

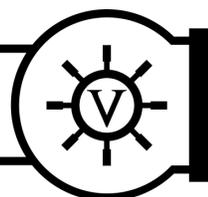
# It Takes a Village

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	42
Chapter 4	62
Chapter 5	92
Chapter 6	117
Chapter 7	141
Chapter 8	167
Chapter 9	192
Chapter 10	219
Chapter 11	247
Chapter 12	272
Chapter 13	302
Chapter 14	332
Chapter 15	358
Chapter 16	388
Epilogue	422

**PONY FICTION VAULT**



“Oops!”

Spike pulled his tail back between his claws and held his breath as the table skittered precariously towards a bookshelf, before it teetered to a halt. He let out the breath with a gusty sigh of relief. Nothing broken this time, thank Celestia. For once.

“Spike?” Twilight’s voice floated down the stairs from her room. “Not again?”

“Nope, everything’s okay this time, promise!” he called back up to his foster-sister and best friend. He pulled anxiously at his tail a little, eyeing the distance between himself and the bookshelves behind him. He was still finding it hard to judge how much room he required.

He could hear Twilight’s yawn and the creak of her bedsprings as she got up to begin the morning. It was the first day in quite some time that she hadn’t woken to find a dragon-created disaster in the library. Yesterday morning he’d knocked over all the pans in the kitchen whilst trying to make her some breakfast as an apology, and it had taken half an hour for her eyes to go from stark-raving-crazy back to normal.

Glancing at the shelf behind him again, he debated whether to try to turn around to greet the pony now trotting down the stairs. It was with an unhappy resignation that he decided against it. He’d had too many successive disappointments when it came to his clumsiness lately, and it would surely be a nice surprise for Twilight to enter to a catastrophe-free zone for once. He crouched down on the library floor, still holding his tail in with one claw, and tried to bunch himself up as tightly as possible.

“Morning,” Twilight mumbled as she squeezed past him.

“Morning,” he mumbled back, his eyes darting to the table and then to the floor. She followed the glance to the table, and her lips quirked wryly.

“Ah,” she said dryly. “Well, it’s better than the pans, at least.”

“I’m sorry,” he said meekly, and she rubbed a hoof on his head.

“Shhh,” she soothed.

“Twilight,” Spike began, but she shook her head.

“Just... Spike, it’s okay. It’s not your fault, just... it’s fine, okay? We’ll talk about it, but first,” she said around another yawn, “I need coffee.”

“Oh, oka–” Spike turned from long ingrained habit towards the kitchen, mind already planning coffee and biscuits, and absently released his tail. It swung around and slammed directly into the table he’d shunted before. Flying woodchips and ink cut off the sound of Twilight’s cry of alarm.

“Oh NO, no, no, Twilight, oh no, are you okay? I’m so sorry... are you okay?” Spike blurted, green eyes wide, as she spat ink and wiped her face. Splinters of the table were caught up in her mane.

“Uuuurgh,” she growled, and ink splattered from her face onto the ground. “No,” she grumbled.

“Can I...”

“NO. No. You just...” She held up her hoof. “Just stay there, okay? I’ll wash up and then we’ll go to Sugarcube Corner. I’ll get a coffee there. Have you eaten?”

He shook his head mutely.

“Then we’ll both eat there,” she concluded. “Or I will, or we’ll stay outside. Or something,” she added under her breath, and Spike winced.

“Twilight,” he pleaded, and she sighed, raising her stained face up to meet his eyes.

“I know, Spike,” she said, and rested her ink-smearred hoof on his cheek for a moment, before squeezing past him again to get to the stairs.

Spike sat motionlessly for a while, his heart in his feet. He examined them idly, the broad pads, the thickened claws, and closed his eyes in resignation. Heaving himself to all fours, he looked around him as thoroughly as possible before carefully, carefully backing out of the library doors to the main thoroughfare. His spines caught the upper doorjamb and scraped a thin groove into it, and he flinched slightly, trying to duck lower. Unfortunately that caused the scales at his elbows to dig into the sides of the doorframe and his wings to catch painfully against the wood, rendering it impossible to get out at all. He stifled a scream of frustration, and resigned himself to scraping the upper doorjamb rather than tearing the frame out altogether.

When he finally squeezed himself out onto the street, he stretched as fully and luxuriously as possible. It had been quite some time since he'd attempted the door. His back had cramped fiercely from trying to compress his full length, and his legs felt sore and rubbery from constant muscle tension. He shook out his shoulders, feeling the armoured scales shift over his shoulderblades and the heavy flop of the spines from side to side. Even his tail seemed to have a kink in it from continually holding it back. He whipped it lazily to loosen it, before drawing himself up onto his hind legs and balancing with it.

Ponyville was quiet this early in the morning. The only ponies he could see about were Derpy the mailmare, flitting from house to house like a grey bumblebee, and Mrs Cake, sweeping out the front of the bakery. He stretched his neck even taller, trying to see over the houses to Sweet Apple Acres where he knew the Apple family always arose with the dawn. Not quite tall enough yet, but the tops of the houses were getting ever closer.

"Whoa," he heard an awed and yet dismayed voice say from below. "How are you fitting inside the library at all?"

Spike looked down gingerly to see a slightly dampened Twilight staring up at him. "Um," he said, biting his lip. And then "Ow!" as his fangs dug into his mouth.

"Are you okay?" she asked him, and he nodded his head sheepishly.

"Yeah, uh, just forgot about them," he mumbled. "Are you okay? I'm really sorry, Twilight, I didn't mean to..."

"I know," she said, "I'm fine, it was an accident. Now, come on. Breakfast. I still haven't had that coffee, and we need to talk about this."

"Uh." Spike scratched the back of his neck. "Can you back up a bit? I don't want to land on you, and I can't..."

"Walk on two legs anymore," she finished with him, before moving to one side of him.

Spike allowed his upper body to fall under its own gravity, and there were two distinct booms as his forepaws touched the combed dirt street. He winced at the noise, and looked sidelong at his foster-sister.

She shook her head in amused resignation. "Come on then, big guy."

He followed her up the main street, wishing he was still small enough to be carried on her back like the child he was.

There wasn't enough food in the whole of Sugarcube Corner to feed Spike anymore, but the citizens of Ponyville had acknowledged his contributions to the town as a debt to be repaid. Thus, a couple of barrels of apples and vegetables were delivered to the library every few days. Occasionally a few gems were included in his haul. Spike liked those days. The whole arrangement made him feel inexpressibly guilty about taking food from the village, but Twilight had put her hoof down.

It was too early for his food to have been delivered this morning, however, and Spike resigned himself to going hungry for a few hours as Twilight ducked inside the bakery to order her breakfast. She soon reappeared and sighed gustily as she sat down on the stoop, blowing a strand of wet purple-pink mane from out of her eyes. Spike lay down beside her and placed his head over his forepaws, trying to keep his body out of the main thoroughfare.

"So," Twilight began in her customary brisk research voice. "You don't fit in the library anymore."

Spike closed his eyes. The library was home. Home meant the library. "I don't want to go away," he muttered rebelliously.

"Who said anything about that?" She sounded genuinely surprised. Then her eyes opened very wide, and her hoof travelled halfway to her mouth. "Spike! You didn't think that we'd get rid of you, did you?"

"Well..." Spike squirmed against the knot in his throat.

She simply stared at him, her mouth open.

"I don't..." Spike began, but quietened as Mrs Cake bustled outside with a serving of banana bread and a mug of coffee. She placed them on the ground beside Twilight, and smiled kindly at them both.

"Good morning dears!" she trilled. "My, Spike, I don't see you around very much any more. How you've grown!"

Spike could tell that his answering smile was a little sickly, and no doubt a little intimidating now that his adult teeth had grown in. "Uh, thanks," he said awkwardly. *Yes, I've grown. And that's the problem!*

“Call me if you need anything, dears.” Mrs Cake beamed. “Pinkie should be in soon, no doubt she’ll be thrilled to see you!”

“Thanks, Mrs Cake,” Twilight said, her magic scooping up the coffee as the sonsy pony bustled back inside. She took a large gulp, before firmly setting it down and leaning forward to glare at him. “Spike, how could you *think...*”

“But... I just...” Spike interrupted, rearing back onto his elbows and haunches, before settling. “Look, I don’t want things to change!”

“Nor do I, but this simply isn’t working anymore.” Twilight sighed. “You’re growing up, Spike. In another few months you won’t even get through the library doors. We’re lucky you’ve grown longer than bulkier, otherwise I doubt you’d have made it outside today without ripping a hole in the wall.”

Spike steeled his courage. “Um, yeah... about that...”

The coffee cup stopped halfway to her lips. “I didn’t see a hole...?”

“I tore the top of the doorjamb,” he admitted very quietly.

She groaned. “That’s that, then. You *really* don’t fit in the library anymore.”

“I don’t,” he said woodenly. There was an awful pause.

“Well, let’s think of something,” Twilight said in a brisk voice to cover the awkward silence. “I suppose you’re not much into caves...”

Spike made an inelegant noise of derision, before pressing his forehead against his claws. “What am I gonna *do*?” he burst out.

“We, Spike,” she corrected him absently, waving away the cloud of smoke that had accompanied his exclamation and taking another sip of her coffee. “Perhaps...”

He swallowed, and then it all seemed to come pouring out of him. His head reared to his full height, his lengthening neck snaking skywards. His claws viciously raked the ground once in pent-up frustration. “Twilight, I *hate* this! I don’t fit *anywhere* in Ponyville any more, not just the library! And I’m just going to keep on getting bigger and bigger, and I can’t stop breaking things, and I don’t even know how to stop! I don’t know how strong I am, and I can’t use *these* stupid things.” He flapped his wings once, before letting them fall uselessly against the dusty ground by his sides. He could feel his eyes stinging, and

blinked hard. "I'm not good for anything anymore. I can't write because I can't hold a quill, and I can't send messages unless I'm twenty ponystrides from a wooden structure, and... and..."

He could feel a hissing tear sliding down his face, and rubbed it off hurriedly lest the boiling water scorch his best friend. "...can't even cry..." he managed bitterly, and closed his eyes once more.

"Spike!" Twilight sounded horrified, and her hooves began to smooth down the spines beside his face.

"I'm a disaster! It's... only a matter of time before I *hurt* somepony," Spike spat through his hitching breath. "Maybe I'll hurt them... *bad*, Twilight... I don't want to, I *don't*, I don't wanna go, I *hate* this..."

"Oh, Spike!" Twilight gasped softly, and leaned her head against him, her whole weight pressing against the feathery scales at his jawline in an attempt to comfort him. It only brought up bittersweet memories of being cradled against her when he was unhappy, once so much bigger than him, so much stronger. He tried to get his heaving breath under control. His lower lip quivered against his wicked teeth as he slumped to the ground in misery.

"I'm dangerous," he said dully as his lungs burned and burned with more than green fire. "Only a matter of time... and I'll be asked to leave..."

"Shhh," Twilight implored in a whisper, "Spike, please, it's okay, shhh, it's okay..."

"It's not okay," he grated. "How can you say that? This is *my home* and I don't fit!"

"It *is* okay," she insisted. "Or it will be. Why didn't you tell me you felt like this?"

Spike opened one eye to give her a sardonic glare.

"Right." She smiled weakly. "The leaving thing, right. But, Spike... we love you. *I* love you. I'd never ask you to leave. You're my number one assistant, remember?"

"Number one at not being able to do anything," Spike said, and then flinched as Twilight's hoof batted his cheek.

"Now stop that, Mister," she said sternly, before relenting and holding his head as close as she could, carefully avoiding his smoking nostrils and brimming, boiling eyes. "I'd

*never* ask you to leave. I'd do whatever I needed to do to keep you here, little brother. My great big little brother." She chuckled sadly and stroked the crested scales on top of his head.

He stifled another sob, and sniffed noisily, desperate not to let his tears slide onto her. She leaned back to regard him, and her face grew affectionate and rueful. "Oh, look at you," she continued softly, fondly, "we forget how young you are, don't we? You're still just a kid, considering how large dragons grow and how long they live. Shhh. That's it. It's okay."

"Twilight, it's *not okay*," he insisted, his tone anguished. "Didn't you hear me? I can't do *anything* anymore! All I do is break things and eat other people's food!"

"Didn't you hear *me*? I said 'whatever I needed to do'," Twilight retorted, sitting up straight and eyeing him almost challengingly. Her horn flared, and her saddlebag opened to permit her notepad and quill to float before her. She gnawed at her lip for a moment, before nodding.

"What are you..." Spike began, but Twilight was already beginning to write.

"First things first," she said in a businesslike tone, though her eyes were a little too shiny for it to be convincing. "It'd have to be near the library. We've got nothing behind the tree, so that's a start. You're likely to end up roughly five times the size you are now, and that's not including wingspan or your adult tail-length. Let's see... and room enough to turn around... and hmm... Yes, that field's easily big enough."

"What is? Big enough for what?" Spike asked, bemused. His unhappiness was still twisting in his belly and shrieking in his ears, but Twilight's behaviour was throwing him utterly off balance.

"We'll make you a house," she said matter-of-factly. "Not wooden, obviously. Stone would be better for you. It would have to be big enough for you to be comfortable, even when you're fully grown. Oh, there's a thought, what if you decide to have a hoard one day? Or a mate? Nope, better be twice that size..." She ducked her head as the magic-infused quill began to scribble furiously once more.

Hoard? *Mate*? Spike's mouth dropped open in astonishment, before he began to blush violet. Words were lining up in his brain ready to be spoken – words of protest, of embarrassment, of gratitude – but he was too stunned to give them voice. His jaw simply worked uselessly as he stared at Twilight.

“Hmm.” She squinted at the paper. “We may have to clear some trees, but that should work. Lucky that plot of land’s unoccupied. You could pull those trees up and replant them, no problem. And that brings us to the next point... controlling your strength.” She peered up at him consideringly. “Hmm.”

“I could help ‘im,” came a soft-accented voice from the road beyond Spike’s body.

Both Twilight and Spike jerked slightly in alarm, the notepad and quill clattering to the ground. Their heads whipped around to see Big Macintosh hitched to his hefty wagon. Within it were the piled barrels and crates that constituted Spike’s meals for the next couple of days.

“Mighty sorry for scarin’ y’all,” Big Macintosh continued in his slow, deliberate voice, “but I couldn’t help overhearin’.”

“Macintosh, oh...” Twilight blew out a breath of relief, before her ears perked forwards. “You can help? Would you?”

“Well, yes’m.” Macintosh ducked his large red head. “Y’see, when I was a colt, I had a similar sort o’ problem, bein’ that I was taller an’ stronger than all th’ other colts. Took me a long time t’ control mah strength. I could help there, I reckon. Show you what I learned.”

Spike eyed the farmpony dubiously. “I’m a whole bunch bigger and stronger than you already,” he said doubtfully, and Macintosh snorted.

“Y’ain’t more stubborn, though,” he said.

“That’s a given, you’re related to Applejack,” Spike said. All these shocks were making him blunt, he realised dimly.

Twilight tsked even as she lifted a hoof to cover her smile. “Manners, mister,” she scolded, before her face grew serious. “It’s up to you, Spike. Your decision.”

Spike looked at her helplessly, his eyes darting between them. “Um,” he managed.

“Oooh! Oooh! I can help too! I can! I can! I –ulp!” Pinkie Pie had abruptly appeared behind the cart, and just as abruptly tripped over her hooves. She tumbled awkwardly to land in a candyfloss pile at Spike’s feet, her legs an interestingly complicated jumble. “What am I helping with?” she asked dazedly.

“Uh, Pinkie...” Twilight began, as Spike tried to prop the party pony up again. His forepaw pushed too fast, and she sat back on her rump heavily.

“Hi Twilight! Hi Spike!” She beamed from within another complicated tangle of pink limbs as Spike began to splutter apologies.

“Y’see, you’re movin’ too fast,” Macintosh said critically. “Cain’t do that when you got some size on yer. Gotta move slow an’ steady, give all these li’l folk time t’ see y’ comin’.”

Spike glanced over at the stallion and nodded despite himself. Then he reached out his foreleg and very, very slowly pushed Pinkie back onto her feet.

“There, now,” Macintosh said with quiet satisfaction.

Spike looked at his forepaw, at the long, curved claws and the large pads, and then at the knowingly grinning Pinkie Pie. “Huh,” he said blankly.

