

A Paper Past
By Nullh

A draft blew through the winding corridor as Princess Celestia made her way down it, the alicorn's white coat glowing in the dim light. She nestled the scrolls delivered that morning under her wing as she had another task in mind, finding a library long forgotten by many residents of Castle Canterlot.

At a nondescript section of wall Celestia stopped. When she was sure nopony was in sight she shut her eyes in concentration, horn glowing with a faint aura. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the wall began to change from the white stone of its neighbours into an old, gnarled wood banded by grey metal. With a last stirring of effort she forced the newly appeared door open and stepped inside.

Immediately the smell of dust and old books assaulted her. Cobwebs hung from the many bookshelves lining the walls. Every flat surface in the small circular room was caked in a patina of dust and some of the higher shelves were beginning to sag under the weight of the heavy tomes they supported.

It was something her sister had said that had spurred Celestia's trip to her old library; a recollection of their childhood and a name the princess was ashamed to admit that she had long forgotten about. The return of her dear Luna had awakened feelings in Celestia that had lain dormant for centuries, memories of family and belonging.

It took the princess some time to search the decrepit shelves for the book she needed, an ancient tome bound in wood. She placed the book on a crumbling lectern and stared at the cover, its title unreadable to all but the few scholars still versed in the old tongues.

The old bindings creaked as she gingerly opened the book. Row after row of tightly spaced muzzlewritng filled the yellowed pages. Celestia smiled, flicking forward through the account to a page marker placed there many years ago.

"Mulberry..." whispered Celestia, smiling as she began to read...

...I remember the night well, for I was lucky enough to be there on the day the world changed. It began with a birth.

I stood at the hooves of Great King Utherd as he stared with milky eyes at the dark lands surrounding the fastness. The once mighty stallion was beginning to show his advanced years, his head hung low as if examining his cracked old hooves, his splintered horn nearly touching the parapet. It was a sad sight seeing a once mighty warrior reduced to a crumbling old nag.

My young mind found it hard to reconcile the pitiful figure at my side with the stories of the noble stallion that had used wit and strength of arms to claim his dominion over the other Unicorn Kings. It seemed like any last vestiges of his greatness had left him, along with his youth.

A fork of lightning and peal of thunder interrupted my reverie then. The sudden light in the black sky illuminated the roiling clouds in the far distance.

"The damn pegasi grow bolder. Soon they will dare to strike the smaller kingdoms," snarled the King.

"We will be ready for them, my Lord," said the hulking grey unicorn standing at the right hoof of the old stallion, dark metal barding strapped to his flanks. His horn had once been shattered and was bound with the same ugly iron as he clothed himself in.

"What with? Earth ponies," Utherd spat the words out. "Barely capable labourers and worse soldiers. Or the unicorn kingdoms? Too concerned with holding onto their meagre power." His dim eyes narrowed. "The age of the unicorn is ending, Aggramayne. Soon those winged abominations will tread our castles and holdfasts calling themselves 'Lord' and 'King'."

"Not while I draw breath, sire," the warhorse growled before both fell silent.

I waited on the cold stone, the chill wind cutting through my coat, and I struggled to stay upright through the shivering it set in my young bones. My usual post in the kitchen had been taken by another pony that night; instead I'd been assigned as the King's messenger, possibly due to the fact that I used to be quite the sprinter, but more probably because I knew when to keep my mouth shut.

A scream split the night then, but no response came from the King, save a wary drawing of breath. We had been waiting on the ramparts since the pale orange sun had sunk below the horizon, and many such cries had rung around the thick castle walls that night.

"The mare had better bear me a colt, Aggramayne. Ever since Maredred..." the King trailed off, his stony eyes glaring into the night.

"He was a fine warhorse, my Lord. Without his skill we would have lost Hoovesbury to the Trottingham upstarts," said the warhorse.

"Yes, and what a fine trade that was," the King snapped at Aggramayne, flecks of spittle flying from his lips. "The life of my heir for a miserable scrap of land-"

A clattering of hooves interrupted the pair. A young unicorn mare, her yellow coat steaming in the night air, came skidding onto the parapet. She was not one of the Lady's servants; otherwise

I would have recognised her. "My Lord," she bowed deeply.

"Speak, mare. What of my wife?"

"There is a complication. The foal will not come, my Lord. Without magickal help we may lose the mother and newborn."

