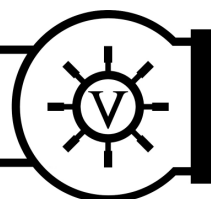


Through Death and Life

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Rainbow Dash is shouting at me.

I knew it would happen eventually. These things always do. Whenever I grow close to one of my little ponies, this day eventually comes: the moment when they come to beg some indulgence of me.

“C’mon, Princess!” Rainbow Dash flies close enough to the throne that my guards tense up, though a quick look out of the corner of my eye signals them to keep their posts. She flies so close to me that our noses are practically touching. “Don’t you get it? Derpy’s gonna die unless you save her! So get up off your plot and save her!”

Derpy. Ditzzy Doo, if one were to use her proper name, though few do. Daughter to Klutzzy Doo and Alta Stratus, sister of Cirrus Doo. Currently lying in Room 42 at Ponyville Hospital with an inoperable brain tumor. Right now she has a terrible headache, and is weak and nauseous from the treatments the doctors are giving her to save her life. Treatments that will do little more than forestall the inevitable. She is beyond the help of modern medicine.

She is dying.

One could say that I have known Ditzzy “Derpy” Doo since the day she was born, but that would not be accurate. I have known her far longer than that. I knew her when my sister declared a young adventurer named Daring the materfamilias of a new clan in Old Pegasopolis. I knew her even as that clan named me tyrant and usurper, issuing a call to war in my sister’s name. I knew her as I watched her ancestors burn at Maresidian Fields. I know her in ways far more intimate than the father of her foal, or her current lover, Cloud Kicker.

In all the time that I have known her, I have loved her. Just as I love all my little ponies.

And now she is dying. It is simply the nature of the universe. Ponies are born, they live, and finally, they die. It is a cycle that was ancient even before I came into the world, and one that will continue even as I pass into dust and my sun burns itself out. Despite the undeniable truth of this, those that still live can never accept the death of the ponies they love.

I give Rainbow Dash the only answer I can. “I am sorry, Rainbow Dash, but I am afraid there is nothing I can do.”

“Horseapples!” she snaps at me. “You’re Princess-feathering-Celestia! You raise the feathering sun every single feathering day! There’s gotta be something!” Her eyes

narrow, and the anger in her voice shifts to dark, resentful fury. “I saved Equestria for you. Twice. You *owe* me.”

For a moment, I can't help but remember my sister, speaking to me in almost exactly that same tone. She wanted me to abdicate the throne, let her plunge Equestria into eternal night as some twisted form of punishment for our subjects simply because they preferred the daytime. Even now, after Luna's return, the dreams of that night haunt me. I do not think I will ever shake the memories of it, or the feeling that in the end, I failed her. That there must have been something I could say or do that might have penetrated the haze of madness and dark magic that separated us. That if I had just tried a little harder, I might not have needed to send her to the moon.

I know it is an irrational fear. It took the Elements of Harmony to cleanse her of Nightmare Moon's taint. I waited as long as I could before meeting Nightmare Moon in battle. Too long, if I am truly honest with myself. Thirty-six ponies died as a direct result of Nightmare Moon's first rise, victims claimed by her darkness while I desperately tried to reason with the madmare that had once been my sister. I know that banishing her was the only rational course of action.

I will never forgive myself for it.

Now one of the six ponies who restored my sister has come to me in the hopes that I might repay the debt I owe her. It would only be fitting that I do so—that I restore her friend in exchange for the restoration of my own sister. And yet, this is not a request I can grant for her. “I am sorry, Rainbow Dash.”

Rainbow slowly backs away from me, her ears flat on her head. I know what is coming next—Rainbow Dash is far from the first pony to come to me begging me to save a friend, family member, or loved one. She is the ten thousand three hundred and seventy-fourth pony to do so. That will not make what she does next hurt any less than it did the first time I experienced it.

Her face, normally adorned with a bold, almost arrogantly confident smile, shifts to a desperate, wide-eyed pleading look. She drops down to the floor, prostrating herself before me. “Please.” It is a single word, yet it carries all the pain that Derpy's loss would cause. “Please, Princess. I'll do anything it takes to save her. Anything. Just tell me what I gotta do.”

