

## The Horse Strike Back

By Makena Vass

We all withhold our excitement as the calendar is flipped. Everyone knows that you shouldn't turn the calendar the night before the new month, but here we do. It is a glorious thing.

No one knows when the tradition started- either of them, but we do know that one must be heavily punished and the other must be heavily celebrated. Turning the calendar assures certain doom for the day that follows.

"Good night," Stacey bids with a smile, her fingers still fresh from doing the dangerous deed. "Sleep well everyone!"

She turns out the light and slides the door shut, the metal screeching against the wall as it always has.

*Bang!*

The door is closed. We're alone.

"It's about time! I've been waiting for this all year. To think- I've been so good at all my shows this year. Someone might take me to the vet!" Polar cries.

"You're the only one that likes the vet," moans Farrah.

"They give me treats!"

I stamp my hoof against the sawdust before striding out towards the door. The usual contenders are already conversating over the stall doors, heads hanging out and over the wooden sheets that keep us confined.

Polar, the green Thoroughbred who would eat a hoof pick if someone dared him to. Farrah, who only participates because we need someone to keep us on track and committed. Keeper, a little mini horse with the most evil sense of humor encased in a horse that I've met. Remi, the lesson horse who saves all of his pent-up anger for one day. And me. Lily.

"Alright," I declare. "This year is going to be legendary. The humans will hate us and might skimp on the treats for the next few weeks, but *remember*, they deserve it! We've been good all year. Well, with the exception of Keeper."

"Shut your hay hole, you can be demonic too," Keeper snorts. All I can see are her ears peeking over the top of her door.

"That's not the point," I say. "Anyway, let's get started."

The door grinds again in the morning, letting in dusty rays of sunlight. Stacey flips the lights back on and wishes us a good morning.

I lift my head up at her voice.

Food.

And the stall doors. Oh, dirty metal bits, the stall doors.

"Who's ready for breakfast?" Stacey asks, walking down the aisleway, hips swinging and her head bobbing until they aren't.

“Rem-rem? Why is your door open?” She scratches Remi’s chestnut face. He leans deep into her hand, loving every second of it.

“Silly boy. I must’ve left your door unlocked by accident. At least you’re good.”

She locks the door back and turns around.

“Wait, Lily, is your stall unlocked as well? And yours, Farrah?”

She goes around, locking all us culprits back in.

I whinny out to Polar, “You were supposed to lock them!”

“I did!” he says. “I thought I did.”

“Idiot. He can see a ghost a mile away but can’t slip a key in a lock,” snorts Keeper.

“She’s on to us now.”

Stacey heads over to the calendar, which is perfectly set in our view. She taps it with her fingers twice and sighs. She mumbles something that none of us can hear, but there is an evident eye roll.

“She’s definitely onto us, I’m so going to the vet for this!” Polar says.

“Maybe they’ll check his brain cell count,” Keeper moans.

“Be quiet, guys. She already knows what’s up. We’ve got to be stealthy, or she might just cancel the rides today.”

“I can think of plenty evil things to do on the cross ties, if you like,” Keeper says.

“Nobody rides me, anyway.”

That's true, it's hard to ride a miniature pony whose body weight consists mostly of fluff and fat.

Stacey proceeds to feed us, giving all of us with unlocked stall suspicious looks. I think she skimped on the normal carrot she adds to my feed, but that's alright. Us horses get one day of revenge and today happens to be that day.

After feeding, Stacey goes into the tack room to retrieve our halters. Angry snorts blast from the room a second later. Polar laughs like a suspicious colt.

“Shut up!” I repeat.

“Sorry. But it's so funny!” the grey exclaims.

Stacey storms down the aisle and leans into my stall. I'm still finishing breakfast and I was starved, so her rant is the least of my concerns. It is funny, though. But I won't dare say that near Polar.

“*Who,*” she says, “took all the girths?”

The girths are kept on the wall, draped over a big stick sprouting from it. There's no security at all and the tack room door's handle broke off years ago. Stacey should really consider fixing that because, although most of us are too big to squeeze in the pint-sized stall doorway, Keeper happens to be unusually small.