"Curse that physician!" growled the King, giving me a kick in the flank. "Colt, go and bring Maregaine. No doubt the blasted witch will be waiting for the call."

Attentive to the word of my King, I skidded off at full gallop down the stairwell, through the courtyard and out of the gate, stopping only briefly to grab an oil lamp.

The hut stood on a grassy hill not far from the imposing walls of Canterlot, a ramshackle amalgam of old tree and scavenged wood. Symbols representing the sun were daubed onto the walls in brightly coloured paint, and wind chimes made from hollow sticks and metal fragments drifted in the cold night winds. The lone lantern hanging at its door lent the place a disturbing feel.

At the time Lady Maregaine was one of the few remaining worshippers of the old sun god in Canterlot. Utherd had driven most of them away, discouraging any mention of the 'old ways' years before my foaling, yet Maregaine was allowed her small abode outside the castle walls. The belief in the old sun god who brought the daytime persisted amongst the lowborn, despite being discouraged by royal decree. Maregaine acted as their ersatz priestess.

I shouted for the witch as soon as I believed I was in earshot. Although the lamp clasped in my teeth muffled the cry, the door to the shack was immediately flung open and a deep purple unicorn came barrelling from the light within. Her long white mane flowed behind her and the mark of a pale sun on her flank seemed to leave a brilliant after-image in the night. She called after me to follow. I skidded to a halt and quickly turned about to follow the galloping witch.

The return to Canterlot was quick and near silent, the only sounds were our hoofbeats on the sodden meadow and the tinkle of the fetishes tied into the witch's mane. Upon reaching the gates, Maregaine immediately headed for the queen's chamber, unhindered by the guardponies save for a few unsavoury looks.

Lacking any other distraction and too agitated to sleep, I cantered around the grey courtyard, waiting for someone to notice me and set me to some menial task. Anything to take my mind off the fate of my queen.

The cold wind whipped through the castle, carrying with it the screams and moans of my Lady

Norwhinna. I stamped my hooves to try and regain some feeling, but in my few scant years I had grown used to the cold. Such was the lot of an earth pony in Canterlot, I am afraid to say.

I spent some time in that courtyard, listening to the sound of my own hooves on the cobbles and the increasingly desperate cries of my Lady. My own discomfort at the distress in her voice would be nothing to match hers, I knew, but the thought of my mistress suffering sent an uneasy feeling to my stomach.

Presently the queen's shouting stopped to be replaced with another cry.

"Come back you foalish mare!" The commanding voice of Maregaine broke my reverie.

I spied the same unicorn as had reported to the King earlier fleeing along an upper floor, away from Norwhinna's chamber. Save the hoofbeats of the mare there was no other sound. Not a cry.

Unsure what to do I made my way back to my stable bay. The box of blackened wood smelled of old hay and several other old earth ponies of the court were already asleep in their stalls, their snores rattling around the large chamber. My mind began to wander. Was my Lady dead? What of her child? I hunched down on the meagre straw of my bed. If she had passed, what would become of me? There, in the cold, creaking barn I wept for my queen.

My sleep was fitful at best but, unknown to me at the time, the all too brief repose allowed some preparation for the ordeal ahead.

I woke with a start as a strong muzzle was rudely pushed into my flank. Blinking the dried tears from my eyes I saw a pink unicorn standing over me. Her green mane was cropped short and partially hidden under the cheap iron helmet of a guardpony, a sturdy lamp hung from her padded saddle.

"I said get up! Your queen needs you."

I slowly rose and yawned. The sick feeling in my stomach had still not subsided.

"Damn it colt, come here!" The severe pink pony beckoned me over and hastily began attaching a tightly wrapped bundle over my back and securing it at my flanks, adding a folded blanket and saddlebags to cover it. The weight was more than I was used to carrying, and I felt my back and haunches quiver under the load. Forgetting my manners around a unicorn I began to protest.

"Keep quiet. Stretch your legs," the guardpony's horn glowed with a faint white light as she lifted a load onto her own back. What I had taken to be a large hessian sack resolved itself to be the

body of a pony, unmoving. The pink guard strained a little under the weight, but the corded muscle at her shoulder and stifle held the burden with ease. I could not see her load's face, the pony's entire body being roughly wrapped in the coarse cloth, but I could make out the slight motion of the pony's breathing.

