

To Lead Them Home

peppermint owl

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PONY FICTION VAULT



My name is Sparrow, and I am a psychopomp.

Okay. Wait a minute. Let me frame that better.

My name is Sparrow. I grew up just outside Canterlot with my parents and little sister. I couldn't fly or levitate things like the other colts that lived nearby, but I have always been a natural explorer. My sister and I loved to explore the countryside together, and when we were still very small, we got caught in a storm. I managed to navigate us back home through the rain and the darkness, and although we were terrified and exhausted when we made it to the front door, it was the happiest day of my life—I had gotten my cutie mark.

In order to earn a little extra money to help support my family, I moved to Canterlot and joined a guided tour business. It was mostly taking rich, bored families and couples through the old mining caves or around the mountains, depending on the season. As long as you could give them a good thrill, the tips were usually decent, and the other guides were a blast to hang out with. After many logged hours and one or two foul-weather rescues, I was a top-earning guide. Word must have spread too, since I came home one night to find a letter from the Princess waiting at my apartment.

After making quadruply sure that I hadn't done anything wrong—they couldn't know I had stolen an apple when I was six, right?—I found myself in the royal Canterlot gardens the next afternoon. They were more beautiful than I had heard, with statues and exotic old trees amongst the perfectly trimmed hedges and flowers. The Princess was waiting for me in a small courtyard by the castle. I was focusing so hard on not stumbling over myself that it took some time to notice how her smile didn't have her famous cheer behind it.

Our conversation was pleasant enough; I just gave her a little bit of my personal history, including my cutie mark story, and then I was free to go. I was puzzled, but even more so when another invitation arrived a few days later.

The next interview started like the first. We were just ending some idle conversation about the weather when my big fat mouth managed to blurt out how mountain tours were booming and I had lost out on some good tip money by honoring Her Highness' summons. She went very quiet. I almost slammed my head against our table, but instead, I opted to sit and wait for her to throw me out. We sat for quite some time in silence. I

hoped she had forgotten I was even there, but just as I attempted to channel my inner statue to blend in to the background and wait for her to leave, she spoke.

“Do you know what happens to ponies?” My eyes briefly flicked up to see her softly silhouetted by the glow of the late afternoon sun. She stared at nothing in particular. “What happens when they pass on?”

Her question was so out of the blue I could only sit in silence, looking every which way but back at her. An answer, any answer, just wasn't coming. I had overheard from several prominent ponies on my tours that Celestia preferred conversation topics as sunny as her cutie mark. Wasn't this a little dark for her?

I don't know if she meant for me to answer, since she let minutes pass with her question hanging in the air before speaking again.

“You've heard of Tartarus, haven't you?” She glanced at me sidelong from the prickly white flower she was examining. I averted my eyes to the sky.

I thought on it and nodded. “Yeah, but that's not where everyone goes, right? Isn't that just for monsters and particularly, uh, bad ponies?”

She nodded, a hint of a soft smile spreading across her face. “Yes, that's right. But that still leaves out just about everyone else. Where do you think they go?”

I couldn't help but stiffen a bit. This... This wasn't a threat, was it?

“Perhaps this is the wrong approach,” she said, standing. “Instead of explaining, I would like you to see what I mean first. If you accept, I will arrange a journey for you. It will take some time, and I will assign guards for your protection.” She paused and I sensed her turn towards me. “But if you go, it can afford you something incredible that very few have been able to experience.”

I gulped, daring my eyes to look in her direction. “And what is that, Your Highness?”

Her eyes met mine with a strange intensity I couldn't place. “A glimpse of the beyond.”

And that was about as much instruction as I got. She did go on a bit about different ponies' perspectives and how some experience big life events differently than others, but it was a bit dry and didn't hold my attention like the purposefully vague bits. I had to find out for myself what she wanted. Plus the monetary compensation was fantastic. So, I accepted.

I was to leave immediately. Princess Celestia supplied me with everything I'd need, plus two of the Royal Guard—a pegasus and a unicorn might come in handy, after all. Just as we were about to set out from the castle gates, the Princess pulled me aside. As I noticed how much more at peace she looked, her horn glowed intensely and she touched my chest, just over my heart. Blinding light filled my eyes and I was suddenly overcome with intense memories.

I saw myself, in a strange faded light, gently pushing my little sister on the tree-swing just outside our old house. She suddenly got bold and jumped when it got high, and although she fell like a stone to the ground, I was by her side in an instant. I watched myself carry her back to our home and, since our parents were gone, I messily applied far too much bandage to a few small scrapes all by myself. When she managed to stop crying, she went back to her room and drew a Hero-Sparrow in her best crayons, just for me.

More images started whizzing by in rapid fire. My dad and I stood proudly on the top of a mountain after a particularly difficult climb, one that we had nearly given up on; my mother and aunts dragging me along to a show in town—which I had secretly been dying to see; my fifteen minutes of fame when I helped track a family down after a snowstorm; my first crush agreeing to a date. Each one made my heart feel a little closer to bursting.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more, the light came away. It felt like waking from a deep sleep. My body felt heavy, and my eyelids were as if they had been replaced with lead. I slowly opened my eyes to a starry sky. Registering the sound of wooden wheels churning along a dirt road took a bit longer—apparently I had passed out at the gates and the Guards opted to catch a ride on a passing cart rather than carry my flank anywhere.

They were both actually very agreeable fellows, and neither were short on stories. Apparently the unicorn was some long-lost twelfth cousin removed, or something like that, of Starswirl the Bearded, and the pegasus bragged about how his family could trace back their heritage to the first pegasi settlers in Equestria. They were also pretty good entertainers. The unicorn had a great singing voice and wasn't shy on leading the three of us in every song he knew. The pegasus was a big fan of terrible jokes, although I can't repeat the one about the lion and his—um, never mind.