“I'd better text everyone. Completely forgot it was *that* day. How do you guys know? Every year, I swear. Do you keep track of time?”

She should consider disregarding our ability to track time and regarding her ability to track girths. She will be spending a good portion of her day digging through saw dust uncovering

the hidden girths and later brushing them off. Wouldn't want us to get rubs from saw dust, after all.

Besides, it'll be good for us all to get fresh shavings. By the time Stacey's done finding all the tack, she'll definitely need to refresh our stalls. No one ever uses the old shavings stuffed in the back of the pile in the little barn where they're stored, this is the chance to finally use them. It'll be good for everyone. Just maybe not Stacey.

"Does anyone else have this problem? Or is it just my horses that are crazy?" Stacey asks, looking at Polar.

"IT'S JUST YOUR HORSES STACEY, I'M SURE!" exclaims Polar. Next to me, Keeper rams her head into the wall and sighs.

Stacey comforts the big baby with some pats, smiles and treats. There's no way he could have unlocked the doors. There's no way his extra-long and flexible lips could have easily manipulated a lock.

We're all led out to our fields with breakfast fresh on our stomachs. The boys are led to one field, I and the other mares to another. Keeper and her friend Goat have their own field.

Farah and I are lucky enough to be in the same field. We're even luckier to be in a field without Polar.

"He almost gave us away!" Farrah says.

I swish my tail. "I don't think the people speak our language. If they did though, yeah. We would be screwed."

“I know that. Why else does James keep giving me apples? I’ve told him a million times, I like carrots.” Farrah’s blue tinted ears tip backwards.

I nod. “Yeah. I’ve made it pretty clear to Zip that I hate dressage.”

Farrah nickers. “I don’t think you can bypass that as an eventer.”

“Can’t we just get to the cross-country part?”

The field gate swings open. “Speak of the horse trailer,” I say.

A red head approaches me, a halter slung over her shoulder and bright blue eyes radiating the word *dressage day*. She’s so predictable. Whenever we do flatwork she has an unruly look in her eyes and a vibrant grin. She picked the wrong day to attempt such an act.

“Remember?” Farrah asks.

“Of course,” I reply.

Zip gets close enough to where she could pat me when I balk at her arm as she tries to slip the halter over my ears.

“Lily-”

The sound of mine and Farrah’s hooves cut her off. We bolt to the very end of the field where there is a convenient pond. In the summer, us horses are locked in the front end of the field while the people go swimming. Sometimes, we accompany them and sometimes, we enjoy the pond on our own. It isn’t horribly deep, only to my chest after a rain. But Zip is in the same category as Keeper. Short.

The water is frigid at first, but once we've submerged ourselves, it isn't as bad. We wait and conversate while Zip mopes down towards us. She drags her toes almost as bad as I do in an extended trot during a dressage test.

"Lily! Come here, girl! Treat?" Zip taunts, her boots at the edge of the pond.

Oh. A treat. A molasses treat. I like those. A lot.

Farrah nips my neck, taking some of my black and white mane with her. "Snap out of it, this is business."

"Right," I assure her. "All concentration is on planting my hooves deep into this pond."

"Good girl. You'd be a fine dressage horse if you applied your concentration in that arena."

"I'm good, thanks."

Zip shakes the treat in the air, waving it, jumping up and down with it. She begs and begs. Then, she looks at the barn. Then at me. Then at the girth she keeps wrapped around her arm.

"Oh. It's *that* day."

Took her long enough to make that epiphany.

She sighs and touches her boots to the water. She sighs again and proceeds, squeaking as water floods her boots and drenches her clothes until she is sopping wet. Dancing on her toes, she prances closer, her hands lifted over the water and her core squeezed tight. She might make a better dressage horse than me.

By the time she has piaffed over to us, the water has gone cold around our legs again. Farrah and I meet eyes. And bolt out of the pond, making sure to leave extra-large waves for Zip. We gallop all the way to the front of the field.

Zip returns with a wilted expression. Her lips are nailed together, and her eyes are narrowed. Best of all, water droplets wander down loose bits of her hair, staining her face as they fall. We succeeded in wave-making.