“So, that’s a yes?” Twilight pressed him, and Spike swallowed, before simply nodding once more.

She gave him her most brilliant smile, before the notepad and quill floated before her again. “So, for strength training, Big Macintosh. Sundays okay?” She smiled her thanks at the red pony, who gave his slow smile back as he began to unhitch himself from his wagon.

“Eeyup, Sunday mornin’ be fine with me, Miz Twilight.”

“Th...” Spike cleared his throat. A pony he barely knew was offering to help him, after all. A vast sense of stunned amazement was beginning to overwhelm him like a new dawn. “Thank you. *Thank you.*”

“I wouldn’t be thankin’ me just yet,” Big Macintosh drawled, his smile still in place. “Y’ gonna be workin’ mighty hard to get yerself under control, same as I did. But you’ll get there.” The large farmpony nodded approvingly.

Twilight frowned at her list. “So, for flying...”

“Somepony mention... ME?”

A swirl of colour announced Dash's arrival, and Spike had to stop himself from flinching. He didn't like the idea of learning to fly like Rainbow Dash. She was so nimble, so fast and light and speedy. He'd no doubt rip himself in two if he tried to learn her way.

"Well, we mentioned flying..." Twilight said with a note of irritation in her voice.

"Which means you totally mentioned *me*, because hey, I AM flying," Rainbow Dash said smugly, flittering around their heads. "So what do you need to know? Super Speed Strut? Cloud Roulette?" She winked. "Sonic rainboom?"

"I'll be the biggest crater you ever called brother," Spike whispered in a panic to Twilight.

"We don't need trick-flying," Twilight said, elbowing him. "We need somepony to teach Spike."

"Ohhhhhhh," Dash said in sudden comprehension.

"Me, meeee, I can help, me!" Pinkie bounced, before stopping dead still in petulant realisation. "Aw, no fair, I can't fly!"

"Pinkie, I appreciate the offer..." murmured Spike.

"Hey, I'll help you out," said Rainbow Dash, settling on the ground before him, her wings flipping back neatly. "No problem! Like I'd leave you hangin', no way!"

"I..." Spike gulped. "I can't do all the stuff you can, Rainbow Dash... so, can you just teach me to fly? No... trick stuff? I mean, I'd make a *really* big mess if I hit the ground, so..."

"You got it." She grinned. "Easy peasy kiddie stuff, I promise!"

"Nothing like the crazy stuff you teach Scootaloo?"

"Cross my heart and hope to fly," Rainbow Dash said solemnly. Pinkie gasped in outrage that Dash didn't finish the 'Pinkie-Pie-Swear', and so continued with the rest of the actions herself. "You are gonna *love* it," Dash continued enthusiastically. "Just you wait! When you're up there, the wind in your mane, the current under your wings, the whole sky yours to *own*!"

"But Spike doesn't have a mane." Pinkie tipped her head, squinting at him.

“Oh...uh, hello, Spike,” came a soft, nervous little voice, and Fluttershy inched tentatively beyond his body to see the rest of the collected ponies. “Oh! Oh, I see... I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt, I’ll just be...”

“No! Fluttershy, wait!” Twilight suddenly squawked and grabbed her meekest friend. “Perfect!”

“Oh, hello there Twilerk,” Fluttershy squeaked as her breath was entirely cut off.

“Fluttershy, you’ve got that stare *and* you’ve had experience with dragons before... Oh! *You* can be the one to help Spike with his flame!” Twilight rejoiced, hugging the shy pegasus even tighter.

Fluttershy meeped.

“But Twilight, I can already flame,” Spike protested, confused. “I’ve been able to flame since I was hatched!”

“But Fluttershy can help you refine it!” Twilight turned to him. “You see? Knowing how much to use, and when! You’ve always given it your all – but now you don’t need to, and it’s become a problem, sooooo – ta-dah! Fluttershy!”

Spike cocked his head. “I don’t think she likes the idea all that much,” he said dryly. Fluttershy was trembling violently in Twilight’s stranglehold.

“Fire!” she managed in a tiny voice, shaking her head so fast it became a peach-coloured blur.

“I hope I’m not bein’ too forward if I suggest somethin’?” Big Macintosh ventured.

Pinkie furrowed her brow, before her face lit up with utter glee. “Ooooh! Me too!”

“No Pinkie, no party just yet,” Spike said impatiently. “Go ahead, Mr Apple.”

Macintosh looked amused. “Call me Big Macintosh, hell, ever’pony else does. How’s about Miz Fluttershy takes these firin’ lessons after I done the strength lessons? You’ll be a bit more tired, an’ less likely to produce as much fire, I’m guessin’?”

“Well...” Spike scrunched up his face. “I guess? I don’t really know, to be honest.”

“We got two fallow fields out on the farm fer you t’ practise in, no trees or nuthin’. Y’ stay behind him, you should be safe as houses. An’ might I say, AJ’d be a right help on this too. Her aim ‘n’ concentration when it comes t’ ropework ’re second t’ none, after all. Might be that translates over t’ dragonfire lessons too, leastways the part about hittin’ targets.”

“That’d be fantastic!” Spike exclaimed, that overwhelming sensation beginning to fill him up again. “Fluttershy, would you...? Would you please? I’ll ask Applejack right away! Wow, to be able to control my flame, that’d be...”

“Now he’s excited.” Twilight shook her head. “Boys.”

Fluttershy had slowly relaxed as Big Macintosh spoke, and she smiled tremulously up at Spike. “Well, if Applejack and... uh, Mr... Big Macintosh are okay with that, then... well.” She ducked her chin and whispered, “I’ll try.”

“Thank you, Fluttershy!” Spike beamed, really *beamed* down at them. It made Twilight realise how long it had been since she’d seen it. “Big Macintosh, everyone, thank you all!”

“Oh, we’re not finished yet,” she said cheerily, scribbling some more on her notepad.

“We’re not?” Rainbow Dash blinked. “Twilight, that’s flying lessons, strength lessons, fire lessons...”

“Yes, yes, and we’re building an enormous stone house too.” Twilight dismissed this rather large undertaking somewhat airily. “And I’ll work out how to spell some quills and parchment larger for him... but we still need to find a way to get him to stop feeling guilty about the food he’s eating...”

“Ohmygosh, you GUYS.” Pinkie’s eyes went huge. “I. Can. HELP!”

“Pinkie... Oh Celestia, of course! Pinkie! You’re a baker and a cook!” Twilight skittered over to her most enthusiastic friend. “What can you do?”

“Me? Bounce, of course!” And she looked at Twilight as though she were the crazy one.

Twilight sighed in disappointment. “Right. Obviously.” She began to turn away, but Spike carefully and *slowly* put out a forepaw to stop her progress.

“Hang on, sometimes there’s something in those things she says...” he whispered as softly as he was able. Then raising his voice, he asked, “Pinkie, what good does bouncing do?”

She rolled her eyes. “Silly billy dilly dragon! It’s good when *I* bounce because it’s super duper fun, but it’s good when *you* bounce because all the apples will fall off the trees just like that!”

“Shoot, she’s right,” Big Macintosh said in startled surprise. “Get him jumpin’ in the orchard an’ applebuckin’ season’ll last a day, tops.”

“And with your fancy new fireskills you could roasty toasty them all up!” Pinkie shrugged. Big Macintosh choked, and then stared up at Spike in amazement.

“That’d save us three weeks when autumn rolls around,” he said in an awed voice.

“Say what now? An’ where you been?” Applejack’s strident tones demanded, and the farmpony in question came storming up to her brother and poked him in his massive chest with one hoof. “You were supposed to come back an’ take Apple Bloom an’ her friends to school if I mucked out the pigs, y’lazy varmint! You *know* I cain’t stand all that teenager talk first thing in the mornin’, an’ *ulp*–” Applejack’s tirade was cut off as her brother’s great shaggy hoof hooked her close and dragged her over to Pinkie, speaking faster than anypony had ever heard him speak.

“AJ, you got to hear this – Miz Pie’s got her some ideas that’re gonna get Granny that new hip!” Macintosh grabbed his little sister’s head and turned her to face Pinkie. “Listen to all this!”

Pinkie gave him her shiniest smile. “Oh, I’m just getting started! Rarity could magic up one of his claws so he can find his own jewels to munchy-crunch on, and I could ask him to roast all the coffee beans in the whole shop which would be one heck of a selling point, and it’d take a great big dragon no time at all to pull up trees or lift up rocks or fight off nasty ole diamond dogs, and he could warm up water for Lotus and Aloe, or do AWESOMELY scary things on Nightmare Night, or protect Ponyville from all the creepy silly funny nasties in the Everfree Forest, OH! And he could learn to do barbecues for parties, and S’mores, oh YUM, and dig furrows in the fields with his claws and melt the ice and thump all the snow off the houses at Winter Wrap Up...”

“Pinkie, you should really breathe...” Fluttershy said worriedly.

“...or help with all the cooking on festival nights, or give air-rides to all the earth ponies and unicorns...” Pinkie blinked as Fluttershy’s words sank in, and then dragged in a huge breath. “Ooooh, that’s better...” she giggled light-headedly.

“What’s all these ideas in aid of?” wondered Applejack aloud. “Not that they wouldn’t be a right help, y’get me... but what’s brought all this on?”

“We’re helping Spike!” Pinkie announced. “And he wants to help back, of course!”

“Oh, right,” Applejack said, finally turning to him. “An’ Spike needs help with *whoa nelly*.”

Spike crouched a little as Applejack’s green eyes widened, taking him in. “Landsakes, kid,” she said a little hoarsely.

“Hi Applejack,” he said a trifle meekly, but at Macintosh’s steady look he pulled himself up to a more comfortable sitting position. The red pony’s nod was approving, and he straightened his forelegs and shoulders unconsciously in response. “Haven’t seen you in ages,” he added, a little more confidently.

“Well now, ain’t you a sight, sugarcube?” She whistled, tipping her head back to smile up at him.

“And by the way, you’re teaching him to be accurate with his flame down in your fallow fields,” Twilight added, checking her list, “on... Sunday afternoons.”

“I’m doin’ what now?”

Spike tried to take all of it in. There were a few things in that list of Pinkie’s that he wouldn’t be able to do until he got even bigger – but for the first time in Celestia knew how long, he didn’t feel sad or bitter about the undeniable fact of his growth. In fact, he sort of liked the idea of helping out, being Ponyville’s big scaly defender, keeping things warm, fixing things up, even showing earth-bound ponies the skies. “Wow...” he said softly. His whole mind was beginning to reel. He could do this. He could be himself, and keep his home, and still be useful!

Pinkie smiled sunnily. “Feel better?”

“I sure do! Thanks, thank you!” He darted a look back over at Macintosh, before lowering his face to Pinkie and carefully and *very* slowly touching her neck with the side of his head, which was the best he could manage at approximating a hug. She, of course, threw caution to the winds and threw both her forelegs around his whole head, heedless of his smoking nostrils. He sucked in his breath quickly and held it, worried about hurting her.

“Don’t be silly!” She nudged his cheek. “This goofy little smoke isn’t going to burn me, so just you turn that big ole shiny frown upside down!” She stuck a leg right over his nose. “See? It’s not even hot...”

He swallowed, and tried to begin breathing again. “Whoops, a little hot,” she corrected herself as the smoke began to coil once more. “BUT! Nowhere *near* burning hot,” she said firmly, “so quit your worry-warting! Sheesh, like you’d hurt anypony! The whole idea just makes me want to laugh!”

She crossed her eyes, blew a loud raspberry, and yanked his head down into a hug again.

The lump in Spike’s throat was now a boulder. His body was gently trembling with suppressed emotion.

He felt the shy touch of Fluttershy’s hoof on his neck, and Twilight was stroking his crested spines once more. Rainbow was prodding idly at the fanned scales at his jaw, intrigued at their aerodynamic shape. Applejack gave his shoulder a hearty clap, and Macintosh even nudged his side in encouragement.

They weren’t afraid, and they weren’t abandoning him.

His brain was clamouring, different reactions tugging him in different directions. He barely knew what to think. He could really do it. He could stay, and be a dragon among ponies. He really, really could.

He closed his eyes and relaxed into the acceptance of his friends.

Rainbow Dash’s voice broke his reverie. “We’re really gonna build him a house?” she asked plaintively.

“I wonder where we’re going to get that much rock?” Twilight pondered.

Rainbow Dash groaned. “I hate work that takes more than ten seconds.”

“Colour me astonished,” Applejack said dryly.

Spike cleared his throat and gently began to straighten his neck, pulling his muzzle out of Pinkie’s sprawling embrace. His friends beamed at him and he smiled back, heedless of the appearance of his fangs. “I’ll find it – the rock, I mean, and I’ll bring it back,” he said earnestly. “I’ll build it.”

At their dubious – and in some cases, challenging – expressions, his smile grew a little bashful. “I, er... could use some help though,” he mumbled sheepishly, glancing over at Twilight. She shook her head at him smilingly, her eyes still faintly shaded with her concern.

“Worse than Applejack, you are.” She nudged him affectionately. He gave her a giddy grin, feeling lighter than air. He barely needed a flying lesson at all...

“Hey Pinkie? I *really* like the idea of enchanting one of my claws to find jewels, you’ve got so many good ideas, I can’t *wait* to hear the rest...” he burred enthusiastically.

She laughed as she began to bounce. “Only had to aaaa-ask! Oh, and wait ‘til you hear my ideas for your shed skins!”

“Somepony mentioned Spike needing jewels?” said a beloved voice. Spike whipped his head around, eyes wide and expectant, to gaze worshipfully and wistfully down at Rarity as she stepped daintily down the street. “Why, darling, you should have said they weren’t enough!”

Spike blinked. “They...?”

“You mean you didn’t find them?” Rarity’s long-lashed eyes snapped in annoyance. “Ooooh, if I find that somepony’s been stealing food from you, food I personally gathered with my very own hooves and very nobly and very selflessly *did not* use on my new spring collection for Hoity Toity, OH, they will Rue. The *Day*. They will regret their very existence! They will curse the moment they ever crossed the one, the only, Rarity the unicorn!”

“You... left them for me? With my food?” Spike was beginning to feel a little dizzy. It was too much.

“Uh-oh,” he heard from Pinkie’s direction. “Twitchy tail, twitchy tail... he’s gonna FALL!”

“Eh, he’s fine, let him,” said Dash’s voice. “We’re all on the other side of him now.”

Spike stared at lovely, tiny Rarity. She was all the way down there. “Thanks,” he said, a little dopily. “I really appreciated it... never knew it was...”

He slumped to the ground, right in the middle of the street.

“Darling...? Oh the poor dear, it must have been simply too much, I have been known to have that effect. Ahem. On occasion. One of the burdens I must bear. Should we put a wet cloth on his forehead? Perhaps a wet towel, yes.” Rarity’s voice sounded rather far away.

“Here you are, Spike,” came Fluttershy’s soothing tones, and something cold was laid against his head. “Just sleep here. It’s nice and warm in the sun...”

“Twiligh...?” he managed, and felt a familiar hoof press his face, before a purple blur swam into his vision.

“I’m here, you silly dragon,” her voice said gently. “What did I tell you? It’s going to be okay.”

