

Off-Key

Part 2 (The Chaotic Sonata)

-Chromosome

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Vinyl Scratch was running for her life. Forced into a fierce gallop, a fearful, primal instinct was screaming in her eardrums, urging her to go faster if she wanted to survive. An echoing boom thundered around her, vibrating the air as her legs started to feel heavier and heavier. Sweat pouring from her brow, the binding force in her legs became insurmountable, and she froze in place against the will of every panicked fiber of her being. Her pulse throbbing in her ears, and her breath fast and hot in her throat, she couldn't even move her head as some massive presence rose from behind her. She couldn't even scream as it seized her. And she couldn't even see as she started falling.

With a yelp, Vinyl's eyes snapped open. Panting, her red eyes flitted across the room in terror. Why was it upside down!? She tried to move, and it didn't take her long to realize that she was hanging off the edge of her bed; the cold, sweaty sheets were tangled around her in an accidental harness. As her heart began slowing to a regular rate, she tugged at her binds in frustration. Coming free, she fell to the ground with a painful grunt.

"Ow..." she muttered, rolling onto her feet and rubbing her head. Her dormitory was now flooded with brilliant yellow sunshine, its joviality almost mocking the filly's fall. Letting her eyes adjust to the brightness, she plodded over to the gilded mirror hung over the antique desk, and winced at her chaotically curled mane and ruffled fur. Grabbing a brush laying on the wooden surface of the desk, she used it to painfully force out the knots formed during her turbulent rest. Her eyes strayed and wandered to a grandfather clock. She blinked.

8:06 in the morning.

8:06.

“Agh! I’m gonna be *late!*” shrieked Vinyl Scratch, dropping the brush. Classes started at 8:15! Her outcry jolted Octavia awake on the top bunk.

“Not onions, I hate onions...!” the gray filly shouted in a sleepy daze, “I...wait. This isn’t the--” Her purple eyes wandered down to find Vinyl hurriedly pulling on her maroon uniform, and they tightened into a scowl.

“What is *wrong* with you? Screaming at Celestia-knows-what hour in morning and...wait...what time is it?”

The two fillies burst out from their dormitory and galloped into the hallway at a frantic pace. Tearing through the corridor, they realized that they were completely empty; all the other students had gone.

“This is *not* going to happen to me! I won’t be the one pony late for class on the first day!” swore Octavia as they careened around a corner, “And I can’t *believe* you used my brush!”

“Oh, come off it, and run faster!” gasped Vinyl, trying to keep up as best as she could under the weight of her saddlebag.

“Do you know what they *do* to ponies that are late? Oh...let me think...West Wing, which way is the West Wing?!”

“Turn right here!” said Vinyl as they reached a familiar corridor. The tour hadn’t been a waste after all. Galloping forward, Octavia looked at each door as they passed by.

“Storage, Musical Philosophy, Advanced Maintenance, Applied Musics...wait, there!” she said, skidding to a halt at this last door. “Quickly, before we’re--”

Bursting through the door, the three only students in the room and turned to stare at them. Their

pegasus professor looked at them with a bemused air. Vinyl glanced at a clock hung above the chalkboard hidden behind rows of instruments.

8:16.

“Ms. Octavia and Ms. Scratch, I presume,” said the professor, smiling wryly. “You’re late.”

“This is all your fault!” Octavia whispered harshly as they sidled their way alongside the three other students.

“My fault? How is this my fault? If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be in bed!” Vinyl responded, as her stomach growled hungrily. “I didn’t even get to have breakfast, either!”

Octavia looked as if she was about to respond when the professor cleared his throat noisily.

“Fillies and gentlecolts, I’d like to be among the first to wish you all a stellar two years here at the Hoofington Institute for Musical Excellence,” proclaimed the pale orange pegasus with the 3 five-pointed stars on his flank, smiling warmly. “My name is Professor Harpsichord, but I insist you call me Professor Harp, or even Mister H. Welcome to Applied Music.”

