

# Tales

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# Chapter 1

## In the Starting Gate

### Zecora

Did I ever tell you I knew a zebra? It's true.

Her name was Zecora, and she lived near Ponyville when I knew her. Actually, she lived in the Everfree Forest nearby, and if you know how creepy *that* is – and you knew *her* – you'd understand why she lived there.

She wasn't from Equestria, but I never knew exactly *where* she was from. Somewhere far away. And she knew a lot of natural cures and remedies. Could whip up medicine from a bunch of weeds and berries like it was nothing. Pretty impressive if you were a young filly like I was when I knew her. Well, I *was* young when I knew her. Hard to believe now I was *ever* that young.

And I think she had what they call "second sight." You know – where somepony can tell what's going on at that moment far away, or they can see tell the future. I think she had the second one. I got that impression when I saw her once.

We were talking at her house, and I said I wished I knew what my life was going to be like. The general flow, I guess.

She looked at me, and her eyes were really sad. Then she told me something in a rhyme. She always spoke in rhymes, which was another strange thing about her. What she told me was kind of sad, too, even though I didn't understand it at the time.

She said, "One far day when you're far from this place, a king will kiss you as his tears strike your face."

I had no clue what she meant. No clue. And it didn't seem to answer my general question, I guess. But that was Zecora. You *wouldn't* understand some things she said at first. But eventually, you'd *learn* what she meant. Not with some flash of insight. You'd put it together bit by bit, like a puzzle. And you'd realize – slowly – that she was right about whatever it was you'd been talking about.

I've been back to Ponyville a lot of times since then, even before I met Rex. Before we married. Before the kids. I went back to Zecora's house the first time I visited Ponyville after moving back to Canterlot. It was empty. No trace of her, and nopony knows where she went.

I've always wondered.

# Chapter 2

## Out of the Gate

### Applejack and Pinkie Pie

Never thought I'd be a grandmare. Just didn't think it would happen. I certainly never *planned* on it.

I had a friend named Applejack when I lived in Ponyville, and her grandmare was still alive when I was there. Her name was Granny Smith. She was really old and slow and arthritic. And it really showed in her face and her white mane. I remember looking at her and thinking, "How old *is* she?" But I never asked. You just *don't* ask that of a mare, you know.

A.J. – that's what we called her – and her grandmare were earth ponies, and you know that earth ponies don't live as long as us unicorn and pegasus ponies. A.J. was only a few decades old when she died, and that was generations ago. More than I care to remember.

She made Sweetapple Acres the top apple operation in Equestria. That was the family orchard. Her older brother, Big Macintosh, helped her, but she was the driven one. Her grandkids – no, her great-grandkids ...

No, wait ...

OK ...

I've lost track of how many "greats-" there've been now. That's the thing about being mystical, like we unicorns are. Same with pegasuses. We live so damned long. Queen Celestia is millennia old now. Earth ponies think our near-immortality must be great. But if we make friends – really great friends – with earth ponies, we're damned to watch them die. Over and over again. Nearly forever.

Sometimes I think immortality – or anything close to it – is overrated. By a lot.

Anyway, A.J.'s descendents run Sweetapple Acres now. If I had a sugar cube for every apple it's sold since A.J. ran the place, I'd need a thousand barns for them. Maybe more.

So I guess A.J. knew what it was like to be a grandmare.

I mentioned Big Macintosh – we called him "Mac." He ended up marrying a mutual friend, Pinkie Pie. Talk about opposites attracting. Pinkie was a bubbly, fun-loving, party-pony ... well, *airhead*. But a good kid. Always came through in a pinch. Always.

Mac, on the other hand, was quiet and reserved and sounded a little, um, *slow*. If you know what I mean. When he and Pinkie said they were getting hitched, I took A.J. aside in private and asked her whether she thought the marriage was a good idea. I said I really didn't want to sound rude but that Mac seemed "slow," like I said. What about their kids, I asked.

A.J. said it was OK. Mac wasn't "slow," she said. He just didn't say anything if he didn't have anything to say. And he wouldn't say any more than he needed to. She told me, "There ain't nothin' wrong with Big Macintosh. He ain't 'slow.' If anythin', I'm afraid the kids'll take after *Pinkie*. But the kids'll be fine, Sugar Cube. I know it."

I guess they were. Mac and Pinkie had seven of them. Mac always was a hard worker.

I once asked Pinkie – as tactfully as I could – why they had so many kids. She just giggled and said that "being with Mac" – if you *know* what she meant – was a lot of fun. She enjoyed it. A lot.

And I said I enjoyed being with *books* a lot, but that sometimes, I put them down and closed the covers.

So she said, "Huh?"

And I said, "Never mind."

They were both earth ponies, so they've been gone for generations, too. But their kids – and grandkids and great-grandkids and so on – ended up being as prolific as they were. After all these years, I think at least half of Ponyville can now trace its ancestry to Mac and Pinkie. Thank The Steed that so many other ponies came to Ponyville to work as Sweetapple Acres grew. It helped deepen – and spice up – the gene pool.

And can you *imagine*? I was in Ponyville when it was a *village*. I mean, you look at that skyline now, and you can't believe it. Sometimes, even I can't. Canterlot is the political center of Equestria, but Ponyville is now the economic engine that drives it.

And I think A.J. would have been proud to know she helped make that happen.

# Chapter 3

## The First Turn

### Captain Rex of the Royal Guard of Equestria

My husband's name was Rex. He said it meant "king" in an old foreign language.

He was the captain of Princess Celestia's royal guard, and she *was* only princess then, not queen, like she is now. Her father, the king, was very old and infirm when I was younger, so Celestia – his elder child – handled things as his regent. She was his heir, and when he died, she became queen. That's how it works.

She was the one who made me royal librarian. The previous one had retired, and they needed a new one. I had been Celestia's student, and there were my years of study in Ponyville, so when the opening came up, she suggested I take the job.

As in, I was going to take the job. When the regent "suggests" you do something, you really ought to do it. But it was tough to leave Ponyville and my friends.

I had been in Ponyville for years by then, like I said. Celestia originally sent me there to make friends. I was that much of a bookworm – I had to be *told* to make friends. And I did. Turned out to be fun, really. More than I expected. When I got there, I really just wanted to do a job Celestia assigned me to do, then get the hell out of there. Glad I stayed. Really.

Most people know *those* stories, so I'm not going to go into them. Personally, I was shocked how well my Ponyville memoirs sold. They even made little plays out of them. About 20 minutes or so each. A whole series. I'd go to the premieres as guest of honor and laugh – and cringe. Was I really ever that young and stupid – and such a self-righteous know-it-all jerk sometimes? It was embarrassing. But the shows were fun.

Anyway, I moved back to Canterlot. I met Rex at Celestia's reception for me when I was appointed. He was leading her guard, of course, and, well, I guess I caught his eye. And I couldn't believe it – here was this magnificent military stallion in his armor, and he actually started talking to *me*. Apparently, it wasn't a breach of protocol for him to do that because I wasn't a royal. And I'm not, of course. I was just a librarian. First thing he ever said to me was congratulations on my appointment.

Now, I wasn't a silly filly by that point. Too many crazy things happened to me over the years in Ponyville for me to still be a giggling giddyup. But to have this wonderful stallion paying attention to me was *unreal*. Even after all these years, it still seems unreal.

So we started stepping out. He told me on our first date that because of his position, he had to ask Celestia's permission to become involved with a member of the royal staff. Which I was. I was the *royal* librarian, but again, I've never been *royal*. I was just the librarian for the royal family and Equestria's national archives. But not royalty. But Rex said he wasn't interested in royalty. He was interested in *me*. And, you *know*, even we unicorns can blush.

Rex said that after he asked Celestia's permission, she smiled and said she thought we two would be "wonderful" together and that she approved. But then, he said, she got really serious and said, "She's very special to me, Captain. You will *always* treat her well. If you don't, I'll be upset."

And then, he said, she leaned toward him, narrowed her eyes and said quietly, "You *don't* want to make me *upset*, Captain." He said she leaned back then, nodded and said, "You may go."

Now, I know what she meant. I was kind of perversely flattered by it. But I don't think Rex needed a threat. Over time, I learned he had a big heart and a sincere one. We began to know each other more, and we found each other fascinating – and friends. I was glad I learned to make friends.

All my Ponyville friends, and Celestia, attended our wedding in Canterlot. Rarity the unicorn designer from Ponyville made my bridal tack. Yes, *that* Rarity. I'll tell you about her later.

So Rex and I settled in and planned a family. I was looking forward to it.

I just wish it had lasted longer than it did.



# Chapter 4

## The Second Turn

### Wishful the Lost One

My husband died so young. Equine encephalitis. There was a plague of it decades and decades and decades ago – you might have read about it in history books – and Rex died of it.

He was so young. In the prime of his life. It was one of the three times in my life I've cursed The Steed. Yes, I know it's blasphemy, but I've done it. And I meant it every time. If you want to hate me for it, go ahead. I don't care. I'm not sure anymore that The Steed even exists.

I mean, it was so *unfair*. Why did he take my husband when there were so many other ponies who *deserved* to die? I'm sorry, but it's true. It's not like Equestria is some sort of damned perfect paradise. What did Rex do to deserve to *die*? Did *I* do something wrong? What could *I* have *done* to deserve *that*? What sin from either of us was so terrible that he deserved to die?

Anyway ... at least he got to have a family of his own before he died. He got to see his children.

Even then, we went through hell first.

We lost our firstborn. She was a filly, and we had even picked out a name for her if she *were* a filly: Wishful. Because we wished for her happiness in life – and ours.

She was stillborn. I remember pushing her out, and then I didn't hear anything after that. No breathing, no movement. It frightened me. Rex was there, and I remember him suddenly breathing frantically behind me right after Wishful came out. And he wasn't saying anything. Just started moving crazily. I yelled, "Rex! Rex, what's *wrong*? *What is it?* *What's wrong?*"

When I finally turned around, I could see him nudging her on the ground like a toy. She was still wet. Rex had torn open the membrane around her, but she wasn't breathing. Rex was nudging her like crazy, but she wasn't moving. I started nudging her, too, and I was in a panic and practically flipped her over. I got so insane, Rex finally stepped over her and had to restrain me. And I was screaming at him and at Wishful, and I was fighting him tooth and hoof to get to my baby.

