavia's eyes softened by an almost imperceivable fraction. Then, slowly…

She nodded.

Lyra grabbed Octavia's hoof and led her back into the town square.

~ ♫ ~

They arrived to find the square crammed with ponies. Almost everyone was wearing a simple cloth vest that was either beige, green, or blue. Lyra dropped Octavia's hoof before they reached the crowd and trotted wordlessly to Bon-Bon's side. Octavia saw her nudge Bon-Bon, who turned and waved a cheery hoof. Octavia nodded at her, but just once.

"…so let's do even *better* than last year, and have the quickest Winter Wrap-Up EVER!" The mayor was saying. "All right, everypony, find your team leader, and let's get galloping!"

A few seconds later, Octavia sat back on her haunches as the scene was magically darkened, with a single spotlight piercing the darkness. A sky-blue pegasus stepped into it and began to sing.

Three months of winter coolness,
And awesome holidays!...

~ ♫ ~

'Cause tomorrow spring is here,
'Cause tomorrow spring is here!

Octavia released a breath in reverie as the last of the magical spotlights faded and the song concluded. And in spite of everything—the chilly air, the loneliness of the song, the biting wind, the pain of her past, and the tenuous balance and discipline required to walk the path that separates vice and virtue—the smallest of smiles found its home on Octavia's visage as she turned her back on both Lyra and Ponyville and trotted towards her grey future.

~ fin ~

---------- Author's Notes ----------

I hope you all enjoyed reading this fic' as much as I enjoyed writing it, even if my OCD inner grammar pony went berserk several times during its creation. I spent a fairly significant chunk of time deciding whether or not to actually submit this to Equestria Daily. Here's a few fun facts, see if you can figure out why:

- The "and" in the title graphic is actually colored with Octavia's coat and outline colors.
- Black and White is based on a true story. About 80% of it is factually accurate.
- Cannoli, Cloudburst, Vinyl Scratch, Lyra, Bon-Bon and Octavia are all based on actual people.
- If IRL-Cloudburst, IRL-Vinyl Scratch, and/or IRL-Bon-Bon were bronies and read this story, they probably wouldn't recognize themselves.
- If IRL-Cannoli and/or IRL-Lyra were bronies and read this story, they would definitely recognize themselves.
- IRL-Cannoli would probably know that it was her from her pony's name alone.
- IRL-Lyra's revelation would take a bit longer, but she'd figure it out. Of that I have no doubt. [/Zecora]
- If IRL-Octavia were a brony and read this story, he would wonder why in Celestia's name he's re-reading the story he's already spent weeks on writing, editing, proofreading, rewriting, and being generally displeased with.

I guess it technically isn't a 'self-insert' by the standard definition, as I didn't create an OC pony for myself. I truly see enough of myself in Octavia's fanon that I don't feel overly awkward and out of place stepping into her hooves and projecting my own story into her background. I can only hope that it doesn't ruin her for anypony, and if it did, I'm super-sorry! D: Please don't hate me!

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed it. If you have a comment, question, suggestion, or if you've run across a typo, leave a comment on the Equestria Daily page, shoot me an email at melionos@gmail.com, or send me a tweet @melionos. Thanks for reading and keep on rockin'! Bronies forever!