The last thing Spike heard before drifting off into black fuzziness was Applejack demanding, “Why in the *hay* has this family never gotten a dragon friend before? An’ why in the *hay* have I spent all them years buckin’ apples when he can do the work o’ twenty ponies by *dancin’ along with Pinkie Pie?*”

• • •

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Sorry for the claw-writing. It’s Spike. Twilight suggested I try writing a letter to you now that I’m getting used to using a quill again.*

*I’ve been having a pretty difficult time lately. I haven’t seen you for a couple of years, so I don’t know if you’re aware of how much I’ve grown. I don’t fit in the library anymore. Actually, the only building in Ponyville I can get into now is the barn at Sweet Apple Acres. Sorry about the size of the letter – maybe you can magic it smaller?*

*Anyway, I was getting really sad. I thought that because I was getting so big I’d have to leave Twilight, Ponyville and all my friends. I was trying so hard to hide how big I was, and it wasn’t working. Wow, you should have seen some of the messes I made in the library!*

*A few days ago, I learned some things about friendship. I learned that a friend is a friend no matter how different, how big or small or scaly or pony-shaped they are. I learned that even if you think you’re useless, sometimes it takes a friend – or a few – to point out what you can do. And I learned that change doesn’t always mean the end of everything.*

*Twilight's helping me with this letter, and I have a stack of quills that she's enlarged for me to use. I have permission to sleep in the square for the moment, but the whole town is interested in helping me build my house, behind the library. Tomorrow morning I have lessons in learning how to control my strength and my fire. Tuesday is my first flying lesson! I'm real nervous about that one.*

*All my friends are helping me, and I'm going to help back as well. There are stumps around the apple orchards I can pull up, and I'm going to try to move the big rock trapping the stream on Horsefall Mountain. I'll donate my fire to the Sunday afternoon picnic in Ponyville Park, and donate my shed skins to Rarity. When I learn to fly I'll take the little fillies and colts on joyrides, and I'll scare away that old cockatrice from the Everfree Forest. I can't do a lot of the things I used to be able to do anymore – but I can do enough of them to get by. Besides, I've got a whole new set of skills to learn, and that's pretty exciting.*

*I can't remember too much about Canterlot any more. I can remember Pony Joe's, and the citadel, and the palace, but that's about it. It's all a bit blurry because I was just a baby. Ponyville is my home now, and I'm so, so glad I don't have to leave it.*

*Your friend,  
Spike*

The sun rose appallingly early on Sunday morning, flooding Ponyville with thin golden light. Spike groaned and folded a forepaw over his eyes. Sleeping in the square was convenient, and certainly kinder on his back, but the wake-up calls were somewhat earlier than he liked.

“See, he’s awake,” he heard somepony whisper.

“No, he’s just shifting,” whispered somepony else.

“Nah, he’s awake, he made a noise.”

“So? Heaps of ponies make noise when they’re asleep. Sleepovers at Apple Bloom’s ring any bells?”

“There’s a difference between the sound of Big Macintosh *snoring* and *waking up*,” hissed the first voice.

“Yeah, and you can hear ‘em both from the other side of the farmhouse.”

“You’re lucky Apple Bloom isn’t here to hear this.”

“Think he’d mind if I put my hooves over his nose? It’s *cold* first thing in the morning.”

“Well, if he is awake, you can ask him.”

“If he’s awake, then you don’t have to whisper, dummy,” snorted the second voice. There came the sound of a short scuffle as the two combatants tussled, before a muffled ‘ow’ proclaimed victory for the first voice.

Spike had half-listened to this with the detached befuddlement that goes claw-in-claw with being woken far earlier than usual. He finally cracked his eye open to see a blurred orange face peering back at him much too close for comfort. “Auugh!” he blurted, his neck reflexively snaking his head away from the distorted orange apparition.

“It’s just Scootaloo, Spike.” Sweetie Belle moved into his sleep-blurred field of vision, her eyes dancing in amusement. Scootaloo had also jerked back in surprise at his sudden movement. To cover her momentary lapse of cool she scowled balefully at her friend.

“I didn’t think he’d wake up just then,” she defended herself, flipping her wings tightly against her back. Rainbow Dash’s old goggles glinted in the sunrise from within her short-cropped purple mane. “He slept through everything else!”

“Everything... else?” That didn’t sound good.

Scotaloo gave him a look that seriously queried where his head was at. “It’s *Sunday*.”

“And?” He stretched his back a little, hearing the bones in his spine clack and crack. “So?”

Sweetie Belle giggled. “Look around, Spike.”

He did, and then felt rather foolish. “Oh yeah,” he said, embarrassed.

There were gaily-coloured stalls setting up all through the square, banners, flags and signs gently waving in the crisp early morning air. It was a long-standing tradition that upon Sunday morning a market opened in the main square of Ponyville, weather permitting. Everypony in the vicinity of Ponyville came to hawk their wares. Wagon-back sales, home-grown flowers, herbs and vegetables, fancy craftwork: it all came to the Sunday Markets. The absence of Apple Bloom from the usual trio was abruptly obvious. She would be flitting between her family’s apple stall and her own little nascent woodcraft and artwork stall. Spike himself had even gathered the weekly groceries at the market before becoming too ashamed to step beyond the library doors. It was still so early that hardly any Ponyville ponies were out and about and only the out-of-towners were visible, busily bustling to get their stalls ready for the crowds. The riot of colourful marquees glowing under the gleaming disk of Celestia’s morning sun made his sleepy eyes blink. Although all seemed as it usually did on market morning something about it was slightly off, but he couldn’t quite put his claw on it.

“You slept through all the carts arriving, all the stalls setting up...” Scotaloo listed.

“Right, right.” He yawned. Then he stood himself up on all fours and stretched like a cat. “Urgh, it is way too early,” he muttered, rubbing at his eyes with one paw. He flopped back down onto his haunches and glared down at the two adolescent fillies petulantly. “Why’d you have to wake me up anyhow?”

“Sorry,” said Scotaloo sheepishly.

“Didn’t mean to,” Sweetie Belle said, shrugging. She then bit her lip and eyed the nearer stalls apprehensively. “We were trying to... y’know...”

It then occurred to Spike what was different about these Sunday Markets compared to the ones he had attended as a baby. These were *quiet*.

“Why isn’t anypony yelling what they’ve got to sell?” he asked. “I know it’s early, but that’s never stopped them before.”

“Well,” Sweetie Belle said reluctantly, “we’ve kind of gotten used to seeing you sleeping in the square over the last few days, you know...it was a bit of a shock at first to see how much you’ve grown, but you’re our friend and we’ve known you since you were a baby. But...” she trailed off.

“There are a whole bunch of folks who only come to Ponyville to sell at the markets, and they don’t know you at all,” Scootaloo said. “They’re a bit intimidated. We thought we’d come get close to you to show them there was nothing to be afraid of – Oh, and to say hi!” she added brightly.

Spike sagged. “Oh.”

“So... hi?” Sweetie Belle ventured.

He sighed. “Oh, *everypony* knows that dragons are nasty and scary, so you’d better be scared of the nasty ole dragon,” he muttered to himself with heavy sarcasm. The two fillies were peering up at him worriedly. He cleared his throat and shook off the self-pity that threatened to rise. “Sorry,” he said.

Scootaloo shared a look with Sweetie Belle. “We’re not scared of you,” she said, tipping her head back.

Spike raised an eyebrow. “I heard. Cold hooves.”

She blushed, and Sweetie Belle snickered.

He got himself comfortable on his belly, and crossed his forepaws before him. “All right, stick ‘em over here.”

She stared at him incredulously. “You’re serious?”

He shrugged, and laid his head over his feet with another sigh. “You gotta be up at this crazy hour, you might as well be warm,” he said. “I don’t have to be anywhere for a few hours yet. *Somepony* woke me up early,” he added with a little scowl.

He was abruptly crowded by the sight of four little hooves swaying through the thin curling drifts of smoke from his muzzle. They were a moving blur of white and orange, and he blinked a few times as his eyes automatically tried to focus on them.

“You went cross-eyed!” guffawed Sweetie Belle whilst Scootaloo groaned dramatically in relief at the warmth.

“Ohhhhhh, that’s soooooo much better,” she moaned, her wings also beginning to comb through the smoke. “I thought they were gonna snap off!”

“Your friendly ambulatory furnace at your service,” Spike quipped, and the two fillies snorted in unison.

“More furnacing please,” Sweetie Belle said appreciatively.

“It’s really not too hot?” he asked, a little nervously.

“It’s *perrrrrfect*,” said Scootaloo, gyrating in order to stick three hooves and both wings into the smoke. “Gnnngh,” she managed blissfully, teetering precariously on one hoof.

Spike hoped she didn’t end up losing her balance. Deciding to ignore Scootaloo’s increasingly bizarre contortions, he addressed Sweetie Belle. “So are you still taking lessons from Madame Mezzo Forte? Twilight told me she’d agreed to teach you.”

“That’s a bit out of date,” she laughed, waving her white hooves to make his smoke eddy and billow. “I still see Madame for a technique lesson every now and then, but she passed me on to a colleague of hers in Canterlot. She...” Sweetie Belle blushed in thrilled modesty. “She introduced me to *Bel Canto*. I mean, *the* Bel Canto! The most famous singer in Equestria! It’s just so exciting and glamorous. I take the train to Canterlot every week now to have my lesson – oh and guess what! Miss Canto says I’m to sing in her next production! *Eeeeeee!*” she squealed with barely-suppressed joy.

“Wow!” Spike said, despite knowing utterly nothing about this apparently famous pony.

“I *know!*”

“And, uh, how about you, Scoot? What have you been up to?” Spike asked, tilting his head so he could see the practically melting pegasus properly – without removing the warmth that was apparently sending her into paroxysms of happiness.

“Flyin’, skatin’, scootin’, you name it.” She grinned in satisfaction, her eyes lazily lidded in the heat. “I’m gonna be the best extreme sportspony in Equestria. Don’t forget, you knew me before I was *huge*.”

“Before your *head* was, you mean,” teased Sweetie Belle.

“Oh, *you* can talk, Leather Lungs,” retorted Scootaloo amiably. “Anyway, the scooter routine’s gotten the attention of the ponies that do the movin’ and shakin’ in these sorts of things. They *love* the Scootaloo Spacewalk – have you seen that one? I get the scoot really going, right, and then – *Whhooooosh!* Aaaaaand – *powie!* Round and round and round! Sends ‘em *wild*. I’ve got a few moves that I’m keepin’ in reserve, but I’ve gotta perfect ‘em before...”

“Oh, *Celestia above*, what are you *doing?*”

The shriek came from a blowsy unicorn with pale greenish-blue fur and a peach-coloured mane, which was tied in a knot above her ears to keep it out of her way although wisps of it were making a bid for freedom. An apron adorned her and her face was almost comically distorted in fright. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle shared a quick glance as Spike drew back, speechless.

“Well, we were talking with our friend, lady,” Sweetie Belle said pointedly.

“And we were warm for the first time since waking up,” sulked Scootaloo.

“You are in terrible, terrible danger!” the aproned unicorn said tremulously. “Quietly, now, just step away and maybe it won’t notice you were ever there...”

“He can *hear* you,” Sweetie Belle said. “I think he’s noticed by now.”

“Look, we appreciate the sentiment,” Scootaloo said, “and seriously, I don’t want to offend you or anything – but you’re a bit of an idiot.”

The aproned pony drew herself up. “I understand you’re scared,” she said in a shaking but measured voice, “but humouring it simply won’t keep you safe dears... quickly now, run! I’ll protect you!” She drew herself up and her horn began to glow fitfully.

“I should go,” Spike muttered, and began to stand.

“Yes, fly, foul beast!” the unicorn declared hotly as murmuring began to rise from the stands behind her. “You shan’t have them! Slink back to whatever pit you crawled out of!” A few other shouts joined hers, and Spike cringed.

“You stay right there, mister!” barked Sweetie Belle, before nodding to Scoot. The orange pegasus with the racing-stripes cutie mark saluted her friend smartly, before wrapping all six limbs around Spike’s foreleg.

“You’re goin’ *nowhere*,” she said.

The aproned stallpony was now close to hyperventilating. “Fillies, get away from there!” she shrilled. Spike debated simply walking away with an orange pony clamped to one leg. “Don’t you know that’s a... a...” The word seemed to be too frightening for her to even think.

“Dragon,” supplied a familiar voice helpfully. Murmurs rose from the unicorn’s supporters as a yellow earth pony walked serenely towards them.

“Apple Bloom.” Sweetie Belle exhaled with gratitude.

“What in the hay is goin’ on here?” Apple Bloom asked, her eyes flicking between her friends and the newcomer.

“Our sartorially disastrous friend here,” Sweetie Belle jerked her horn towards the quivering unicorn, “has an issue with Spike.”

“Uh-huh.” Apple Bloom considered that. She was taller than the other adolescent ponies, and constant physical labour had turned a once rounded and dainty little filly into wiry, indomitable steel. White and pink flowers cascaded down her flank symbolising both her name and her need to create. Her red mane was pulled away from her face with a pink band, which in deference to her foalhood had a small pink bow jauntily perched on one side. Despite her still-tender years she carried herself with an undeniable air of authority, and she had the Apple attitude in spades.

She glanced back to where the stallholders were all avidly pretending that they weren’t eavesdropping furiously. “So Spike do anythin’ to deserve this?”

“He was just talking to us!” Scootaloo protested.

“It was about to *eat their feet!*” screeched the unicorn. The murmurs of support from the ponies gathering behind her were rather more strident this time.

Apple Bloom's coppery eyes regarded them evenly. "Spike don't eat ponies," she said calmly.

The unicorn pulled at her wispy mane. "They named it, they *named* it," she gasped.

"He," snarled Scootaloo. "He's a *he!*"

"Guys, leave it," Spike said. "I'll just clear out to the farm or something on Market days..."

"And where does that end?" Apple Bloom tilted her head up at him. "Spike, think about it. Y'know, mah brother had a tale fer me the other day. Said you were worried about gettin' run out of town. Well, you better make your stand right here an' now, cos this is where it starts if you let it."

Spike stared at her.

She smiled faintly. "Straight from Macintosh's mouth t' your ears."

He took a deep breath and released it slowly, trying to regain that sense of belonging he had felt when he realised that his friends accepted him just as he was and he didn't have to leave at all. In the face of this knee-jerk prejudice it was quite a task. He still wanted to simply leave the square and perhaps hide in the outskirts of the Everfree Forest – but he recognised that Apple Bloom – and thus Big Macintosh – was right. He couldn't allow himself to be chased away by hysterical strangers, not when the town itself was solidly behind him. He had to stand firm as a full citizen of Ponyville just like any other, otherwise his life here would only become a different kind of exile.

With that in mind, he turned large green eyes on the greenish-blue pony and her fellows who had so readily assumed the very worst simply because he was a dragon.

"Look, I know what I look like and what I am, but you don't have the whole picture, ma'am," he told her in a carefully uninflected voice. He didn't want to appear offensive or defensive – though the odds were admittedly stacked against him in that department. "I was hatched in Canterlot so I guess that's the pit I crawled out of. I moved here when I was a baby. Ponyville is home, and always will be. My sister lives here, my friends, everything I know and love. As to food, I eat gems, and vegetables, and apples, and gems, and bananas, and cakes, and gems. Not ponies. Sometimes rocks by accident if I think they're gems. I *really* like gems."

“A sister?” the unicorn gasped in horror. “Oh great galloping goddesses, there are *two of them*. Oh, this must be stopped, it *must* be stopped, won’t somepony think of the foals! We have to drive the monsters from Equestria! It and its foul sister both!” A half-hearted chorus of cheers met this ringing announcement.

Spike hurriedly heaved himself to all fours with Scootaloo still wrapped around his foreleg. He was both furious that they were threatening Twilight and desperate to make the increasingly rowdy bunch hear him. “No! Please!” he called anxiously, “you have to listen to me! Please!” His wings half-spread in his distress, and their shadow spilled across the faces of the small crowd.

The group of fledgling dragon-haters and their blowsy ringleader gasped and leaned backwards in perfect unison, resembling nothing quite so much as a multicoloured wheat-field bending in the wind. In the resulting hush Spike realised how he must appear: a dragon three times the size of any stallion with outstretched wings the breadth of a building rearing menacingly over a cowering congregation of ponies.

Far too late he drew his wings quickly against his back once more. The assembled ponies were staring fixedly up at him in fear and distrust, and he hung his head against their condemning eyes.

“Please, listen to me...” he begged, his voice ringing awkwardly in the yawning silence. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Please. Don’t think of me as a... as a dragon, if you like. I’m Spike. I’m just Spike, no matter how big I get, please, listen...”

“Oh for Celestia’s sake...! This is ridiculous! His sister is a *pony!*” yelled Sweetie Belle.

“He used to ride her back – he was as titchy as any li’l foal you ever saw!” chimed in Scootaloo.

“He had a little round face and little soft claws, an’ Twilight used to get him to write letters an’ spells down,” Apple Bloom remembered.

“He’s been here practically our whole *lives!*” Scootaloo said.

“He was there the day I got my cutie mark.” Sweetie Belle raised her chin haughtily, the quaver-tailed diamonds glinting on her flank.

“Me too.” Apple Bloom drew herself up, her jaw set challengingly.

“And me,” Scootaloo piped up from around his leg.