She never woke up.

I don't like thinking about it. Even now. And like when Rex died, I was mad at The Steed. Screaming mad. Shrieking mad. And I cursed him.

Is that why some bad things have happened to me in my life? I don't know. I stopped trying to understand years ago.

We had two other kids – Purpose the colt and Promise the filly. But Rex and I were really scared about losing them, too. I remember praying for forgiveness when I was carrying each, even though I still hurt and angry over Wishful. They came out OK, but I don't know whether The Steed answered my prayers. Or even cared. Or even existed, like I said.

But we never forgot Wishful. She was the only reason I ever saw Rex cry. He was the captain of Princess Celestia's royal guard, and other than about Wishful, I never saw him cry. Smile and laugh, sure. All the time. But never cry. Except for Wishful.

Sometimes in private, he'd nuzzle me over the back of my neck quietly, then he'd start to cry. We'd never say anything in those quiet, sad moments, but he'd cry, and his tears struck my neck, and I knew why.

Often, I'd cry, too.

Celestia and my Ponyville friends attended Wishful's service. And then Rex's. I fell hard after Rex died. I was glad they were there, especially the Ponyville folks. They kept me from crashing so hard, I wouldn't get back up again. They reminded me that Promise and Purpose needed me now. I *had* to get back up and live.

I'm glad they did. That's what friends are for.

# Chapter 5

## Entering the Back Stretch

### Rarity

Yes, I *am* going to drop a name. I admit it.

Rarity.

Yes, *that* Rarity. The designer. The fashions, the accessories, the interior design, the grand events.

The one who designs outfits for Queen Celestia – and did even when Celestia was "only" princess. *That* Rarity. I recommended her. What are friends for, right?

I knew her when I lived in Ponyville. Interesting thing is that even after she became famous throughout Equestria – when you can say "a Rarity design" anywhere and *everypony* will know what you're talking about and be impressed – she stayed in Ponyville. Still at work. Designing for Celestia was a lifelong dream for her. Sometimes, you couldn't shut her up about it. So it always seemed strange that when *that* happened, she never moved to Canterlot to be close to her top client.

I asked her about it once, and she said, "Oh, *darling*, I've *been* to Canterlot to meet with Celestia. There's just *too much* going on. I'd never get *any* work done. And I need my beauty sleep, of course, and that would almost *never* happen. I need the quiet life around me for my art. Isn't that *strange*? Who'd have guessed?"

I think she was putting on a brave face. When she'd visit Canterlot to finish a project for Celestia, we'd sometimes go out together after her work was done for the day. She loved meeting Rex and the kids, and she enjoyed the nightlife, despite what she said. But I couldn't keep her company all day and night. I had my own work and a family to take care of. So sometimes, I'd just drop by the palace to check in on her before I went home.

I'd often see her all alone at a worktable in Celestia's dressing room, which was the size of a barn. And that was next to Celestia's wardrobe, which was also the size of a barn. And Rarity would be the only pony in all that vast space. She looked, well, small. And sometimes – before she'd realize I was there – I could see her staring off into space.

She'd look so lonely.

She once told me she was honored to work for the queen, of course. But sometimes, she missed the background noise of Ponyville coming through the windows of her shop. Even Pinkie Pie bursting in with a lame joke she just learned. Or any of her friends. She said, "Sometimes, my dear, it's too *quiet* here. I need to *feel* life around me for my art. Isn't that *strange*? Who'd have guessed?"

You know, I heard that – and remembered what she said before – and I never saw a contradiction between the Rarity in Ponyville and the pony in Canterlot. I think she knew what she really wanted. And it really wasn't Canterlot.

Even then, I never saw her prouder than on the day of Celestia's coronation as queen. Rarity had designed her dress, and when Celestia entered the Great Hall, it looked like Rarity had finally seen the moment she was born for.

Still the classiest pony I've ever met. Except for Celestia. Maybe. It's a tie. But I really know Rarity more, I guess. Ever hear that courage is "grace under pressure"? So is class. I saw Rarity stay a lady in some situations that would make you litter a pasture, if you know what I mean. And she wasn't a wilting flower when it happened. She always stood her ground. And was always classy doing it.

She's never married. She had dreamed about marrying Celestia's nephew, who's a prince, of course. Honestly, it was always kind of an unrealistic fantasy, but it was a strong one for Rarity when she was younger.

So I finally asked her why she's never married. And she said in that high-class way she has, "Oh, *darling*, I simply don't have the *time*! So much to do! It would just get in the *way*!"

I think she was putting on a brave face again. But she seems happy the way things are. I'm glad for her.

# Chapter 6

## The Back Stretch

### His Late Majesty the King of Equestria

I met the old king once. Really. Celestia's father. Just before he died.

She summoned me to the throne room out of nowhere one day and told me the king wanted to see me. Remember that she was his regent. Ponies would forget that. That's because the king became so old and weak, he didn't appear in public anymore. Some ponies even whispered he had died and Celestia was covering it up.

They were wrong. I met the old king. It was sad.

We left the throne room with her guards – Rex was off duty, so he wasn't there – and we went to the private chambers in the palace. I'd never been there, and I kept wondering what the king could possibly want with me. I was just a librarian.

We finally got to these two huge, magnificent doors with gilded crowns on them and guards on each side. The guards went to attention when Celestia approached. She nodded, and the guards opened the doors.

I've never seen such a vast, opulent bedroom. Everything was plush and luxurious and gilded and bejeweled. And regal. Celestia told her guards to stay outside, and we went in. I heard the doors boom shut behind us, but I was too fascinated by the room to look back.

It was really sunny because the room had these giant windows with purple curtains tied back with gold cords. And there were these tapestries that seemed to cover an acre of wall each. And there was a massive carved fireplace on the far wall. It was so big, it looked like you could fully curl up in it and go to sleep. If there wasn't a fire in it, I mean.

But there was a strong fire in it when we came in. And near the fireplace was this enormous canopy over a great purple cushion with gold-cord trim and tassels. It was so large, a pony could sleep on it. Because a white male unicorn pegasus pony was sleeping on it. He looked like he was sleeping, anyway.

He was lying on his side. He looked weak, and you could see his ribs, he was so frail. I saw his chest rise and fall regularly as he breathed, so I figured he was sleeping.

Celestia went over and nuzzled his face, and she was very gentle. The pony on the cushion woke up with a start. Actually said, "Uhn timer ...?" Just like that.

So Celestia said, "Father, it's me," and he blinked at her like he didn't recognize her. Then he said, "Oh ... Celestia ... It's you ..." His voice was really raspy, and when he spoke, I saw he had the longest teeth I'd ever seen on a pony, so only The Steed knows how old he was then.

She said, "The librarian is here, as you asked, Father."

He turned slowly and looked at me, and I did my best curtsy. Then he said, "Oh ... Come here ... child ..."

I went over, and he looked me up and down. His eyes were half-shut. Then he said, "You're the librarian ... are you ...?"

And I said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, which seemed to take a lot out of him. Then he looked at me again and said, "I want you ... to ... save my memories ..."

And Celestia whispered to me, "He means his royal and personal records."

I nodded and said of course I would. Then his eyes grew dim, and tears started to form along the bottom edges. And he said – very weakly – "*Promise* me ..." His eyes closed again, and his tears started falling.

And he moaned in a whisper, "I don't want to be *forgotten* ..."

Celestia nuzzled him again and said quietly, "You won't be, Father. I promise."

Now, I don't know what came over me at that point, but he just seemed so sad, I raised my left front leg and touched his cheek with my hoof. Looking back, it was probably a huge breach of protocol, but I felt so sad for him. Celestia didn't say anything when I did it.

And then a tear touched my hoof.

Which shocked me. I pulled my hoof back quickly and didn't know what to do next. Finally, I promised I'd save his "memories," like he asked. I felt really clumsy when I said it because his tear threw me off.

He was really quiet for a moment after that. I was honestly afraid he had died right there. But then you could see his breathing again, so he was all right.

Celestia nuzzled him one more time and said, "I'll see you later, Father." He seemed to have already gone back to sleep, so he didn't answer.

We went back to the throne room, but Celestia didn't say a thing on the way. Then she stopped when we got to the doors and turned to me. And she said very seriously, "My father will die soon. All he wants is to be remembered. He made Equestria what it is. I want everypony to always know that. Don't disappoint him."

Then she leaned her face close to mine, narrowed her eyes and said – really, *really* seriously – "And don't disappoint *me*, librarian ..."

After that, she turned around and went into the throne room. The guards closed the doors behind her.

The king died soon after that. I'm still organizing and preserving his records. Even though I'm officially retired now, I still go to the archives every day and work on them.

Because I made a promise once to a sad old king.

# Chapter 7

## The Third Turn

### Fluttershy

I was told Fluttershy refocused on the animals after I left Ponyville. I guess she was always more comfortable with them.

Not that she forgot her friends there. She just started spending more time with the animals. In fact, she finally moved out of her house to be closer to them. All the way to the Everfree Forest. And you'll never guess *where* in the forest.

Zecora's old house. I kid you not.

Now, this was after Zecora left Ponyville. And again, nopony knows where *she* went. But Fluttershy once said Zecora told her, "Someday I might leave and roam. When I do, my house will be your home." Guess you don't get clearer than *that*. For Zecora, anyway.

I found all this out a few years after I moved back to Canterlot. Now, I'd been back to Ponyville a few times by then, and Zecora's house was still empty. And Fluttershy was still living in town. We'd get together on my first few visits, and she really liked Promise and Purpose. She got really shy around Rex – more than usual – but I didn't blame her for that. I was pretty shy around him the first few encounters we had, too.

But then she seemed to change.

Rarity and the others said she started to spend more and more time in the forest, then bring home strange plants. And sometimes, she'd bring back an animal that seemed injured. The next day, she'd open her door, and the animal would scamper out, looking apparently healed. And then she'd speak to it in a language nopony could understand. It became creepy, they said. And Fluttershy seemed to be at a complete loss about how so much animal speak had come to her.

Then one day, she just moved out of her house and into Zecora's old place. Ponies asked her why. She just said it felt "more comfortable" to be there by then.