“I hate this day,” she moans. “But it’s payback, right? Just one day, right?”

I bob my head and finally let her halter me. Farrah whinnies to me as I leave, “Success!”

Meanwhile, I can hear Polar cackling from the other end of the other field on the other side of the barn.

I’m good while Zip tacks me. She is a good rider and owner, so I’ll spare her the wrath of my teeth. Farrah thinks it would be a good idea for me to give Zip a little nip, but I’d rather not go as far as to leave a permanent mark on her. Our revenge is all in the spirit of humor, not cruelty. However, it does bring me pleasure to see Zip drag herself into the unlockable tack room to change into dry clothes. It gets even better when Stacey whips around the corner, pats me on the nose, and proceeds to the tack room. They both shriek when the door is opened.

“She went into the pond?” Stacey gasps.

“Yeah. And managed to persuade me into following her.” Zip says, dressed now.

“I locked the gate to the pond last night,” Stacey says.

They both give me a sideways glance. What? Just because Farrah and I figured out how to open that gate this morning doesn’t mean we’re bad horses every day.



“It’s a good thing it’s warmer today, or else you’d freeze,” Stacey continues.

“It’s plenty cold, trust me. I’m going to towel dry Lily.”

“Have fun with that. But try to be quick, Remi has a lesson in an hour, if you hurry, you’ll have the ring to yourself for a bit.”

Zip nods, her red hair falling over her face.

She finishes towelng me, scrubbing deep into my painted coat, working extra hard on the white patches to remove the dirt I’ve collected. When she bridles me, she repeats our normal routine of kissing my little pink snip over my nose.

We’re both set to ride. The arena remains Remi-free, although a car has begun to roll up the driveway.

Farrah whinnies from the mare field, reminding me once again what day it is. I call back in assurance. I have a plan.

Zip never holds the reins when she rolls down my stirrups. We’ve known each other so long that mostly, I oblige to standing still. Even when she checks the girth. I hate the girth.

As usual, the reins go slack against my neck as Zip works on the finishing touches to the saddle. First, she goes to the girth and grips one of the billets. I don’t like that. In fact, I really hate it.

Zip is smart enough to back off, even though I would never hurt her.

I let out a wild buck. That feels good. All the muscles in my back stretch in a new way and it feels like I’ve tapped into a fresher side of myself. So, I keep doing it, bucking, bucking, bucking, bucking! It’s wonderful. I rock back and forth, on and off my heels until I’m dizzy.

Then, I see the fence. Dressage is for ponies not named Lily. Lily likes to jump big things. So, this Lily charges down the arena fence. The reins remain over my neck, which will work nicely for the jump. One, two three. Perfect striding! I liftoff and soar over the large obstacle, the wind tickling my ears for a few heart beats. Then, I've landed, taking on all my weight once more and galloping away, across Stacey's front yard. Freedom!

*Ack!* Not freedom. Stacey materializes from nowhere, waving her hands in the air and baring her teeth. I don't like that. So, I grind to a halt, dirt splashing my face.

Polar screams triumphantly somewhere in the distance.

"Dirty pony," Stacey says, snagging my reins.

I willingly go back in the arena. That was enough. I feel better now. Zip mounts me and lets me canter in a huge, fast stride for a bit before we start the dreaded dressage when Remi joins us.

The big bay horse keeps mumbling "I hate this, I hate this," as he trots around in a circle for the millionth time. Zip helps me balance through a half pass.

While Zip and I cool out is when the real action happens.

Remi suddenly screams, "I HATE CIRCLES!" and stops in his tracks. His little rider tumbles to the ground and lays like a rag doll.

Zip and I halt as the girl's trainer comforts her and then tells her to get her butt back in the saddle.

"That felt better," he says.

"You could've hurt her," I say.

Then he starts panicking, breathing hard, eyes the size of an apple. “I could have, couldn’t I? I’m a horrible horse.”

“No, you aren’t. Everyone needs a day off from being a good horse. Just be good to the riders.”

“You dragged yours into a cold pond.”

I say no more and we leave the arena.