I still had to wonder how much they were told before they left. Our trail was long even after the one day by cart, but pretty straightforward. Actually, I wasn't sure if we had reached the right place at first. On top of it being an easy trip, the path just sort of ended at the edge of the woods. In fact, almost everything seemed to end there. It looked a bit

like a forest clearing with dense morning mist obscuring the far trees, but the light was dim here and the ground was almost sandy.

We left our saddlebags and cautiously crept from the path. I strained my ears to hear any noise, but the air seemed to block it all out as if there were something rustling just out of earshot. I was too hesitant to go much farther, but the other two went to the edge of the grass and inspected the dirt. I thought one of us would eventually have to abandon our silence and speak, but we were interrupted before we managed to get that far.

A low rustling came from a far edge of the clearing. The mist swirled out to reveal a path similar to ours, and on it, a very tall, dark hooded figure. It didn't seem very disturbed to see us. It just calmly walked towards the center and pawed a bit of a hole in the ground. It took a vial of red juice from its cloak and carefully let a few drops fall into the hole. The earth didn't exactly shake, but the dirt reformed itself in a way I had never seen before. The dent began to yawn, slowly stretching into a cave that sloped deep down. A river echoed far below, and the air that wafted out couldn't make up its mind whether it was supposed to be hot or cold. The figure paused to look at us before heading in. I wasn't sure if that was an invitation, but before I could move, the two Guards were hustling me back the way we came.

I don't remember the trip back nearly as well. I spent most of my time wrestling with what I had witnessed. It must have been some kind of magic, that's for certain. Had I actually seen...?

But there was no "Death." That was just an old mare's tale. There was no such thing as a spectral stallion that collected souls with a massive scythe. And there were no such things as ghosts.

Though there were stories. As a guide, I heard about Windigoes and souls that would be trapped on mountainsides when ponies perished in the snow. But those were stories. Right? I needed to just put it from my mind until I could get a proper explanation in Canterlot.

And the wait was maddening. I think Princess Celestia sensed it, since the first thing she did was have a private audience with me back in the gardens.

"I'm sure it was aggravating to go on a journey without knowing why I would ask it of you," she said with apologetic eyes, "but I hope you trust me when I say that you wouldn't have believed me without having seen it for yourself first."

I could just gape, unsure how to respond without being rude. “Some sort of heads-up would have been nice.” Well, it was an attempt.

Her lips twitched strangely. I took it to be a smile. “Most tend to make up their own minds if they have time to think it over before they see,” she said. “You’d be surprised how many refused to believe me when I would tell first and show later. I gained a bit of a reputation as a prankster for a little while.”

Apparently, we had stumbled across the entrance to the Underworld. Or one of the entrances, anyway. She explained how she had instructed the Guards on how to open the chasm, but running into one of the current psychopomps was actually a stroke of luck.

“I’m sorry, Princess, but a psycho-what now?” I blurted.

“A psychopomp. They guide the dead.”

“So, like...” I hesitated, “like Death? What was he doing out in the middle of the woods?” I leaned in, eyes wide.

“Not quite like *the* Death, but he might have been doing his job. The spirits aren’t visible to the uninitiated, after all, so he probably looked quite alone no matter whom he was with.”

I would have gone home right then, barred my door shut and had no further business in this had the sheer terror of knowing what I had seen not kept me glued to my seat. The Princess was quick to elaborate.

“They never cause death or seek to influence it. They simply guide the spirits to their final resting place.”

A bubble of dread began welling in the pit of my stomach. “S-so, what does this have to do with me?”

“There are usually a handful of ponies who hold these positions. If one is no longer able to perform his or her duties, this presents a severe strain on the system. With such an important job, we can’t afford mistakes.” She paused to look around, lingering over bright flowers and singing birds. “Our talents are important, don’t you agree?” Her eyes met mine.

“Um...” She nodded to my cutie mark. “Oh. Oh! Yeah, of course.”

“And why is that?”

I watched a ladybug crawl across my hoof as I thought, trying to steady my racing mind enough to give an answer. “Uhm. Well, everyone has their own job to do. Everyone has a talent. And that’s what makes us unique. I think... I think if a pony has a particular talent, something really important, they should use it. Not just for themselves, but to help others too.” I lifted my hoof up to a face-high branch of a nearby bush and slid the ladybug off on a leaf.

I gulped and forced myself to meet her eyes. “I’m sorry, Princess, but I can’t take much more of this vagueness. Why are you telling me all of this, and why are you showing me these things?” I tried to suppress a shudder when the thought of what I didn’t see in that woodland clearing shot across my mind. “What is it you want me to do?”

Celestia smiled for the first time, soft and patient. “I need you to help them go home.”

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A week later I was heading west. With a little preparation I was able to square everything away before I left—I told my family and my boss that I had been chosen by Celestia herself for a special university program overseas. I suppose all I was missing for that to be true would be the university and the sea, but the Princess was explicit when it came to telling others what I was up to. I was expecting some sort of “enticing panic in the masses” explanation, but apparently there are some nasty things hidden away in Tartarus that are better off staying that way.

So, after about five false starts when my mother refused to stop hugging me and my sister made me swear up and down she’d still get her Hearth’s Warming gifts, I set off with a saddle pack filled with a few things I couldn’t live without and hoofed it down the same path I took with the guards. I met up with a fairly normal-looking cloaked unicorn about halfway there. I think his name was Pan-something, or maybe I have it backwards. I’m not going to lie, I’m terrible with names. Anyways, he took me through a slightly different path to what was the entrance to the Underworld. It was a sandy, foggy clearing like the other, but much larger. He took a vial out from his coat, uncorked it, and showed me how to dig the shallow hole and apply the red liquid to draw out the cavern mouths.

I followed him down a wide passage with engraved stone steps. He lit the way with his horn some ways, although sporadic torches lined the walls. I would have to either learn these passages by heart or start carrying a torch down the darker paths to keep from

getting lost in the maze. I grinned and tossed my head towards my cutie mark, assuring him that getting lost wouldn't be a problem for me.

