

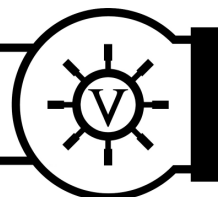
A Short Story
by Twilight Sparkle
Skywriter

a short story

by Twilight Sparkle

jcw, sec'y

PONY FICTION VAULT



The One and Only Chapter of This Story

Princess Celestia, my teacher, mentoress, and goddess, sipped delicately from her antique Yixing teacup, curls of warm white vapor framing her heartbreakingly sculpted muzzle. Her eyes fell closed in gentle satisfaction at the ancient gesture.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the low table, a little purplish mulberry-colored unicorn (me) plucked up a tiny rice cracker with a thread of magic and crunched on it, glumly. The noise felt totally barbaric in the stillness of the Moss Garden, and the problem was only compounded by the fact that a couple grains of wasabi powder from a nearby pea had made their way onto the surface of the cracker, eliciting from me a little throat-spasm and a snort. I love wasabi, usually. I love saunas and cold showers. I love hot ginger beer. I love things that make me *feel*, because I spent so many years of my life not feeling and not even particularly caring if I felt or not, and I'm really trying to make up for lost time, here. But it hardly seemed fitting to be coughing and hacking in the presence of the Princess.

It's not even the rudeness that I'm most concerned about. The worst thing about acting like a lump of sapient clay in front of the most perfect and regal creature on the face of the planet is...

The Princess smiled at me with gentle amusement. "The crackers are a little spicy, yes?"

...is that she understands me. Somehow, she knows exactly what it is to be Twilight Sparkle, what it's like being a klutzy, obsessive-compulsive unicorn with an endomorphic body-type, an unhealthy fixation on cinnamon and a comprehensive, all-consuming weakness for daffodils and baked goods. Somehow, Princess Celestia has endured thousands and thousands of years of life without ever forgetting what it's like to be, well, me. I am shamed that she can see so much of me and still accept me unquestioningly; and am furthermore shamed by her power to look upon me with this sort of eternal, patient and almost parental affection without it ever seeming to diminish me. To say that she merely finds me "cute" is a grave disservice to the complex tapestry of love that she has inexplicably woven around the undeserving target of my person. It makes me all at once despair and love her all the more.

I nodded, silently, not meeting my teacher's serene gaze, and took a sip of tea. I hated the slucking sound I made when I did it, hated it lots; and it didn't help that Ms. Latte had prepared jasmine today, a tea which I normally adore, but which I now didn't know if I could ever look at the same way again.

Not after *The Story*. Not after my Princess Celestia Fiction, a.k.a., *That Thing About Tea*.

It wasn't supposed to be popular; it just was this stupid idea I had that wouldn't leave me alone, a goofy little tale about the possible repercussions of Princess Celestia revealing that a popularly-held truth about her wasn't, in fact, true. Somewhere deep underneath that was the keening anxiety of a pathetic, petulant little filly who profoundly feared that her ignorance of her beloved teacher's true self was just as complete as her teacher's understanding of her was. It was just Twilight Sparkle, getting rid of a mental bugaboo or two using the power of words. It wasn't supposed to spread like a forest fire in the undergrowth of Canterlot's underground indie fiction market. It wasn't actually supposed to have been released at all. And while I have no illusions that writing a bizarrely popular story makes me a "good" writer, even by my own pragmatic standards it really wasn't even that good. For instance: I was so self-amused by the part where my fictional version of Princess Celestia was going around randomly approving people's paperwork that I dragged the joke out for about two paragraphs too long; and the whole ending felt shockingly rushed and weak, because, frankly, I was so darn tired of writing it by that point I couldn't see straight. I had testily sworn to myself that I would not endure another morning with that stupid "Tea" story hanging over my head and distracting me from my *Omnibus Catalogue of Other Books*, so it ended up that dawn was actually starting to break by the time I scribbled down the last lines and staggered up to my loft.

But even above all niggling questions of quality, the biggest problem with "Princess Celestia Hates Tea" was that *Princess Celestia wasn't supposed to read it*. And, according to rumor, she had.