Now, a while after that, I thought I saw Zecora again. I was visiting Ponyville by myself and saw a pony heading away on the path to the Everfree Forest. The pony was wearing a hooded full-body cloak like Zecora's. And I thought, "It's Zecora! She's back!"



So I started trotting toward the pony – it was quite a way away from me – and I started calling Zecora's name.

The pony sort of shook and then froze. And then it started galloping off into the forest. Well, I wasn't *about* to lose Zecora after all that time, so I galloped off after the pony and kept calling Zecora's name. The zebra knew my voice – I didn't doubt that – so I kept thinking, "Why is she *running away*?"

By the time I got into the forest, I lost the pony, but I could still hear its galloping and followed it. In a few moments, I realized I was heading in the direction of Zecora's old house. I suddenly thought it might not be Zecora but Fluttershy. I'd heard the stories about her by then. But I'd never seen Fluttershy in a cloak like that before.

I saw the house just as the front door slammed. So I went up and knocked on the door and yelled, "Fluttershy! It's me! Open up!"

Nothing. So I knocked and called again, and finally, the door opened. A little. It was Fluttershy. And she was wearing a cloak. She peeked out from under the hood, and her mane was covering one eye, as it sometimes did.

And just for an instant, I swore I saw her visible eye flash brightly in the shadow of the hood.

But when she saw it was me, her expression turned meek, and she said in her usual quiet way, "Oh, it's you. I'm sorry. Please come in. I didn't mean to make you worry."

I'm going to tell you now: I remembered a lot of what she said that day. There's a reason. I'll tell you later.

So I went in, and it was the strangest thing: The place looked *almost* like it did when Zecora lived there. Now, there weren't any of the carved wooden masks that Zecora had, but her bed was there and the bottles of stuff hanging by cords on the wall. The place was filled with books and potted plants and stuff I didn't recognize. And Zecora's giant caldron was in its fire pit.

Fluttershy took off the cloak, and I asked her where she got it. She said Zecora left it hanging up in the house with a note, which she showed me. It read, "Please take my cloak and wear it well. The comforts it brings – who can tell?" It rhymed. Zecora wrote it, all right. Fluttershy said the cloak *was* comfortable and that she liked wearing it. As much as she could – it felt *that* good.

Then I asked her how she'd been, but before she could answer, I heard this really eerie sound from across the room. It sounded like "Mee-OWWWLLL ..." Fluttershy glanced at a basket on a table and blushed. And she said, "Forgive me a moment. I have a friend who's been sick and on the mend.."

We went over to the basket, and in it was a black-and-gray-and-white-striped cat lying on its side on a folded blanket. It looked tired – almost asleep. When we looked in at it, the cat looked up at us and blinked once.

Then something else creepy – really, *really* creepy – happened.

Fluttershy started meowing.

The sounds went up and down, and the pacing changed a lot. It was like she was *talking* to the cat. Of course, I didn't understand a thing. I didn't think any pony could use cat speak. I mean, almost *every* non-pony in Equestria knows pony speak, like we use.

The cat was quiet, then let out a few meows. Fluttershy nodded and meowed some more. The cat nodded slightly – I didn't know cats could *even* nod – and it closed its eyes like it was going to sleep. Then Fluttershy took some of the blanket in her teeth and covered the cat up to its neck with it.

She looked at me meekly and said, "He hurt his paw a few days ago, and treating him ... well ... I don't know. I just did."

So I asked where she learned cat speak. She said, "When I met him, I just ... *knew*. I understood him. It wasn't hard to do. I don't know why."

Then she told me she just started to understand a *lot* of animals' natural languages. And that somehow, the cures and remedies for the animals just began to come to her. She'd be walking in the forest – usually wearing the cloak because even in the summer, it could get cool in the woods – and when she looked around at the plants, certain combinations began to make sense when there was a problem she was concerned about. She didn't know how it happened. "Feelings" just *came* to her.

I asked whether all that frightened her. She was quiet for a moment, then said, "You know, I suppose it really should, but when it happens, it's OK. I'm comfortable. It feels good."

Well, it *sounded* like she was OK and happy, so I was glad for her. She asked me to stay for dinner, and The Steed knows I *never* turn down a free meal. I admit I was surprised at how good a cook she was. She figured it was all the time she spent mixing things together. Seemed to make sense.

We talked the night away, and at one point, she put the cloak back on. She said she was feeling cold. I didn't notice anything, but we both weren't as young at that point as we used to be, so I figured her tolerance for cold was different from mine.

And she told me a funny thing. Remember Angel the bunny? The one who was practically Fluttershy's sidekick back in the day? Well, he'd been Angel the *rabbit* for

years and years by then, and he'd been married a long, long time. And he had his wife had had 21 kids. At last count. And about 350 grandkids. At last count.

It made me think of Mac and Pinkie Pie. The difference was I'd *expect* big families like that from rabbits. Ponies? Not so much.

Well, it got late and time to go, so Fluttershy nuzzled me goodbye at the door. And then she said something that seemed like it was coming to her from far away. She said, "Please be safe, my friend. Be well. I hope The Steed watches you through your visit's end. So good night."

And then I went home. Well, actually, I stay at the Ponyville library when I visit, and I even get to sleep in my old loft. The librarians there have always been really sweet about it. Maybe they're just humoring a grandmare. They've all been about my age when I lived there. I can't believe I was *ever* that young.

So I went to bed that night. Being in the loft has always been so comfortable for me. And I thought about how Fluttershy's life had changed so much. About how she ended up with Zecora's house. And about how she still helped animals but now with skills like Zecora's. And how much comfort she seemed to take from that.

And *that* made me think about how comfortable Fluttershy said Zecora's cloak was. The one she said she almost always wore now.

Then I froze in bed. Because I suddenly thought about all Fluttershy had said that night. And how – if you really thought about it carefully ...

A lot of the things she said ...

Rhymed. Somewhere.

I tried, but for the life of me, I couldn't get to sleep that night.

I couldn't stop thinking about the cloak.

# Chapter 8

## The Final Turn: Rainbow Dash

Rainbow Dash.

Yeah ...

That was sad, wasn't it?

You get so close to a dream, you can almost touch it, taste it, smell it – *feel it* standing next to you ...

And you die.

It was one of those three times in my life I screamed at The Steed. It was so unfair, so *cruel*. Why was he *like* that? Why have her born *at all*? Why give her a dream that deep and strong and then take it away like *that*? *WHY*?

I don't know. Like I told you, I gave up trying to understand long ago.

This was while I was still living in Ponyville. I'd been there a few years, and Dash always wanted to join the Wonderbolts. The Equestrian flying team. She loved flying. She loved the sky. And she loved to tell everypony about it.

But you know what it takes to join the Wonderbolts? Before you take even a flutter off the ground for them, there are written exams and strength tests, and if you flunk any one of them, you're out on your rump. I think it surprised Dash.

She squeaked by her first test, and I think the reality of what it actually took to join the Wonderbolts scared her. About the only time I *ever* saw her scared. She came to the Ponyville library one night, and she tried to ask me something, but she really wasn't getting to the point. Finally, she just started crying. I didn't even think she *could* cry.

I just let her cry herself out. Turns out, after she settled down, that she wanted me to help her study for the tests. I said I would but that she had to be serious about it. I said it was one thing to have a dream but another to dedicate yourself to really go after it.

And she did. I remember waking up after some all-nighters with her and finding I'd fallen asleep on an open book. And drooled on it. Then I'd look over at Dash and see she was *still* asleep on an open book. And *still* drooling on it.

By the way, want to know how long it takes drool to dry out in a book? Don't ask. And it leaves the pages all bumpy, too.

Anyway, by the time she passed all the tests, even I knew how to fly. Almost wished I were a pegasus pony. Seemed like fun.

The qualification flights were at the flying field outside Canterlot, and I went up there with Dash. So did all our friends. We were moral support for her. I don't think she wanted to admit it, but it seemed like she was really, really touched by that.

I'm glad she got to feel that one last time before she was gone.

Know what I remember about that day ... other than how it ended?

It was Dash's rainbow mane fluttering in the breeze as she stood at the far end of the line of candidates. Everypony else had monochrome manes, so she stood out already. Like she always did.

And she had the same expression Rarity had at Celestia's coronation. That the thing she wanted most in life was finally in front of her. In Dash's case, it was just one more flight away.

Like I said, she was at the end, and the other candidates were really good. Now, there were mandatory maneuvers that everypony had to perform, then each candidate could perform a move of his or her own choice. We all thought Dash was going to do her superspeed trot, but another candidate did that before her. Not as good as Dash but respectable. So she apparently changed her plan at the last moment. I guess she didn't want to look like a copypony.

She took off, and it was just wonderful to see her do the mandatory maneuvers. She was like part of the sky itself. She didn't just *do* the moves, she *became* them. It was like you could see the air itself move.

She was beautiful. She was always beautiful in the sky.

At the end of the mandatory maneuvers, she flew along the ground faster than I'd ever seen her do. Suddenly, she pulled up at full speed and started the fastest, tightest loops I've ever seen a pegasus pony do. One after another after another after another.

Which is when she hit the bird.

At full speed. During the upward side of the last loop.

I was told later she had no chance to avoid it. Not a chance.

It looked like the bird exploded.

And it looked like Dash had slammed head-first into a brick wall at top speed. Everypony screamed. It seemed like she hung in the air for a moment, and you could see she had gone completely limp. Then she started falling. It really appeared like it was in slow motion at first, and she began to spin slightly as she picked up speed.

You couldn't hear her hit the ground. It was at the other end of the field, and we were too far away. You just saw her hit. She hit hard and bounced once. Then she hit again. And didn't move.

No pony moved. No pony said anything. The ponies who had come to watch the tryouts seemed to stare forever at Dash. The only movement for a moment was Dash's rainbow mane fluttering in the breeze.

Finally, there was a voice. It was A.J., who was there with us. All she did was whisper, "*Dash ...*"

The Wonderbolts attending the tryouts sprang up instantly and flew out to her. They landed next to her and started to gently prod her flank with their hooves. One knelt down and put an ear to her side and kept it there for a moment. Then he gently put a hoof on her neck just under the back of her jaw and held it there. And then he put an ear to her mouth and seemed to listen. Finally, he glanced up at the other Wonderbolts.