“He has a crush on my sister that’s lasted longer than a Fillywood *marriage!*” Sweetie Belle threw her hooves in the air.

“Oh, you *had* to go there,” Spike muttered. “Why can’t anypony keep that secret?”

“Shyeah, you call that a secret?” scoffed Scootaloo.

“You’ve been mooning over her since *I* was taller than you.” Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes.

“You... really live here?” came a voice from within the small group who had been haranguing him.

Spike looked up eagerly at the lack of aggression in the speaker’s tone. “Yes, I do. I live – *lived* – with Twilight Sparkle in the library. I was her number one assistant.”

“You still are, dummy,” snorted Scootaloo. “No pony’s ever getting a hoof on that position while you’re around.”

“Well, why don’t you just go back there and leave normal ponyfolk in peace!” snarled the greenish-blue and peach unicorn, and Spike’s heart sank a little. He ducked his head.

“I outgrew it a few days ago,” he said sadly. “I didn’t want to. I can’t help it. It’s just the way I am.”

“You know, I think I heard something once about the little lizard that lived with the librarian from Canterlot...” another pony murmured. Sounds of vague agreement rose from others in the assembly.

“Lizard! Well, I like that!” Spike said indignantly, but Apple Bloom hushed him, her eyes watchful.

“Well, what about what I saw!” the aproned unicorn challenged. “You were about to snap those poor fillies’ hooves clean off! You can’t deny it; I have the proof of my own two eyes!”

“You really are an idiot,” sighed Scootaloo, finally uncoiling herself from his foreleg. “We were *cold*. Spike is *warm*. It’s freezing here before the dew really dries, and he let us heat up our hooves in his smoke.”

“I say, would he let me do that?” a colt asked rather suddenly. “I kept thinking I needed to check for chilblains, it was so cold this morning.”

Spike blinked, and then smiled hopefully at the colt. A few ponies drew back suspiciously at the sight of all those teeth. “Sure, if you like,” he said, his voice tentatively optimistic. A general air of mistrust greeted this offer, so he added, “And if anypony doesn’t like the idea of that then they can put their feet against my side. It’s pretty warm compared to a pony’s normal temperature.”

“You weren’t that eager to help us,” accused Sweetie Belle, and Spike wrinkled his nose at her before sticking out his forked tongue at her.

“Well, *you* woke me up,” he said sulkily. “You great big bullies.”

Though the laughter that followed this display of childishness was a touch nervous, it finally broke the tension. Slowly and steadily Spike lay back down on his belly and rolled slightly onto one side, his head stretching to rest over his claws once more. Scootaloo immediately shot over and stuck both front hooves back into the smoke curling above his nostrils, and both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle leaned companionably against his ribs.

The aproned unicorn clamped her jaw shut in horrified mortification, turned on her hoof, and stalked stiffly away to pack up her stall. Three or four of the visiting ponies followed. The rest however were edging closer to Spike.

One by one they tentatively made their way towards him, their expressions apprehensive. Quite a few made their way to lean their hooves against his side and his partly-exposed pale green underscales. Far fewer seemed to want to stick their feet in the smoke rising from his muzzle – it was probably the proximity to the teeth and claws that worried them. Yet a small number of the throng braved it, with that one colt in particular growing almost as ecstatically gymnastic as Scootaloo.

Spike kept still and calm. If one of the former Cutie Mark Crusaders or new heat-seeking ponies asked him a question, he answered as quietly as he could. Giggles from the vicinity of his ribcage told him that his passengers could feel his voice through his skin. Utter strangers spoke to him, their panic turning to shyness and inquisitiveness. He offered a little thing, the smallest thing he could do – warmth – and despite their initial fears they accepted it.

A new sort of determination gripped him. It was less euphoric than the heart-full joy that his friends’ acceptance had brought him, but it was firmer, steadier. He was beginning to realise that the challenges of carving out his life in Ponyville were going to be even more varied than he had expected. He had to stay calm and stand firm to succeed.

He chuckled as Apple Bloom told jokes into his ear, and listened sympathetically as one of the ponies before his nose complained about the trip from Trottingham.

He'd seen the first test and prevailed with help from the Cutie Mark Crusaders. He'd won a skirmish, but he'd only just started the campaign, and the war was far from over yet.

And to think – the day had only just begun.

• • •

“Trees are good,” Spike said to himself with relish as he stepped through the orchard at Sweet Apple Acres. “Trees are *great*.”

Breakfast with Twilight, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle had been an interesting experience. He'd had an audience to watch him eat his crate of fruit and vegetables, two rubies and – a rare treat – a pink diamond. Some were checking to see whether he was snacking on pony, he was certain. Others seemed to be growing more fascinated by his history and his different, draconic self. Several of the crowd had followed him all morning, even so far as to trudge down to the lake to watch him take a bath. He'd felt immensely exposed – and just plain old immense – walking under their scrutiny along the bare roads to the farm. And then – trees, blessed trees!

Big Macintosh was just exiting the barn as he neared, and the red farmpony nodded to him in greeting as he walked back towards the farmhouse. “Mornin’, Spike. Be with y’ in just a tic.”

Spike sat down to wait, wondering what sort of thing constituted a ‘strength-controlling lesson’. He'd made good use of Macintosh's first piece of advice already. Moving slowly and steadily had certainly curtailed many of the accidents that had plagued him – though of course moving out of the library might have had something to do with that.

Big Macintosh re-emerged with a large basket full of oversized vegetables on his back, and Spike tilted his head. “Uh, I've already eaten,” he said.

“These ain't fer breakfast,” Macintosh said as he placed the basket down by Spike and tipped it over onto the grass. Pumpkins, squash and marrows tumbled over. “These are fer practise.”

“With food?”

“Eeyup.” He nodded. “I’ve noticed that you ain’t usin’ them claws anymore. I had a think about it, an’ I’m guessin’ you simply ain’t used to their strength an’ size yet. That’s gonna be the first lesson. Can’t have you grab fer somethin’ an’ break it. We’ll get to judgin’ yer distances an’ how to tell if a thing can hold yer weight in due time. First thing is t’ make sure y’ can get through a day without rippin’ it t’ pieces. Now, are y’ right-hoofed or left-hoofed?”

The lesson was bizarrely exhausting. Spike had to try to pick up the vegetables without piercing or shredding them between his claws. The first squash he selected turned into pulp almost immediately and he sighed before steeling himself for another go. He had to concentrate very hard on the vegetable and shift his paw very slowly and delicately, and he found it very hard work despite the fact that he had barely moved. His focus wavered a few times and he punctured his test-vegetable, but each mistake was less dramatic than the last.

Macintosh watched and nodded and made his laconic comments interspersed with advice. “This’ll help you a bit on judgin’ distances, too,” he said when Spike huffed in exasperation.

“Don’t you worry none about some mistakes,” came after Spike had skewered another marrow.

“Y’think this is dumb? Mah granny made me open an’ close doors fer hours until I could feel how much force I needed to use without slammin’ em,” he added when Spike faltered, vegetable mush all over his claws.

After what seemed like a million pumpkins, marrows and squash had been pierced, pulped and shredded, Spike was beginning to get the knack of it. After he had lifted four vegetables in a row without piercing a single one he looked over at Macintosh flushed with victory. “Good onyer,” the farmpony said approvingly. “That’s good work. Keep practisin’ that.”

“I don’t get it,” Spike said as he flopped onto the grass feeling rather drained. “Twilight helped me to hold a quill again, and I didn’t shred it to bits. Why am I having so much trouble with a few measly veggies?”

“Cos a quill don’ get held by yer claws,” Big Macintosh answered in his slow, considered way. “I’m guessin’ you hold it by restin’ it between yer toes?”

Spike looked down at his feet. “Oh yeah. My claws never actually touched the quill, even when I was little. They went around it instead.”

“Eeyup,” said Macintosh, idly walking over to a close-standing apple tree. “A quill’s long an’ thin an’ you can grab it without any sharp bits gettin’ involved. But yer paw is designed to direct all yer strength in them sharp bits, I reckon, so tryin’ to pick up anythin’ that ain’t long an’ thin is a mite harder. ‘Specially small things.” He eyed the apple tree appraisingly, before giving it a carefully measured kick. A single apple thumped softly onto the grass, and the farmpony turned to Spike expectantly.

Spike swallowed. “It was hard enough trying to pick up a great big pumpkin! I’m not going to be able to pick up a tiny little apple!”

“How’d you eat them barrels I sent yer, then?” Macintosh leaned idly against the tree.

“Stick my head in it,” said Spike bluntly. “It isn’t pretty, but I can eat.”

“Want to fix that?” Macintosh jerked his head at the apple once and then gazed at Spike steadily.

Spike sighed once more. “I’m gonna squish it,” he warned.

“You were doin’ real well there with the last o’ them vegetables,” Macintosh said reasonably. “Don’t hurt to try, does it?”

He steeled himself. “You’re right. Okay.”

Carefully, almost tenderly, he lifted his claws above the little red fruit. He focused so hard he could practically see every freckle on its shiny skin. Hesitantly, he allowed his thumb and pointer claws to close as slowly as he was able. The tension running through his whole foreleg was unbelievable.

“You got it now,” Macintosh said.

Spike breathed in sharply as the hard talons met resistance, and began to lift. He turned his forelimb over to look blankly at the apple pinched delicately between his claws.

His head came up. “I picked up an apple,” he breathed.

“Eeyup,” said Macintosh, full of quiet pride.

“Did what now?” came a voice from the farmhouse that made them jump, and Spike’s concentration broke. His claws pierced the apple like rice paper.

“Ah, shoot,” he grumbled, flicking the ruined fruit off.

“Sorry sugarcube,” was Applejack’s bashful rejoinder. “Didn’t mean to scare you none, only it’s almost lunchtime an’ I thought you boys might want something t’ eat, seein’ as you’ve been workin’ out here all mornin’.”

“It is?” Spike said in surprise, and looked up at the sky. Sure enough, the sun now blazed from almost directly above him. The morning had simply disappeared whilst he bent his concentration on picking up vegetables. “Lost track of time, I guess.”

“That’ll happen when you’re that focused,” Macintosh agreed.

“Come on, then,” Applejack said cheerfully. “Lunch, an’ then we go an’ watch you makin’ fireworks. We got last autumn’s apples in the apple cellar if you want some, an’ you can practise pickin’ ‘em up too if y’ like.”

• • •

The sweet smell of apple blossom mixed with the pungent smell of turned loam as he neared the fallow end of the farm. The fields had been raked clean of weeds and grass, and bare earth rolled smooth and crumbly under his claws.

Beside him, Applejack and Macintosh were debating what use to put the fields to next year. “I still say it should be taters,” Applejack said stubbornly.

“You say that every time these fields’re goin’ fallow,” Macintosh drawled. “We orta call ourselves Sweet Tater Acres.”

“Well, what do *you* suggest?” she challenged, and Macintosh hummed, his ever-present sprig of hay travelling to the other corner of his mouth.

“I reckon,” he said slowly, “we should put some carrots in there.”

“Carrots!” scoffed Applejack automatically, before she blinked and began nodding. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea y’got there.”

“There ain’t no pony who don’t like carrots,” Macintosh said, eyeing the fields with satisfaction. “What d’you think, Spike?”

He glanced down. "Carrots are okay, I guess."

"You makin' a liar outta me?" Macintosh snorted, and then turned to the fourth member of their party who had been characteristically quiet since her arrival after lunch. "You think we should we plant carrots, Miz Fluttershy?"

"Oh!" she said, startled at the sudden attention. "Well, that is. Um. I like them fine, but you know, my little Angel Bunny would be ever so appreciative..."

Macintosh's expression didn't change one iota, but his voice softened slightly. "Well, I know you do like a-carin' fer all them critters. So carrots it is, I guess. Fer Angel Bunny, o' course."

Applejack stifled a knowing chuckle.

Spike yawned hugely as he sat down in the middle of the proposed carrot-patch. "So what do I have to do?" he asked.

"Well," Fluttershy said in her soft little voice, "I thought maybe you could start by blowing the very, very biggest fireball you can. We'll be able to see what the upper limit is that way – if you're okay with that," she finished meekly.

He looked down at her, mildly surprised. "Okay, well, if that's what you want..."

"Better get well away," muttered Big Macintosh, and the three ponies hurriedly moved to a point perhaps thirty ponystrides to one side.

"Let 'er rip, Spike!" Applejack hollered.

Spike inhaled as deeply as he could and the familiar feeling of liquid sloshing into his flame-chambers rumbled in his chest and throat. He half-stood in order to relax the muscles of his diaphragm, his breath swelling, before opening his jaws and exhaling.

A sheet of green flame erupted before him. He closed his eyes against the glare and continued to roar until he had run out of air. His knees sagged slightly as he dragged in a shallow breath, and looked up to see that a great swathe of the fallow soil was blackened, dried and charred. The area was approximately three times the length of himself, including his tail.

"Holy horseapples," came Macintosh's voice.

“Landsakes, that’s one heck of an upper limit,” Applejack said weakly.

Fluttershy said nothing, her legs trembling noticeably. Her wide aquamarine eyes met his, and she swallowed before visibly getting herself under control and taking a deep breath. Then she regarded him contemplatively. “Oh, that was very impressive, Spike,” she said with only the faintest tremor in her tone, “and it was a very *big* fireball, and certainly quite hot.”

“You said to try the biggest,” Spike said, his voice a little hoarse.

“Oh yes, yes.” She nodded, and began to trot cautiously over the blackened ground towards him. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

Behind her, Applejack and Macintosh shared a look of bewilderment. Fluttershy normally needed some sort of catalyst in order to be assertive in any way, unless it came to her animals.

“Now,” Fluttershy said as she reached the dragon, “if you feel like trying that again I’d be ever so grateful – but instead of the fire just going everywhere, why don’t we try to narrow the focus?”

Spike squinted down at her. “What, like making it smaller and hotter?”

“Exactly.” She beamed up at him, her pink hair swaying. “Oh, not that that wasn’t the most impressive thing I ever saw,” she added hurriedly, “but perhaps you could try to have a little more control over it?”

Control. Spike was quickly beginning to hate that word. Along with *focus*. “Okay, if you say so,” he said, and began to stand once more. Then he stopped. “Uh, you might want to go back over there.” He jerked his muzzle to where Applejack and Macintosh were standing, their mouths ajar.

“Oh, I’ll be fine here,” she said sweetly, her large and timid eyes full of trust. “I’m only beside you. Besides, you didn’t get a single curl of flame anywhere but in front of you last time. I’m perfectly safe.”

“What if the wind changes?” Spike wondered.

“It’s all quite all right,” she said. “Please stop worrying and try it... if you want to, that is...”

Spike blew out a smoke-laden breath sharply, and reminded himself that he trusted Fluttershy. She *was* the Stare Queen of Ponyville after all, and had shouted down a dragon, a cockatrice, and a gala full of the rich, famous and painfully stuck-up.

“Okay,” he acquiesced. She smiled prettily, and then expectantly turned her head to the expanse of blackened earth.

Spike sucked in air once more, the depleted fluid in his flame chambers replenishing itself. He tried to focus on *narrow, focused, intense* rather than simply *big* as he began to release the fire in a long roar. His jaws elongated as he attempted to rein in the billows of flame.

“That’s a little better, but perhaps you could try moving your mouth and head some more,” Fluttershy suggested in his ear. He tried to adjust his soft palate and tongue in order to change shape and direction. This met with somewhat mixed results. His fire shortened and became more concentrated, but he still couldn’t distill it into a single blade of flame.

It wasn’t until he lengthened his neck and sent his breath barrelling along the roof of his mouth that he hit upon the answer. Abruptly the fire changed from a vague core with amorphous tendrils to a focused, sizzling white-green tongue of flame only a ponylength long. What it lacked in length it more than made up for in sheer ferocity. He could feel the power of it rattling the bones of his skull.

“Wooo-*hoo!* Yee-haaah! Knew you could do it!” Applejack cheered.

“Eeyup,” approved Macintosh, a glint in his sleepy green eyes.

“Oh congratulations, Spike!” Fluttershy beat her wings until she was eye to eye with him, her face wreathed in her demure smile. “That was ever so amazingly wonderful!”

He panted a little as he caught his breath, and it began to sink in. “I controlled it, didn’t I?” he said exuberantly, his chest beginning to puff with pride. “I really did!”