Walking around the room, his crystal blue eyes swept across the gathered fillies and colts.

“Now, you might be wondering why there are so few of you here. Simply put, Applied Musics is not an academic course as much as a self-fulfillment course. Each pony requires individual attention, and this is done through small-focused classes. This is key to the success of the institute. Because here in Applied Musics, you will be doing one thing, and one thing only.”

He gave them all a beaming smile, and cast a dramatic sweep of the hoof toward the instruments behind him, his wings twitching slightly. “You’ll be discovering your musical talent! Any one of these instruments could become yours in two years’ time. The possibilities are endless!”

Despite herself, and her hunger, Vinyl couldn’t help but feel slightly excited at Professor

Harpsichord's speech. Her eyes scrutinized the bassoons, the tubas, the drums and violins, all these instruments that might hold the key to her future. Slightly worked up by his speech, Professor Harpsichord smoothed back his brown mane, straightened the tie of his blue suit, and let his wings settled down against his torso.

"Now then," he said in a more controlled tone, "Let's start off simply. Your names and a little something about yourselves, if you'd please, starting with you." He pointed at a light brown filly with freckles and a pale blond mane that hung freely over her blue eyes. Aside from Octavia, she was the only earth pony in the room.

"Fiddlestick, Mister H, sir," she answered proudly with a western drawl, "from Lopeka. And Ah'm gonna be the best darndest fiddler in all of Equestria!"

"Well that's certainly very...forthcoming of you. And you are?" asked the orange pegasus to the next in line, a gray-blue unicorn colt with a loose white mane. His eyes lowered to his hooves as he answered.

"Um...My name's Falsetto, Mister Harpsichord, from Ponyville," he mumbled indistinctly, pawing the ground, "I dunno what I want to do yet. I'm not--" His voice faded away. Vinyl smiled to herself. At least she wasn't alone.

The next filly, a unicorn, introduced herself before Professor Harpsichord could even address her. "Opera Gusto. Manehattan. Singer," she stated in a clipped, curt tone. Her straight magenta mane elegantly complemented her pink fur, while clashing with her steel gray eyes.

Opera's last name sounded vaguely familiar to Vinyl Scratch; she remembered having heard it somewhere before. Not giving her time to think about it, Octavia nudged her slightly as the class waited for her to introduce herself.

"Oh, uh..." stuttered the blue-maned filly, "I'm Vinyl Scratch. Came from Fillydelphia. Not sure what I want to do either." At the mention of 'Scratch', Opera's nostrils noticeably flared, and Professor Harpsichord laughed in delight.

“Ah, so you’re the Scratch! I assumed it was this other young filly here...” he said, nodding to Octavia. She sighed in frustration as Vinyl covered her mouth and giggled.

“My name is Octavia, Professor Harpsichord. From Canterlot.”

“And what do you intend to learn here, Octavia?”

The dark gray filly shifted her hooves uncomfortably, “Well...I...I’m not entirely sure. I just know that I want to learn. Whatever it takes.”

Professor Harpsichord smiled another radiant smile. “You’ve got some fire there, Miss Octavia. I can appreciate that. I think we’re all going to get along just fine. Yes indeed.” Staring at them for an awkwardly long time, he cleared his throat again, and his tone became business-like.

“Now. Some of you have an idea of what you want to do with yourselves, which is an excellent start. However, who knows? You might end up somewhere else entirely. Either way, it’s my job to find out, and I’m rather good at that. Come here, then. Come, come!” he said, motioning for them to approach. Lining up again, closer to the assortment of instruments, Vinyl watched as Professor Harpsichord’s brow furrowed, and he brought a contemplative hoof to his chin. Walking around the nervous Falsetto, he muttered to himself, his eyes flitting between the colt and the instruments.

“Hm. I think...let’s try the flute. That seems right.” He picked the silver flute and passed it to the uncertain colt, who turned it over in his hooves quizzically.