"Listen, colt. We are going to walk out of Canterlot. You will not ask questions, you will follow me, and you will not stop."

Before I could say a word, the mare had set off out of the stable at a brisk pace. Not knowing what else to do I followed, still foalishly in the dark about what I was becoming party to. Orders were orders.

Crossing the courtyard I was milling about in earlier, I spotted the flank mark of the guardpony. Although it was hard to see at first due to her haggard passenger, I managed to make out the shape of a shield surrounding a sun detailed in gold. I felt a little pang of jealousy, her vibrant colours and vivid marking stood in stark contrast to my muted grey coat and blue mane, as well as highlighting my shamefully blank flank.

Our exit from the castle was surprisingly uneventful. My pink companion made several excuses to guards about the pony she carried, a vagrant, a disease stricken pony. The guardponies didn't question these explanations, and seemed to show a modicum of deference to her.

The meadow covered the land that lead down from Castle Canterlot's precarious but defensible location on the cliff edge to a well trodden cart track and the dark forest beyond, split only by the path leading to the castle gates. The light rains that fell during the day had left the turf damp and slippery, but gave the air a sweet smell, the better to take my mind off the confusing events of the night.

The pair of us had maintained a brisk pace towards the road, our path lit by lanterns placed on wooden posts at regular intervals. Any attempt I made to discern our goal was quickly silenced by a word from the guardpony, her face an ashen look of concentration. The silence was only broken as we had reached the muddy cart track.

"Sunsinger!" The shout came from a guardpony galloping down the path behind us. I turned to look as two as two of the guards I remembered from the gates bore down on us.

"Run!" Shouted the pink unicorn, breaking into a gallop of her own, heading across open pasture to the thick woodland I could only just discern some 300 paces away. Panic gripped me; I stood still, turning my head from my pink escort to the fast approaching guards. I had guessed we were performing some illicit task and shamefully my first instinct was to stop and submit to the authority of our pursuers. A further shout from my companion spurred my legs into

movement.

I leaned into the run, my small legs pumping against the soft ground as quickly as I could make them. The unicorn was leaving me behind. My heart pounded in my chest, I closed my eyes and gulped ragged breaths as I willed my legs to move faster. It was no good, I could feel my strength waning with each hoofbeat.

Suddenly I felt a blow to my side. Had something hit the pack I was carrying? No, the pack itself had moved. I made the mistake of turning to look. The bundle was writhing at the straps that bound it to my flank.

I let out a small gasp, and at that moment lost my footing. Yelping in pain I stumbled and shuddered to a stop on my fore-knees, my muzzle pressed roughly against the damp turf.

I pulled my head up, nose filled with the scent of earth and torn grass, bracing myself to run again. Before I could raise myself from my awkward position I felt weight place itself heavily on my back.

"Now then colt, let's have a look at those saddlebags." The first guard was an orange earth pony, heavy set, his chest heaving from the gallop. I struggled to turn and face my captor head on, but could not free myself from the restraining hoof. The second dark blue guardpony with a face like thunder obliged me by stepping to my fore. His armour was old, and his horn was short and pathetic, protruding only a short way from his crimson mane. He was obviously no great magick user.

"Don't struggle. You'll just make this harder for all of us." I remember his words and their suggested threat to this day. I had been beaten before, and idly threatened; such things wash off a low born earth pony's back. This was different. The intent in the guard's voice caused my skin to crawl. I began to fear for my life.

With no conception of what I had done to deserve such treatment I simply squeezed my eyes shut. My breath caught in my throat, turning to a rough sob. I felt a tug as one of the guards began to untie the bindings holding my load.

The pressure from the hoof on my back became unbearable. I let out a cry, opening my eyes. The orange guard had unwrapped some of the bundle. From the opening he had made sprouted the head of a tiny foal, its newborn eyes blinking sleepily, a light pink mane laying flat against its white coat. The tiniest horn on its head indicated its unicorn heritage. The foal, still wet from birth, didn't struggle or cry, unlike most other newborns I'd seen the mares cooing over. The little pony bucked its shoulders, dislodging the rest of the old cloth. The guards and I stared, disarmed by what we saw. A small pair of stubby, white, unformed wings sprouted from the unicorn's back. As if appreciating the audience the foal looked at me quizzically, before folding the appendages flat to its sides.