“That’s just the start, sugarcube,” said Applejack, though her face was still proud. “Now the hard work *really* begins.”

What followed was both a lot of fun and a lot of work. They sent Macintosh back up to the barn, and he came back carrying some old steel poles and soup cans. Spike drove the poles into the soft, turned earth and set the cans over them, and then tried to hit them from different distances and with varying strength of flame.

Applejack was a mine of information garnered through years of rope-twirling. “It ain’t necessarily about lining up the eye,” she said critically as he missed his can altogether, blackening the mid-lengths of the pole instead. “Especially as you’re shootin’ from yer mouth. You’re gonna have to learn to judge where yer *real* line o’ fire is, no pun intended. If you aim with yer eyes, you’re always gonna be off. Learn to aim with yer *brain*.”

He nodded, panting, and fired again, trying to imagine the line between his mouth and the can rather than his eye and the can. It wasn’t easy, but the resulting blast was closer than before.

Fluttershy remained right beside him, gently coaxing him to try different methods, different breaths, and different stances. She wheedled, soothed and encouraged him through every target and exercise, and with her help he somehow made his way through them despite his rapidly mounting exhaustion. Macintosh remained to one side watching the lesson with a slightly singed stalk of hay in his mouth, though occasionally his dark green eyes slid over to the pegasus by the dragon’s side.

Spike was discovering that his flame could do so much more than simply send messages or blast what was before him. When he pursed his lips and blew very, very gently, a thin little line of green would waver in the air, barely visible to the eye. When he hissed through his teeth the flames would flicker like a fire in a grated fireplace. And when he opened and closed his mouth whilst breathing out, puffs would appear like crackling green smoke-rings.

Celestia’s sun was flaring pink and orange by the time he finally flopped onto the utterly charred soil and moaned. “I surrender,” he mumbled in defeat. “I am *pooped*.”

“Y’ done good today,” Macintosh said gruffly, and clapped his scaled shoulder with a shaggy hoof.

“Yeah, that was darn good work, kiddo!” Applejack said, and Fluttershy gave him a little smile that lit up her eyes.

He groaned, and began to pull himself up once more. His legs were as wobbly as jelly. “Guess I’d better get back, Twilight’ll be wondering where I am,” he said, looking around at the blackened earth. He winced. “Uh, sorry about your field.”

“Well, we don’t need to buy no charcoal fer the fertiliser this year,” Macintosh said. “Gonna be the biggest carrots you ever did see, I’ll betcha.”

“Oh, Angel will be so pleased,” Fluttershy said happily.

“Well, I hope so, Miz Fluttershy,” Macintosh said with a peculiar catch in his voice.

“Actually, I’d better be going home to him,” Fluttershy continued, her voice tinged with worry as she looked up at the setting sun. She began to beat her wings, floating gracefully from the field. “He gets quite cross if I’m late, you know. I hope to see you all very soon, and that was ever so wonderful, Spike! You’re going to be just so good with your fire, oh, I just know it!”

“Thanks so much, Fluttershy!” Spike called after her.

She waved a hoof once before flying away into the honey-warm afternoon light, her long tail curling behind her.

Macintosh stifled a sigh, and Applejack rolled her eyes.

“You are *hopeless*, brother o’ mine,” she said with fond amusement.

“Oh, you hush up now,” he muttered. Spike watched this exchange in bemusement before shrugging.

“Whatever. Anyway, I better go home,” he repeated, yawning once more. “Guys, thank you *so* much,” he said rather more seriously then, his eyes sincere. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

“Oh, go on, y’ sentimental reptile.” Applejack brushed this off affectionately. “Go see Twi; I bet she wants to hear all about yer lessons.”

He grinned. “Gotcha. See you soon!”

The siblings waved him off as he began the walk back to the town proper. His gawkers had long since disappeared, and his body was pleasantly heavy with the weariness that comes with hard work as he trudged along the farm road to the main thoroughfare of Ponyville. The doors to the little balcony set into the library’s ancient old tree were open, and so too was the main door to the street with its scraped upper doorjamb. He stuck his head inside.

“Twilight?” he called. “Twilight, you home?”

“Spike?” came a voice from upstairs, and he pulled his head out from the downstairs door. Balancing on his hind legs and tail, he hooked his claws carefully – and gently – on the railing of the balcony, and stretched himself up to peer in.

“Over here,” he said, tired but happy. She was sitting on her bed, books and scrolls piled high around her. She looked very startled to see him at her balcony, but smiled anyway.

“So then, how’d it go?” she asked.

“I am *soooo* tired,” he said pathetically. “Fluttershy is a slavedriver, and Macintosh is twice as bad.”

She giggled. “How about Applejack?”

“Don’t even get me started,” he said, shuddering.

She hopped down off her bed and trotted over to look down off her balcony at his stretched body and legs. “Wow, that’s quite a long way down, Spike! We should measure you sometime,” she said, impressed.

He nudged her flank very gently with his snout. “Food first?” he pleaded. “I am *starving*. Applejack gave me some stored apples, but not all that many...”

She gave him a sceptical look. “How many is ‘not all that many?’”

He rolled his eyes. “Two bushels, hardly anything! Come *on*, Twilight, I’m sore all over and this is really starting to hurt.”

“Okay, I’ll be down in just a moment,” she said, brushing his cheek briefly before whirling back into her room. Spike unhooked his claws from the balcony and gingerly lowered himself to the ground, the muscles in his hind legs screaming at him as they braced his weight. He looked over at the barrels and crates stacked by the library full of his meals, and set his jaw in determination.

“Right, here goes,” he murmured to himself.

“What was that?” Twilight asked as she stepped outside into the darkening square.

“Well,” he said, squirming, “I’m going to try to eat dinner... well, by picking up the apples. It’s one of the things Big Macintosh taught me.”

She looked astonished and then pleased. “Oh, well done, Spike!”

He sat down and grasped a barrel cautiously before dragging it towards him. He studied the nailed-down lid for a moment before sticking his pointer-claw straight through it and yanking it out. The disc of wood clattered to the ground, and he gently set the barrel down before himself. Then he glanced up at Twilight’s encouraging face, focused on the uppermost apple as hard as he could, and carefully, delicately pinched it between his talons before offering it to her.

“Want one?” he asked tentatively.

Twilight’s hoof gently lifted the apple from his claws, and she smiled at him with pride in her eyes.

“I’d love one,” she said.

He fumbled the next apple and stuck his thumb-claw right through it, but Twilight didn’t mention it. “So what else did you learn?” she asked, getting herself comfortable as the stars started to wink between the clouds.

• • •

Spike was woken the next morning by a loud, crass burp.

He sat up in alarm, checking the square for any damage, but the brief burst of flame thankfully hadn’t singed anything important – though several of the flagstones directly before him were red-hot and plinking as they cooled. He relaxed in relief, flopping back down onto the now-heated stones, and his claws moved against something that rustled.

Curiously, he picked up the oversized piece of parchment, and laboriously unpicked the ribbon. Claws were a real *pain*.

Smoothing out the letter, he began to read:

*My dear Spike,*

*I was surprised to hear from you the other day for two reasons. Firstly, I had quite forgotten how much time had passed since I had seen you (that can be an issue when you are as old as I am), and secondly, I was in the bath when your letter arrived.*

*It must have been a very difficult time for you, and I fear the challenges you face are no less daunting. Always remember that you are surrounded by the Magic of Friendship.*

*I was so proud to hear your friends are helping you in this time of adjustment, and equally proud to hear that you plan to help them back. True, change can be frightening, but it is not always bad. You are to be congratulated for your great courage, my little dragon – though perhaps I should not be calling you ‘little’ anymore!*

*A word of caution – keep in mind that you will not always succeed. There are many ponies that fear and shun the different, and there are skills that will take many years to master. Continue to face these odds with the bravery and honesty of your letter, and always trust in your friends.*

*I hope that you may count me among them, and send me word should you need my assistance.*

*Princess Celestia*

*P.S. My little sister is remarking over my shoulder that you seem to be a rather different sort of dragon and she would very much like to speak to you. I feel you both would benefit from each other’s friendship. I do hope she can call on you? P.C.*

Twilight had launched directly from breakfast into her studies, and Spike knew from experience that there was no way he was able to pry her out of a book with anything less than a national catastrophe. Bored, he lay down in the sunlight and fiddled with one of his oversized quills, watching Ponyville wake up and scurry off to work. He was practising picking up apples again when the Mayor found him.

“Spike,” she said pleasantly. “I haven’t seen you for a donkey’s age! I trust you’ve been well?”

“Hi, Mayor Mare.” He put down his apple carefully. “Well, I’m getting there.”

She nodded. “I see, I see.”

He squinted down at her. “Want an apple?”

She smiled. “Very kind of you, but I’ve just had a truly delightful dandelion salad. Perhaps some other time.”

“Sure,” he replied, puzzled. “Er, Mayor, did you want something?”

“Well,” she said, “I received a complaint yesterday afternoon from a rather distressed group of ponies who said you had, and I use their term, ‘terrorised’ the morning Market.”

“Oh, ponyfeathers,” Spike grumbled.

“I didn’t believe a word of all that braying, dear,” the Mayor assured him, “but I do want to get to the root of the issue.”

Spike folded his feet under his chest and fumed – both literally and metaphorically. “Great, just great.”

“So what actually happened?”

“I was sleeping in the square,” he replied crossly, “and Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo woke me up. All the visitors seemed to be pretty scared, but nopony was attacking me or anything. Those two began talking to me and warming up a bit in the smoke, and this one unicorn went *crazy*. Didn’t listen to a word any of us said, just kept going on and on

about me being a monster and dangerous, telling me to go back to where I came from and all.”

The Mayor hummed in thought. “So you definitely never instigated this... er, conflict.”

“No!”

“Oh, I never doubted it,” she said, giving him a reassuring pat on the forepaw. “However, I worry that this may not be the last time you have to deal with such arrogant prejudice. The complainant and her... associates were rather vocal when they stormed into the Town Hall, and they were threatening rally action. It’s a fairly common attitude after all; no doubt they’ll find support for their beliefs somewhere or other. I do hope they don’t stir up trouble for you.”

Spike felt a bit sick. “I... maybe I should have just cleared off after all...”

“No, no!” She waved a hoof. “You were doing nothing wrong, Spike, and they are the ones who blew it out of all proportion.”

“What if they come back?” Spike asked.

“You are a citizen of Ponyville and Equestria,” the Mayor said firmly, “and you have as much right to use its public spaces as any other pony... uh, dragon. If they come back we shall deal with it. Until then, we should put it out of our minds.”

“I suppose,” he said, wrinkling his snout.

She patted his folded leg briskly. “Chin up, dear,” she said with a kind smile. “Now, as I said, I haven’t seen you for simply ages. I know it’s unpopular to have a natter with a politician, but do go ahead and fill me in on what you’ve been doing. I like to know these things, you know.”

Spike shrugged internally and began to tell her about his lessons the day before, and about several of his plans to help the town. He found it easy to talk to her, although the image of a clown wig kept trying to intrude and break his flow. She was an attentive listener, and nodded her elegant white-maned head appreciatively at several of the ideas. She was especially enthusiastic about the air-rides.

“Just think!” she said eagerly. “Flying, an earth pony like me! Oh, I’ll be queuing for the very first tickets, never you fear!”

Spike smiled. "I'm really grateful you're letting me build my house here," he said.

"Letting schmetting, dear. You're the personal assistant of the most powerful unicorn in Equestria, and close friend to the Elements of Harmony – why, you're practically one yourself," she said. "Who knows, perhaps you'll be famous! Ponyville's Famous Dragon, do you like the sound of that?"

He cringed. "I don't know..."

"And just *think* what it could do for tourism!" she said in a satisfied way.

"Well, let's hope it's the kind of tourism we *want*," he said gloomily, remembering their earlier topic.

The Mayor bade him a cheery farewell, and he was suddenly possessed by a need to do something, anything. He carefully picked up and ate the last of his apples, and then piled the empty barrels and crates into the wagon. Eyeing it thoughtfully, he eventually shrugged and picked up the whole thing under one foreleg. Walking with three legs was lopsided and awkward, but there was no way he was ever going to fit into that titchy little harness. Hoisting it cautiously, he began the walk to Sweet Apple Acres.

Macintosh seemed grateful that Spike had returned his wagon, crates and barrels and so spared him a trip into town – but with the laconic red farmpony you never really could tell. He told Spike that he'd deliver another wagon-load that evening and that he'd be able to take another lesson on Thursday morning. He seemed busy, so Spike waved and began the walk back into town. It was much easier on four legs.

He was cresting the rise of a little hill overlooking the farm when a breathless Cheerilee barrelled into him.

"Spike!" she gasped. "Oh thank goodness I caught up with you!"

"Er... hi, Cheerilee," he said, slowly extending his forepaw to support the heaving pony. "You were looking for me?"

She leaned heavily on his scaled forearm and swallowed, trying to get her breathing under control. "Yes... I tried the square first, seeing as you've been there nearly a week, and when I didn't find you there I asked Twilight and she said you'd left, so I cantered through town and finally..." She coughed a little. "Phew, sorry."

"That's okay," he said. "So what's the big hurry?"

“I wanted to catch you before school started,” the teacher explained. “You see, I’ve had some complaints recently...”

“Oh no,” Spike groaned.

“...from a few parents of my younger students. They haven’t really seen you since they were barely weaned, and seeing you... well, as you are now has unfortunately given them nightmares, poor little mites. No matter how many times I or their parents tell them that you’re a friendly dragon, they’re scared stiff of you.”

Spike’s heart sank. “Hooray, I’m the stuff of nightmares,” he muttered.

“Anyway, I was wondering if you’d be willing to come by the school? Perhaps tomorrow?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Well, I spoke to the parents, and they agreed it would probably be best if their colts and fillies met you properly in a safe environment. That way, they’ll discover they have nothing to be afraid of. Perhaps you could tell a few stories to the little ones about growing up as a dragon in Ponyville?” Her green eyes blinked up at him hopefully.

He was rather taken aback. “Um, sure, if you like? What time?”

“Well, after lunch would be best,” she said, beaming. “Oh, thank you, this will surely put their minds to rest! Silly little cherubs, you wouldn’t believe the stories that were being bandied about the playground.”

“I think I can live quite happily without ever hearing them,” he agreed sourly.

“I must dash,” she said, “I haven’t much time before the first of them arrive at the schoolhouse. Oh, thank you, thank you again, Spike!”

She was gone in a swirl of dark purple.

“*What was that?*” he wondered to himself.

• • •

Spike heaved on the ropes as hard as he could, his shoulders straining and his wings half-extended with effort.

“That’s it!” Pinkie clapped her hooves together. “You’re doing it!”

He collapsed against the ropes, panting. “I’m doing *squat!* It won’t budge, Pinkie. It’s solid as a... well, as a rock!”

Rainbow Dash wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, funny that.”

As the rest of Ponyville went through a normal Monday afternoon, the three of them had made their way to the peak of Horsefall Mountain overlooking the Everfree Forest. The mighty stone that rested against the peak had shifted during an earthquake many years ago, blocking off the little brook that had once trickled merrily through the Forest and into the lake by the village. Granny Smith had told the story so many times it had become legend. So too had her mumbling complaints about losing access to the convenient source of fresh water.

Spike had promised to move the rock, but he had seriously underestimated its size. Seeing it close up was worlds away from seeing it at a distance. It was broader than it was high, and thus rolling it was a virtual impossibility. So he was attempting to drag it away from the spring’s source – and he wasn’t nearly strong enough yet.

“Never thought I’d want to be bigger than I am now,” he puffed, his face shiny. “This thing is seriously ticking me off!”

“Easy, tiger.” Dash grinned from her perch on a little cloud. “Give it another go.”

“Don’t give up, Spikey-wikey!” Pinkie echoed, bouncing gently on the spot. “You got to push on through it if you want to do it!”

“Easy for you two to say,” he grumbled, but braced himself against the ropes once more. The muscles in his neck tensed as he hurled his whole weight and strength against the rock’s indifference. His claws dug furrows beneath him as he scabbled for more purchase against the scrubby ground.

Eventually he had to concede defeat again, and his head flopped forwards as his shoulders wilted. “Unnngh,” he groaned painfully. “Ow. Really, really, *ow.*”

“You totally gave it your best shot, Spike,” Dash said, “and hey, it’s not everypony that can be as awesome as *me* on the very first try. Maybe next year, huh?”