The only solace I took was that I'd done a whole mess of pseudonymous damage control in the wake of its accidental publication. With any luck, the lion's share of the blame would fall upon the completely fictitious shoulders of a little made-up blue pegasus colt named Skywriter, instead of—

"Oh, Twilight, I wanted to let you know that I read your story about me," said Princess Celestia. "I thought it was delightful."

Of course, I reminded myself. Since when do I have "any luck"? I folded in on myself a little, wondering how rude it would be to just up and teleport away right now. I ran the equations in my head. It wouldn't be difficult or anything.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry, it was just an idea I had and it was really distracting me from my work so I thought maybe I would just write it down and get it out of my head but then I left it too close to the pile of books that I had set out for

Spike to return to the Canterlot Archives and I guess somepony found it and started circulating it and so I panicked and made up this fake pegasus author who supposedly wrote it and I thought that would be the end of it and you weren't ever supposed to have seen it and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

"Twilight—"

"I'm sorry!"

"Twilight," she said, gazing at me, ocean-deep. "Please listen to me."

I shut my yap.

"It was a fine story," she said. "Very amusing, in an admittedly farcical way. Nothing you need to apologize for."

"But I pretended I was you!" I nearly wailed. "I made all sorts of statements like 'I think this' and 'I think this other thing' only it was supposed to be you that was writing! How presumptuous is that?"

"No more presumptuous than anyone penning a work of fiction. If all authors fussed as much about the details as you seem to, I daresay there'd be no fiction in our land whatsoever."

"It wasn't accurate!" I pressed on, heedless. "Fictional Princess Celestia was just acting how I needed her to act so that the story would work! It wasn't like you at all!"

The Princess smiled at me. "Again, no more sin than any author of fiction commits when attempting to delve into my character," she said. "I do keep very much to myself, don't I? It leaves rather a lot of room for speculation." She took another achingly delicate sip of tea. "I would hate to tell most of them that I do not in fact possess the cart-load of personal demons I am often assigned. For all my years, and for all the sorrowful things I have witnessed, I have seen an equal measure of joy, and I am very much at peace."

"It's hard to write a pony who's always at peace," I muttered. "No agonizing conflicts or anything."

"Well, then, I'm not a very interesting character, am I?" she said, chuckling musically. "But that's not really what concerns me most, my Faithful Student. I'm actually a bit more worried at how you depicted yourself in your story."

“I thought it was pretty accurate,” I groused. “Neurotic, check. Hyper-focused, check. Frequently oblivious to reality, check.”

“Twilight Sparkle,” said Princess Celestia, “what would you do if I told you right now that I’ve been lying to the world at large for millennia about liking tea?”

I blinked. “R—really?” I said. “My story was right?”

“No,” said the Princess, smoothly. “Tea is one of my great solaces. I enjoy it on many different levels simultaneously, one of which is, yes, the taste of it. I was asking what you would do *if* I told you that.”

It is totally impossible to resist the dreaded Pedagogical Tone. I swallowed hard and stepped up to the metaphorical podium. “I’d feel honored at your trust in me,” I began. “I would... be a little dismayed that we’d been taking tea together for so many years, and here I thought it was a special moment of connection between us, but in reality, you were faking it all along because you wanted me to see you a certain way. I know, as Princess of the Realm, you’re always conscious of other ponies’ perception of you and you do actively try to manipulate your image for the good of the land, but...”

I gestured, helplessly, with one hoof, but the words didn’t come.

“But you like to think that maybe, just from you, I keep no secrets,” said the Princess, evenly and enigmatically.

I nodded, suddenly feeling like I was about to cry. Dumb. Dumb foalish Twilight Sparkle.

“Twilight Sparkle, you are so very dear to my heart. You must never doubt that I love you, as your teacher and your friend, now and evermore. It is with this same love that I tell you that there will always be secrets that I must keep from you, because of who I am, and because of promises that I have made. Is that acceptable to you?”

I nodded, silently, still unable to raise my eyes and look at her.

“Good,” said the Princess. “You see? You underestimate your capacity to handle unpleasant news, just as you underestimate so many of your strengths. “

“So I wrote me wrong too,” I said, despondently.

“I don’t think I need to tell you how glad I am that you’re far removed from that person you cast yourself as,” said the Princess. “When I look at you, I don’t see an anxious,

obsessive wreck who destroys the things around her. I see a beautiful and talented young mare, one of the most special and courageous ponies I've ever had the honor of knowing. It vexes me a bit that you are unable to see yourself the same way."