And shook his head.

Then he turned toward the crowd at the other end of the field.

And shook his head widely.

Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Rarity screamed and fainted where they stood.

A.J. fell to her knees like somepony had just kicked her in her stomach. She started breathing hard and whispered, "Oh, Steed, no ... Oh, dear Steed, *no ...*"

I just stood there. But my legs were trembling wildly. I couldn't *think* for a long moment. It was like all my body could do is breathe. And shake. And finally, I closed my eyes, bent my head down and whispered ...

"Damn you ..."

But my mind was screaming. Like my soul wanted to tear itself from my body and scream into the sky, "*DAMN YOU! DAMN YOU! DAMN YOU TO HELL!*"

I was screaming at The Steed. I didn't care what he thought. I just wanted to say it, to have him *hear* me say it. So he would know the horrific pain that had just ripped through me. I didn't care.

I just damned him. Because I wanted him damned.

Anyway ...

The official report said Dash died from a broken neck. Whether it happened when she hit the bird or hit the ground, nopony knows. Hardly seems to matter. But I've always hoped it was in the air. So that she died instantly and thus didn't live to know she was falling to her death. I want to believe she died while she was flying. That she died in the sky.

That's what I want to believe.

Celestia was at her service in Ponyville. That's when she announced that the commander of the Wonderbolts – at her *suggestion* – had declared Dash to be a full Wonderbolt when she died. Even though she hadn't finished her elective maneuver.

Now, here was the rationale: Dash had passed the mandatory maneuvers, according to the Wonderbolts reviewing the candidates that day. Her elective maneuver wasn't a *required* move. It was just something that was *permitted*. So in passing the mandatory maneuvers, Dash had already qualified to be a Wonderbolt. And so she's now listed as a full member on the team's roll. One who died on her first flight as a full member.

That's what Celestia suggested to the commander.

The Wonderbolts flew over her service in the "missing-pony" formation. I cried. I admit it. I cried.

And there's a memorial to Dash now at Ponyville's flying field outside town. I try to go there on the anniversary of her death to leave some flowers. I try to get as many as I can and of as many different colors as I can. Then I line them up by color at the base of the memorial.

So it looks kind of like a rainbow.

# Chapter 9

## Entering the Home Stretch

### Spike

It was the biggest surprise of my life.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it was the most *important* thing that ever happened to me. That would be Rex and the kids. They meant much, much more to me. Always have, always will.

But Spike was the biggest surprise of my life.

He was just a kid when I knew him in Canterlot and Ponyville. He was actually considered a baby dragon, but he could talk by then. Enough to be a real smart ass at times.

I'm sorry. "Smart ass" is something I learned when I was young. Yes, it's an insult, and the donkeys and mules in Equestria consider it a species slur. Just like "jackass" and "stubborn as a mule." And they're right. It's wrong. Shame on me.

Anyway, dragons grow up really, really fast but then live a really, *really* long time, just like us mystical ponies. I'm talking centuries here. So Spike being a "baby" dragon with a developed mind and speech wasn't a surprise.

A bigger surprise was that his real name is Spikor – "SPY-kor." I didn't know until the day he left Ponyville, back when I lived there. I keep thinking of how they say you can know somepony – or some dragon, I suppose – a long time and still never know everything about them. I guess it's true.

But it wasn't the biggest surprise of my life.

OK, I need to back up a bit.

Now, I knew that Spike – I still call him that – had been living in Canterlot for a while when I was there. He always said he was on kind of an exchange program between Equestria and Pyra – the dragon realm, where he was from – but he never went into a lot of detail about it. Tended to change the subject whenever it came up. Kind of a high-placed exchange program, if you asked me then. I mean, he was living in the court of Canterlot. Pretty much not your average student exchange.



When Princess Celestia told me he was going to be something like my scholastic assistant – sort of a study buddy, I guess – I asked about the exchange program he was in. She was quiet for a moment, then leaned forward toward me, narrowed her eyes and said really seriously, "It's an exchange between Equestria and Pyra. That's all you need to know."

And you've probably gotten the impression by now that whenever Celestia narrowed her eyes at somepony, she tended not to explain anything after that. You just went along. Period.

Everypony knows that Spike was told to follow me when I was "assigned" to Ponyville. Celestia always told me she thought seeing more of Equestria would be a good thing for him. I suppose it was, in the end. But I didn't learn until years later that it was considered prudent then to relocate him from Canterlot to somewhere relatively inconspicuous. No pony really ever explained *why* then. But it was when Pyra had been having some problems at the time with Mythos, and problems with Mythos are *never* a good thing.

That's where the other mysticals are from. The griffins, the manticores, the hydras, all the other chimeras. Now, yes, they *also* live in Pyra and Equestria. And dragons live in Mythos and Equestria, too. And ponies live in both of the other places. It's not like we all live in walled-off realms.

But sometimes, there's a feeling that maybe Mythos *should* be. Mythosians always seem to be pissed off about *something*. Always ready for a fight. Often to start one. The only happy Mythosian I ever saw was a manticore that Fluttershy helped when he got a thorn in his paw. Otherwise, they all seem to be belligerent just below the surface.

I'll give you an example. Rainbow Dash once had a griffin friend named Gilda. She was born in Mythos but lived in Equestria for years. And you'd think *that* would rub off on her a little. But she was still arrogant and couldn't even take some party pranks Dash herself had set up. Stormed out of the party and was never seen again. Maybe it was something in her Mythosian blood.

I'm sorry. I'm going on stereotypes again. I'm certain there are a lot of decent Mythosians. I'd love to meet them, even at my age. But at my age, old bad habits are hard to break. I'm sorry.

What's interesting is that Spike actually spent some time in the court of Mythos, too. On the same kind of exchange he was on in Equestria. Trying to learn more about the place and understand it. But he said Mythos was creepy. He said it was like the court of Mythos tolerated him only for the sake of good terms with Pyra. And he'd overhear things about how Mythos was jealous of Pyra's and Equestria's power.

And that maybe Mythos ought to *do* something about that someday.

And he said *that* was when he understood why Pyra wasn't on as good terms with Mythos as it was with Equestria.

I look back now, and I realize that even with Spike's experience in Mythos, the exchange made sense. I mean, it turns out he *had* to know these things. About why Mythos and Pyra acted like they did toward each other. So he would know what Pyra should do if Mythos "did" something, for example. And he had to start learning about things like that as a child, really. Poor kid.

By the way, guess who also did exchanges when they were young? Celestia and her younger sister, Princess Luna. They had just finished their exchanges when they were given their duties over the day and the night.

And we all know where *that* ended up. Nightmare Moon, anyone? The threat of eternal darkness after a thousand years of light? I helped stop it. It's true. Look it up. Just don't believe some of the stories you might have heard. Trust me. I was there. It wasn't fun. Once in my lifetime was enough.

But to be fair, Luna – who *was* Nightmare Moon – seemed to have learned her lesson. She was always faithful to Celestia after that. Because what I've learned in all this time is that Celestia will *always* give you a second chance – but *never* a third. Ever. And Luna turned out to be smart enough to realize that.

Anyway, about Spike ...

He was my link to Celestia, in a bizarre way. I'd dictate a letter, he'd write it and then burn it – he's a dragon, remember – and the smoke would be magically transported to Celestia in Canterlot. When she had a reply, she'd burn it, and then Spike would burp loudly, and this luminous green gas came out of his mouth. Then it would magically transform into a rolled parchment scroll with the royal ponyshoe seal.

Personally, I thought the whole thing of reading a letter after Spike belched it out of his mouth was kind of disgusting. Never told him that, though. Let alone Celestia. When she found out early on that Spike could do it, she suggested we use it as a way to keep in touch, even when we all lived in Canterlot.

And again, when Celestia suggested something ...

I never imagined a belch would lead to the biggest surprise of my life. It's not the most *dignified* of openings.

One afternoon while I was still in Ponyville, I was at the library – what a surprise – and I heard Spike belch in the next room. Mail's here, I thought. A moment later, he came in with a scroll and said it was for me. I saw it had the royal seal, so I knew it was from Celestia. But it also had a note attached. And it said *only* I should read the letter.

By the way, I still have the letter. After all these generations. It's a milestone in my life.

So I opened it with magic and began to read. The first clue something was up was when I saw it was written personally by Celestia, not a scribe, like usual. I was also addressed by my full name, not "My faithful student." If you don't know this, I'll tell you: Celestia uses your full name only when she's formally addressing you as queen. Or as the regent, at that time. So I wondered what had happened that she was addressing me as a subject, not as her student.

So I read on, and it said I had to be at the Forever Plain beyond Canterlot at noon *the next day*. A chariot would arrive for me at 9 the next morning at the flying field outside Ponyville.

And I was to bring Spike. And that I was to tell no other pony about it. After that, she wrote in capitals, "ABSOLUTELY NO ONE."

Then "And you are *not* to discuss the following with Spike: This is the most important duty I have yet to ask of you. It *must* be done. You *mustn't* fail. I can tell you no more now."

After that was the strangest – and most frightening – thing she's ever written to me:

"I expect there will be no complications on your trip to the Forever Plain. But I command you as princess and regent of Equestria to make peace with The Steed – or at least your soul – *now*."

"Because IF something untoward occurs, you must be prepared to give *your very life* to protect Spike. History might depend on it."

"I will expect you both at noon."

And then, instead of signing it "Your teacher, Celestia," she signed it "Celestia, Princess and Regent of Equestria." Which – again – meant she was addressing me as one of her subjects. So something was up. *Way* up.

I told Spike about our having to go to the Forever Plain the next day and asked why Celestia would want to see him there. He just shrugged and said, "I dunno."

I didn't get much sleep that night. I'd get up and stride around, worried, and I'd see Spike asleep in his basket at the foot of my bed in the loft. He looked like the child he was.

And I asked myself what was so important I might have to *die* to protect Spike. I realized I really didn't know that much about him, after all. He was just another dragon from Pyra, as far as I knew. What was so special about him? He's just a kid. A *dragon* kid, for that matter.

But then I realized that *was* the point. He *was* just a child. Would I risk my life to protect a mere child I really didn't know at all?