“For you, a fiddle, of course,” mumbled their instructor. He spread his wings and, with a powerful pump, became airborne. He hovered around the higher shelves in the room, hunting for the elusive instrument. “Now, I swear I saw one of those around here somewhere...Ah! Here it is!” Gingerly pulling a dusty fiddle from between an accordion and a banjo, he alighted and handed the instrument to Fiddlestick. She scrutinized the mistreated instrument disdainfully, throwing the pegasus a sour look. He shrugged apologetically.

“We...never really use those.” Ignoring Opera, who turned her nose upwards snootily, and

leaving Fiddlestick to wipe the coat of grime off the fiddle's body, he turned his attention to Octavia. Almost instantly, he pointed to a large instrument in the corner, and concluded: "Something in the strings, for sure. Let's try the harp, and see where that takes us. And as for you, Ms. Scratch..."

He stopped right in front of her, and a befuddled look contorted his face. Scratching his mane, he circled around her as he had with Falsetto. However, this eerie stare-down took far longer. He would open his mouth to speak, then shut it again before any words could escape as he reconsidered his answer. Vinyl wiped a thin bead of sweat rolling down her forehead as Professor Harpsichord continued his silent analysis. Octavia was now too staring at Vinyl and the instructor in confusion. Finally, he stopped and sat on his haunches in defeat.

"Well, I'll be darned. I have no idea," he said, mystified, "This has never happened before. Normally, I can get close, even nail it spot on. But never before have I not had the slightest idea."

His wings twitching again, he stood and turned to face the array of musical instruments. Not speaking to anypony in particular, he said:

"What a peculiar filly you are, Ms. Vinyl Scratch."

Vinyl coughed slightly, the focus of the students now on her. This was exactly what she was afraid would happen.

Snapping out of his glazed-over trance, Professor Harpsichord spun around sharply. "Well!" he exclaimed eagerly, "This is an inconvenience, but education stops for nopony! You've got some future ahead of you, Ms. Scratch. I guarantee it. In the meantime..." He took a guitar-like instrument from its stand and carefully placed it Vinyl's hooves.

"Let's try the bass, for starters. It's fragile, so don't drop it."

The filly tugged at the steel strings of the instrument. "What am I supposed to do with this?" The other students nodded, echoing her concern.

“Simple. You play it. Like so!” he said, taking Vinyl’s hoof and running it across the strings. A strangled chord warbled from the instrument.

“But I’ve never played a harp in my life!” complained Octavia, looking up at the intimidating array of fine strings.

“Don’t you see, children?” said Professor Harpsichord, exasperated, “That’s the *point*. This is your time to experiment, to learn! You can become anything, but you will become peerless at it. However, there are many paths to greatness, and it’s only by trying them all that you can choose which is right for you.”

He clapped his hooves together with finality. “And the only way you can try them all is to have friends that have tried as well. I need to step out for some business, and will return soon enough. Try to get along and...um...don’t destroy anything!”

“Are you seriously just gunna leave us all--” started Fiddlestick, before being cut off by the door slamming shut.

“Alone. Pfft.”

“Highest quality education in music my *flank*,” muttered Octavia indignantly, plucking at one of the harp’s strings. The monotone vibration hummed through the room, leaving an awkward silence in its wake as the ponies weighed their instruments.

“So...”

“Yeah...”

“Um...” stuttered Vinyl, “Fiddlestick, right? You said you were from Lopeka. Where is that exactly?”

“Out west,” responded the earth pony nonchalantly as she adjusted the tuning pegs. Satisfied, she picked up the bow, sat on her haunches, and brought the fiddle to her cheek, resting it on

her shoulder.

“Well, yeah, but where out west?”

“Deep west. Out in the middle ah nowheres. Mos’ folks ain’t heard of it. Can’t blame ‘em.” She drew the bow across the fiddle’s strings. A horrific screech pierced the ears of the unsuspecting ponies, leading to an aggravated chorus of groaning and grumbling. Fiddlestick wailed in despair, clutching the fiddle to her chest.