"Oh really?" he said as he glanced back, eyebrow cocked and sly smile cracking across his face. "That's what the last newbie said before she went missing. Ah, no need for that look, we found her eventually. And she was still alive, even!" He chuckled. I tried to rearrange my face into something other than "horrified" when the tunnel suddenly opened up around us.

We came out to a chamber so large its ceiling was lost in the upper air. The floor seemed to not know it belonged to a cave, since the stone gave way to a field of dead grass, and even further to a swamp. I thought I saw a little cluster of gray ponies at the swamp bank, but my new friend ushered me away before I could properly see.

The ground was roughly shaped like a bowl, and we walked along the western rim until we rounded a cliff protruding from the wall. Past it was my first glimpse of the castle, impossibly massive with spires that reached towards the infinite ceiling and a dozen different architectural styles through history piled over one another. This was where the Reapers lived. Or "psychopomps," if you will.

"Celestia likes that name better," my new guide told me as I followed him through the castle gates and into the courtyard. "It's got a kind of professional cleanliness to it, I think."

"It certainly sounds fancy," I murmured as I took in the towering spires.

"Yeah, but we never use it, just doesn't sit right. Get used to the sound of 'Reaper,' kid."

And with that he opened the massive, heavy wooden doors of the castle, where I was greeted by a small swarm of ponies, all there to check out the new recruit. When I tried to bring up the titles again with the unicorn, an older, grizzled stallion barked out a laugh.

"There's no use prettyin' it up, no matter what Celestia would like us to think. Death is a part of life, and life is mean. Reapers wear their name with pride."

I didn't ask about the names again.

I started training a few days after settling in. At first it was mostly getting to know the different parts of the underworld. There was Tartarus, of course, but then there were all these rivers and fields, too. The rivers ran in every direction, and it seemed that each one

did something different. They all joined in a murky swamp close to the entrances, where a stallion would ferry shades across in his ancient boat. I try not to interact with him much. He... still creeps me out.

I was also given half a dozen books from the castle's private library. Mythology and legends, psychology and physiology of death, maps...

"...And personal journals?" I eyed the small black book at the top of the stack.

"Yes. They usually give you better insight as to what you will actually be doing." A slightly short, pale stallion with dark eyes stood in the doorway of my room, levitating the books into a neat stack on my desk. "And I expect the three on the bottom to be memorized by next week."

"Y-yessir!" But by the time I had jumped to a salute, he had already left.

From there I began shadowing other Reapers. I was basically told to keep my mouth shut, observe with every fiber of my being, and save questions for later—even the most cheerful Reapers could get quite scary if newbies didn't abide by the rules. It sounds harsh, but there was a method to it. It was definitely one of those jobs best learned through experience, but there's still a lot of tradition and procedure we have to observe. The biggest thing, I think, was the Reaper's silence.

The first reaping I witnessed, I nearly screamed. I was to accompany an older yellow earth stallion by the name of Wheatlock. I was given one of their special cloaks that rendered the wearer invisible to all but the spirits and Reapers when in the presence of the dead—but not without a threat from my new mentor implying the horrendous amount of dishwashing allotted to anyone who lost a cloak.

We went to a village not too far from a back cavern. A small, plain wooden house stood at its outskirts. Inside was dim, but the layout was simple. We found the bedroom where a figure lay under the covers. I watched it for a while before I realized there was no rhythmic breathing or sleep twitching. There were no signs of life at all. That's when it suddenly convulsed, as if my thoughts had reminded it of the living world. But when it sat up, it was the face of an old mare's corpse that looked back at me. I crept behind Wheatlock with as much dignity and stealth as I could muster and from there noticed how the old mare seemed to be split in two. The one sitting up had slowly gained a little substance to her cheeks, looking livelier by the second, while the other remained lying in bed. She looked quizzically at the bigger stallion, who gestured vaguely towards the door with one large hoof. I was surprised at how little time it took for her to understand, and

after my fellow Reaper extended an arm to help the struggling old mare up and out of bed, we were out of the house and heading back to the woods.

She was very chatty on the way, telling us all about the two dozen cats she had cared for over the years and how her favorite neighbors would bring the best pies to the village potluck. She even thanked us for listening to her babble as she boarded the ferry, totally oblivious to the rank mud and gnarled trees that now surrounded her. Her smile looked like it belonged back home with her cookies and family. Not here.

On the way back to the castle Wheatlock asked over his shoulder if I had any questions. I thought to ask why we were never supposed to speak first, and likewise why I wasn't allowed to speak at all, but that old granny really did more than enough talking for the three of us. I suppose everyone deserves to use that last bit of time however they like, that even if they have no choice in where they go, they're welcome to think or say whatever they want. So, we keep our silence.

"No, I guess I don't have any questions for now," I finally managed. "I just need to think." But I wish I hadn't spoken so soon.

As I mulled it over, the old mare's acceptance seemed more and more... wrong. Maybe she lived a very long and fulfilling life—I didn't doubt that for a second, she seemed downright sweet. But she utterly accepted it, right down to the gloomy underground. Thinking that she may have even been happy to go gave me chills. I pushed it from my thoughts.

When we reached the castle, a bunch of Reapers were making a racket in the main study. We entered a room filled with large desks and comfortable chairs, and nearly every one was taken. A dark yellow pegasus named Stormstarter stood before the fire, pacing and making increasingly grander arm movements as he set the scene for his next story. Wheatlock and I found some seats near the back as Stormstarter opened on a cathedral funeral. He had arrived for a midnight service in some distant city, despite fighting lightning and wind to get there. He had just entered, sopping wet, to see the slick closed casket far in the front. He looked for a spot to wait for the shade's awakening when he glanced up, only to see the casket's lid wide open. As if on cue, a gust from the open doors blew out half the candles. As the other ponies scrambled to relight the chapel, a flash of lightning streaked across the sky, throwing colored light through the stained glass and temporarily illuminating the high ceiling. Including the pony shade crawling across it, slowly creeping to a point directly above Stormstarter.