And the answer came to me:

Of course I would.

I would protect *any* child from harm. Without question. Even with my life.

Suddenly, I felt at peace.

I didn't know then that as I looked at him, I was watching Spike's last peaceful sleep for a while. Quite a long time. A really, *really* long time.

And that the next day, I'd get the biggest surprise of my life.

# Chapter 10

## The Home Stretch

### The Four Warponies of Equestria

The chariot arrived at the flying field at 9 the next morning. Spike and I were the only ones there.

I knew even more that something was up when I saw the chariot team. Instead of the usual two palace-guard pegasuses, there were four huge warponies. They were bigger than most palace guards but about the size Rex was. Of course, I hadn't met him yet. But I remember his stature now, of course. And by the way, you didn't become captain of Celestia's guard unless you were a top-flight warpony. You had to qualify. It wasn't just some pretty title.

The warponies wore gold-colored helmets with unicorn-like blades on the foreheads. They weren't decorations. They were weapons – swords, knives, spears. Rex said they could penetrate dragon scales, if they had to. Not that Equestria had any quarrel with Pyra. It hadn't in a long time. But Mythos could be a problem, and any problem with Mythos was never a good thing, like I said. Mythos hadn't tried to "do" anything in a long time. But you never knew about the future with Mythos. That's why there were warponies. Mostly to deal with Mythos.

And warponies were expected to give their very lives at any moment to defend Equestria. Rex told me that as we grew closer. He could get orders any second, leave – and never return alive. I had to accept that. I did, but it was never easy. Especially after Promise and Purpose were born.

And then he died of a disease. Not in a battle. I never understood that

But that morning, I understood what it was like to be ready to give your life to protect those special to you.

The team leader – their insignias are on their collars – was a huge red pony with red eyes that seemed to glow like flames. He nodded to us and indicated we should get on the chariot. I thanked him and asked his name.

"War," he said, then he nodded at the three other ponies. He said it was his team. Celestia had requested them specifically to take us to the Forever Plain.

I looked at the others. They were a strange bunch: One was black and looked like he was starving. Another was white and seemed like he was possessed by a devil.

The last one was pale and looked like he was about to fall down dead.

Honestly, they really didn't inspire much confidence.

War made sure Spike and I were settled in, then he spoke to me. He said he assumed the fact we were there meant I had received Celestia's letter. I said I had. Then he asked whether I was prepared for anything that *might* happen. I said I was.

And then he asked whether I was ready for the possible sacrifice Celestia had mentioned.

I looked at him straight into the flames of his eyes. I said, "Yes."

He nodded and said the trip would be completely over Equestrian territory. Really, he said, we should just *relax* and enjoy the ride. His team could handle anything. He said, "We're *always* the ones who are left after any trouble, Miss. Please don't worry."

I looked at the team again. And worried.

During the entire trip, I kept looking around the sky for anything "untoward." Nothing happened. But I worried.

Now ...

Ever been to the Forever Plain? It's a plain, all right, but it's high up in the mountains way beyond Canterlot, so even at noon in the summer, it can still be chilly. And there's often a lot of mist, so it's like you're standing in gauze. And the whole day is pale gray beyond that. It was like that when we got there. You could barely see the mountains surrounding the plain. They were just silhouettes. Or like ghosts.

Spike and I got off the chariot, and then there was this sudden, scary sound. It was like something heavy hit the ground with a thud. At the same instant, there was the sound of metal rattling. I saw it was the tongue of the chariot's hitch. I learned later there's a release the pegasuses can kick and unhitch themselves. I guess that's what they did.

War told us to come with him, so we walked away from the chariot and halted. The rest of the team moved out and took positions where they were facing away from the chariot. It was like the four members ended up at the four points of a compass. And they kept scanning the area – and the sky – like they were expecting something.

The pale pony was watching the area behind us. War said that one was always at your back. And he said, "By the way, you two aren't on the team, so don't get too close to him. Not a good idea."

I didn't feel like getting close to *any* of them – even War – but I didn't say anything. Finally, I asked him what this was all *about*. He told me only that the team was ordered to bring Spike and me here at noon. He said, "I'm not allowed to say anything else, Miss."

Which told me exactly nothing.

So we waited a little longer, and Spike – who'd been surprisingly quiet during the trip – shivered a little bit. That's when I remembered he's a reptile and because of that, he's cold-blooded. I guessed the chill was getting to him. I told War that and that I was going to nuzzle Spike to warm him up with my body. War didn't look at me. He just said, "Go ahead," like he didn't care. So I started nuzzling Spike, who embraced my neck, and it seemed to help.

A little bit after that, I heard this loud flapping, like it was coming at us from a distance. It wasn't the flapping of pegasus wings. Even at a distance, it was too loud for that. It was a *lot* stronger. The air seemed to shudder with every beat. You could feel that.

War suddenly turned his head back toward the team. It was like he was checking on it. The other ponies glanced at one another, like they were telling themselves to be ready for something. Like a fight.

That scared me. I could feel fright spark inside me, and I nuzzled Spike tighter. For my benefit, honestly – not his. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He didn't say anything.

Then Celestia's chariot and its pegasuses materialized from the mist above. Which confused me no end. I thought, "That *can't* be where the flapping is coming from."

Her chariot landed and approached us, but the flapping continued. What the hell *was* it, I thought. Then the flapping stopped.

And three mountains slammed into the ground.

They were dragons.

They landed so hard, I nearly fell over from the impact. And I heard the hitching parts of our chariot rattle crazily, then stop. That's how strong it was.

One dragon landed directly behind Celestia's chariot. The two others landed just behind that one, slightly off to each side. Those two quickly scanned the area – and us. Me and Spike and War and his team. Even Celestia and her team.

Their eyes widened for a moment, like they were hungry and had suddenly seen a pile of snacks.

And I thought: Oh, *this* can't be good ...

# Chapter 11

## Neck and Neck The Dragons of Pyra

I read as much as I could about Pyra when this was all over. There was too much I didn't know. And I felt really ashamed about that.

For example, I didn't know there are two types of dragons in Pyra. I always thought there was just one. But there are two, and they live in different parts of Pyra – the Occident and the Orient. The Occident is the western part, and the Orient is the eastern part. The Occident is right next to Equestria. The Orient is on the other side of the Occident from Equestria.

Occidental dragons are the kind most ponies know: the long necks, the huge lower bodies, the big arms and legs. The ridge of vertical scales from their heads down to their tails, sometimes. And wings.

When we were on the Forever Plain, the two dragons in the back were like that. And they wore helmets a lot like the ones War and his team wore. Even had spikes on them. But their helmets were bigger. Like as big as a house.

I learned they're called "wardracs." They're the soldiers of Pyra. They're there if Mythos starts something. Know how a normal dragon – if there *is* such a thing – is about the size of, maybe, three, four houses in Ponyville? The wardracs are about the size of *ten*. And there were two of them right in front of us. Looking at us like we were lunch. Well, it was about noon.

The other dragon – the one right behind Celestia – was different. He was about the size of a normal dragon – I mean, an *Occidental* dragon – but he was long and narrow, like a snake. His arms and legs were relatively short, and his arms were about where they'd be on a normal dragon.

OK ... look ... When I say, "a normal dragon," I mean an Occidental dragon. They're the only ones I'd seen before then. Like I said, the Occident is next to Equestria. As far as I knew, they were the "norm." So saying "normal" became a habit. But I learned that the dragon behind Celestia wouldn't be considered *abnormal* in Pyra. I didn't know that then.

And that was a lesson for me. Not just something I learned.



Anyway ...

The dragon's legs were at the other end of his narrow body, so he looked like a snake on all fours. But he had something like a mane around his neck. *And* he had a sort of mane around his jaw. I learned it's called a "beard." And he also had these two, um, "feelers" on the front of his snout that swept back along the sides of his head. *And then* – like there wasn't *enough* different about him – he had something like *antlers* coming out of the top of his head.

And I learned that *all* that was considered normal for dragons from the Orient. He *did* have a ridge of scales all the way to the end of his tail. But he *didn't* have wings, which was strange to me because I thought all dragons had wings. Well, like I said, all *Occidental* dragons. But Oriental dragons don't, which makes the next thing *really* weird.

They can fly without them. They just can. They leap up and draw in their arms and legs, then sway their bodies left and right to move. So they look like slowly swimming snakes when they're flying.

And they *do* fly. They just can.

Like I said, when all this was over, I read up on Pyra a *lot*.

# Chapter 12

## Down to the Wire

### His Majesty the First Fire of Pyra

Celestia descended from her chariot and approached us. I curtsayed, and Spike bowed. War nodded. Barely. Celestia thanked us for coming, and I arose. But I noticed she was focused almost entirely on Spike.

Then she glanced at War for a moment. She asked him how the journey there had been. He said, "Uneventful," like the question didn't concern him. Then he paused and added, almost as an afterthought, "*Highness*."

She nodded and then introduced the Oriental dragon as Pyra's ambassador to Equestria. His name sounded like "LOON-guh." I later learned it was spelled "Loueng." He nodded at us but didn't say anything.

Celestia then explained that the other dragons – the wardracs – were his escort and had come to Equestria the night before. They still looked at us like they were hungry. I'm sorry, but it was creepy. But I eventually noticed that War kept looking at them like he was deeply unimpressed.

Then Celestia did something totally, *totally* strange: She went over to Spike. And curtsayed in front of him.

And I thought, "HUH?"

Then she said quietly, "Lord Spikor, Ambassador Loueng has some regrettable news for you."

And I thought, "SPY-kor?"

And only *then* did it register: "LORD Spikor?"

And it was only after *that* that I noticed Spike didn't seem to be confused by being called "Lord." But he did suddenly look scared. Like he had been expecting something bad to happen – and it had.

Loueng walked over to Spike and bowed his head deeply. He said, "Lord Spikor, I am Loueng from the Orient. I have profoundly sad news for you."

Spike took this really deep breath and looked even more scared. But when he spoke, he seemed to be forcing himself to be calm. You could tell he was trying not to start crying.

And he said, "*Dad ...?*"

Loueng closed his eyes and said, "It is with supremely deep sorrow that I tell you your father, the First Fire of Pyra, has died."