“I think it almost moved a teeny-tiny eensy-weensy bit just then!” said Pinkie loyally.

“Well, I think that in any future epic fight between dragon and rock, I know who my bit’s on,” Dash drawled.

Spike huffed, and Pinkie pursed her lips disapprovingly.

“Dashie!” she scolded, and Rainbow Dash shrugged.

“The rock won. Tell it like it is.”

“Stupid... rock,” Spike managed, staggering out of the ropes. “...show it...”

“Yeah, you *show* that rock! Show it who’s the biggest, baddest boss!” Pinkie cheered, her hooves boxing at thin air. “You kick it to the *curb*, you take it to the *cleaners*, if it wants trouble it’s got *double*, cos lean, mean, purple-and-green is here to kick tail and take names, but he ain’t taking no names, no sir-ee!”

He stomped around the stupid thing until he was on the mountain above it, leaned his shoulder against the pitted side and pushed with all his might and main. His hind feet immediately began to scour deep gashes in the ground behind him, and he gritted his fangs. The great flight muscles in his shoulders and back were locked and burning, and his haunches felt like they were on fire.

“What the hay?” he dimly heard Rainbow Dash say.

“It’s moving!” squealed Pinkie. “Gimme an *S!* Gimme a *P!* Gimme an *I!*”

Spike’s eyes were beginning to water, the boiling tears splashing at his feet. The sound of rock scraping against rock screeched harshly in his ears. He began to snarl through his teeth as his forelegs shook with effort. With that awful grating rattling his head, he slowly slid the huge stone down the mountain for perhaps ten ponystrides before finally crumpling into a heap.

“Wow. I mean *wow*.” Rainbow Dash flitted down to him, her face gobsomacked. “Okay, I’m on Team Dragon now, all right? Remind me not to annoy you in future... hey, are you okay?”

Spike just gasped and trembled, his throat working furiously.

“Oh, no, he’s hurt himself.” Pinkie’s pupils were blown wide with worry. “Spike?”

“...water...” he rasped.

“Water, right, can do...” Rainbow Dash zipped away quicker than thought and returned even faster with a puffy black cloud. “Say ‘ahhh,’” she instructed, preparing to jump on the cloud.

“...No, no... the...” Spike swallowed, “the stream... is it...?”

“Oh!” Pinkie blinked, before she scurried back to the rock’s original position to peer at the black mud that had rested underneath it. “Nopey dopey!” she reported cheerfully.

Spike groaned.

“Hang on,” Pinkie continued more slowly, “is that... *whoa!*”

Her whole back shuddered, and then her eyes fluttered in conjunction with her nose twitching and a single ear flopping forwards. “Combo!” she gasped.

Spike pushed himself painfully onto his elbows. “What... does that mean?”

She turned to them, her blue eyes earnest. “Don’t know, that one’s new!”

A great subterranean rumble began under his claws, and the craggy mountain peak began to quake.

“But I *think* it means that we’re gonna get wet,” she added brightly.

Abruptly a veritable geyser of muddy water blew into the sky behind her, and Spike only had a second in which to say, “Oh, that’s just *great*,” before he had a faceful of it. Spitting and spluttering, he stood with some difficulty to see Pinkie being carried down towards him by the blocked stream’s initial torrent.

“Pinkie!” he yelled.

“Wheee!” she crowed.

“Oh, brother,” Dash sighed.

He waded towards her, the mud sucking at his claws. She was spinning like a cork in the current, and he was only able to halt her progress by extending one wing and catching her within it like a net. Unfortunately that also meant that he was catching an awful amount of very fast-moving water, and he sucked air through his teeth as his wing was wrenched back, though he didn’t dare move for fear of losing Pinkie.

Rainbow Dash swooped in at that point, grabbed Pinkie's hooves and hoisted her into the air. "I got her, Spike!" she hollered. "You can get out now!"

Folding his wing back in was pure agony. He ducked his head against the rushing water and squelched his way to the bank of the stream. The water was quickly scouring the layers of dirt away to reveal the old stream-bed, but he was still very muddy when he made it to dry land. He sprawled onto the ground, his wings and legs trailing behind him.

Pinkie was sitting on the grass like a sack of potatoes, her dripping mane in her eyes but a cheery grin on her face. Dash was hovering at the water's edge watching him anxiously. "Ya know, you really ought to read the fine print before you volunteer to do anything like this again," she said.

"I know," he croaked.

"Well, you unblocked the stream," Pinkie pointed out in the tone of somepony trying to find a silver lining.

Spike raised his eyes to meet Rainbow Dash's, and they both began chuckling. "Really? I hadn't noticed," Spike laughed.

"Yeah, when was that?" Dash snickered.

Pinkie flopped over onto her back. "Would I call it a 'Rock-Moving' Party?" she mused. "Or possibly 'Stream-Unblocking' Party? No, not that name, sounds too... too *medical*. Oooh, maybe a 'Spike, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie Narrowly Escape Drowning' party! That'd be..."

"You again!"

The booming roar came from the edges of the Everfree Forest far below them. It prodded a memory from long ago, and Spike's fatigue disappeared in a cold rush of fear. He leapt to his feet and turned to face the Forest edge, his wings extending to shield the two ponies.

From between the trees emerged the huge snout and snakelike neck of the green dragon he had met when he was a baby. It was just as ferocious-looking as he remembered, its eyes roiling with anger and disdain – and it was easily five times the size of him. The wicked-looking spines along its back caught the branches of the trees and its gargantuan teeth gleamed unpleasantly.

“Spike, you know this guy?” Dash whispered hoarsely.

“We met once, a long time ago,” he muttered.

Pinkie beamed. “Well? Where are your manners? Make some introductions!”

“I should have known it was you, hatchling,” the dragon growled deafeningly. “Who else would dare flood my home?”

“What? He didn’t flood it, the stream just got *unblocked*, it’ll die down eventually, and anyway what do you mean *hatchling*? Spike’s not a baby anymore!” Pinkie said very quickly and very indignantly.

“Pinkie, please shut up,” Dash said urgently. The dragon’s orange eyes flashed, and it began to stalk menacingly out of the trees. The extra-sharp claws and extra-spiky tail were exactly as Spike remembered – unfortunately.

“I found this one in my home, eating my gems, when he was barely out of the egg,” he said with thunderous scorn. “Now I find he has graduated to flooding my cave.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” Spike said quickly, “I didn’t know this stream would wash out your cave.”

The dragon hissed in anger and towering contempt. “Tell me, hatchling, have you made any improvement on that miserable flame?”

“Some,” said Spike warily.

The great green dragon chuckled darkly. “It would have been difficult to do otherwise, pathetic as it was. And I see you have your wings and teeth.” The huge claws effortlessly raked a gigantic trench in the rocky mountainside. “Can you use them?”

Spike remained silent. The dragon’s laughter grew gleeful. “Ah, no. A flightless dragon, a grounded lizard. You have wings and teeth and claws, child, but you might as well be exactly as you were when you ate my gems.”

“What’s it to you?” Dash said pugnaciously, and Spike gave her a warning look.

“That infant trying to shield you has insulted me for the last time, mammal,” the green dragon snarled. “He infringes on my territory and blithely takes what is mine for his own. Finally he has drowned my lair and washed away my hoard. It must be answered.

Any true dragon would not allow such an affront to live.” He took another precise step, the distorted wavering of superheated gases playing in his mouth.

“Dash, take Pinkie and run,” Spike said. “You have to run!”

“Hey, I don’t leave my friends in the lurch,” she hissed back.

“He’ll *kill* you, you have to get out of here!” Spike pleaded with her.

“And how about you?” she threw back. “He invitin’ you to a tea party and a nice little sing-song?”

“He doesn’t look like the sing-song type,” said Pinkie weakly.

Step by ominous step, the great beast prowled closer. The ponies’ eyes were pinpricks of fear. Spike’s panic was close to overwhelming as he barked “Go!” at them.

Rainbow Dash scooped Pinkie Pie up and hovered for a moment, Pinkie’s legs dangling comically. “I’m comin’ back,” she said grimly. “Don’t do anything dumb.”

“Dumber than sticking around for a dragon-fight?” Spike cried in frustration. “Get out of here!”

She gave him a last look of desperation, and then they were gone.

“How touching. You are fond of the little beasts,” crooned the green dragon mockingly.

“I was raised by ponies,” Spike said, turning back to face it. “Of course I’m fond of them.”

The great creature spat in ridicule. “You are no dragon, hatchling. You are nothing but a mammal in a scaled skin.”

“Least I don’t live all alone,” he retorted, backing up slightly. “Least I actually have *friends* to talk to.”

“Friends!” The dragon laughed derisively, a great plume of fire rising from his jaws. “A true dragon has no *friends*. You speak weak mammal words with your forked tongue.”

“Do all ‘true dragons’ talk as stupidly as you do?” Spike asked insolently, though his voice was trembling. He continued to back up the mountain, his heart beating so hard it felt like it would tear through his chest.

The dragon snorted fire from his nostrils like an enraged bull. “You know *nothing*,” he growled. “You little fool.”

“I know one thing,” Spike said defiantly, “I know that dragons are supposed to be proud. Where’s the pride in killing me? Like you said, I’m just a kid. Wow, killing a kid, *huge* achievement there. Really something to be proud of, I’ll bet.”

The dragon stopped for a moment, before it squatted back on its haunches. “There is something to what you say,” it said.

“Oh, *thank Celestia* you think so!” Spike exhaled hugely, smoke puffing everywhere, careless in his relief. “Wow, that was a good one! You really had me going there, I totally thought you were gonna kill me...”

“I hadn’t finished,” the dragon interrupted with a slow, sly grin. “I *am* going to kill you, have no doubt about that. However, I will give you a small chance. A token. Some time, perhaps, to prepare your puny little fire against mine...”

“Time...?” Spike squeaked.

The dragon began to prowl back into the forest. “One month at the full moon, hatchling, upon this peak. I will fight you, and you will die. If you flee like a witless worm or cower amongst those ridiculous mammals you so care for, why then... I will descend upon their cosy little village and reduce it to cinders and ash.”

Dread gripped Spike with cold, icy claws.

“One month,” the dragon repeated, and disappeared into the trees.

Spike stared and stared at the place where the dragon had vanished. He was still staring when Rainbow Dash returned.

• • •

“Well, we’ve got trouble,” Twilight announced as she closed the book.

“No, really?” said a mud-encrusted Spike hysterically. “That’s *amazing*, I hadn’t figured that one out for myself at *all!*”

“Stop pacin’, sugarcube, yer makin’ me dizzy,” Applejack said irritably. They were all gathered by the lake where Spike had once had a very rude awakening after his very first Winter Wrap Up. A muddy little stream now fed into its forested edge.

“So this is the same one you stumbled over during that whole Owlowsious tantrum? Aw-kwaaaard,” said Pinkie, wringing out her still-sopping mane.

Spike simply let out a long and heartfelt groan as he sank to the ground, covering his head with his wings.

“I’d forgotten about the dragon in the Forest,” Twilight admitted.

“Why does he suddenly have such an issue with Spike?” Fluttershy asked.

“Because he’s becoming a threat,” Twilight said reluctantly. “Dragons are incredibly territorial, after all, and now that Spike’s no longer a baby the dragon can’t really ignore him anymore. He’s a constant challenge to his dominance. Add to that the fact that Spike’s, er, prior contact with this dragon has always been... um... er...” She turned her eyes skywards, searching for the right word.

“Disastrous?” Rarity suggested.

“Un-awesome?” Dash put in.

“As if he’d deliberately purposefully on-purpose gone out of his way to purposefully get in the dragon’s face and purposefully mess up his territory issues?” Pinkie said brightly.

“Yes!” cried Spike, sitting bolt upright. “All those, yes!”

“Spike, calm down!” Twilight said, her voice thick with exasperation. “That’s not helping!”

“Oh, I didn’t realise, I’m sorry,” Spike said frantically, rude in his shock and fright, “I didn’t realise I needed to be helpful about my own impending messy death!”

“Spike!”

Twilight was frowning at him, and despite the fact that he was over three times her height and easily twenty times her weight, he cringed. Hers had always been the voice of authority to him.

“Please, Twilight? Can’t you find some magic or something?” he pleaded in desperation. “Maybe make me his size? Make him my size? Make him *Winona’s* size? There’s got to be something!”

“Spike, you know this,” she sighed.

“Know what?” Applejack asked.

“That dragons are naturally magic-resistant,” Spike said, gritting his fangs in frustration.

“That’s why the entrance exam to the School for Gifted Unicorns was to hatch a dragon’s egg,” Twilight said as she floated yet more books from her saddlebag. “My exam was considered so extraordinary because I even affected Spike himself. And that’s *also* why I always practised magic on him. His natural resistance makes it harder.”

“*Magic-resistant*, not *magic-proof*,” he said hopefully, but those hopes were dashed when she shook her head.

“It grows stronger as you age, Spike,” she explained. “I’d barely be able to affect that dragon at all, and I bet the moustache you’d get nowadays wouldn’t be half what it used to be.”

Spike postponed feeling nostalgic about that until he’d finished panicking his heart out. “Okay, no magic, no magic, oh *horseapples*, no magic... so what else can I do?”

“Language,” Twilight said sternly as she selected another book, a red dragon embossed on its cover.

“I know, I can die horribly and get buried in six or seven different graves!” Spike began to shake again.

“Oh no, that won’t happen at all, Spike,” Fluttershy said, “you’ll see. We’ll think of something.”

“I should have left, I should have left, I really should have left!” he moaned. “I’ve put you all in danger.”

“Now stop that at once, Spike,” said Rarity, her eyes reproachful. “We’ll have none of that business again – moping about thinking you have to leave, good *gracious*. That topic is closed, and that’s final. Now pull yourself together and let’s think about this.”

“Aha!” Twilight said suddenly.

“What have you found?” Spike whirled on her.

“It’s a treatise on the exact sort of challenge the Forest Dragon has issued,” she said. “Apparently it’s... oh.”

“It’s what?” Pinkie pressed.

“According to ancient dragon lore, it’s completely and totally legal for him to rip Spike into itty bitty pieces and then stomp on the bits,” sighed Twilight, closing the book. “This is bad.”

Spike whimpered.

“Tell you what,” Rainbow Dash said suddenly, her voice hard with determination, “if nothing else, I’m gonna make sure that big bully can’t talk to you like that about flying ever again. I’ll give you a lesson every day if that’s what it takes. You are gonna fly rings around that show-off.”

“I’ve only got a month to learn,” Spike said, “right before he swats me like a bug!”

“No way, not with *my* teaching!” she argued, her chin set proudly.

“Rainbow! I haven’t even *had a single lesson yet!*”

“Hey, it’s me we’re talking about here!” she declared.

“I’m toast!” Spike wailed.

“Calm. Down,” Twilight grated. “That isn’t helping the situation at all.”

“Stuff the situation, help *me!*” he exclaimed wildly.

“*Spike, you will settle down right this instant!*”

Spike sat obediently.

“Thank you, Fluttershy,” Twilight said with a grateful sigh, before turning back to the dragon. “We *are* helping you, if you hadn’t noticed. And I think Rainbow Dash really came up with something there. You’re already having lessons to get used to your new size – well, we’ll just step them up.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll be, Twilight, he’s so much...”

“Bigger than you?” she finished pointedly. He stared at her for a moment, before his head dropped to his chest.

Twilight tilted her head, her eyes hard with worry as she gazed at him. “Spike. You should know better than anypony that size doesn’t mean all that much. So he’s bigger than you. Big deal! That just means you have to use your brain.”

“The bigger they are, the harder they *lose*,” Rainbow Dash said with a sly grin.

“Anyway, for all his size and strength and experience and really hot fire, you have something he doesn’t,” Twilight continued.

“A use-by date?”

“*Friends*,” she stressed.

He looked away. “I know,” he said, “I even said as much to him, but... I’m just so scared, Twilight.”

“We know, sugarcube,” Applejack said. “But don’t you worry. We’re gonna have you aimin’ like a sharpshooter before y’ can say Lariats of Fire.”

“You’ll be the fastest dragon who ever lived,” enthused Rainbow Dash. “Not as fast as *me*, of course...”

