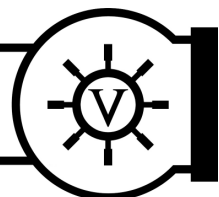


Mortality Report

Bad Horse

PONY FICTION VAULT



While pacing back and forth along the length of the castle's finest guest room, Princess Celestia paused in mid-stride, her attention caught by the full moon. Its pale, cold, steady light, shining in through the open window, clashed with the warm, flickering, yellow light cast by the candles over the mantel. The castle had been outfitted with electrical lighting years ago—Twilight herself had instigated the change—but candlelight seemed more friendly, more restful, if a little overly portentous.

It was mid-summer, but the breeze flowing in was deliciously cool. The sun had not burned quite so hot that day, and Luna was no doubt now standing on top of the south tower, horn to the sky, expending considerable energy to keep the night air at a constant comfortable temperature in defiance of a thousand years of meteorological precedent. They wanted everything to be perfect that night. Perfection was all they had to offer, useless as it was.

Celestia had not stopped to admire her sister's moon in quite some time. It still made butterflies leap in her stomach every time she looked at the moon and didn't see Luna's image there. But after a thousand years during which every glimpse of the moon was an icy dagger in her heart, she had unconsciously learned to avoid places and times when it was visible, except those horrible moments at dusk and dawn when it had been her duty to attend to it. Now that Luna was back, Celestia was usually fast asleep by now, and rarely saw the moon at its zenith—only on special occasions, like Nightmare Night, or Hearth's Warming Eve, or tonight.

"I think I see what you mean, Twilight," she said softly. "It's hard, for me of all ponies, to look at the moon and see it. See it for itself. But it is beautiful. It's beautiful in the same quiet way Luna is beautiful. Thank you for pointing that out to me."

The purple unicorn in the guest bed continued snoring in quiet, uneven gasps that were painful to listen to. Celestia stepped over to the bed, and the doctor scuttled back from his post to make room for her. She looked across the bed and met the eyes of old Granny Applejack, standing there silently. Rainbow Dash was asleep on her feet, snoring more loudly than Twilight. The last of the original Elements of Harmony had both been keeping watch since yesterday—no, the day before yesterday, now—with only infrequent naps. Celestia leaned in close, until she could feel the tingle of magic emanating from the sleeping unicorn, weak but still there.

"How much longer, doctor?"

The old earth pony looked down at Twilight as he spoke. "One day, maybe two."

How odd, Celestia thought. He didn't look at me. Ponies always look at me when they speak. Always. Is that what being mortal feels like? Like life has forgotten about you?

The doctor was wrong. She had only asked him so that he could feel useful. Celestia could sense precisely her old friend's life-energy. It would not last that long, but it would last at least until morning. Certainly enough time to write one more letter.

She touched her nose softly to Twilight's, which was now gray with age, and then did what she had never dared before—licked the old unicorn's nose and face, like she would have her own foal if she had ever had one. The doctor turned away in embarrassment. If Applejack found it strange, she didn't say.

The Queen chose her for this assignment, she had said, because of Celestia's strong motherly instincts. What a cock-up that had turned out to be. Mother of Equestria, her ponies called her, a title that thrilled and stung her.

Celestia went to the enormous mahogany desk she had had installed years ago specially for Twilight's visits. She put away Twilight's modern ballpoint pens, unscrewed the lid from the ink jar, poured a puddle of thick black ink into the inkwell, pulled out her best quill pen and a fresh sheet of her heaviest parchment, dipped the nib in the ink, and began to write.

Dear Queen Titania,

Once again, I find myself watching a dear friend's life burning low, like a candle about to gutter and flicker out. I have never told you this, but I don't think you understand the impropriety of asking me to turn my friends' final moments into reports for you. I take some comfort in knowing that this pony, at least, would be delighted at the prospect of being immortalized (as they say) as a lesson. I would tell her, but she would probably try to struggle out of bed to assist in writing it.

I also take comfort in knowing this will be the last of these loathsome reports I shall write you.

The quill trembled slightly as she wrote these words. The Queen was not accustomed to being addressed so bluntly, especially by one so young as herself. But if she could not throw some plain words at Her Majesty, she could hardly hope to have the courage for the greater defiance she had decided upon. And Celestia was not a pony to waver in her decisions.

The effects of mortality are easy enough to predict from evolutionary psychology. Mortality causes ponies to value the here-and-now above the future, and the dominance of individual over group selection increases the love they show their offspring at the expense of the kindness they show to strangers.

Twilight would have liked that part. Just another little bit of knowledge she would have savored, another little pleasure Celestia could have given her. How much could she could have taught Twilight in one lifetime, if she'd taken her role as teacher more seriously? But her real purpose in taking on the little unicorn hadn't been to teach. She knew that now.