I remember gasping like my lungs had stopped working. But Spike just stood there. I could see he was getting ready to cry. But not yet. He was quiet, then asked when. Loueng said the evening before. It was sudden. Spike nodded and just looked at the ground. Then he said, "How's my mom ...?" Loueng said she was grieving – but that she was well. Spike didn't say anything.

That was when Celestia came over to me and whispered that Spike's father had been ill a long time but had taken a bad turn the day before. He died before word could get to Spike to come home.

And she said that Spike was now the First Fire of Pyra. And I asked what that meant.

Celestia said, "It means he's now the king of Pyra."

And I thought, "*SPIKE? OUR SPIKE?*"

Didn't say anything, of course.

And that was the biggest surprise of my life. Right there.

Then Celestia told me to curtsy to Spike. And I thought: "To *SPIKE?*" She must have seen my confusion because then she nudged me. So I curtsied, and so did Celestia. And she said, "Equestria mourns the loss of your father, Lord Spikor."

Spike sniffled. That was all. He still was looking at the ground. Then he nodded.

And at that, Loueng stood up, and he was as high as a bell tower. And then he yelled, "The First Fire has gone out! LONG BURN THE FIRST FIRE!"

The wardracs also stood up and yelled, "LONG BURN THE FIRST FIRE!" And my whole body shook when they did. Then it seemed like the echoes started running away from us into the mountains like they were – I don't know – messengers, I guess.

Then the dragons went back to how they were, and Loueng told Spike that they all had to return to Pyra immediately. "They" meaning the three dragons and Spike.

Spike started shaking a little, like he was trying to hold something uncontrollable in. He sniffled again and asked, "Now?" And Loueng said, "Pyra needs to know the First Fire still burns, Lord Spikor."

So Spike looked at me, and I saw his tears finally forming. And his chin started quivering. I looked at Loueng and asked – and I know it was probably another of my breaches of protocol – why Spike had to go so soon. He was just a *child*. He wouldn't be able to say goodbye to his friends here. He'd just be ... *gone*.

Well, Celestia narrowed her eyes, but Loueng just looked at me tolerantly and asked me my name. I told him, and he thanked me "on behalf of Pyra for escorting Lord Spikor." Then he said in a very patient tone it was regrettable but that the dragons had to catch the afternoon eastward winds to return to Pyra. And that Spike's mom – he called her "the queen mother" – was waiting for him to return. And that surely I'd understand a son – of whatever age – should be with his mother just after his father died.

*Surely*, he repeated strongly, I'd understand that. As in, I'd *better* understand.

I was going to say something, but Celestia touched me with a wing. I looked at her, and she shook her head. As in, "Shut up."

Then I felt a hand touch my side. It was Spike's, and it was trembling. He looked up at me, and his eyes were filling with tears by that point. And then he grabbed my coat tightly, like I was an anchor.

Then he slowly turned his face to me, put it against my side and finally started crying.

He bawled and sobbed and moaned and wailed, and it was like we were the only two there. And I'll tell you: For that moment, it truly felt like we were.

Finally, I turned my head and nuzzled the back of his. And he whimpered, "*Daaaad* ...," into my side.

And I thought, "This is the new king of Pyra ... Poor kid ..."

So I said, "Spike, listen to me," and he looked up at me, and his face was an emotional wreck. I said, "Kings ... don't cry in front of their subjects ..." Then I nodded over at the other dragons.

He glanced at them, sniffled and then went back to me. And then he hugged me around my neck – it was really fast – and put his face against it. It was like he was hiding from everypony – and everydragon – for a moment. He started crying again, but not as much. And he whispered, "I'm *scared* ..."

I said I understood. In all honesty, I really don't think I did, and I didn't understand that deep a loss until Wishful was stillborn. But it seemed like the best thing to say then. I was at a loss, too.

Then I told him a king couldn't be scared. Not in public. He had to be strong. And I said, "You're strong, Spike. I know that. Now go out and be a king."

He pulled away from me, and I saw some tears hanging off his jaw. He sniffled one more time and whispered to me, "Thank you ..."

And then he got up on his tiptoes and kissed me on my forehead.

And when he did, his tears shook loose and struck my face.

And I thought:

"Oh ...

"My ...

"*STEED* ..."

This time, I pulled back. And stared at Spike.

He let go, wiped his cheeks and noticed my expression. So he said, "*What* ...?"

I just shook my head and said, "Nothing ..."

Then Loueng cleared his throat, and when a dragon does that, it sounds like thunder. And he was right by us, so it got our attention. He begged Spike's forgiveness, but the eastward winds would last only so long that afternoon, so the dragons had to go. *Now*. He said that last word as diplomatically as he could.

So Spike hugged my neck again. For a very long moment. And he said, "Tell everyone ... I said goodbye ... and thanks ... please ..." I said I would.

And then he moved close to my ear and whispered, "Would you tell Rarity ... I always had a *crush* on her ... please?"

I smiled and almost giggled but didn't. And I whispered back, "I think she *knows*, Spike. But I'll tell her."

He finally let go and looked at me. And he said, "Thanks. For everything."

And I said, "You're welcome ... *Your Majesty* ..."

He smiled, then walked over to the dragons. But when he got to Loueng, he turned around and looked at Celestia. His eyes were still moist, but in just that short time, they started looking ... I don't know ... *different*.

He said, "Princess Celestia ... thanks for letting me stay. I've really liked Equestria."

Celestia curtsied again, and so did I. When the princess curtseys, you curtsey. And she said, "It was our honor, First Fire. Please return someday."

Spike nodded, then looked at me. He gave me a little smile and a tiny, simple wave. It was the kind of subdued recognition royalty offers when they want to stay dignified and not show too much emotion. I'd actually seen Celestia do it.

I guess he was already – that quickly – not the Spike I knew. Not anymore.

Loueng helped Spike onto his back, and Spike held onto his mane. The older dragon bowed his head deeply to Celestia, who had stood up by then. And he said, "Your Highness, with your permission, we'll take our leave now."

Celestia nodded. Then she looked up at Spike and said, "Go in peace." Loueng looked thoughtful and then said peace was something to be savored in between "interesting times."

And I froze when I heard that phrase. Because someone once said it to me.

Celestia asked if there was some matter of concern Pyra had that Equestria should know about. Loueng shook his head and said just dealing with Mythos on a daily basis was *always* "interesting times." Then he nodded and said, "Goodbye, Your Highness."

At that, the dragons crouched down on all fours, almost to the ground, and the wardracs spread their wings. They looked like acres of sail.

And suddenly, they all sprang up like explosions into the mist above. One moment, they were on the ground. The next, they were gone.

I looked into the mist and listened to the flapping of giant wings. I wanted to hear it as long as I could before it faded away.

Because it was the last connection I'd have to Spike for a very long time.

# Chapter 13

## At the Wire

### Celestia, Princess and Regent of Equestria

It was quiet for a few moments. Then Celestia said my name.

I turned around and saw her watching me. War was standing where he had been. Even after the dragons' flapping faded away, he was looking up into the mist, like what was up there was the only thing that interested him at that moment.

I asked Celestia what would happen to Spike now. She said he'd be proclaimed king and that his mother would be his regent until he came of age. It would be kind of the opposite of Celestia's situation: Equestria's king was too old and infirm to rule, so Celestia was his regent. This was long before the king died. On the other hand, Spike was too young to rule, so his mother would handle things for him.

So I asked what Spike's mother was like, and Celestia said she met the lady dragon when she – Celestia – was on her exchange to Pyra generations ago. She said Spike's mom was very smart and devoted to her husband and her son. "They were a very loving family," she said.

Then I kind of debated asking something, and I finally did. I asked if his mother would try to, well, *manipulate* Spike. He was just a child, I said.

Well, Celestia heard that, and she leaned her face toward mine and narrowed her eyes. And I thought, "Oh, *this* won't end well."

She said – and she was very cool when she said it – yes, she *remembered* me telling Ambassador Loueng *something* like that. I sort of cringed.

But she sighed and said she'd always thought Spike's mom was an honorable individual and would always act in his best interests. That was her impression, anyway.

I said it sounded like Spike was going to have it rough for a long time. Poor kid.

Then Celestia nodded and said I was right – Spike was still just a child. But he'd have to grow up fast now. But fortunately, she said, dragons do that, anyway. And she said, "I think he'll be fine. You've been his friend for a while now. Don't you have faith in him?"

I thought. And I realized that no matter how *little* I knew about Spike, I knew him well *enough* to trust him. To have faith he'd be all right. So I said that. And Celestia smiled when I did.

Then a throat was cleared – conspicuously. It was War, who had finally stopped looking at the sky. He turned to Celestia and asked, "Are we done here?" Celestia nodded, and War said, "I'll hitch up the team. Please have your team hitch me up when I'm done." And again, there was a pause before he seemed to remember something:

"*Highness.*"

And then he walked away. I waited until he was out of earshot to ask Celestia directly why she let him treat her with, well, not as much as respect as she deserved. She said he *did* respect her and that she, in turn, respected his service. His team could lay waste to an entire land, if it had to. "Thank The Steed they work for us," she said.

Then she thought. And she said, "I *think* ..."

I really didn't understand any of that.

Then she said it was time to go. We walked over to the team's chariot, and she nuzzled me goodbye. She told me to tell my friends what happened, even though there'd be an official announcement soon. And she said, "Growing up means accepting that things change. I know you're strong enough to do that."

She glanced at the team, and her pegasuses were hitching up War. She suddenly made me turn my head away from the team and asked – quietly in deathly seriousness – whether War had warned me not to get too close to the pale pony. I said yes.

She said, "Good. It's *far* too early for you to be introduced to him. Be safe. Goodbye. Go in peace." Then she kissed me on the forehead.

I got on the chariot, and we took off. I remember Celestia standing where I left her. Her coat is white, so as we flew away, she disappeared into the mist fast. Like a ghost.

Actually, I was kind of numb on the trip home. Can't even really remember it, to tell you the truth. I *do* remember us landing – in front of the Ponyville library, not at the flying field – and noticing that when we did, the few ponies on the path in front of it froze, went bug-eyed and galloped off at top speed. I guess the team made an impression, after all.