"What-" began the blue guardpony. His sentence was cut short by two solidly shod hooves connecting with his temple. The metal of his helmet rang for a second as his legs gave way and he fell to the side. I breathed deeply as his hoof was removed from my back.

"Walk away Lancer," my pink companion had returned. She planted herself over the foal and I, lowering her head, horn glowing. Her passenger was still draped over her strong back.

"We have orders Sunsinger. This," the blue stallion gestured at the newborn still resting across my back, "thing cannot be allowed to live."

"And what of your queen? You know what fate awaits her now if we bring her back to Utherd." I'm not sure if I had really known the identity of the pink unicorn's passenger and chosen to ignore it, or if I really was so blinkered in my youth.

"The King has given his order. Back down now and I'll see you are well treated."

"I won't submit to you, no matter what. I will do what I must to protect my queen." She narrowed her eyes. "Whatever I must. This is bigger than you know." Her horn glowed fiercer than ever.

The blue guardpony seemed to weigh his options in silence for a few seconds before bowing his head in defeat.

"I yield to you, Sunsinger. But I do so knowing my life is forfeit, as is yours," he said, never raising his gaze above the turf.

The next words Sunsinger spoke were the first time I heard compassion in her voice. It was at that moment when I began to understand the nature of my protector.

"I understand, and I'm sorry it had to be you, Lancer. Run. File your horn and hide amongst the earth ponies. By the blessings of the old god, pray Aggramayne doesn't find you."

The blue pony raised his head and held the gaze of Sunsinger for a moment. A look of regret crossed his features before he turned and set off into the night, leaving nothing but the vapour of his breath. My pink guardian stepped over to the fallen guard. His eyes were rolled back into his head, but he was still breathing slowly, regularly.

The mare sagged in what seemed like relief.

"Sunsinger." I whispered her name, without realising it.

The mare turned to me, anger in her eyes. "Yes?"

"I-I just thought I should know your name," I stammered, shocked at the fearsome look in her eyes.

This comment seemed to clear her countenance slightly. "Can you walk?" she asked.

I stood. Painful quivers ran through my muscles. For a second I thought I would collapse again. Taking a few tentative steps I nodded my assent.

"Come. It's not far to the tree line. We'll find somewhere to rest."

Sunsinger gently wrapped the foal in its rough covering and secured it to my back once more, the silent filly simply blinked at her, tilting its head. Wordlessly the guard nudged my passenger and me towards the trees, my legs quivering from exhaustion and adrenaline.

We took up a position some distance in from the edge of the tree line and my companion extinguished her lamp. It's hard to imagine how dark the night truly was back before Luna and Celestia created the Moon and stars, an inky black that seemed to press up against your muzzle like a mask.

Grateful for the rest, I happily waited for an hour or so while the strength returned to my poor legs. No lights came from the castle in our direction, which assured Sunsinger that we were no longer being followed. She led us deeper into the woods at a slow pace, feeling our way in the dark. This part of the forest was wild and unmapped as unicorns tended to avoid the deeper woods, something about the way nature persisted without magic seemed to disturb them. Beside me I heard Sunsinger breathe in deeply, the slightest light of her horn illuminating the concentration on her face. A second later a spark ignited in the oil lamp she carried.

Spiderwebs hung like glass as frost gripped their strands. Overhead through gaps in the trees I could make out the empty blackness of the night sky. I held some fear of the woods, tales told of odd creatures making their home in the trees ready to turn a wandering foal into a hasty dinner. All the better for a hiding place I supposed, as long as we didn't fall foul of the wood's inhabitants on our trek into its depths. Dread still gripped me though. My young mind had started making sense of the crime that Sunsinger was committing, and had made me a part of. If we were found by one of Utherd's guard now our fates would be sealed.

"I'm sorry," Sunsinger said suddenly, as if seeing the grave look I wore. The comment surprised me. The voice it was delivered in was soft, caring; so different from her half-shouted commands.

"Sorry for what?" My breath hung in the cold air for a second before she answered.

"I'm sorry I left you behind," she turned to me. "And I'm sorry I've pulled you into this. If I could

have carried the foal and her mother safely I would have."