Farrah’s owner, James, is busy tacking her up when we enter the barn. We gossip a bit and laugh about my bucking, but Stacey stops all the commotion between a sobbing rider thanks to Remi, awkward whispers between James and Zip, and the conversation between Farrah, Remi and me.

“Goat is missing.” Stacey’s face is as pale as a fourth-place ribbon. She’s abandoned her wheelbarrow to alert the barn.

Goat’s missing? That wasn’t part of the plan. Keeper would never hurt Goat; they’ve been friends as long as I’ve been at this barn. They stay in the same tiny field, cooking up evil jokes between each other all day. Keeper wouldn’t endanger her best friend.

“We have to find him, then,” Zip says. “We need to check the trails and barn.”

Stacey nods. “You ride Polar, I’ll take Lily back out. I’ll search the barn while you and James search the trails.”

“No!” I cry. “Zip, you have to take me.”

“You’re sweating buckets, Lily,” Farrah says. “Don’t overexert yourself.”

“I won’t do that. I can go for a trail ride.”

Zip strokes my neck and kisses my snip again. “You’ll be alright, girl.”

I stamp my hoof and whinny at her. Before I can break the cross ties, Stacey has removed them and clipped me to a lead line. Zip jogs out to the gelding field the opposite direction of me.

I pace the fence line with Remi. We both beg to be taken out rearing and screaming, but when the herd leaves, we remain stuck. I could jump the fence, but what good would it be? Zip is riding Polar and not me, she would stick me back in the field.

“They’re gone,” sighs Remi. “I knew I should’ve been better to the girl riding me, maybe then I’d be out there helping. Goat couldn’t have gone too far, right? He’s Goat. He loves Keeper. They’d never leave each other.”

“Exactly,” I say. “They’ve got it wrong! Goat won’t be out on the trails, he’ll be somewhere in the barn. We have to get out of here.”

“What if Stacey sees us? We’re not that stealthy.”

“Then get stealthy, Remi. C’mon, let’s jump the fence.”

Stacey jogs past us and into the house quickly. We have a few heartbeats before she returns, so Remi and I back up to get a run and go. Then, we stare down the fence until we’re soaring over it.

“Gogogogogogo!” I exclaim once we’ve cleared the obstacle. We canter briskly, but as quietly as possible, to the back of the barn.

Stacey emerges from the house as soon as Remi’s tail has slipped behind the wall, she has her phone in hand, talking into it as humans do. Sometimes, I wonder what a phone does.

They talk to it like we horses talk to each other, but in contrast, the phone never responds. Its absurdly rude, if you ask me. Almost as rude as betraying your own horse for another on a lazy trail ride.

“He’s not in the shed? You’re sure? Alright. Let me know if he shows up, he really likes apples. Thanks.”

She pokes the rude helpless block again.

“He’s not at the neighbors, keep checking the trails.”

Even the phone is in on the trail ride? Now I’m even more betrayed. Stacey has used her phone all morning and yet it’s not in need of a break but I, the well-trained eventer, am?

“We should go talk to Keeper. She’ll know more than anyone,” Remi says. We lower our heads and pick up our feet like fancy dressage horses to sneak to the little barn where Keeper and Goat normally stay. Keeper nickers lowly when we step onto the concrete of the little barn, she’s just come in from her paddock.

“I didn’t eat him, I swear If anything, he would’ve eaten me first,” Keeper whispers.

“What happened exactly?” I ask.

“Well, we were watching the show you and Farrah were putting on- nice job, by the way, and we were about to start our continuous screaming.”

That’s right. I forgot. Their screaming was supposed to ‘spook’ me into bucking instead of me just freaking out on my own. Had I set aside my own pride I might’ve noticed their absence. We planned the whole day out like clockwork, filled to the brim with antics. We talked about it *all night*. I should’ve remembered. Then I could’ve stopped whatever happened to Goat.

“But when I turned around to tell him that if he screwed up, I was pushing him into a pond with Zip, he was gone. His hoofprints led out to the gate but the gate was closed. Like someone picked him up and ran.”

I prick my ears forward. “What if someone did? What if someone took him?”