I got out, but I was still numb. I kind of mechanically thanked War and the team for their help, and War nodded. And he said, "Our pleasure, Miss. Most of our missions aren't this pleasant. Goodbye." And then they left.

I remember going into the library. It was midafternoon, but I locked the door and went up to the loft.



I saw Spike's basket at the foot of my bed, and I stared at it for the longest time. Finally, I got into bed. Then I curled up in the sheets and covers like they were a cocoon, and I buried my face in the pillow.

And I remember clearly that after a while, I cried myself to sleep.

# Chapter 14

## Photo Finish

### The Flower Vendor of Ponyville Square

I told my friends about Spike that night, after I finally could get out of bed.

And none of them believed me. Seriously. Not one. It took Celestia's official announcement of Pyra's new king the next day to convince them.

Two of them had opposite reactions after that: Rainbow Dash and Rarity. Dash was still alive then, and she said, "Spike? *NO WAY!* He's just a kid!" I said I *had* mentioned that at the time, but I decided not to go into details about it with her. I was tired of trying to make anypony care about that anymore, anyway.

I visited Rarity in private in her shop after the announcement. And I told her about Spike's crush on her. I figured she knew already, but I had promised Spike I'd tell her. And she said she *did* know.

But then she was quiet, and her eyes seemed to go far away. When they returned, she seemed to be putting on the brave face I'd seen before. She said, "Well! A prince among us! A KING!" She said that had she known, she'd have made more ensembles for him. She thought it was such a missed opportunity.

But I could see in her eyes – even after they returned – that she was sad. I don't think she was sad because she missed a chance to be involved with royalty. In fact, she was very realistic about it. She said Spike was "a charming, delightful boy" – but a child, after all. She said, "His crush was very sweet, darling, but that's all."

But I think she was sad to see Spike leave. When that reality set in, a lot of ponies I knew were.

By the way, many years later, Celestia's nephew, the prince, married a noblepony. I thought Rarity would be crushed, but when I finally talked to her about it, she just smiled. She said marrying him was just a silly dream from when she was younger. But I saw the brave face again.

She said, "Anyway, he's a mere *prince*, my dear." But then her eyes lit up like she was telling a joke we both knew. And her smile got bigger. "I had already caught the eye of a *king*."

And we both laughed at that.

Spike finally did come back. For the Celestia's coronation as queen a few generations later. And by dragon reckoning, he was a young adult. A full dragon. And the First Fire of Pyra.

He'd grown up, of course. He was of age, so he was king in his own right now. And my fears about his mother turned out to be unfounded. I was glad.

He was very tall, very strong-looking, and his wings had sprouted and grown. Add to that the fact he was this huge light-purple beast, and you tended to notice him.

I was the royal librarian by then, and I first got to talk to him in the reception line after Celestia's coronation. I curtsied, and he chuckled. I carefully asked him why – and, yes, I *had* learned to be tactful by then – and he said he remembered the first time I curtsied to him, on the Forever Plain. He smirked and said, "You looked so *confused*."

Actually, he was right. And like I said before, we unicorns *can* blush. Which I then did.

He made an official visit to Ponyville later. But it was a private trip, too. It was a big deal there, but I guess a visit by a king is, regardless. The mare who was mayor at the time welcomed him in Ponyville Square. Which he half filled by himself. So all the ponies who came to see him had to fill the streets leading to the square.

And even though the streets were packed, there didn't seem to be as many ponies as you might have expected. At least, *I* thought so. It was like something kept them home that day.

I don't know ... might have been the two wardracs standing guard nearby. Looking like they were hungry for something to nibble on. But I could be wrong about that.

Anyway, Spike later told me he was amazed how much Ponyville had grown up, so I told him about A.J.'s legacy at Sweetapple Acres. And I told him about Pinkie Pie and Big Macintosh – and how prolific *that* line had been over the generations.

And Spike said, "Huh. I *wondered* why so many ponies here looked so familiar ..."

Now, before the private events of his trip started, we were going to publicly purchase four bunches of flowers in the square. There's a reason. I'll tell you about it in a bit. But we went to a flower cart run by a young pony who was just starting her business. The mayor thought it would be nice if Spike bought some flowers from her to give her venture some publicity. That's *not* why we were going to buy the flowers, by the way.

But Spike *didn't* buy the flowers. Not that he didn't want to. He did. But you see, if the merchant *gives* you the flowers for free, you've haven't technically *bought* them. But the pony hadn't *planned* on giving them away, though. It just ended up that way.

Here's how: Spike and I went to the cart. I asked for the four bunches on his behalf. Now, he was then supposed to ask me to pay her on his behalf, too. By the way, did you know royalty never carries money or actually *pays* for something? Personal attendants do that for them. I was Spike's attendant for that day. I enjoyed it, actually.

Anyway, that was the plan. It was a good plan. Until the pony went into vapor lock. Stage fright. All she did was gape up at the huge shadow covering her, me, her cart, half the square.

It was Spike, blocking out the sun.

The pony kept gaping up at Spike, and finally, she just picked up four bunches of flowers by touch, then held them out. I took them and asked how much.

She just kept gaping up at Spike, and finally, she whispered, "*Free ...*"

And I thought, "Wait. *That's* not the plan."

Now, Spike also knew the plan, and he knew the pony had frozen up. So there was this awkward silence. And what happened next showed me how he had learned to think fast on his feet – and be gracious, like a king should be. He nodded politely at the pony and said, "That's very kind, Miss. Thank you."

The pony kept gaping up at Spike, and finally, she whispered, "Uh-huh ..."

Then he said, "Would you give a donation from me to a charity of your choice?"

And I thought, "Wait. *That's* not the plan."

The pony kept gaping up at Spike, and finally, she whispered, "Uh-huh ..."

Then he told me, "Give her the donation, please." He sounded very collected, like he had intended to do that from the start.

I gave her the money. And Spike told her, "Thank you again. Best of luck in your new business."

The pony kept gaping up at Spike, and finally, she whispered, "Thanks ..."

We left her like that. The last I heard, her business was doing very well.

# Chapter 15

## The Finish Line

### The Distinguished Ladies of Ponyville

The flowers were for Rainbow Dash. I'll tell you about that in a little bit.

After we got them, Spike and I – and the wardracs – went to the Ponyville flying field for a private audience. With Rarity and Fluttershy.

Rarity was gorgeous. You know, she occasionally designed fashions that were over the top. But when she went to meet Spike – excuse *me*; the First Fire of Pyra – she was elegance itself. Just a simple black outfit, no frills, and her Elements of Harmony necklace. She was class.

She and Fluttershy curtsied on Spike's arrival, but when he started speaking to Rarity, he held out a hand to her. We were sort of confused about what he was doing, but after a moment, Rarity finally put a hoof in his hand. Spike kissed it gently and said, "Lady Rarity. It's good to see you again." Then he grinned. Rarity's coat is white, and her blushes practically glowed under it.

And let me tell you: If you've never seen a fully grown dragon trying to kiss even the very tippy-toe of a unicorn's hoof in his hand, you haven't lived. But you better not laugh. I know. I almost did.

Then he turned to Fluttershy, but he seemed unsure what to do next. I think the hooded cloak she was wearing had something to do with it. Zecora's cloak, of course. When Spike and I were approaching the flying field, we saw her wearing it and Spike asked me what it was. I told him it was a long story and that I'd tell him later – please just accept it for now.

And then I told him that if he thought Fluttershy was speaking in rhymes, he was right. He asked why. And again, I said it was a long story. I'd tell him later.

Fluttershy shook off the hood, and Spike held out his hand, like he did with Rarity. Fluttershy looked at it meekly. Then she slowly put her hoof in his hand, and he kissed it. She blushed, too, but, hey – seeing Fluttershy blush wasn't unusual.

So Spike said she was looking well – he called her "Lady Fluttershy" – but you could tell he was trying to come up with the right word before he said, "Well." I noticed he had been looking at the cloak up and down before he did.

And Fluttershy said in a near-whisper, "I'm very honored, sir, and I'm glad to see that you're looking well, too, Your Majesty." Like I said before, I started remembering almost everything Fluttershy said after that one visit to her.

Now, I *swear* you could see Spike's mind working after she said that. And his eyes widened when he finally realized there was a rhyme in what she said. Because there was.

Then he turned to me and gave me a look like he was asking if what he was thinking was right. I just nodded and mouthed, "*Later.*"

So we all caught up on things. To be honest, Rarity dominated the conversation, but I guess it was all right. I think it let her finally acknowledge to Spike she knew what he once felt for her – and that she had been flattered. And he seemed happy for that.

He also was gracious to Fluttershy, asking her about the Everfree Forest, living in Zecora's old house and how she learned animal speak. He seemed fascinated by that. Finally, he lowered his head to her and started ... well, growling. The pitch went up and down, and the pacing changed. He was using dragon speak, which sounds a lot like growling. To a pony, anyway. Then he stopped.

If dragons had eyebrows, it seemed like each wardrac had raised one. Slightly. But they didn't react in any other way. Just before I married Rex, he told me that when you're in a royal guard, you ended up seeing so much, you barely got surprised after a while. And you didn't talk about it, anyway – on or off duty.

So I often wondered what he had seen in his career that he didn't share with me. If he wanted to share, he could trust me, I thought. But he was also a disciplined soldier, so he didn't share with me. I respected that.

And I kid you not: After Spike spoke to her, Fluttershy lowered her face, smiled *just* a tiny, tiny bit – and blushed so brightly, you could have read by it at night. Then she faced Spike again.

And she started growling.

Of course.

And like when Spike spoke, the pitch and pacing changed, and when she stopped, she lowered her head. Then she glanced up at Spike. Like she was deeply, deeply flattered. Or deeply, deeply embarrassed. Or both. I wasn't quite sure. And she kept blushing.

Then Spike grinned and nodded kindly at her, which seemed to be the end of the exchange.

I finally asked Spike what they had said. He just glanced at me, grinned even deeper and said – and he sounded so gentlepony-like – there were *some* things between a king and a lady that should *always* stay only between them.

Everypony – and everydragon – didn't say anything for a moment. Fluttershy's blushing finally seemed to be fading, but she blinked once at Spike. And still smiled.