"Hooray for that, I guess," I groused, the young and insatiably hungry part of my soul nevertheless lapping up the praise like a kitten with a saucer of cream. "It does sort of make me wonder what the point is of writing at all, though. If I don't really know the ponies I'm writing about, and can't accurately communicate it to the ponies who read my stuff, what good is any of this? It's just me, making up words that sound good."

"Ah, a lesson," said the Princess. "You'll like this one. Lift up your teacup."

I looked up at her, blinked, and then picked up my teacup with an effortless little bloom of telekinetic magic.

"Look at it," she said. "Tell me what you see."

"It's a Yixing cup," I said. "From Qilin. Reddish-brown, unglazed clay. It's at least a hundred years old, probably older."

"Several hundred," the Princess confirmed.

I winced a little. "I know, I know, another inaccuracy. I said that you drink tea out of porcelain in that story. It's just that I couldn't remember the word 'Yixing' for a second, which is really dumb of me, but it was one of those things where it's just on the tip of your tongue and you just can't think of it, and I was writing so fast, and—"

"Tell me about Yixing teaware."

Right. Carried away again. I reined myself in and hobbled my steps with facts. "Yixing clay is prized for teaware because its slightly porous surface absorbs the essence of the tea that is prepared and served in it," I recited. "Essence which it then imparts to subsequent preparations."

"There will never be a perfect cup of tea served in Yixing teaware," said the Princess, nodding. "Each cup brewed is different than the last, as the teaware itself moves through time." She looked at me, then, whimsically sly. "Through teatime, specifically. But one thing is certain: each cup, good or not-as-good, will do nothing but increase the delightful complexity of the next. There is never an end to the process, never a single perfect iteration. Eventually, after hundreds more years, I may arrive at a point where I am drinking something so close to the perfect cup that it might as well be that

thing. But, until that far-off day, every cup of tea I drink has value in the essence it gives to the future. Is my parable clear, my Faithful Student?”

“No story is perfect,” I said. “But each one is worth something, in what it adds to the entire experience.”

“Exactly,” said Princess Celestia. “Now, In lieu of a formal report on this lesson, I have something different in mind for you today. You are going to write me a story about this. Non-pseudonymously.”

I quailed a little. “About what?”

“About this,” she said. “About us. About this conversation we’re sharing, right now.” Princess Celestia raised her head and looked about her, at the cool, lovingly-tended Moss Garden, at the gently babbling stream that ran through its length. “You may describe your surroundings to any level of detail you wish. You may start the telling wherever you like, and finish it wherever you like.”

“But... nothing really happened,” I said. “Nothing I can write a story about, at least.”

Princess Celestia laughed again. “You misunderstand what a story is, my Faithful Student,” she said. “Stories don’t have to be about intrigue, about dramatic clashes with the High Cabinet, about a certain royal pony rather theatrically losing her temper and reducing the Rosewood Salon to ash, a rather sad fictional loss, I must say. The only requirement of a story is that something *happen*, that a journey is made, even if that journey deposits you right back where you started. Do you understand that a journey has been made, today?”

I thought about it for a second, and then I nodded. “I think so,” I said.

“Then write about it,” said Princess Celestia, eagerly. “I’d love to see what you come up with.”

“What should I call it, though?” I said. “I’m terrible at thinking up titles. I mean, ‘Princess Celestia Hates Tea’? Come on.”

“On the contrary,” said Princess Celestia. “Simple titles are often best. You may even call your story something like ‘The Perfect Cup’, if you wish.”

“Is that good enough?” I asked, dubiously.

“Title it in whatever way looks right to you,” said Princess Celestia. “If it looks right, then odds are it’s the right title. This is art, after all, and you the artist.”

“Okay, Princess,” I said, resolved. “I’ll write that story for you.”

“Excellent,” said Princess Celestia, sipping with contentment at her delightful, non-ideal cup of jasmine tea, tea that certainly had flaws, but which was nonetheless absolutely perfect in its own way, simply on the strength of the fact that it was here, and it was now, and it was us, and that’s all it would ever need to be.

“No title too simple?” I asked.

“No title too simple,” affirmed the Princess.

“Good,” I said. “I know exactly what I’m going to call it.”