Keeper snorts. “Yeah right. Goat’s so overweight and ugly no one would ever consider taking him. He’s a walking breakfast.”

*“Still no luck? Nothing?”*

“That’s Stacey. Hide!” Remi exclaims.

We start to dart out of the barn until Keeper stops us.

“Idiots! Almost as bad as Polar, she’ll see you if you go out. Hide behind the shaving pile, that’s your best bet,” Keeper says.

I may be a pony, but Remi is not. Remi is a very large appendix horse who definitely got the Quarter Horse butt, but Keeper is right, there’s no way Stacey won’t see us if we dart out of the barn, so we try to tap into our inner stealthy-ness. I throw shavings over Remi’s butt and squeeze as tight as I can between the wall and the shavings. I’m almost sitting down because Remi takes up so much space.

“Hey Keeper, we’ll find your friend,” Stacey coons, toying with Keeper’s mane. Her eyes remain glossy. Then, Remi sneezes.

Stacey’s head snaps around.

“We’re screwed,” I huff.

Stacey stomps up to the shavings. “Remi? Lily? What are you doing?”

We both hobble out from our hiding place, heads low. “Sorry,” I whicker.

Stacey grumbles about the little barn, stealing some halters all of us thought had disappeared. I think Keeper was in charge of hiding them a few years ago but no one ever found them, so we assumed they had been stolen. Goat always hated the halters because he hates having his face touched.

Being a bad pony is fun until it isn't. Remi and I submit to our fates, moping around the fields the rest of the day. When the other horses return, they tell us about their failures. Polar got stuck in the creek. He thought the water was sticking to his legs and forcing him to stay put. Even once he was fished out, they had no luck in the search for Goat. We graze without talking, there's no need too. Our revenge day has failed. And I'm an awful pony. I might've spared Zip unlike Remi spared his rider, but Goat took the real casualty.

Zip, James, and Stacey search the barn the entirety of the day to no avail. Eventually, Stacey throws her hands in the air, tears pouring down her face like a water hose has been hooked behind her eyes. She screams in frustration and walks away to get in her car. Zip and James are left to their own devices, aimlessly drifting around the barn. Every now and then, one will call out Goat's name, but he never comes.

Goat was a gift to Stacey from the barn boarders a few years ago. Ever since, he's been Stacey's equivalent of a horse. Stacey can't ride anymore because of a riding accident long before Zip and I came here. She loves the horses, but she doesn't own one of her own. Even Remi has an owner, even if he never comes to visit. Goat is the closest thing Stacey has to a horse. And Goat loves her the way a horse would. He follows her around the farm when no other

people are around. He helps her with feeding a watering. He even does tricks for her. Keeper doesn't mind some alone time and Goat loves terrorizing Polar. Above all, Goat keeps Stacey happy. She loves having him around.

So, we all stop with our antics and operate as good horses. As good as I can be, at least.

At one point, Zip walks up to me and gives me a sugar cube. They aren't as good as molasses treats, but they're still food.

"Wasup, Lils?" she asks, stroking my bay-colored face. "Sorry I had to ride Polar, but it's because I didn't want to hurt you, alright? You work hard for me as it is, and I don't want you to work harder than you need to." She grins and leans in closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. She always knows what I'm thinking. "Plus, we both know Polar doesn't do much more than complain, anyway. It's good for him to get out."

She has no idea how much I agree with that.

But also, I know that in the same way she is my girl, I am her horse. We both have our funny days, but we accept each other and move on. Not every day can be the same, that would be boring, which is why horse people are such strange people. Horse people are different than the weekly lesson students who only ride during the summer, real riders love horses through all seasons. Not riding is the thing that keeps them sane, so they power through the good and the bad. I'm lucky. I have a very good horse person. She loves me even when I'm a complete idiot, so she'll forgive me about Goat and I'll forgive her for bringing a sugar cube in place of molasses.



Zip stays with me, running her hands down my neck and scratching my withers. I close my eyes and let my head go level. For a while, we just are. Time slows. I am happy. She is happy.

Then Stacey returns, a hefty glass bottle in her hand. The sunset's rays shine through it, making the contents shimmer.