It took me a moment to finally notice that Rarity might have looked a *little* jealous. Without even knowing what they said. But I could have been wrong.

Later, I realized that Spike never mentioned Zecora's cloak, at least while they were using pony speak. I guessed he learned tact, too. But as a king, he would have *had* to, I suppose. In fact, he probably learned it faster than I did. Because he would have *needed* to.

For the record, later that day – while Spike, the wardracs and I were returning to Canterlot – I told Spike what I thought was going on with the cloak. He thought and then said it sounded creepy. And I said, "Yeah. It does."

Just after the audience, all four of us went over to Rainbow Dash's memorial at the other end of the flying field. I guess there really were six, but I stopped counting the hungry-looking shadows that followed Spike.

Ever seen Dash's monument? It's a simple upright granite slab with her name, birth and death dates, an engraved portrait of her – and the insignia of the Wonderbolts. And an inscription says what Celestia had declared: Rainbow Dash of Ponyville died on her first flight as a Wonderbolt. I've always felt strange about that. It *wasn't* the honest-to-Steed truth, but the technicality still makes me feel better about her death. Even after all these generations.

We placed the flowers we brought at the base of the monument and bowed our heads in silence for a moment. Spike finally looked up at Dash's portrait and said quietly, "She was *crazy*, you know that?"

I just nodded and said, "She sure was." And Rarity and Fluttershy nodded, too.

Then Spike said, "And she was a great pony."

And Fluttershy said, "Yes. She was." That was it. No rhyme. No mystical message. And I think it was because even though she was wearing Zecora's cloak, it was Fluttershy's heart speaking. Not that I ever thought it had disappeared. It hadn't. I just knew it hadn't. And this time, it spoke for itself.

Spike was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Sure were a lot of interesting times for us back then."

Rarity said, "Indeed, there were."

Me? I froze. "Interesting times." There it was again. But I didn't say anything.

A little bit after that, Spike and I had to return to Canterlot. Spike had an official schedule to keep there that evening. So we exchanged goodbyes, and Rarity and Fluttershy and I hugged before they did final curtseys to Spike. I rode on Spike's back for the flight back. Hey, I'm no pegasus, right? And Spike had flown me out to Ponyville, anyway. He said it wasn't a problem. He was glad to do it.

By the way, when he said that before we left Canterlot, I noticed that the wardracs looked a little, I don't know, offended. Like they thought it was inappropriate for the king of Pyra to be just a "ride" for a little pony like me. And from any grown dragon's perspective, all ponies were kind of small, helpless things. Even warponies.

But you'll remember that War watched two wardracs with me once. And looked like he didn't give a damn what they thought. You can lose someone's mind games only if you play. He wouldn't.

Anyway, I think Spike saw the wardracs' expressions. He looked at them for a moment and then spoke in what I can only call a regal tone. A tone that reminded them who was in charge. Like it was a bad idea to disagree with him. A *really* bad idea.

But before he spoke, he narrowed his eyes. Just like Celestia would.

And I thought: They're going to regret this. A lot.

So he said, "This is our *friend*. We *choose* to do this favor for her. We *give* favors." Then he leaned closer to them, and he said, "*And* we sometimes take them away."

The wardracs glanced at each other like they didn't know what to do next. And that doing nothing was probably the *best* thing they could do. Finally, they just bowed their heads.

And at that, Spike said, "We leave. *Now*." Then he took off.

A moment later, the wardarcs took off and began to escort us. I noticed they looked kind of, well, *ashamed* for the entire trip.

At one point, I asked Spike why he used pony speak in the exchange. I said I would have understood if he used dragon speak to keep the matter between dragons alone.

He said, "I wanted to make sure *you* knew I expect my friends to be treated with courtesy and respect. Helping them isn't beneath me." He paused and then said, "Helping *you* isn't beneath me ..."



It took me a moment, but I finally said, "Thank you ...Your Majesty ..."

And did you notice? In the exchange, he was using what's called the "royal 'we' " – "we," "our." I learned it's an ancient way that some monarchs use to indicate they're the symbol of the country and its residents. So it's plural.

And it was the first time I heard Spike use it. During the recent public events then – the receptions, the dinners, the audience with Rarity and Fluttershy – he just used "I," "me," "my," "mine." Like that. The first person.

But with the wardracs – especially given that Spike thought they were out of line – he spoke like he did to remind them they were his *subjects*. Now, I never heard Celestia use the "royal 'we.' " But I wouldn't be surprised that if you were the monarch of dragons, you probably had to occasionally remind *some* who was in charge.

While we were flying to Ponyville after that, I kept looking at Spike's head. It didn't have the simple roundness it had when he was a child. Now it had the long, narrow, forward-pointing, *mature* look of an adult dragon. It had changed. *He* had changed. Like how his eyes had changed right before he left the Forever Plain.

For the rest of the flight, I tried to remember him as the "baby" Spike I lived with in Ponyville. I couldn't. Try as hard as I could, I couldn't.

And I've never been able to since.

# Chapter 16

## The Winner's Circle

### The Retired Royal Librarian of Equestria

So that's it. As far as I can remember. My memory isn't as good as it used to be. I might have left out a few details. Sorry about that.

Anyway, I'm retired, like I said. And a grandmare. The grandkids keep Promise and Purpose busy. Promise became a paralegal and married a town attorney in western Equestria. And when the kids give her *any* free time, she helps out in his office.

Purpose joined the warponies, like his father, and then was picked for the royal guard. He's not the captain, like his father was – just a member of the corps for now. But he's still young. I think Rex would have been proud. I know he would have been.

When Purpose applied for the guard, Celestia knew he was my and Rex's son but insisted that the guard choose him on his merits alone. If he couldn't make it, he couldn't join. She told me her *suggestion* was that procedure be followed strictly. And it was. And I'm glad.

Purpose *did* make it on his own. It makes being a guard that much more meaningful to him.

And get this: He married the personal assistant to the noblemare who married Celestia's nephew, the prince. True story. And like his father, he had to ask Celestia's permission to step out with the pony.

I was with him in the throne room when he met Celestia. She was queen by then, and when Purpose asked her permission, she smiled a little and glanced at me. Then she looked back at him and said yes, he may step out with the assistant.

Then her eyes narrowed, and she leaned closer to him. And I thought, "Oh, here it *comes*."

She told Purpose she didn't grant such permission lightly. She didn't give it for a pony's whim of a new fling. She expected him to show the assistant love and respect and commitment, like his father had been expected to show me. And did, I might add.

Then she leaned back and smiled. And told him that if he and the mare were even *half* as happy as his parents were, they'd be blessed more than he could imagine.

And at that, she glanced at me again. And smiled. Again.

I smiled back, but I was blushing. I'm still capable of that. I was so *embarrassed*. I *know* it was a compliment, but in a way, it was so *corny*, I almost started giggling. But I didn't. Would have ruined the moment.

Of course, because of his position, he lives in Canterlot with his family, so I see them more than Promise and her family. But I love them all.

By the way, Rarity did my ensembles for both weddings, and the bridal tacks for Promise and for Purpose's wife. I was told their friends were *very* jealous. And I teased Rarity – I *know* it was naughty – about how my son now had a connection to the prince she once dreamed about.

She chuckled like she was bemused and said, "Oh, *darling*, we've *been* over this! I've already told you: I've enchanted a *king*." Then she looked at me – again – the way an old friend looks at you when they understand an unspoken joke between you two. An old, good friend.

Oh, and speaking of that king: Spike's older now, of course, and he's married. I've been told his queen is considered quite a looker. For a dragon. Hey, I really wouldn't know a beautiful lady dragon if she *stepped* on me.

Well, I mean ... Well, there I go again. It's not for *me* to say what's a beautiful lady dragon. If *Spike* thinks she's beautiful, she's beautiful. And that goes beyond her physical appearance, even if *I* can't gauge it. The Steed knows I struggled to learn that for myself.

And they're nesting their first clutch of eggs. I've been told they're excited, and so is Pyra. I learned that the first dragon to hatch in the first clutch is heir to the throne. Boy or girl, it doesn't matter. But the next First Fire of Pyra is on the way.

But I don't think the current First Fire is going to go out anytime soon. He's still young. I don't think I'll even be alive when he dies. And honestly, I don't *want* to be. I've already cried for a young father who died before his time. I never want to do that again. Not for Spike.

And even more so, *never* for Purpose.

And never for a young mother like Promise, for that matter. I cried when I lost her sister, Wishful. I don't want to ever cry for Promise.

You know, when I got older, I learned *why* you don't want to get too close to the pale horse on War's team. By the way, the team is still around. Hasn't aged a day. It's like those four ponies will *always* be with us. Anyway, I found out that the pale pony will just

show himself to you one day. He just does. You can't, like, *schedule* it. Nothing you can do about it. It just happens.

I just hope it happens to me before it happens to the young ones – more or less – in my life. I've cursed The Steed in my life, but now, *that's* what I ask him for the most.

So ...

Like I said, I'm still in Canterlot, working on the old king's records. There are, um, quite a few. More than I expected, really. Seems he had quite a life of his own. But the project keeps me busy in retirement. And I made the promise to the king, so I want to do it.

But when that's over, I'm thinking about moving back to Ponyville. Lot of good memories there. Lot of interesting times, like Spike said. It's where my life opened up beyond books. Kind of ironic for a lifetime librarian, right?

Oh, about "interesting times": That reminds me of one last thing about Zecora the zebra.

Remember when I said I told her I wished I knew what my life was going to be like? And that she told me about a king's tears striking my face? That?

Well, before I left her that night, I said thank you to her at her door. She nuzzled me and said one more thing: "Child, I *never* wish evil in my rhymes, but *you* shall live in *interesting* times. Good night."

I've wondered about that all my life. And I think about Rex and Wishful and Promise and Purpose. *And* about being royal librarian. *And* about Celestia and the old king. *And* Spike.

*And* all my friends from Ponyville: Rarity and Fluttershy and A.J. and Pinkie Pie.

And Rainbow Dash. Especially her.

And I remember Zecora saying I'd live in "interesting times."

Well ... I guess I did.

You know, it's been generations now since she went away, but every once in a while, I still wonder whatever happened to her.

**--THE END--**