But I did not need to travel light-years and take the form of a pony to tell you that. How do I feel about mortality? Horrified. There's the raw horror of holding someone's hoof at the moment the light goes out. Their head flops to the side, their jaw drops open, and you're suddenly left holding a mocking effigy of your old friend. I have never come to terms with it as they have, like an immigrant who has spent decades in a foreign country, yet never learned the language.

Almost as bad is the horror of watching them twist themselves so as to live with it. Imagine living in a village below a mountain with an ancient dragon who comes down every night and feasts on a villager or two. This has gone on for so long that the villagers have grown used to it. They tell each other that dragons are natural, that those who run or fight or curse the dragon are cowards and fools who cannot die with dignity. They speak of being reunited with their loved ones in the dragon's belly. They write songs and poems about the dragon's beauty, and leave flowers outside its cave to thank it for helping them to appreciate life.

I listen to the obscene excuses they make for death and nod, as if it were wisdom. Who am I to take away their soft lies and give them nothing in return?

Her pen ran dry, and she set it to rest in the second, empty well. Twilight did not expect another life after death, but had made the princess promise to let anypony who found comfort in that idea say what they liked at her funeral. Celestia looked toward Applejack, so solemn and still, and probably the pony Twilight had had in mind. Well, it wouldn't matter now anyway. She dipped the nib again.

I'm giving the wrong impression. Mortality isn't just about death. How does one live in the shadow of death? By not thinking about the future. This is what makes mortals both a joy and a frustration.

If I've learned one thing, it's this: Mortals throw the best parties. I've already written you about my friend who would throw a party at the drop of a hat.

Celestia had never explained how literally true that had been. She remembered standing against one wall in Twilight's library, next to a bookcase, getting slightly dizzy from watching brightly-colored ponies with high blood sugar run and fly about the little room. It was like being inside the clear plastic globe with the little popping balls in a popular foal's toy. She'd been trying to teach Twilight to mingle, but Pinkie's parties were not like those in Canterlot. Twilight had gone to bed at midnight like a responsible pony, but Celestia was determined to get this mingling thing down. "Pinkie," she asked when the earth pony finally paused for a few moments between bounces. "Tell me again the purpose of this party?"

"Sure thing, Princess! It's for Jorge!"

"And Jorge is..."

"Oh! You haven't been introduced! Princess Celestia, meet Jorge! Jorge, meet the Princess!" Pinkie thrust her head toward the princess. It was covered with a gaudy, wide-brimmed straw hat, with diamonds woven into the brim and rope tassels all around the edges. "Isn't he splendouriferous? I saw him in the marketplace and I knew right away a hat like that meant only one thing: it meant *party!* I mean, a lot of things mean party, like 'party' for instance, but Jorge means *party!* Oh, I forgot you can't see the italics. I'd let you wear him, only you've got that big sharp horn on your head, and I don't think Jorge would like that at all!"

"Probably not," Celestia said. "Pity."

Pinkie bounced off, the hat flopping madly, to introduce Jorge to the other guests. Celestia decided to approach whomever was moving the slowest. This turned out to be Spike, lying on a pillow in one corner with a half-finished pint of ice cream in one claw.

"Spike," Celestia chided. "A whole tub of ice cream? Surely Twilight has explained to you that a dragon's endocrine system is very sensitive to sudden changes in temperature, such as those induced by a large bolus of ice cream."

"Yes she has," Spike had said, "and I have an answer for that."

"You do?"

Spike had burped green flames, and then said something that seemed to sum up the attitude of every pony there. “That’s future Spike’s problem.”

Celestia smiled at the memory. Present Spike was fast asleep, in a cave far away. Future Spike would have quite a few problems when he awoke. She hoped Luna would be able to help him. She’d gone through something similar. Celestia resumed writing.

She lived in the moment, in a way that we immortals can achieve only by either centuries of meditation, or by attending one of her parties. That willful short-sightedness, so much harder for us than for them, is the secret to, as she would say, “getting down.” I regret that I cannot adequately explain this crucial concept in a letter.

The downside is obvious. I remember a farmer who called my conservation measures foolish, because the aquifer he drew his water from would never run dry. “Never?” I asked him. “Never,” he said. “In fifty years?” I asked. “Well, sure,” he said, “in fifty years.” That was nearly two hundred years ago. In the past hundred, his farm has grown nothing taller or greener than a tumbleweed. I remember a mare who was sensitive to disturbances of any sort, and was constantly nervous because she lived in a noisy, smelly part of the city, but never moved, because it was too much bother. She lived that way for forty years. Ponies who hated their work would stay at it day after day, year after year, rather than take a few weeks to look for something better. That was why I instituted cutie marks. Mortals are like apples, and will thoughtlessly grow wherever they fall unless you give them a good kick.

Celestia shook her head and smiled. Now Applejack had her making apple metaphors.