I later came to find out that it was a tradition to tell such stories to the newbies after their first reaping, but I still didn't sleep easy for a few weeks.

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One of my most memorable assignments began late one summer evening, well after I began solo reapings. I was sent to a beautiful little village in the mountains that skirted a still lake. With time I've been able to feel less guilty when I inflict myself on places like this, but something about the peacefulness here made me keep to the shadows a little more than usual.

The town was quiet. I passed their small square before seeing anyone. Out towards the lake it looked as if every villager had gathered around a small boat. I had heard of this sort of thing before, but it was a striking ceremony to see for myself. A small bonfire was crackling on the beach, along with a few torches that made a path to the water. There was a figure draped in white lying in the boat, which was adorned with a painter's palette of bright mountain flowers. It was a bit louder than the usual procession, and though there was plenty of mourning, it seemed to be more of a quiet celebration than a lamentation. A few big, sturdy stallions came forward and began pushing the boat down the torchlit path. I carefully stepped in as it passed by me in the crowd, and soon the two of us were adrift.

For a few minutes I just watched the prow cut smoothly across the lake. It was surprisingly calm, considering the large waterfall on the far side that was drawing us out. I sat and traced the edge of the mountain as it cut into the top of the falls. Then there was a soft scuffling behind me. I turned to see the white sheets drag off the face of a young mare.

A very beautiful young mare.

I met startlingly blue eyes, and I'm not terribly ashamed to say that I stared. In fact, no one else could see her, and by Celestia she deserved at least six admirers at any given time, so it would practically be my duty to make it up to her.

I must have been totally engrossed with the thrill of being the only pony able to see her. The next thing I know, she nearly tips the boat in a panic as she scrambles to her hooves. The waterfall had drawn us across the lake much faster than I had expected, and our little skiff was getting tossed in the current as we quickly drew closer. I frantically began paddling on my side of the boat and she followed suit on the other. I must have been pulling harder than her, as we only succeeded in spinning in a half-circle before I gave up

with a frustrated groan. The dingy approached the falls only slightly slower on its side, though it gave me enough time to search the bank for some saving grace. Spotting a sharp edge of the mountain jutting out close to the falls, I reached a hoof out to the mare. It took only a moment for her to see the cliff and realize my intent. She took my hoof, climbed on my back, and I leapt.

And started to fall far too short.

The mare extended her wings in a desperate attempt to soar. But she was just a shade; maybe if I tucked around her and surfaced fast enough, she would be alright. But would I be alright? The sound of roaring water pounded in my ears. I closed my eyes and waited for the drop.

Instead of hitting water, I felt my hooves gently touch the ground. My eyes shot open. The waterfall lay behind us, the little boat on its side and caught on some snag just below the water. The mare slid off my back, looking terrified but exceptionally pleased with herself. We stood there for a moment watching the boat un-snag itself and go tumbling over the falls. I wheezed out a nervous chuckle and tried to steady my legs when I glanced at her, catching her eye for just a moment before she looked away and smiled.

“You know—” I managed between gasps, “we can—we can take our time. There’s—no rush—”

But as I struggled to finish my thought, she simply met my eyes with a smile and said, “I’d love to show you my favorite spot by the lake.”

Under the shade of the mountain, we sat and talked. She accepted the news about her death pretty well—there must be something that happens in that in-between sleep that makes it easier to believe, though I couldn’t hold back a wince when that thought occurred to me. I also told her about the trek we’d have to make, but it really just seemed to excite her. She had rarely ever left her village, so this whole experience was like an adventure to her.

With business out of the way, she told me about her life here, how she lived with her aunt in a small cottage on the village outskirts. I also told her a bit about myself—she was fascinated that I was just a normal stallion. I couldn’t help but puff out my chest a bit when she started asking me about all my adventures. We needed to get going, so she promised to follow as long as I told her stories. I faced the mountain to size it up, trying to think of the last time I had a mountain-related adventure. I felt a nudge at my side and turned to meet those blue eyes stunningly close. She moved in, and... Well.

I must have gone through a dozen stories. She was a great audience too, even if she loved to ask questions in the middle of the good parts. I tried matching the stories to each new landscape we came across, even if I had to stretch them a bit to make them fit. I told her about the swarms of butterflies strong enough to lift a pony as we crossed a rolling sea of bright flowers and of a timberwolf pack so large they disguised themselves as a forest when we came to a grove of ancient, twisting trees.

I think she must have heard a nasty story about a timberwolf while in her village. She stuck close to me through the copse, although no harm would have come to her as a spirit. When we were about halfway through the woods, a loud snap from a dry twig sounded nearby. We both froze. I raked the trees with wide eyes searching for the source of the noise—even a Reaper’s cloak sometimes isn’t enough to smother fear of the unknown. A second crunch sounded behind a particularly large beech, and out from the side poked what looked like a muzzle.

It was a timberwolf. A pack of them, in fact. My companion and I pressed close to each other as they lurked towards us. It was incredible. Here we were in the middle of the copse with timberwolves passing right by us. I was nervous that they might smell me—I was only invisible, after all—but they left without so much as a sniff.

I may have implied that I totally made that happen on purpose. After the feeling came back to my legs, of course. I was forcibly reminded of my interviews with Celestia once I realized exactly how stiffly I had been standing.

She was so impressed that she would only talk about timberwolves and dangerous animals she had heard legends of afterwards. She started walking a little faster, I guess in anticipation of coming across something even more exotic. I couldn’t stop my feet from becoming lead when I spotted the sandy clearing in the distance. She hadn’t noticed, and I didn’t want to end her day of adventure with my selfishness.