A germ of anger rose up in my mind, but it was quashed when I saw the regret in the pink pony's eyes. I was sold as a foal and never knew my parents, nor had any pony shown much concern for me before. This strong pony addressing me in this way was strange, but a warm feeling spread through my chest, and for the first time in my short years it felt like someone cared about me, pitiful as I was.

"It's all right," I said in a quiet voice. I wasn't sure what to say next, she seemed to want some kind of validation. "I want to help my queen." The truth was that I'd never felt quite as many conflicting emotions as I did at that moment, all I knew was that I wasn't being treated like property, kicked at and ignored.

She locked eyes with me for a second. I wasn't sure if I'd somehow managed to insult her, but moments later her face broke into a wry smile.

"You're a good foal," she said. "Let's rest for a while, eh?"

She led us to a clearing. The ground was thick with old fallen leaves that deadened our hoofbeats. Sunsinger shrugged her load onto a pile of the soft leaves; the hessian wrapped pony falling from her back. Fussing over the fallen figure she straightened limbs and pulled back the hood of the cowl concealing the pony face, confirming my suspicions.

It was a brilliant white unicorn, her coat shining in the dim light. She was unmistakable; her flank mark a silver sceptre set with a red gem and her normally pristine purple mane now a matted mess. Sunsinger continued to free the pony from the tattered hessian cloak, its breaths coming in short bursts.

"Queen Norwhinna," I said under my breath, bowing reflexively.

The queen's eyes opened a fraction, revealing startling lilac eyes.

"Who..." she began.

"Sunsinger, my Lady. You're safe. This is..." Sunsinger paused, realising she had never asked my name.

I was about to offer it when recognition began to cross the tired features of the queen. She tried to rise to her feet, but had no strength. "My foal," she whispered. "Where is she? I demand to see..."

"She is safe, my Lady," said Sunsinger, beckoning me over to her. She loosened the straps securing the strange pony to me, removing the blanket and saddlebags she had used as

concealment for the foal. She carefully levitated the calm creature over to the fallen queen, squinting with concentration. It waved its wings experimentally before pushing up against its mother's neck and closing its tiny eyes. Sunsinger and I stared in silence as the mother nuzzled the foal gently, ignoring us onlookers.

We stared in silence for a good few minutes until Sunsinger whispered "What is it?"

"An alicorn," replied a voice from the underbrush. I am not too proud to say the unexpected voice caused my heart to skip several beats. I turned in dismay, but Sunsinger wheeled about head down, ready to charge.

A rustling in the greenery at the edge of the clearing revealed the familiar white maned form of Maregaine, her deep purple coat seeming to disappear into the darkness of the woods beyond. As she approached Sunsinger straightened and dipped her head in recognition.

"Lady Maregaine, I'm sorry, I did not recognise you." The harsh edge had returned to the guard's voice.

"Nonsense, friend. By the blessings of the old god I would rather you be quick to charge than quick to trust in such times!" Her soft blue eyes closed as she nodded to my companion. "I realise what you have sacrificed this day, and I know my thanks is small recompense, but you have it."

"It was an honour, my Lady," said Sunsinger, bowing deeply.

"And my thanks to you as well, little colt," the witch gestured to me.

"Mulberry Pie," I said, since no one seemed to be asking.

"I'm sorry?" The witch looked confused. In hindsight I was a little short with her, but I was tired and still a little scared.

"My name is Mulberry Pie, and I'd rather like to know what I've been roped into," I stamped my hoof with as much indignation as a tiny colt could muster in front of the well respected pony. A couple of hours ago I would have kept my head down and shut up in front of my unicorn betters, but I felt like I'd been through enough strife that night to earn an explanation.

Both Maregaine and Sunsinger looked at me blankly. I felt the anger drain from me and be replaced with a creeping feeling of horror. I'd talked back! Good servants don't talk back! The two must have seen my expression change, as Maregaine smiled warmly and Sunsinger chuckled, moving to stand at my side.

"Awfully indignant for a little colt, aren't you?" said the pink guardpony mussing my mane with a

fore-hoof. I shied away with a wan smile, unsure how to respond to this simple act of friendship. I was about to respond when Sunsinger silenced me with a meaningful look. She gestured with a hoof towards Maregaine, who had knelt down in front of our dishevelled queen.

"How do you feel, sister?"

Sister? I looked at Sunsinger.

"Did you know?" I whispered. She shook her head, but her gaze told me that more questions might result in dire consequences.