I step off of my throne, and gently put a hoof on her shoulder. “Rainbow Dash, I am so sorry, but there is nothing you can do.”

“Take me instead!” The words spill out of her mouth so suddenly that I do not think even she expected them. A moment later she nods, as much to herself as to me. “Yeah. If that’s what it takes, then that’s what it takes. Do it.” She closes her eyes, as if she expects me to strike her down then and there.

“I cannot trade one life for another, Rainbow.” Even as I speak those words, a cruel truth emerges in my mind. Even if it were within my power to take Rainbow’s life to spare Derpy’s, I would not do so. I could make mention of the moral implications of such a choice, but the sad truth is that my reasons are far more pragmatic.

Derpy is a wonderful pony, but Rainbow Dash is an equally wonderful pony who is also attuned to one of the Elements of Harmony. There are too many potential threats to Equestria for me to ever willingly sacrifice one of the Element-Bearers.

“Please,” Rainbow Dash whimpers, any semblance of the brash daredevil gone. All that’s left is a pony who is utterly broken by the prospect of watching her friend die. “Please. Please.” She keeps repeating the word, clutching it like a security blanket, until she moves on to her next argument. “She’s got *kids*.”

I know her children. Dinky Doo, daughter of Derpy and—well, that would be telling. I wonder if I should tell him? He doesn’t know that he even has a daughter, let alone that the mother of his child is dying right now. He is a good stallion; I am sure if he knew of his child or her mother, he would want to do something before the end came. But all that knowledge would do now is bring him grief and pain. Neigh, I think in this case we can say that ignorance is bliss.

Dinky is innocent. Too innocent. I would spare her this cruel awakening to the harsh realities of life, if I could.

Then there is her other daughter, Sparkler. The child of two ponies I love, placed into the care of the state by cruel necessity. She fears losing her mother, moreso than what is ordinary for a child. While she was still in the state’s care, her foster father broke one of her legs in a drunken fury—he’ll never leave Canterlot Jail while I sit upon the throne. Now she fears a return to such circumstances. She need not, for I know that Rainbow Dash would never abandon her.

Rainbow is not suited to motherhood. It is a sudden, overwhelming responsibility. I think it would have been wiser for Derpy to name Fluttershy as her children’s caretaker. No pony could doubt her gentleness and maternal instincts. Cloud Kicker might also be a

wiser choice—what she lacks in her own right as a mother would easily be compensated for by the support of her clan.

But there is a greatness in Rainbow Dash. It is yet raw and untempered, but if she ever reaches her full potential she might become something incredible. However, right now her strength is brittle. I do not know if the responsibility of caring for Derpy's children will be what is needed to forge her greatness, or whether it will shatter her. Both outcomes seem equally probable.

I give Rainbow Dash the only answer I can, even though I know it will not satisfy her. "I have set aside a portion of the crown's income from the royal demesne. It should prove more than sufficient to provide for their living expenses and—"

"No!" Rainbow Dash cut me off with an angry shout. For several seconds she stands there, her eye twitching and one of her ears flicking repeatedly as she struggles to put words to her anger. "They don't need money! I've got bits! They need their *mom!*"

"I know." I let out a heavy sigh and hang my head. "But bits are all I can give them."

Rainbow Dash glares at me, and I can see the anger and pain building up in her. She came to me expecting salvation, and in a way I have betrayed her—I cannot fulfill her dream, her desperate hope that somehow her princess can fix this terrible wrong. Her body goes tense and her wings flare open, even as the first tears begin trickling down her cheeks. My guards are wary, on alert, they can see that she is on the verge of pouncing. Despite that, when she makes her move they cannot stop her in time. Thankfully, instead of attempting to strike me she leaps and flies up to a priceless vase and kicks it over, smashing it on the floor.

My sister commissioned that vase for me to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of our joint rule. Amphora Potter spent more than a year crafting it. She poured her life and soul into making it, only to spend the rest of her life lamenting its success. Amphora was the greatest craftswoman of her age, and that vase was her finest work, one that she spent the rest of her days knowing she could never again equal, let alone exceed.

Rainbow Dash smashes the porcelain shards until they are mere specks on the floor.