I told her that the next step required a magic trick. She eagerly volunteered to help. I directed her how to dig the hole and how many drops from the vial should be put in and in what pattern. When the mouth of the cave yawned from the sand, her face was brighter than the sun. I forced myself to smile.

We reached the edge of the swamp when we saw the ferry stallion’s boat loom towards us through the gloom. I didn’t realize how close we had been standing until the ferry really came into view, when the stallion at the helm gave me a searching glare. I felt like a helpless novice all over again as his gaze rooted me to the spot.

She must have noticed. She reached a hoof to my face before the ferry reached its landing spot, but even though she felt so alive up above in the sunshine, in the undergloom she was nothing more than a gentle breeze against my cheek.

We both muttered a quiet goodbye and she left me on the bank to board the ferry. I had a difficult time pretending to smile as I watched her fade in the swamp's fog. And I didn't even have her name to mutter under my breath as she melted away.

I don't really remember how many days I took off after that. Most of my time was spent alone in my room. I tried writing to my parents once or twice, though nothing could really come out. I didn't know what to expect from them, either; they still thought I was abroad, after all, and I didn't feel like being on the receiving end of a "more fish in the sea" speech from my father.

Eventually one of the pegasi I had gotten to know here came over and attempted a little pep talk. Her name was Snow Drift. She had been in a similar situation a few years back, but she had gotten riled up enough to get in a physical fight with the boat stallion.

"And then I cracked him in the jaw with a low right hoof," she finished proudly.

"That must have felt great," I muttered into my blanket.

"Well, I got into trouble for it, but yeah, the look on his face was priceless." She rocked on the back legs of my desk chair across the room. "I would do it over and over again if I could."

I'm not sure she took her loss the same way I did. "What gave you the courage to do it?" I murmured.

She sneered. "I thought I could make his ugly mug look better, of course!"

"But she left. There wasn't even a question about it. She... She just..."

"Hey." Her tone grew sterner. "It's how it works. You've got my support if you want to act stupid for a while, but don't blame yourself. Or her."

"She just looked so happy when she went," I murmured.

The room grew quiet. Snow Drift had pestered me earlier about the mare I met, but I wanted nothing more than to forget for a little while. When she couldn't get anything from me, she shrugged and started playing with the candle flame on my desk as she

described her would-be lover. I'm not sure if that was better or worse, but the fight was a pleasant change of topic.

"Snow, when..." The lump in my throat that I had been fighting began to well up again. "When she left you standing there on the shore, after all of that, was she still happy to go? Did she look happy even though she was leaving you?"

I dared glance up for just a moment, afraid to feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes, and saw my friend staring with wide eyes into the distance. I recoiled on myself for asking, but she squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and spoke.

"It doesn't feel like it most of the time, but we're the closest any of us have to a family." Her voice softened. "I might still miss her, and sometimes I wonder what we could have had together in a different life. But as long as I have everyone here, I know I'll be alright."

I didn't know what to say. Or what to think. Her words were like the lightest breath of air, just enough to notice but unable to bend the smallest blade of grass. Even with my friend right beside me, telling me I'll be fine, I had never felt quite so alone.

Snow Drift broke the silence. "When Celestia met with you, did she ever do something that made you..." She opened her eyes wide. "See things?"

I almost asked her if Celestia had fed her something funny when I remembered all the memories she had pulled from me.

I raised my head from my blankets. "You mean like a film reel of your life?"

"Yeah!" She slammed the chair legs down and leveled her eyes at me. "Have you ever focused on them? Try it sometime. Just think about them as hard as you can. You'll know if you did it right."

She left my room, to let me be alone with my thoughts, I suppose. I buried myself in my covers to block out all the light, closed my eyes, and tried to recall the memories that Celestia had shown me. It surprisingly took little effort. Almost immediately I was with my family again. For the rest of the evening I watched a Hearth's Warming Eve from years past, preserved right down to the details. I fell asleep at some point, but the next morning I felt well enough to clock in.

The letters never left my desk. As long as I had my memories, I told myself I could be close to my family in some way.

I cried that night, though I know now that I cried for myself. For my loss, and in my fear.

I was not a clever colt.

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Some time later, I was asked to accompany Stormstarter in the reaping of a particular griffin.

“This is highly unusual,” said Wheatlock. He had informed me of my duty in the dining hall over breakfast instead of giving me the usual list of assignments.

“As you know, full Reapers work solo. You have shown yourself to be responsible and have already been charged with the enormous task of escorting the dead of Equestria.” He gave a slight harrumph before continuing. “This is a special case, and considering your situation, I think assisting Stormstarter will be good for you. Meet him in the atrium at seven sharp.” And with that he marched away before I could ask what “your situation” was supposed to mean.

I choked down my toast and met up with my partner. He was already tapping his hoof at the castle gates, which meant he had been waiting for about three minutes.

“Finally!” he shouted as soon as my head poked around the corner. “Let’s go. We have a lot of ground to cover,” he said as he trotted towards the gates.

“I just found out,” I sputtered as I ran to catch up, “and why am I going with you if it’s a griffin we’re after? Wouldn’t they be in the skies?”

“Ya know, you’d be moving a lot faster if you saved your breath.”

And that was about as much as I got out of him. After passing hill, vale, and valley, we eventually arrived at a massive tree. Stone steps were wedged into the trunk, making a spiral staircase that disappeared into the canopy. They were quite wide, at least large enough for five ponies to go up at once, but that didn’t keep me from hugging the trunk as close as possible. My plan to stave off my own untimely death was made complicated by all the griffins and ponies going both ways, some of whom just as skittish of the free edge as me.

The landing at the top of the staircase was wedged between two massive branches, which also supported the front façade of a massive stone building. It looked a bit too small to

house everyone I had passed on the stairs, but the columns and wings sprouting off on different boughs were too lavish for any one pony.

Stormstarter knew where to go. I followed him in past the outer columns and through winding, high-ceilinged halls until we reached a particular set of double doors, propped open by small, stylized marble pegasi.