"Zip! Are you coming?" James calls.

"Coming!" my girl replies. She looks back to me one last time and says, "You're the best girl."

"So are you," I nicker.

She pats me, smiles, and leaves.

Zip meets Stacey and James and the top of the field where they all lean against the fence. A popping noise sounds, followed by the pouring of liquid into glasses.

Stacey's hands still tremble, though.

"I loved that dang pig," she says.

"We all did," Zip comforts. They both tap their glasses.

Farrah, Polar, Remi and I congregate over the fence.

"We failed," I say. "Miserably."

"No more of this," Farrah declares. "We've made everyone miserable. Had we not caused a scene, we might've seen what happened."

"No more revenge? Ever?" Polar squeaks.

“It’s for the best,” I say.

Remi agrees. “I wish we could fix this. We are good horses; I like to believe.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” I say.

“I agree. No more revenge,” says Polar.

“No more revenge,” I comply.

“No more revenge,” we toast, tapping noses.

There’s a somber moment at the fence, few words are said but we all know the message. We screwed up. But we’ll do better. We’ll do more circles. More dressage. We can’t replace Goat, but we can do more for our riders who have searched all day for him.

The spring air rushes through the field, tinging my skin and ruffling my coat. I take it in, the coolness filling me whole, giving my insides a cold jolt. It makes me feel more alive. Light snakes across the grass like the hose around the barn aisle. It turns the green tips a luminous orange and yellow. The people are only silhouettes in the distance.

I’m grazing, enjoying the fresh grass that comes with spring when the people begin to scream.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Dunno,” Farrah replies. All of us gallop to the people, hooves pounding at racehorse speeds.

We skid before crashing into the fence, sinking back onto our haunches. Polar tries to, at least, but ends up smashing against the wood.

There's a new figure among the people.

"What the?" Farrah neighs.

"GOAT'S ALIVE!" screams Polar.

Sure enough, the stocky, pink ball of blubber is mingling with the people, snorting with his ridiculously flat nose, soaking up the attention. Stacey cries harder than before, engulfing him in a hug. He snorts more.

"Stupid pig. Stupid pig," she cries.

Zip and James laugh, petting Goat and welcoming him back.

"Stacey, you're covered in sawdust," Zip says.

"I'm not. Goat is! He must've been hiding in the sawdust pile all day. I don't know how."

"The pig is a mastermind in disguise," James concludes.

"The sawdust pile? Dude?!" I exclaim.

"Remi needs to go on a diet," snorts Goat. "Also, HAPPY APRIL FOOLS!"

My jaw slides loose. I think it just hit the ground.

"Hurts losing at your own game, doesn't it?"

"You're evil," I spit.

"But they all seem to love me," he says. And he's right. The people continue hugging and sobbing and laughing over him.

Goat's right. We got beat at our own game. But he hurt Stacey. I would never do that to Zip. The revenge has to stop. We're doing more harm than good, even if it is fun. We can have fun in other ways that make our riders and owner's significantly happier. They work hard for us so we should be good to them.

Goat proceeds to explain that he used the noise and commotion from the arena while I was bucking to drown out the noise of him running through the gate. It's only locked from the top using a flimsy chain. He was able to blow through the bottom easily. In the saw dust pile, he carved out a space next to the wall in the corner to hide in, the same place he hid the halters he hates. No one ever gets to the shavings at the back of the barn, so it was a suitable hiding place. When Remi and I crammed in with him, he got a lovely view of my bay rear-end. I almost stepped on him and blew his cover, but to his fortune, I missed him. I kind of wish I hit him.

I agree with Stacey. Stupid pig.

But even with the wicked look plastered on Goat's face, Stacey can't get enough of him. They still love each other the same as Zip and I do.

Zip raises her glass in the air.

"HAPPY APRIL FOOLS!" she proclaims. "We survived!"

"Don't jinx it," chokes Stacey.

Then, all of us, horses, pigs, and humans alike, shout "HAPPY APRIL FOOLS!"

We laugh the rest of the evening, inhaling sawdust in horrid quantities.