“Pinkie and I’ll help with a plan,” Twilight said at a nod from the party pony. “We’ll think of strategies. Rarity, would you help with that?”

“Of course, anything for our little Spikey-wikey,” she said immediately, “and perhaps I can whip something up in the Boutique... but...”

“What?”

Rarity’s brow creased. “Well, darlings, I can’t help but notice...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think we ought to talk to the dragon about this? It does seem somewhat of an overreaction, after all, even taking into account his territory... fixations. Perhaps we

could settle this through more... diplomatic methods, yes? Spike and I could replace his hoard, for instance?” Her long-lashed eyes blinked expectantly. “It’s certainly worth a try, don’t you think?”

Spike slumped. “If I get within sniffing distance of that guy, I’m a crispy critter.”

“But we really should try,” she insisted. “After all, those ponies yesterday leapt to a conclusion simply because you were a dragon, Spike. It would be the very height of hypocrisy to do the same, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Spike rallied his flagging spirits. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right, Rarity. I should try, at least.”

Twilight’s horn flared and her books began to float back into her saddlebags. “Well, let’s hold off on that until tomorrow,” she said with a practical sniff. “We’ve got to step up your lessons, Spike – and I suppose somepony needs to tell the Mayor...”

Spike regretfully remembered the older pony’s trust from their morning conversation. Well, this was going to shatter it thoroughly. “I should really be the one to tell her,” he said, his heart sitting heavily in his chest. “It’s me that’s putting the town in danger.”

“We’ll *all* tell her,” Twilight replied firmly.

“But first,” Rarity said, “you” – she pointed at Spike with one dainty little hoof – “in there, *now*.” The hoof jabbed at the lake. Her voice softened as she said, “You’ll feel better when you’re clean.”

Then she eyed his mud-splattered chest with distaste. “*I’ll* feel better when you’re clean.” She shuddered.

He looked down at himself, nodded once, and silently began to trudge into the lake.

• • •

The Mayor had drawn herself up, her face paling, as Spike haltingly explained what had happened on the mountain that afternoon. He fell over himself trying to reassure her that he would not run out on the challenge and thus leave Ponyville to the Forest Dragon’s fire. She said very little, only that her thoughts and support were with him. He trudged wordlessly back to the square lost in a fog of hopelessness.

It was all so different to his foolish little daydreams when he was small. He'd imagined being dashing and impressive, with flames that did his every bidding, the flight of a swallow and enough poise to flick away foes without blinking.

The reality of growing up was ponderous, clumsy, and cumbersome. He had so much to learn – and re-learn – and he had only a month before he was beyond all learning forever. Spike had always been brave in the face of danger, but he'd never had to face this awful waiting. *Deadline*, what an appropriate word.

Almost as bad was the fact that apparently, his growing up had political ramifications in both the draconic and Equestrian aspects of his life. Though the great green dragon's challenge certainly scared him spitless, he was less injured by it than by the threat of the market-ponies from Sunday morning. After all, he'd had barely anything to do with dragons, but he'd been around ponies his whole life. Their rejection stung on a personal level.

Twilight stayed with him throughout the night, curled up against his side, his wing sheltering her from the chill night air. He appreciated it, even as guilt for all the worry he was causing her consumed him along with his fear.

When the morning came she stretched and shook herself before peering out from under his wing. "Your snoring is really loud now," she said in a sleep-blurred voice.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

She gave him a penetrating look. "How long have you been awake?"

"A while," he replied. She sighed and brushed back her tangled mane.

"Oh, Spike," she said sadly.

He sat silently as she pulled herself to her feet and trotted over to his head. She brushed her cheek against his and held it there. "What do I keep telling you?" she murmured. "It's going to be okay."

He said nothing, but kept his face pressed against the warmth of her hair.

She sighed again and her hoof pressed tenderly over the finned scales at his jawline. "So, I was thinking..."

He remained still.

She pulled back to look at him. “Maybe we can start getting your house together? That’d be a good way to get your mind off nothing but lessons and challenges, and it’d get you stronger as well. What do you think?”

He buried his face against her again, and shut his eyes tightly. “Okay.”

“Okay then,” she said. “I’ll work out some plans while you go flying with Rainbow Dash this morning, and you can look at them when you get back. Keep your chin up, Spike. I know this must be a lot to deal with, but I’m here. I’m always here.”

“I know,” he said.

She folded her hind legs so that she could sit leaning against his jaw. “So, I guess you want a Jacuzzi and a state-of-the-art kitchen and a room filled to the roof with gems,” she teased gently.

His mouth quirked. “That’d be nice.”

“Maybe a room only for diamonds, and one only for rubies, and one only for sapphires,” she continued lightly.

“Mmmmm.” His stomach began to rumble, despite himself.

“Of course, you’d need a parlour and a ballroom and a gallery and a conservatory,” she prodded, and he chuckled reluctantly.

“What *is* a conservatory anyway?” he murmured. “I guess it’s for conserving stuff...”

“It’s for plants,” she said. “Oh, I almost forgot the gardens! Manicured, of course, with hedges and mazes and shrubs all shaped like you...”

“And you,” he interrupted.

“Is this your fantasy house or mine?” She tickled him under his jaw, and he snickered, smoke puffing erratically. “Oh, all right, maybe a *couple* that are pony-shaped then.”

“You,” he insisted, still chuckling.

“Fine,” she allowed with a roll of her eyes. “A shrub-me.”

“And Rarity,” he added dreamily, and she snorted with laughter.

“Better not forget the dragon-sized swimming pool...”

“Fountains,” he giggled.

“Of course! And a waterslide as well!” she declared with an expansive wave of her hooves.

“Oh, and the whole thing needs to be a castle. Banners, pennants, the lot.”

“Turrets.”

“A bailey!”

“Is it forecourt or fo’castle?”

“Forecourt. Fo’castles are on ships.”

“Hey, can I have a moat?”

“You can have two,” she said generously, “and drawbridges, and everything. You can climb up the tallest turret and blow fire at all the tourists who come to take photos.”

That sobered him quickly. “Twilight, those ponies on Sunday, what if they come back? What if they hear about this challenge?”

She exhaled. “Then we deal with it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes dropping to the cobbles.

She tugged softly on his spines. “Not your fault.”

“I’m just so much trouble now,” he sighed.

“You always were,” she said, and kissed his cheek. “And I wouldn’t change you for anything. Come on, you. Breakfast.”

He stood slowly and steadily, careful not to jostle or knock her over. The gnawing anxiety did battle with his determination as he followed her back to the library.

• • •

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Thank you for the letter. I'm trying to stay brave like you told me, but it's getting harder. I'm afraid and pretty confused, despite my best efforts. Everything I try to do seems to backfire, and I'm only getting through with the help of my friends.*

*You said to keep in mind that I won't always succeed. That's something that's really frightening me right now. If it were only my success that was at stake, that'd be okay, but somehow it's all become bigger than that. You must know a lot about having to bear responsibility and make hard choices – I'd really like your advice right now (if you have time to give it, of course, Princess).*

*I'd be very, very honoured if your sister would like to visit me. I'm not sure what I could say to her, but it would be an honour anyway.*

*Sincerely,  
Spike*

“Spread ‘em.”

Spike gave Rainbow Dash an incredulous look. She grinned.

“Get used to that joke amongst fliers,” she told him, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Well? Let’s have a look at ‘em, then.”

Rainbow Dash pushed her Wonderbolts goggles higher onto her forehead and whistled as Spike spread his wings as far as they would go. He’d never actually stretched them out to their fullest extent before, and the further he unfolded them the heavier they became. “Wow.”

“Rainbow?” he grunted.

“Nope, just... they’re great, Spike, really great, really... really *big*,” she finished with a small tinge of dismay in her fuchsia eyes.

“What...?” He looked down at her with some difficulty. His back and chest were braced to hold up the expanse of his wings, and the tension was running into his neck and throat.

“Ah-ah-ah!” She immediately shook an admonishing hoof at him. “Stop that! When you got ya wings open, your neck shouldn’t get involved. The stiffer it is, the less manoeuvrable you’re gonna be. Now relax that neck, go on!”

He made the effort. His neck relaxed, but his shoulders bunched.

“Whoops, can’t get tense there either!” she said cheerfully. “Keep those wings out, but relax your shoulders and neck and chest as much as you can!” She scratched her chin in thought. “You gotta build up the muscles on your chest and back.”

“Huh?”

“That’s where you carry the weight of ‘em when you’re on the ground, and where they carry *you* when you’re in the air,” she explained. “Carry that weight in your shoulders, and you’re gonna need a walking frame in under a week. Put those things down an’ I’ll show you.”

Spike gratefully folded up his wings and blew out a little puff of smoke.

Rainbow Dash opened her own wings in demonstration. “Okay, just here, right? You see the big ol’ muscles that run along the tops of my wings and down into my back? And the ones that run underneath and around under my chest?”

Spike peered, feeling a little embarrassed to be looking so closely at Dash’s back. “Uh, yeah?”

“Those are the *magic* muscles,” she said smugly. “They gotta be strong but springy. Get them right an’ you can rock the whole sky!”

“Right, rock the sky, okay.” He nodded, leaning back. “So how do I get those working properly?”

She rolled her eyes. “Practice flying!”

“Right. Silly question,” he said dryly.

“Okay, so here are a few basic rules,” she continued. “Keep your neck loose and your body straight – don’t let your rump slump is what my first instructor used to say.”

Spike wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, I thought it was stupid too,” Dash said, pulling a face. “Just keep your tail high, all right? Anyway, moving on.

“You wanna turn left? Lean left. You wanna turn right? Lean right. The more you lean, the tighter the turn. You want more height? Flap ‘em. You want down? Lock ‘em and lean forward – *gently*. You might need to flap a bit when landing – my personal favourite is backwinging to a landing – and lower your hindquarters first, or you’ll end up snout-first in the dirt.”

“Should I write this down?” Spike asked.

She gave him an impatient look. “Spike, most of this’ll come naturally when you’re in the air, I promise. It does to any flyer. The most important thing of all to remember – cos this bit *doesn’t* come naturally – is to *look where you’re going!*”

Spike gulped.

“Okay, you wanna try a little flight?” she said in the voice of somepony offering a rare treat.

“Rainbow, I...” he said weakly.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re nervous, I get it.” She waved her hoof dismissively. “Look. Water underneath you down there. You’re fine, it’s safe. Now go!”

He looked at the lake far below. “I...” he quavered again.

She scowled. “You’re a *dragon*. Puh-lease. Now quit being a scaredy-baby and go!”

“But...!” he tried.

“Even *Fluttershy* can do this!”

“Oh, so you’ve never been scared at all?” he retorted, stung at the insult to sweet little Fluttershy.

Dash cleared her throat. “Well, yeah I... *wait*, no! No, of course not! Oh, just open up those overgrown sails and jump off, would ya?”

Spike took a deep breath.

And another.

And then yet another, trying to calm the nest of insects that had made their home in his stomach.

“Some time *today*?”

“I’ll be taking my own time, thank you,” he said with wobbly dignity. His knees were knocking violently. Now was it keep your rump tense and your neck high...?

“Oh, come *on*,” Rainbow Dash groaned. “Look, you’ll be fine, I promise!”

“Not gonna be a crater,” he squeaked, and jumped.

• • •

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow...”

“I said I was sorry!”

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow...”

“Look, I promise I can teach this – really! We’ll just keep trying!”

“Ow-ow-ow... ow.” Spike gingerly sat at the edge of the lake and gave Rainbow Dash a dark glare. “Ow,” he repeated pointedly, in case the message hadn’t sunk in.

“Spike?”

“Ow,” he said, and slumped over pathetically.

“Well, your wings locked, that’s good,” she said into the silence.

“Ow,” he agreed grudgingly.

“And you got a few wingbeats in...”

“Owwww,” he remembered, wincing.

“Yeah, so... I probably should have mentioned something about wind resistance, right?”

Spike lifted his head to glare at her once more, and said very precisely and very clearly, “Ow.”

“Hey Spike,” she chuckled. “You made a totally awesome splash when you hit the water!”

He groaned and closed his eyes. His whole body felt like it had been pummelled by experts.

“At least you kept your rump up,” she said encouragingly.

“Hooray for me,” he said painfully.

“Oh, you *can* talk, glad to hear it.”

“Hurts,” he grumbled.

“You really didn’t do too badly for a first run,” she said, before shaking her head. “Nah, actually, that was pretty awful. But hey, you flew!”

“I *fell*,” he corrected.

“Flew,” she insisted. “You totally flew for a bit. You would have seen that if you’d had your eyes open. Incidentally? You really oughta keep your eyes open.”

He huffed. She waved smoke away and patted his head.

“C’mon you,” she said. “Time for another go.”

“Ow?” he protested.

“Quit that. C’mon, you’ll do better this time! I promise!”

• • •

“You lied,” Spike whimpered, sopping wet and aching.

“Sorry,” she said, muffling her giggles with one hoof.

“You’ve killed me,” he managed.

“Hey, if you *will* insist on falling...”

“Breaking News at Ten: Wonderbolts Star Finally Cracks. Crazy Pegasus Kills Incredibly Handsome Young Dragon Stone Dead,” he wheezed.

“That was a pretty wicked somersault you just did.”

“Eyewitnesses Say: ‘It Was a Pretty Wicked Somersault’.”

Dash guffawed. “Additional Report: Dragon Blubs and Moans Just Like a Little Filly.”

“Policeponies Warn That Pegasus Is Obviously Deranged and Dangerous. Do Not Approach,” Spike countered.

“Dragon should get his backside back up that hill and have another go,” challenged Dash.

Spike folded his paws over his eyes. “Pegasus loves to see dragon suffer.”

“Come *on*, Spike,” Rainbow wheedled. “One more go, and that’s it for today. I swear, you’re going to get it this time! I *promise!*”

• • •

Spike dragged himself out of the water and hurked up a fish.

Dash took one look at him and keeled over laughing.

“Glad... it’s so... amusing,” he croaked.

“Sorry... ahahahah! Aha... ahuh... hummhhh...” She tried to stifle her laughter, but the minute her eyes landed on him she rolled over in hysterics again, her legs kicking the air.

Spike growled weakly.

“Ohhh.” She sighed out the last of her riotous giggling. “Oh boy, that was hilarious. You got a future in comedy, pal.”

Spike simply lay like a beached seal, his wings and legs limp as wet lettuce. He tried to raise his head to glower at her, but his neck just would not budge. “Urrrrnghhhh,” he said.

“Aw, Spike,” she said sympathetically, a grin still tugging at her lips. “It’s okay, really it is. You’ll totally get it, I pro—”

“Don’t!” he said hoarsely.

She blinked.

“Never promise me anything, okay?” he rasped.

She tilted her head, taken aback. “Uh, why?”

“When you do, disasters happen.” He cringed as his whole back twanged like a broken banjo. “It’s like you *invite* them,” he added mournfully.

• • •

Rainbow Dash had to, well, *dash* off to a rehearsal, and so Spike had to haul himself back into town alone, his body screaming at him every step of the way. His wings dragged furrows in the dirt either side of him, and he could feel his ankles and knees wobbling like jelly.

Flopping bonelessly down in the square before the library, he tried to summon the energy to call Twilight, and failed. However, a gasp from the balcony told him that he’d been spotted, and the sound of hooves on stairs and the slam of a door announced the presence of visitors. The scratch of hooves skidding on gravel registered in front of him, and he raised his eyes to see Twilight, Pinkie Pie and Rarity all staring speechlessly at him.

“Spike...?” Twilight ventured. Behind her, Pinkie Pie and Rarity shared a look.

“I...” he managed, “am very good...”

“Yaaaay! Flying Celebration party!”

Twilight clapped her hooves. “See! I knew you could –”

“...at *falling*,” he concluded glumly.

“– oh.” She deflated.

“Never mind, Spike,” Rarity said. “You’ll get the hang of it, I’m sure.”

He looked up at her with an expression of pure disbelief.

“It’s only your first lesson,” said Twilight sensibly.

“I know, I know,” he sighed.

“Take heart, dear,” soothed Rarity. Spike grunted, and then steeled himself against the screaming of his shoulders and legs as he hauled himself to his haunches.

“All right, okay, I’m up, I’m up,” he said, panting.

“Poor Spikey,” Pinkie crooned. “Poor little crashy-washy hurty-wurty silly billy Spikey-wikey...”