Inside was dark and crowded. Ponies, griffins, and even a donkey or two were grouped around a magnificent four-poster bed, where a large griffin lay. This was clearly him: Vergilius Marco. A writer, he was one of those names I had heard of from time to time, but I had never actually read any of his works. I'm not sure what the nature of his illness was, but he was molting everywhere, and he took deep, shuddering breaths every now and then. We took up post in the left corner and waited.

Visitors came and went as the great griffin, gasping for breath every now and then, settled debts and bequeathed various personal effects. A very posh young mare came away with a very nice set of pearls, two boisterous stallions had some quarrel to work out over an estate, and one particular griffin came away with just an encouraging sentence or two. I had trouble keeping my eyes open after the first hour until quite the barking cough erupted from Marco. All the candles in the room guttered with the amount of commotion everyone broke into. Doctors and nurses burst in from the hall, some to attend to the griffin and others to usher out the guests.

I started rocking in my seat on the floor, ready to finally be busy with something. I glanced at my pegasus partner to catch his glassy eyed stare. Surprised at his powers to utterly disengage, I nudged him to get his attention—which he shoved me right back for with an irritated scowl. He shot me a glare when I opened my mouth to retaliate and nodded his head back towards the bed.

I looked back towards the griffin, but I wasn't sure exactly what I was seeing. He had become very still as the doctors grew more frantic, and his face seemed to flicker strangely. It was as if his spirit was rippling just out of sync with his body instead of rising straight up. My eyes were absolutely glued to him in fascination and a bit out of horror. I briefly wondered if souls could feel pain in such a state.

Stormstarter's eyes had grown blank again when I looked back at him. Growing frustrated with his inattentiveness, I decided I had to do twice the observation work to make up for my slacking associate.

The flickering seemed to amplify as the doctors slowly surrendered their patient to nature. Once or twice I was almost certain I had seen his eyes open, but the body was as still as death.

It occurred to me that maybe I was finally seeing a soul that refused to die. If he had to accept it in his own time, it would certainly explain why Stormstarter was so thoroughly disconnected. Perhaps he was simply preparing for a very long wait.

I began to wonder if we would have to coax him through it, or perhaps even force him to accept it, and if that would make me a killer. I just started to reflect on the thin line between mercy and murder when there was a sudden stirring on the bed. The two nurses who remained in the room let out a shriek, and in no time the room was once again crowded. The swarm of bodies cut my view of Marco entirely, though even the eruption of voices couldn't drown out his grand cries that he had looked upon death.

Stormstarter seemed much livelier at this. His ears perked at the sound of Marco's voice and his eyes searched the room, though he couldn't see the griffin any better than I.

A couple unicorns were brought in from the hall, each with her own scroll and quill. They wrote furiously as Marco spoke of how the fever took him and how his body shook so violently he thought he might be flung from it. The hairs on the nape of my neck began to rise when he insisted that death had stood in that very room and dramatically gestured to our corner, but my pegasus partner ushered me out of the room with some none-too-gentle prodding just as the tale began to dive into some nonsense about a cosmic train.

Once we were safely in the hall and away from close ears, I turned to Stormstarter.

"What was that about?" I murmured, careful to not let my voice get too far from us. "We didn't even come away with anyone."

He just shrugged. "I think Wheatlock wanted you to see a near-death experience. Mentioned how you might need it one day. We needed to go anyway, though, so we can find our mark."

He took off at a canter towards the front door before I could ask anything further. I managed to stay on his heels with a bit of effort, and once we reached the landing before the mansion, I caught a glimpse of him chasing a griffin's tail as they both disappeared around the tree's staircase.

Stormstarter had been off like a shot, but without the added safety of being a pegasus, I followed at a leisurely gallop that didn't double as a death wish. I reached the bottom of the stairs and caught sight of my partner some distance away, standing at the edge of the woods. I approached him, struggling to keep my gasping breath under control, to see that he was watching something.

A very thin griffin lay on the ground behind a large yew tree. This was the same griffin Marco had comforted on his sickbed. As he lay in the dirt, taking shuddering gasps and coughing, he clutched a clawful of fine jewels.

"He's a thief," Stormstarter muttered, distastefully eyeing a pearl necklace lying in the dust.

We didn't stand there long before hearing the rattling wheeze of the griffin's last breath. His spirit came very, very slowly, rising up as if it were dragging a boulder behind it. He seemed disoriented, though when he caught sight of his pilfered finery, he feverishly tried to pick it up again.

Stormstarter gave a very loud snort. The griffin looked up to see us for the first time, and I thought he might die a second death. He stood still as a statue, eyes wide and rolling between the two of us. Throwing himself on the ground, he prayed that we looked inside ourselves to give him pity. Stormstarter simply stepped over him and began to lead the way.

I had never seen him as icy as this. And the colder he was, the more the griffin cowered under his glare. And the more the griffin cowered, the darker the pegasus' countenance became. I briefly wondered if I was there for the spirit's safety rather than the experience, even if we had no power to harm the spirits.

The griffin was also incredibly compliant for the level of terror he must have been experiencing. He was careful to address us as "sir," and at random intervals his quavering voice would squeak out every awful deed he had done. If he was expecting to receive some sort of pardon for his confessions, Stormstarter was the exact wrong Reaper to petition.

We reached our sandy grove. Stormstarter gave another loud snort with his back to us. Both the griffin and I started at the noise and made it a few paces to him before he whipped around and delivered a withering glare to the spirit. I stopped with the griffin, unsettled at our similar reactions. It took the pegasus another snort before I managed to cut through my self-absorption and lend him my vial.