She is in pain. Pain too terrible to contain, so she will release it the only way she can: by lashing out at me. "Feather you then, Princess! If it was Twilight, or your sister, you'd be doing everything you could to save them! It's not that you can't save Derpy, it's just that you don't care! You don't care about *any* of us! You *never* cared. You weren't there when

me and my friends defeated Nightmare Moon. You weren't there when we fought Discord and we turned against each other. You're never there, 'cause you just turn a blind eye to the ponies you don't care about." Tears are freely pouring down her cheeks even as she screams at me. "I bet you won't even remember our names after we're all dead! You have no idea what it's like to lose somepony you love! I hate you! *I hate you!*"

She flies out of the room, shattering one of the stained glass windows as she leaves. I know she does not truly mean the words, she only says these things because she's in pain. I know that within minutes of leaving Canterlot she'll regret everything she said. That she'll need a week to build up the courage to have Twilight Sparkle send me a letter apologizing for her outburst, which I will immediately forgive her for.

None of this knowledge makes those words hurt any less.

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I am having the nightmare again.

I often have this dream after a pony comes to me, begging me to save their loved ones from death. I suppose Rainbow Dash would think it is because this was the only case where I truly cared about the pony in question. The truth is much crueler.

This pony's death haunts me because I could have saved her.

No, it is more than that: I *should* have saved her. Everything I knew told me that I would. It was not her destiny to die in bed as an old mare. She should be standing by my side, helping me watch over Equestria, not moldering in a grave on her clan's compound. Yet she refused her destiny, and chose a mortal life, including a mortal death. There are times when I think that was the wisest decision she ever made in her life.

There are other times when I hate her for it. When I hate her for leaving my life. There are many times, far too many times, when a second alicorn bearing Luna's abandoned mantle might have been of aid to Equestria. But if I am honest, my displeasure with her decision has far too little to do with what is best for Equestria. It is something far simpler, and far more selfish.

I hate her because her absence made me lonely.

The dream begins with an all-too-familiar scene: Gale Kicker is shouting at me.

“Mother is dying!” Gale herself is not the eager young mare I once knew. Indeed, she looks every bit as ancient as her mother. She will only outlive Shadow by a few short years. I wonder if Shadow’s long life and good health are a result of her destiny—if some divine spark lingers in her, representing her potential to Ascend. Perhaps the universe simply wants to give her a bit more time to consider her choice, to return to her intended path.

Or perhaps she is nothing more than an unusually healthy pony.

Regardless of the reasons for her long span, it is nearly over. She is old, older than most soldiers grow to be. A lifetime of battle only adds to the toll that time takes upon a pony’s body. She tries not to show how much pain she is in, but I know it regardless. I know her joints ache whenever it rains, and how all the old war wounds she had thought healed have returned to bring her fresh pain.

It is one of those that is killing her. Her right lung has never fully recovered from the time a lance pierced it. As her lungs weaken with age, her right lung’s diminished capacity means that she can no longer support her own body. She is slowly suffocating.

“Save her, Princess! I beg of you!” Even Gale calls me Princess now, not Commander. Only Shadow insists upon using my old title. Once she is gone, I will only be Princess Celestia. Not Commander, Queen, or Chancellor. It is a sad thought—the end of an era.

“Shadow has made her wishes clear.” I cannot entirely hide the bitterness in my voice at those words. “She chose a mortal life, and this is the inevitable result. She will not change her mind now.” I have known she was too stubborn to relent, even upon her deathbed. That did not stop me from visiting her bedside and asking her to do so.

Gale scowls and shoots a look out the window, towards the Kicker clanhold. “Then override her wishes. As Princess of Equestria, that is your right.”

The suggestion is more tempting than I care to admit. I am lonely. I have been terribly lonely ever since my sister’s exile. It will be more than eight hundred years before she comes back to me. The last two hundred years have been torture for me. I do not know if I can endure eight hundred more.

I am at Shadow’s bedside. There is so much I want to say to her, but I cannot find the words for it. Many of her clanponies are here. I am somewhat ashamed when I realize how little I know most of them. Well, that is not entirely accurate—I know all of my little ponies—but for most of them the only knowledge I have derives from my talents. I know

them as the Princess of Equestria, not because I have taken any time to exchange words with them.