“Sweet Celestia’s turnips, what have they done to ya, ya poor thang? I ain’t never seen a fiddle this outta tune. Why would anypony be so cruel?”

“Maybe because a ‘fiddle’ is not a real instrument...” said Opera Gusto hotly, raising her snout upwards. Fiddlestick’s light blue eyes narrowed into an intense gaze, and turned themselves to the pretentious unicorn.

“Come again?”

“The fiddle is such a folk-ish instrument that it astounds me the institute would dare even keep one in its grounds. Its mere presence is an insult to the years of art and sophistication that have graced the institutes's halls.”

“Now girls...there’s no need to start this sort of thing! We’re all high class--” started Octavia weakly, before being overridden by an infuriated Fiddlestick.

“Folk-ish? What kinda nonsense is that supposed to be? Are you tryin’ to imply somethin’?!”

“Oh, not in the slightest. A lady would never dare,” smiled Opera pleasantly, batting her thick eye lashes. As Fiddlestick was about to tell Opera exactly where the ‘lady’ could shove it, Vinyl put herself between them and forced them apart.

“Enough! We haven’t even been here for an hour and already we’re at each other’s throats! Can’t we just sit back and try to stay calm?”

“Get your hooves off me, Scratch!” hissed Opera, slapping her hoof away indignantly. Vinyl stumbled back, stunned.

“What the hay is your problem!?”

Suddenly, Opera pressed her face intensely close to Vinyl’s, her eyes thin and hateful.

“You know very well what my ‘problem’ is, you foal! Do not dare pretend to be innocent!”

“You have ruined me and my family, and do not think for a second that it is so easily forgotten!”

And suddenly, Vinyl remembered where she had heard the name ‘Gusto’ before.

“They’ve ruined me!” roared Acoustic, slamming the door behind him.

“Dear? You’re home so early! Was the concert cancelled?” called Graffite, descending from the top of the grand staircase.

“Cancelled? It wasn’t bucking cancelled, I got replaced!” Seething, Acoustic slammed his guitar case onto the polished marble floor.

“What?! By whom?”

The pale green stallion’s face contorted with anger as he spat the name like it was venom.

“Brass Gusto.”

Silent, Vinyl sat in the foyer, rolling her favorite ball between her hooves as she watched her parents curse and argue. She didn’t exactly understand what was happening, but she knew better than to ask. Her wide red eyes instead focused on the ball. Its predictable rolling made

more sense than whatever her parents were talking about.

“That’s the fourth time they’ve run us out of a show. Those amateurs have their hooves in the pockets of every theater and recruiter in Equestria. At this rate, we won’t get another to perform ever again!”

“Come now, dear,” reassured Graffite, despite her own anxiety, “You’re being melodramatic.”

“He humiliated me! I can never show my face in Manehattan ever again, thanks to that confounded saxophonist!”

A steely glint in Acoustic’s eyes, he panted hard as he gradually recomposed himself. A cold edge creeping into his voice, he stared his wife in the eyes and vowed:

“I’ll make them pay. I’ll make those Gustos rue the day they decided to cross the Scratch family again. This isn’t the institute anymore, and I’m through playing by their rules. I’m going to destroy them. I’m going to grind their names to dust. Get me a phone, I need to make some calls.”

Vinyl was silent, and averted her gaze from Opera’s. With a haughty snort, she whipped around and stomped away, stopping before the one of the windows and sitting there moodily.

“Sheesh. Did somepony hurl in her cereal this mornin’ or somethin’?” scoffed Fiddlestick. At the mention of cereal, Octavia’s stomach rumbled. Groaning, she fell backwards, kicking the harp in frustration.

“Please, can we *not* talk about food? I haven’t had a bite to eat since this morning!”