As we descended, the griffin's voice turned a bit steadier as his one-sided conversation moved to his family. His lament over Marco lacked the quivering quality of his self-pity from earlier, but it wasn't until we reached the swamp shore that I understood why I had frozen with this cringing thief up above. When Stormstarter told him to save his breath and obey the ferry stallion, a terrible thought flew through my head. These dead creatures I had been leading for so long accepted everything so implicitly even if I led them to their end. Someone they don't understand tells them where to go, and they follow unquestioningly. All the questions I should have asked Celestia barraged me at once, all the times I should have pried further in what was expected of me sharp in my memory.

Stormstarter's words didn't seem to bother the griffin in the slightest. They slid off him along with a lifetime of regrets and mistakes as he boarded the boat, and turned to show one of the calmest and happiest faces I have seen here.

I turned my head away from that awful death smile.

• • •

I couldn't sleep that night. Even closing my eyes invited grins and lit eyes from the faces I had seen.

I'm not sure what time it was when I finally gave up, but as I lit the candle on my desk, its light was caught by a sleek black cover sitting under a pile of books. The journal from some Reaper of years past seemed to wink at me in the dim light. It felt like a dream as I reached out to it, pulled it from the pile, and flipped it open.

It took a while to focus. At first my eyes just slid over the small cramped writing filling the yellowed pages. Slowly, certain words began to stick out: "family," "no one," "empty." "Lonely." I grimaced and flipped a few pages back, not wanting to deal with some other Reaper's emotional problems. I very nearly shut the book entirely when I caught a glimpse of an entry titled "The Sowing."

It began almost like a laundry list of chores the author had done that day, but there was an odd edge in its tone. The writing was distant, almost methodic, but underneath was something not quite right that grew as it reached the day's library duties. The author, finding themselves alone, takes a break in a particular green-and-gold armchair beside the hearth, only to find a book wedged under the cushion.

I don't know what the book said or what it was about, but the author goes on for pages and pages in increasingly messy writing.

“Everything makes sense now. The obsessions with rules and order are a symptom, and this system is sick.

“It always had to be us. I wonder if there ever was a way out.

“I shouldn't tell them. It wouldn't make a difference.”

My eyes darted wildly across the pages; what was this?

“Celestia chooses us for a reason. We obeyed. We left when she asked.

“Could I leave if they asked me to stay? I don't think I could.

“But that's why I'm here. I'm a Reaper. And I don't think I could ever stop.”

I woke suddenly, twisted in my sheets. The chair at my desk was turned over, the candle burned out, and no book in sight.

• • •

The next day was the toughest job I've ever done.

I woke up early, bleary eyed and with a slight headache, my dream temporarily forgotten. Cerberus had been making a racket all morning. Usually it's not any reason for alarm; the big guy guards the gates of Tartarus to make sure the creatures within stay there. Every now and then something might try at a bid for freedom, but that never ends well for the monster. It sure makes an awful night for anyone trying to sleep, though.

That afternoon I sat on a sunny hillside to peruse the rest of my list. It was strangely short, although that was probably because the last address was more out of the way than usual. I wasn't too far from it now, though, and since I was so far ahead, I decided to catch up on my sleep in a nearby patch of rainflower and cushy clover.

I awoke with a start some time later. I wasn't sure how long I had slept, but the sun was much lower now. I took off at a gallop across the hills, coming to a brisk trot only when I had spotted the town.

The house I was looking for was just off the main road. Incidentally, quite a few ponies seemed to be running either exactly away from or towards the row of houses I was heading for. With a turn around the corner, I could see why.

The little cottage was on fire. Ponies were frantically trying to put it out, but big sections of the walls were already charred. The soft blue paint was peeling, and billowing black smoke erupted as a corner of the roof caved in.

I had a hard time suppressing a shudder. Someone may have already passed on before the fire started, but I have heard how the lists sometimes bring Reapers to ponies as they die. Or even before. Stormstarter insisted he knew a Reaper who practically haunted some poor pony since the list named her every day for a month.

No matter the situation, I would have to wait it out. A spirit would survive the flames, but I wouldn't.

I waited on the curb until the fire burned itself out a few hours later. The house was dark and slightly smoky. It was difficult to see, but I didn't have to squint long before I found the body beside an ash strewn stairwell and a heavy fallen wooden beam. She slowly arose, and though I couldn't make out much, I saw her face fill out and her mane neaten itself. It wasn't until we reached the dimming light outside that I could really see her. She was a pretty reddish mare with a few music notes as a cutie mark. But it was her eyes that made me stop dead. Those beautiful green eyes.

My blood went cold. I couldn't do this. I wouldn't. Not her, not now. But I realized with dread I didn't have the power to stop myself, either.

I don't think she noticed me. Well, no, that's a lie—I must look like a hulking shadowy beast in my getup. I don't think she wanted to notice me. She hardly looked at me, and I think she would have preferred I stayed behind her if I wasn't leading the way. So we walked most of the time nearly side-by-side.

I thought about telling her to leave. In my mind I screamed it, more than once. I imagined myself running her off. But she stayed by my side, no matter how loud my thoughts grew.

Despite the noise in my head, it was the quietest walk I have ever done.

Many ask questions. Some are too terrified or just don't want to talk, though that rarely lasts long. Others shout for help, or beg for another chance, or plead to the skies for forgiveness. No one just doesn't make a sound, though.

At one point we reached a wide stream. The dead can't cross water. She certainly tried, but as soon as hoof touched water, it wisped away like smoke. It doesn't hurt them—everything always comes back right away. It's certainly shocking the first few times, though. I waited patiently for her to stop, although I couldn't meet her eyes when she looked at me for an answer. I dipped my hoof into the water, and—me being alive—it remained in one piece. She was painfully hesitant, but eventually she managed to climb up on my back and I ferried her across. I don't know if she had closed her eyes during the short voyage, but it took her a moment to get back on her own hooves. I almost offered to carry her through it all, but the words stuck in my throat. So I led on.

As the sun dipped low in the sky and we had begun to reach the deeper parts of the forest, she started to get a small twitch. She must have been terrified. I still don't know why she tried to hide it from me. Most don't.