There will be times when Kickers claim that I do not care about the clan, only Shadow. That is both true and false at once. I love the Kickers as much as I love any of my subjects, but it is true that Shadow was dearer to me than most.

It is an unfortunate reality of being an immortal ruling over mortals. I must maintain a certain reserve, a certain distance from my subjects. I love them all, but at the same time I do not let them grow too close. I love ponykind as a whole, but it is unwise to grow too attached to a mayfly. In truth, it happens all too often despite my best efforts. The deaths of Twilight Sparkle and her friends will hurt me more than most, because I have allowed them all too deep into my heart. Yet despite the certainty of that future pain, I do not regret the closeness we enjoy now.

But Shadow Kicker was a different case. Her destiny was immortality, and so I allowed myself more openness than was prudent. I grew attached, and now the inevitability of her loss is far too painful. I wonder if this pain is something my mortal subjects face whenever somepony close to them dies? If so, then their ability to endure such losses is truly a testament to their strength.

All the ponies fall silent when I enter the room and kneel down next to her bed. My words are for her, and her alone, so I use a spell to ensure our privacy.. “Shadow, please. I beg of thee, let me save thee. Thy death is not needful, and it is not yet too late for thee to Ascend.”

Shadow slowly shakes her head. Even that simple act costs her too much of her strength. When did she grow so old? It seemed only yesterday that she fought on the frontlines of war to help me keep my throne. “Neigh, Commander.” Her voice was weak and raspy from her failing lungs—she also needed to stop for a few breaths just from those two words. “There is naught to save me from. My course has long since been set.”

“Thy course.” I cannot wholly hide the hurt in my voice. “Thy destiny is to live, yet thou wouldst defy it. Please, stay this futile stubbornness.”

“I have lived,” she answers me with a calm reassurance that I find utterly frustrating. “Lived longer, than most. Long enough to see ... friends, family live. Perish.” Her eyes drift to Luna’s moon, hanging in the night sky. “Suffer. Lived to build. Family. Equestria. You.”

“Yes. Yes, thou hast. Yet there is so much more left to do. Equestria still needs thee.” My voice drops down to a small, pained whimper as I admit the truth. “I still need thee. Please, do not leave me.”

“I am not needed.” She slowly extends an ailing hoof towards me, until I take it in mine. “Merely desired. And I am *most* honored.”

I tighten my hold upon her hoof. “Shadow, all of my little ponies die. All of them. Please, let me save just this one.” Of all the thousands of times a pony has or will come to me, asking me to save some friend or loved one, this is the only time it will be within my power to grant that wish—if not for Shadow’s own stubborn insistence upon mortality.

“What of my clan?” she rasps out. “Commander, am I to watch all of my little ponies fade too, as thy balm for the ages?”

“I do not know if my heart can endure losing thee.” It is a struggle to maintain my composure, but I manage. “It is not yet healed from Luna’s loss, or that of so many others. To add this new pain atop so many others...”

“You are strong, Commander.” She needs several seconds to gather enough strength to speak again. “I am touched, that I have a place in your heart, however small. Truly.”

“There is nothing I might say that would alter thy course?” I ask the question despite already knowing the answer. I am hoping that this will be one of the rare occasions when my insight proves fallible. “Nothing I might do to sway thee?”

Shadow answers me with a weak shake of her head. “My mind is set. Rule well, my Commander. As you ever have.” A small, fleeting smile crosses her face. “As I know you shall.”

I take her hoof in both of mine and bring it up to my lips. “Not as well as I would with thee at my side.”

“My confidence in you has never broken. I have—” Her words disappear into a fit of coughs thick with mucus and blood. Thankfully, they pass in due time. “I have faith, in you, Commander.”

“Shadow...” I use a hoof to straighten her mane and give myself a few moments to restore my failing composure. “How many times must I ask thee to call me Celestia in private?”

Shadow gives me a weary smile. “I think, just this once, I shall make an exception to my normal policy ... Celestia.”