"I'm so very tired," the queen's eyelids lulled heavily. "I am glad you're here, sister. I need to tell you that I am so sorry for..."

Maregaine shushed her, and began to cover the queen and her foal with the blanket I had been carrying. "There will be time later. For now you should sleep." I suspected her plea wasn't needed as Norwhinna's eyes were already closed and her chest rising and falling in time with that of her strange foal. Just as sleep took her Norwhinna uttered five words, giving a name to the first of two ponies that would that would shape the future of Equestria.

Maregaine watched her sister slumber for a few moments before standing and returning to the guard and me. "The queen will recover with rest, her foal appears healthy. Tomorrow we must travel for Trottingham. The longer we stay in Utherd's lands, the longer their lives are in danger." The witch shook her head sadly, the trinkets woven into her mane gently rattling. "We could have avoided such a flight if only she had listened to my warnings, instead of that foal of a husband."

"We tried our best, my Lady. She's safe now at least," interrupted Sunsinger, seeing the anger spread on Maregaine's face.

"You're right, you're right." The witch glanced down at me. "Now, little Mulberry Pie, I believe you wanted to know why we are out here tonight, defying the order of the King." She sat down on her haunches, I followed suit.

"The sun god once walked among us. He ruled as our king, from a Castle Canterlot now long destroyed and replaced with the monstrosity you see today. It is said that unicorn, pegasus and earth pony lived in harmony then, and the sun god's true name was known to all." The witch looked around the clearing before continuing, noting that Sunsinger was slowly patrolling the perimeter, eyes always moving across the dim forest.

"Those times are long past though, the sun god disappeared and this land has since fallen to ruin and war. Pony now fights pony, and the sun grows dimmer by the day. The ancient texts speak of a time when the sun god's reign will truly be over, his body finally succumbing to the

millennia he has spent watching over us. Should he pass on, the sun will never rise and we shall have darkness everlasting."

The thought of an eternal night filled me with dread. Ponies seldom ventured out in the dark, the impenetrable blackness making it difficult to travel, not to mention the creatures that roamed the wilds whilst the sun was down.

"Fret not though, little colt," Maregaine continued, smiling at my concern. "There will be two sisters born to an unsuspecting mother, they will be neither unicorn, pegasus or earth pony. Our prophecies tell us that they will take the sun god's crown and unite Equestria again." She smiled and looked at the sleeping filly. "Can you imagine it, Mulberry Pie? An end to war, an end to slavery. You've had a hoof in setting events in motion that will change the world, little colt. Is that not worth defying the word of an old, deranged King?"

I listened, mouth agape, to the tale. It was all I could do not to stare at the sleeping form of the foal. Surely this tiny creature couldn't be the basis of such a preposterous story, I thought. But looking at its form, a creature never seen before, and remembering its unnerving calmness I began to believe. If only a little.

"I-I suppose so," I said.

"You should be proud, you have shown bravery rare in such a young pony. For now though you will have to travel with us until we can find somewhere safe to leave you," Maregaine continued.

I was flattered and stunned in equal measure. Not knowing what to say I simply sat in silence, my mind coming to terms with the events of the past few hours.

"I think it's time you got some sleep, Mulberry," said Sunsinger, looking over from her patrol. Her voice had once again adopted a softer tone. "Maregaine and I will stand guard until morning."

There, with the dark pressing in against our little circle of light, two mares stood guard over the queen and her newborn as they slept. I simply watched the odd creature and echoed the words my queen had spoken earlier.

"Her name is Princess Celestia."

Celestia replaced the bookmark in the thick old tome and sighed, looking up at the old library. So many years had slipped by. So many generations of ponies had been born and passed on since the day of her foaling. She didn't remember that day, nor too many days that had gone between those early years and now.

Not forgotten though, she thought. The alicorn looked up at the arrayed books. The newer volumes were slimmer, she could no longer ask a pony to chronicle the mundane comings and goings of running a kingdom, but she still found a way to add to her little library. From under her wing she levitated the scroll delivered that morning, gently unfurling it as she did.

*Dear Princess Celestia,
Today I've learned that...*

She smiled at the note, placing it carefully into box filled with numerous other scrolls.

"I think it's about time we started a volume of your own, my faithful student," she said to nobody but the dusty books.