We climbed a steep hill that overlooked the forest at the top. Its peak was flat and slightly sandy. I reached for a vial to open up the hilltop when I looked back. I saw her silhouette against the sunset as she looked out on the woods. I let the vial alone.

We sat together and watched the sky for hours, not getting up until long after the sun sank and the stars came out. Her twitch had grown into a rough shake. I wanted to do something, say something, say anything to make her stop shaking. I wanted to be her hero, to hug her tight, tell her that she was going to be okay, and whisk her away somewhere where she would be safe, Celestia be damned.

But I couldn't. And I hated myself for that.

We had to press on. I had already kept her longer than I should have. I uncorked a vial and steadied myself when I felt a quaking hoof tug at my hood. My whole body seemed to seize as my face came into the moonlight. I couldn't bring myself to look at those eyes I knew so well as I spilled the vial and led her down the cavern. The ferry stallion strangely didn't stop me from boarding the boat with her. It dipped low in the swamp water with my living weight, causing some of the muddy murk to leech in between the aged planks. He cast off before I could rethink this, and I feared we would sink when we reached the center, but the old ferry held to the other side.

We disembarked, well past the point where shades can fend for themselves. Her shaking had calmed to a shiver, although I'm not sure if it was from us getting closer or from me being there with her. I hoped we weren't near yet. I wasn't sure if I would survive seeing her smile.

We crossed a rather dark, gray field and passed many wandering shades. She was becoming hesitant, unsure if she should stop here, but I pressed her to keep going.

It felt as if we had met the horizon three times over when we finally saw a soft glow in the distance. The hint of gold made my heart leap and my companion quickened her step. Soon we were racing over the dark hills, both of us laughing—she out of excitement, myself out of nervous terror. The light was beginning to add color to the grass, each hill a little brighter than the last. We reached an ashen knoll and practically flew to the top, where we stopped dead.

All I could see before us was stone. Great rock monoliths rose from the ground up high into the cavern, where the ceiling melted away into open air. We stood by a slab that had a sheet hanging from it, a veil so thin it looked to be a ghost itself. For the first time, I turned to my companion for answers. She had become brighter here, nearly as bright as she was in life. Her eyes were full of awe. And she looked happy.

We stood there together. She had stopped shaking. I thought I might start.

“But you’ll still be my BBBFF,” she muttered. It was a statement, not a question.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, but she nodded definitively before taking her first step through that veil.

My name is Sparrow, and I am a psychopomp.

Throughout history many different species of animals came to represent psychopomps. They have been popularly associated with horses, dogs, harts, and many different birds—including Sparrow's namesake.

The “prickly white flower” Celestia observes in the castle gardens is asphodel, genus *asphodelus*, which somewhat resembles a cluster of honeysuckle at the end of a grayish green stalk. Homer described this plant as thriving in the meadows of the underworld and ancient Greeks often planted them on graves. In classic language of flowers developed during the Victorian period, it loosely meant “my regrets follow you to the grave.”

Sparrow travels west to find the mouth of the underworld. Incidentally, the ancient Greeks believed that the entrance to Hades resided “out west,” past the Pillars of Heracles (now the Strait of Gibraltar, between Spain and Morocco).

The “red juice” they use to reveal the underworld entrance comes from pomegranate seeds. Pomegranates have a long history with ancient and antiquated cultures. In Egypt, they had medicinal value; in Greece, they were the “fruit of the dead” and play a prominent role in the myth of Persephone; in older Christian pieces of art, they came to represent suffering. They grow in the winter, a season generally associated with death, and readily yield their bright red juice, which is often compared to blood in poetry. They also stain like a bitch.

As for the air temperature, there have been many conflicting sources as to the temperature of the underworld (or its equivalent in different mythologies and religions). There is a famous academic essay that determines hell to be exothermic (thus hot), although Dante compromises by having temperate, hot, and frozen portions of hell.

The “castle” that underworld personnel reside in is a cross of the House of Hades (often placed deep in the underworld) and The Inferno's Limbo, which features a castle and is overall quite pleasant compared to the rest of hell.

The fields and rivers come from a number of ancient Greek and Roman sources, as well as Dante's Inferno, which in turn borrows from mythology. There's Tartarus, but also the Asphodel Meadows for neutral souls and the Elysian Fields for the virtuous. There are five major rivers of the Greek Underworld, including Lethe (whose waters would cleanse the soul of memories) and Styx (whom the gods would swear by if making an unbreakable oath).

The dead in classical myth tend to be unable to interact with the living and the above world. Except when they can. Seriously, it's confusing. In *The Odyssey* they can drink animal blood, yet Aeneas can't hold his dead wife. Similar contradictions can be found in just about all myths and lore concerning the dead, such as modern notions of poltergeists and apparitions.

The dead also tend to be unable to cross water unaided in many myths and legends. In Greek myth, the body of water that Charon ferries souls across is one of many obstacles that keeps the right souls in and the wrong ones out. "Corpse roads" in medieval Europe took bodies from the churches to the burial sites and often went over streams, possibly to keep the "spirit" from coming back and haunting places and people from its previous life.

Virgil, full name Publius Vergilius Maro, served as Dante's guide in the underworld. One of his works, the *Aeneid*, features a stylized visit to the Underworld for Aeneas to consult with the dead.

Yew trees have strong connotations with death, especially in Great Britain and France. Old lore spoke of yews thriving in graveyards, where they leached off the bodies of the dead. They are still common sights in graveyards today. In literature, Lord Voldemort used a yew wand, and the graveyard he makes his reappearance in also features a yew. These trees are also extremely toxic, especially to horses and other barnyard animals.

In the language of flowers, white blossomed clover means "I promise." Rainflower, or zephyranthes, means "I will never forget you." It's worth noting that many parts of the latter plant are currently considered toxic.

Dante Alighieri had a similar experience on Charon's boat in *The Inferno*, although more than mud filled his underworld swamp.