“Don’t remind me…” muttered Vinyl, placing a hoof on her own ferociously growling stomach. She tried plucking a few more of the bass’s strings, but every note seemed to fall flat musically as well as emotionally. Trying to remember how her father played the guitar, she did her best to

imitate the hoof positions, and, with a strum, a scratchy imitation of an E chord vibrated from the instrument. The blue-maned filly furrowed her brow irritably. She didn't know what she wanted, but this instrument certainly wasn't the ticket.

Octavia was faring no better. Her attempts at pulling the string were half-hearted at best, and she had to contort herself awkwardly to even hope to reach the further strings, not that reaching them made her playing any better. Giving up, she puffed her cheeks.

"Darn this stupid thing."

"Well, at least the two of us know which instruments *won't* be getting us a cutie mark," offered Vinyl weakly as she tried to replicate the chord. There was a shrill whine that turned their heads to a bashful Falsetto, who promptly pulled the flute out of his mouth.

"Make that three," added Fiddlestick dryly, plucking her fiddle to see if she had finally gotten the tuning right. A harmonious *ting* floated through the room. Beaming, Fiddlestick stood and brought the fiddle to her cheek again, lightly placing the bow across its strings.

"Awright y'all. Lemme show you how we get down in Lopeka!" she claimed.

"Hold on to yer hats, pardner..." added Opera in a sarcastic pantomime of her accent.

The first stroke of the bow was a high, harmonic hum that silenced them all. Basking in their astonished gazes and gaping jaws, Fiddlestick pulled the bow back. Slowly, the hum became strong and powerful, a song of hardiness and pride, built upon sweat and toil of devoted earth ponies. Then, at a breath-taking pace, their song became fast, frantic, and full of vivacity. The tempo accelerating to the threshold, and Fiddlestick elegantly switching her hooves from string to string with every rapid chord. Vinyl felt a tingle in her hooves, and a smile spread across her face. Without the least bit of self-control, she started hopping from hoof to hoof, dancing with her eyes shut as she let the festive tune envelop her and let her body become free. Laughing, Octavia joined in, and they swung around each other breezily, perfectly in sync with the fervent melody.

Fiddlestick's hooves became a light-brown blur as they flew across the instrument. The song rose, rose, and rose, finally reaching a single, perfect crescendo. And then, as suddenly as it began, it stopped, and a heavy, satisfied silence took the place of Fiddlestick's song. Panting, she smiled weakly and dropped to all fours as her classmates applauded her.

"That was...wow! Incredible!" squealed Octavia, tapping her hooves in excitement, "I've never heard anything so simply amazing!"

"Fiddlestick, you're unbelievable!" agreed Vinyl.

"That song was just...I can't even describe it," said Falsetto, bewildered. Fiddlestick lowered her eyes and scratched the back of her head.

"Aw, shucks. It was nuthin'..." she said, blushing.

"Nothing? My dear, that was far from being nothing. That was a spectacular display of talent!" A strange voice interrupted them, and Vinyl jumped back in surprise to see that Professor Harpsichord was now standing behind them.

"That truly was fantastic, Miss Fiddlestick. I'm immensely impressed, and dare I say honored to have you as a student," he continued, grinning widely, "And as much as I'd love to hear more, the lot of you need to get moving to your next class!"

"Huh? So soon?" asked Vinyl, confused.

"But of course. Miss Fiddlestick here has been playing for you ponies for the past twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes?! It only felt like three minutes!" cried Octavia. Professor Harpsichord laughed, and gave Fiddlestick a sly wink.

"You, my dear, are good. Very good. Now then, you can leave the instruments here, they'll be waiting for you next class."

As the student began filing out of the class, and Fiddlestick had reluctantly placed her fiddle back where she took it, she gave Opera a light tap in the ribs.

“Folk-ish, ya said?” she said coyly, her tail flicking across the unicorn’s nose. Fuming, Opera glared at the light brown earth pony, but said nothing as they headed out the door, and into the now bustling halls of the institute.

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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’!

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