Living with them is like living in that story about the land where children never grow up. I realize this is partly my fault. I protect them from harm, from each other, and from unpleasant truths. They are content to leave the great mysteries alone as long as they imagine I know the answers. I need only look enigmatic and keep my mouth shut.

And this is the part where I can hear you say, in your kind but knowing voice, that I’m the one who hasn’t grown up, because I still want everything to be flowers and rainbows, instead of setting my charges on the path of struggle and growth.

“Princess?” Applejack called softly. “I think she’s comin’ ‘round.”

Celestia wiped the nib of the pen on a rag, set it in the dry well again, and trotted back over to the bedside. Twilight’s eyes were open, just barely. They opened a little more when the princess leaned over the bed, although they still gazed straight up at the ceiling. “Princess?”

“Yes, Twilight?”

The unicorn just smiled a little.

“Are you... afraid, Twilight?”

“No.”

Celestia blinked, then leaned in closer, as if studying the unicorn for clues. She had an expression rarely seen on her face, of wide-eyed wonder. “Why not?” she asked in a whisper.

Twilight said nothing and kept staring straight ahead, until Celestia thought she might have fallen back asleep. Then she finally said, “Me... not being. Doesn’t seem possible. Consciousness. The greatest mystery. A miracle.” She shifted on the sheets to look Celestia in the eye. “Why would the world take back its miracles?”

Celestia had an answer, but it was long, technical, inappropriate for deathbed conversations, and the unicorn had helped develop it. So she asked, “Have you found faith, now, Twilight?”

Twilight’s lips pulled back into a grin. “Say... a willing suspension of disbelief.”

Celestia sighed. “Twilight. I have something very important to tell you.”

Twilight’s ears perked up.

“The world will go on without you. The world will go on without me. No pony is that important. You must never forget that.”

Across the bed, Applejack, who had been listening with a frown, finally spoke up. “Princess,” she said, “you’re outta line.”

Celestia chuckled. “Out of *place*, my dear Applejack.” She turned back to Twilight. “You think far too highly of me. Whatever reason you had, whatever solace you found in that, you must stop now and see there is no one here except six old ponies.”

Twilight nodded seriously. Celestia had never known this sort of lesson to take when given in words, but it was the best she could do now. And just the fact that Celestia would still take the time to give her a lesson seemed to comfort Twilight. The unicorn’s eyes slowly shut, and she resumed her uneven, raspy breathing.

“I’m afraid, Twilight,” Celestia said.

She leaned over and kissed Twilight on the forehead. Then she returned to the desk, dipped the nib of the pen in the ink, and continued where she had left off.

I know that. I know the thousand years of unbroken peace under my rule is an embarrassment to you, just as it would chagrin an art professor if her student turned in a sentimental painting of birds and flowers in a sunny field.

Let me tell you about my friend who is dying tonight.

Her name is Twilight Sparkle. I’ve mentioned her often in my past several reports. I have formed exactly the sort of deep connection with her that you warned me against. I do not regret it.

She was born with a drive to understand everything, to find what needed doing, and to do it. She would leap into harness for the sheer joy of pulling the plow and getting the work done. She reminded me of you.

I told her to be more selfish, to enjoy life, take a mate, have foals. All the things my duties prevent me from doing myself. She has instead served me—served everypony—selflessly, all her life. For years I’ve dreaded these last moments, when she would realize that it wasn’t worth it, that she had had one short life to live and had wasted it in service to me.

Nothing like that happened. She wasn’t bitter. She only wanted to make sure everything was wrapped up before she was gone. That’s when I realized you had the wrong pony.

I know you will not grant them immortality. You say they must earn it for themselves. I even understand why, a little. I’ve read of the disasters in the past. I know my ponies have a lot of growing to do first, and that I must let them “fall down and skin their knees,” as you put it. But when the knees to be skinned are entire cities, I lose my resolve. I love my little ponies. And so peace reigns in Equestria, and I prolong their suffering, and my own.

I know you’re right—we could build a paradise here, and a better kind of pony, or even other creatures yet undreamed of. The equations don’t lie. But I never really saw the appeal.

Then Luna came quietly into the room. Celestia dropped the pen, leapt up, and almost flew across the room to embrace her. “Lulu,” she said hoarsely, leaning against her shoulder, “my dear, dear little sister.”

Luna's eyes widened and her ears flicked nervously. But she stood firm and returned the embrace. "Oh, Tia. It'll be... I mean, I know this is very hard for you."

Celestia pulled back, and looked steadily at her sister through teary eyes. "Luna," she said, in a calmer voice, "I do love you. You must believe that."

"Why... I believe you, Tia."

"Not just now! You must believe it later. And always. No matter what happens."