For some reason, hearing my name leave her lips, spoken with such simple love, is enough to break my wavering self-control. My eyes are misted by unshed tears, and I lean to meet her lips in a chaste kiss. “I will stay with thee. To the end.”

Shadow tries to speak, but whatever she means to say comes out as a ragged breath. Instead, she gives me a small, sad, knowing smile and gently squeezes my hoof. I think she knows that while I mean it as a gesture of love, part of why I chose to remain at her bedside is my inability to surrender the last hope that she might yet choose life before her time ends.

As promised, I remain with her until the end.

After she passed, and I shed fresh tears for that loss and all the others since, I realize that there is an element out of place in this dream. It takes me a few seconds to realize just what it is—it is a presence I’ve not felt in my sleeping mind for a millennia. “Hello, Luna.”

My sister steps out from the fabric of my dreams, and her eyes move to the bed. “So, that is her. The one that thou wouldst have replaced me with.”

“You would,” I gently correct her. It is possible I am trying to change the subject by bringing up Luna’s ongoing difficulties with linguistic modernization.

Luna lets out an annoyed snort. “The removal of ‘thou’ from the Equestrian language was a mistake. I’ve half a mind to begin a royal program to restore it.” She pointedly returns her attention to the weak, withered form of Shadow Kicker. “Why art thou avoiding my question?” I suspect that this time, she used the antiquated words simply to ruffle my feathers.

“I am not avoiding the question,” I answer her, somehow falling back into the old rhythms of gentle sibling teasing despite our long separation. “I simply chose not to answer it when first you asked.” I take a few more moments to carefully consider my words. “No pony could have replaced you, sister. Even if I named another as Princess of the Night by necessity, you would still be my sister. Always.”

“And if thou didst grant another my mantle?” There is old pain in Luna’s voice, though it lacks the bitter edge that might have moved me from sisterly concern to genuine worry. “What then, sister, upon my return? Would you have stripped Shadow’s immortality

from her to restore me as thy equal? Or would you have let her remain as the reigning Princess of the Night, whilst I lingered on as a shade of my former strength, doomed to a short and mortal life?”

I do not answer her. In truth, I do not know what I might have done if things had come to that point. To leave my sister stripped of her birthright would be unfair, but could I truly take Shadow’s immortal life from her? I love my sister more dearly than any other pony, but returning Shadow to mortality would be little different from killing her. Would it be right to take her life just to restore my sister to her full strength? It seems a cruel way to reward her good service.

That is not to mention the practical problems that would arise from taking power from a pony of proven loyalty and good service, and granting that power to a pony who had just tried to overthrow me. Ponies would not understand.

I give Luna the only answer I can. “I do not know how I would have acted if that happened. Both options are unpalatable to me—I believe I would search for a third.”

Luna is silent for some time after that. When she speaks again, it is on a new subject. “I heard there was an altercation between you and Rainbow Dash.”

“One of her friends is dying,” I answer her simply.

“I see.” Luna looks over the scene, and her eyes return once more to Shadow’s wizened form. “You come here often, when thoughts of death linger on your mind.”

“I do.”

Luna is silent once more, considering the situation. When she finally speaks, she manages to surprise me. “Show me this dream that lingers in your mind then, sister.”

I return to the dream’s beginning.

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I receive a letter from Rainbow Dash the next day. It is unexpected—I was certain she would need longer than a single day to calm down and realize that her actions, while motivated by genuine love, were unacceptable. It is easy to forget that for all that I know of my little ponies, my insight is not perfect.

Dear Princess Celestia:

Look... sometimes I'm not good with my words like Twilight is, so forgive me if this seems like random gibberish but... I'm sorry for saying what I said. You didn't deserve it. No pony deserves what happened to Derpy. So, yeah, I'm sorry... Oh, and ignore the water marks on the page. I got caught in the rain while I was taking this to the post office.

Rainbow Dash

I pen a response.

Rainbow Dash:

All is forgiven.

I know you well, Rainbow Dash. I know that you are strong, kind, brave, and above all, loyal. It is these qualities of yours that will help you endure, like I know you can.

I wish I could do more for your friend. Tell Derpy that my thoughts will be with her, and that she will be remembered fondly.

Celestia.

Somehow, it rains on my letter too.