Luna laughed nervously. "Now, Tia. You're overwrought. You're not making sense. Just... sit down and finish that letter I saw you writing. I'll be here."

"Yes," Celestia said, frowning in determination. "Yes." She stood staring at Luna for several more seconds before recovering her dignity and returning to the desk and retrieving the pen from the floor where it had fallen. She tried, with little success, to blot out the stain the pen had made when she dropped it on leaping up to meet Luna.

Just this once, I'm going to do the right thing. Not because I've learned to follow the equations, but, as always, because it's what I want to do. I hope it will finally make you a little bit proud of me. And I hope you will be gentle with Twilight, because she has had only a foolish and overly fond teacher who has not taught her the cold ways of the equations. You see, I'm not writing to report Twilight's death. I'm writing to report my own. I'm very much alive now, and may still be when you read this—but there is no use writing back to anyone but Luna and Twilight.

You may think I've gone native. That I've bought into their lies that "death gives life meaning and purpose." No; I can never unlearn what I have learned. We are the ones who have purpose and meaning. We understand; we plan; we direct the courses of worlds. They have only a few years of blooming, buzzing confusion, and no more purpose than a leaf drifting on a stream. And I have come to realize that I envy them that.

I never wanted to have a purpose. I wanted to have a life.

She thought again of Jigsaw, the travelling musician and storyteller who had always resisted her attempts to tie him down with a court appointment, yet always seemed to show up when she most needed the cheer of his impish grin-and-wink. Such a handsome stallion. The truth was it was so long ago that all she could remember was that he was brown with a white star on his forehead, but in her mind it was a handsome brown and white. Such a lively one. Such a strange one. He loved his music, but no more than he

loved many things. It was his excuse to travel Equestria and beyond, meeting everyone, figuring them out, fitting them into some giant puzzle in his head.

How she had wanted him!

She was supposed to be all-powerful and fearsome. But if just once he'd broken through the invisible barrier that surrounded her, taken one step closer than was proper, looked her insolently in the eye, and curled his upper lip at her—if he'd nudged her shoulder and bit her flank—she would have been completely helpless. She wouldn't have been able to resist him then, even if he'd grabbed her from behind by both flanks and mounted her in the middle of the throne room in front of the royal guard and the council of nobleponies.

Celestia felt her face flush, but it was dark in the room, and the others were far away, so she allowed herself to think about it for a few seconds more.

Then it could have been her, for once, in the birthing stable, with the doctors in attendance, and Jigsaw looking on in pride and wonder as she brought his foal into the world, and nudged it until it took its first steps. Celestia imagined a little skewbald filly suckling at her teat, huddling under her wing when the pegasus ponies piled the clouds up into great thunderheads and let them roll across Equestria. Then she would be a real mother, not an honorary one, and not a foal-thief disguised as a teacher. She had already come up with a name for the filly: Amaranth. Amaranth had been a filly in Celestia's daydreams for five hundred years now.

Of course, it couldn't be. Two immortals was company; three was a powderkeg waiting for a match.

Celestia widened her nostrils angrily. How could Twilight not want that?

Then she closed her eyes in shame. Twilight was still dying, and here she was being angry at her. This was supposed to be about Equestria, not about her living vicariously through Twilight. What Twilight wanted was her business. If she'd wanted something different, she wouldn't have been Twilight. Celestia was still healthy, and here she was already furious with Twilight for throwing away the sacrifice she was about to make for her. And yet, if Twilight had wanted what Celestia wanted, there would have been no logical reason for making it.

No logical reason.

She continued with the letter:

I could not lie on my death-bed today and ask whether I had served you well. I do not know what will happen when I transfer my power to Twilight, but if I die tonight, I will die cursing you.

I'm terrified of dying. I've seen it happen so many times. There's no such thing as a good death. But I can't be what you want me to be. I don't want to lead anypony towards a glorious future. I can't ask ponies to suffer today to benefit a future they will never see. Perhaps I have gone native. But I think I was that way from the start.

If only one of us can be immortal, it should be Twilight. It will only take me a minute. She understands little now. But she desires a purpose, and has the strength of mind to follow her head rather than her heart. I can solve the equations, but Twilight can trust them. She will do whatever is necessary to lead these ponies to a brighter future. She has true love, which seeks the best for the object of its affections, where I have only sentimentality. I am sure you will find her a better student than I ever was.

*For a little while longer, your faithful student,
Princess Celestia*

Then she took out a smaller piece of paper, and wrote on it,

My dearest sister,

If you find this letter, please read it, make a copy of it for Twilight, and deliver it to our Queen. And please forgive me.

*All my love, forever,
Tia*

She lay the two letters side-by-side in the center of the desk, not stacking them as the ink was not yet dry. Then she wiped the nib clean on the rag, replaced the pen in the drawer, and walked slowly towards the other ponies, to ask for a minute alone with her faithful student.