“Does she have an off-switch?” Spike muttered.

“Nopey-dopey!”

“Anyway, darling, we’ve come up with some plans for your house,” Rarity said, obviously wanting to perk him up a bit.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, and I think you’re going to be pleased,” Twilight said, her horn flaring, and a couple of large, rolled-up parchments came floating out of the library’s open door.

“You’re gonna love it!” Pinkie bounced excitedly.

“Can’t wait to see ‘em,” he said with a shaky smile.

“No Jacuzzi or moat, unfortunately.” Twilight glanced slyly at him.

“Dang,” he said. “I had my heart set on those pony-shaped shrubs.”

She chuckled, and nodded at Pinkie to step on a corner of one of the parchments. Thus secured, Twilight spread out the chart and looked up expectantly.

Spike craned closer, smothering a grimace as his neck ached and spasmed. The chart seemed to depict a rather simple stone structure with only one room. A door, marked ‘metal!’, faced the town and away from the gorge up to the mountains. A large empty space in the centre dominated, but there were markings all around the walls. “What’re all these?” he asked, his claw travelling over the alcoves and boxes.

“Well, here’s a little larder for you – I say ‘little’, but really it’s going to be large enough for you to stand on the shelves for a few more years yet.” Rarity pointed it out – an alcove set against the wall.

“That’s a torch-bracket,” chirped Pinkie. “Big enough for a whole tree!”

“And *this* is a sort of library,” Twilight said, tapping the chart enthusiastically.

“Of course,” he drawled.

“Here’s a kitchen-ish sort of area,” Rarity continued. “I wasn’t entirely sure about that...”

“But *I* said you’ve always liked to cook and I didn’t think that was going to change,” Twilight said. “Uh, you’ll have to use your own fire, though... I didn’t think it was a great idea to put a hearth that size in there.”

He quirked his mouth wryly. “Luckily I’m working on that.”

“This,” Twilight indicated a large round structure nestled against the building, “is a rainwater tank. We’ll get pipes to move the water into your kitchen. It won’t be enough to bathe with, but you won’t have to leave home to get a drink of water.”

“I still believe a house with no bathroom is no house at all,” Rarity declared, firmly stamping a forehoof.

“You don’t need a shower because the lake is right next to the town,” Twilight pointed out, “and there’s the river in the gorge as well if the lake is frozen.”

“And here’s where you can keep your great big bed of gems!” Pinkie tapped the chart. “See? Right away from the door and against the wall so no little baby dragon can sneak in and eat them.”

“Uh, Pinkie? I don’t *have* a great big bed of gems,” he reminded her.

“Not yet, silly!” She beamed.

“These are shelves and cupboards and all manner of things.” Rarity gestured at the lines on the chart. “And *here* is a little platform sort of area for your guests, so you don’t have to crouch down to have a decent conversation. That was my idea,” she added modestly.

“Why the big space in the middle?” he wondered.

Twilight coughed. “Uh, it... it won’t always be bare, Spike.”

“Why?”

“Well, *you’ll* be in it.”

“Oh, right.” He looked at the chart, and then at the scale marked, and swallowed. “Right.”

To cover the moment, Twilight unrolled another of the charts, and he was looking at a detailed view of the roof. “This is an important point,” she said seriously. “See this?”

Her hoof traced a marked circle, and he frowned. “Won’t I get wet if there are holes in my roof?”

“Oh, we’ll give it a shade or an umbrella-like arrangement.” Rarity cocked her head. “Perhaps in green,” she said thoughtfully.

“Okay, but what *is* it?”

“It’s a chimney.” Twilight looked up at him, eyes serious. “As you get older, you’re going to have even more smoke. Remember that dragon who tried to have his nap up on the mountain? He was fully grown, and his snores were blacking out the sun over all of Equestria.”

Spike stomach dropped. “I forgot about that,” he admitted.

"I didn't," she said, giving her plans a determined look. "Now, this chimney is a bit special. I'm going to cast a spell on it, and it will vanish as much of the smoke as possible. Not only that, but whatever is left will always blow away from anyplace where other beings live, until it dissipates harmlessly in the wind."

"Wow, Twilight!" Spike said, impressed. "That's an amazing idea!"

"You like it, then?" she asked a little shyly.

"Like it? I love it! You've thought of everything! Guys, thank you so much for doing this for me!" Spike's claws touched the plans carefully. "You've gone to so much trouble."

"Aw, that's okay!" Pinkie bounced.

"Our pleasure," Rarity said, tossing her mane. "Oh, and I suggest you put in some little accoutrements here and there, darling, or it's going to be terribly bare and gloomy."

"I'd always ask for your advice first." He smiled bashfully at her.

She cleared her throat self-consciously, touching her mane a little. "Yes, well."

"We've got a lot of work ahead of us, you guys," Twilight said. "We have to source as much metal as possible for the tank, doors and pipes, and we're going to need," she squinted at the paper and wilted, "a *lot* of stone."

"Where do we get that much rock?" Pinkie asked.

"I'll haul it back – I said I would," Spike reminded her, and Twilight nodded absently, lost in thought.

"The best place would be along the sides of the gorge," she said finally. "There's lots of basalt along there, and shale for the roof."

"Basalt?" Spike wondered.

"Yes." She nodded. "You see, if you heat up basalt, it becomes a thermal insulator called *stone wool*. That should keep your fire from roasting the rest of the valley, and also keep you warmer in winter-time."

"Ohhhhh," he said, nodding as well. "So I just breathe fire on it before we set it?"

“That’s right,” she said, rolling up the plans.

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“It has to be very, very hot,” she warned.

Spike remembered his lesson, and the fierce white-green flame he had managed to produce. “Fluttershy’s helping me with that. I really think I can do it.”

“Really?” squealed Pinkie. “Oh, *wow*, that is so cool! Show us, Spike, go on, show us!”

“Uh... it’s not really there yet,” he said, eyeing the immensely flammable buildings around the square with a lurch in the pit of his stomach. “I’ll have it by the time I need to heat up rocks, though – you’ll see it then, okay?”

“Aw!” Pinkie sulked.

He shifted his shoulders, and they twinged in pain once more. “I think I should lie down again,” he said unwillingly.

“Was it really that bad?” Rarity asked.

“Well, Rainbow Dash said I flew on all three attempts, but all I know is that I hit the water on all three attempts,” he said through gritted teeth as he carefully and creakingly lowered himself down again.

“Any ideas?” Twilight asked him. He yawned hugely, and Rarity pulled a face at his teeth.

“Yeah, she said I’ve got to build up my chest and back muscles,” he remembered, eyelids fluttering. “Hauling stone should help with that, right?”

“I should think so,” she agreed. Then her brow furrowed. “You know, Tom’s in the field behind the library...”

“You *promised* never to speak of it again,” Rarity grated.

“No, no.” Twilight shook her head impatiently. “Spike can practice with him until we get started on the building. Tom’s the perfect size for Spike – not too heavy, but not light either.”

“With a perfect finish,” Pinkie sniggered. She stopped abruptly when Rarity gave her a long, cool stare.

“Okay,” Spike said in a blurry voice. He was so comfortable, and the sunshine was so nice on his sore muscles. “Build muscles, lift up Tom, gotcha.”

“I’ve got to make some headway on my thesis this morning,” Twilight said. “I’ve been letting my studies slide. Will you be okay?”

“I’ll talk to... to Macintosh about... the rest.” He yawned again. “Get stronger, but... ow, control it. Ow. So... sore...”

“Poor little dragon,” Twilight said, amused.

“Is she talking about *Spike*?” Pinkie whispered to Rarity.

“Sorry guys... I am so *out* of it right now. Thanks,” he slurred. “Thanks... so much.”

“I’ll wake you at lunch, okay?” Twilight said, and he felt her kiss on his head before the three of them turned and tiptoed away. He was asleep before they’d even reached the library.

• • •

“All right, class, settle down!” Cheerilee clapped her hooves. “We have a guest. Now, I know some of you have been telling silly stories in the playground and trying to make the smaller foals cry – no, I’m not naming any names, but I know who you are!”

Spike could hear the class of mixed-age fillies and colts shuffling uncomfortably under Cheerilee’s teacherly gaze.

“Now, single file, we’re going back outside. Pip, dear, would you lead?”

The sounds of the schoolhouse door opening and small hooves clattering reached Spike, and he braced himself for all sorts of screaming and carrying on when they rounded the building to where he sat.

Pipsqueak’s familiar patched face came round the corner first, and his eyes widened before he scurried back out of sight.

Spike pouted and his spines slumped. *Well, ponyfeathers, not Pip too?* he thought, his heart sinking.

But the piebald colt was rounding the corner again, this time with two tiny little fillies and one teensy colt laden on his back. The three foals appeared to be even smaller than Pip himself used to be to Spike's biased eye, and they all gasped in horror and fear as they caught sight of him.

"Oh noooooo, we're gonna be crunched all up wif horrid big teef!" one filly moaned in stark terror.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll do my homework next time, promise!" the other wailed.

"Wet me go, I'm too wittle to die!" the colt hollered.

Pip ignored the three foals' cries with beautiful nonchalance, and dumped them on the grass in front of Spike. "Hi there, Spike," he said with a smile, and then stepped firmly on the three little tails before him.

"Neat," Spike said approvingly.

"I got two little brothers now," Pip said, rolling his eyes. "I picked up a few survival skills."

"You've lost your accent," Spike said with a grin.

"Where've you been? I lost it *years* ago," Pip snorted as the three foals heaved at their immobile tails valiantly.

"Is this it?" Spike asked.

"Nope, Miss Cheerilee should be out with the rest any minute. It's just that these," he nodded to the three before him, "are the ones telling all the stories that are causing all the nightmares. They've got some imagination, let me tell you."

Spike raised an eyebrow reprovingly at them. "Oh, *really?*"

The three whimpered. Pip chuckled, his cap bouncing on his mane.

A breathless sort of hush told him that Cheerilee had arrived with the other schoolfoals. He lifted his eyes to see a group of perhaps twenty colts and fillies surrounding the dark

purple teacher. Most were looking up at him in fright – especially the particularly small one holding onto Cheerilee’s fetlocks – but to his delight, Apple Bloom waved vigorously at him from amongst the older students.

“Apple Bloom!” he said in relief.

“Hey there, Spike!” she called back cheerfully.

Cheerilee organised the class so it was sitting on the grass before Spike, and gently ushered the tiny filly clinging to her fetlocks to sit over with Apple Bloom. The little pale pink pony with the leaf-green mane was trembling visibly as she clutched the older filly tightly.

“Now, how many of you know our visitor today?” Cheerilee asked brightly. Spike felt a bit silly. *Visitor*, good grief.

Apple Bloom put up her hoof, as did Pip and a couple of other ponies that Spike didn’t quite recognise. He definitely remembered Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, however. The two stuck-up fillies were leaning away from him in distaste.

“Very good,” Cheerilee was saying. “Everypony, this is Spike, Ponyville’s resident dragon. Say, ‘hello Spike!’”

“Hello, Spike,” the older foals droned. The younger ones meeped. The tiny one hid under Apple Bloom’s mane and shivered like an autumn leaf.

“Uh. Hi,” he answered, nonplussed.

“Ohmygoodnesshetalks,” blurted one of the smaller ones in a whisper.

“Spike is here to address the concerns that some of you,” she gave the three still trapped beneath Pip’s hooves a stern look, “have been having about him.”

“Right,” Spike said in a faint voice. “Right,” he repeated, a bit more strongly. “So, what do you guys know about me, then?”

“You’re a dragon,” said a little one promptly.

“Dwagons are scawy,” insisted the colt of the troublemaking trio.

“They crunch you all up,” said a filly with relish. “Crunchy, crunch, crunch!” Spike gave her an odd look.

“You’ve got wings,” said an older colt curiously. “Can you fly?”

“Umm...” Spike said, beginning to feel a little swamped by foalish voices.

“Can you blow fire until the whole lake is all dry?”

“Can you blow fire until the whole *world* is dry?”

“Could you eat a pony wif a single snap?” asked one of the two troublemaking fillies owlshly.

“He could eat *you*,” the colt of the trio insisted.

“I wouldn’t...” Spike tried.

“How many ponies you eated?” a little filly asked, eyes huge.

“I bet it’s *hundreds!*”

“I bet it’s *fousands!*”

“Actually, I...” Spike began.

“Fink he could fly around chomping ponies up?”

“Yeah, swoopin’ in, and SNAP! Suddenly you’re all *disappeared!*”

“And *nopony* would ever find you!” said a filly impressively.

“I’d never...” Spike said desperately.

“Bet he can fwy wight into your house, burn it all up an’ then cwunch up your burnt cwunchy bones!” said the colt of the trio dramatically.

“Oooh,” breathed all the little ones.

Apple Bloom was now in silent hysterics. Spike shot her a filthy look.

“And the last thing you see,” said one of the story-telling fillies in a hushed voice, “is great big white teef comin’ to eat your face. Clean. Off.”

“Eeeeeek!” the foals screamed.

“Please!” Spike shouted.

The plume of smoke that arose from his shout froze all the foals in place, and terrified little eyes fixed on him in horror.

“Um,” he said, and threw a desperate glance at Cheerilee, who was trying and failing to hide her grin. “Look, I don’t do any of that stuff.”

“Aw!” sulked the colt of the trio. “Nuffin’s ever the way it *should* be.”

“Kid, you don’t know how right you are,” Spike said sourly. “Well, as *Miss Cheerilee* said,” he scowled at her, the traitor, “my name’s Spike, and I live here in Ponyville. I’ve lived here most of my life. And hooves up if you want to ask something,” he added as one of the small fillies opened her mouth.

She wrinkled her nose and stuck her hoof up. He nodded. “Okay.”

“Where’d you live before that?” she asked. “Wasn’t it nice?”

“It was nice,” he allowed, and then smiled. “Not as nice as Ponyville though. I was hatched in Canterlot, and Twilight and I moved here when I was still a baby.”

“Ooooh! Ooooooh!”

Spike eyed the little colt with his hoof quivering skywards dubiously. “Uh, yeah?”

“You were *hatched*? You came from an *egg*?” he said, wide-eyed.

“Clover Patch, remember our class on reptiles?” Cheerilee reminded him.

A slow chorus of “ohhhhhhhh,” rose from the assembled foals.

“So where’d your egg come from then?” the colt wanted to know.

Spike paused. “Actually,” he said slowly, “I don’t know.”

One of the fillies put her hooves to her face and choked, “Oh, that’s soooo *sad!*”

“Well, it’s okay,” Spike hurried to reassure her, though he was half-wondering if it really *was* okay. “I was hatched and raised by Twilight Sparkle – do you all know Twilight?”

“My daddy says she’s a looker but she reads too much,” said one filly, her expression rather self-important. Spike struggled not to choke.

“Um, that’s her, the librarian,” he said, coughing. Apple Bloom had progressed to holding her sides, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“She scared off an Ursa Moaner!” exclaimed a little colt.

“It’s *minor*, stupid,” said another.

“Yes, she did,” Spike said hurriedly before the situation got away from him again. “Anyway, we moved here when I was about the size of...” he squinted, “you.”

The filly he’d indicated ‘meeped’.

“You were as little as Peepbow?” breathed another of the fillies.

Spike grinned, and they all leaned back from his teeth a little. “Yep, and I didn’t have my teeth then, or these.” He rustled his wings, and then groaned as pain shot through his back.

“Cooooool,” said Clover Patch, his eyes shining.

“So are you all growed up now?” a filly wanted to know.

Spike hesitated. “Well, no,” he said reluctantly. The assembled foals gasped and whispered amongst themselves busily. “I’m still a kid, like you.”

“How come you don’t have to go to school then?” challenged a colt, his lower lip pouting.

“Well, Twilight teaches me. She always has,” he explained.

“So how big ’re you gonna get, sugarcube?” asked Apple Bloom slyly, and he glared daggers at her. He sighed when all the foals tilted their heads expectantly.

“About five times bigger – or more,” he mumbled.

“Whoa...”

“No way.”

“There aren’t enough ponies in the whole of *Equestria* for him to crunch...”

“I *don’t* do that,” Spike repeated crossly. “I eat apples mostly. And vegetables, hay fries, pancakes, salads and gems.”

“Gems?”

“*That’s a lot of hay fries,*” somepony whispered.

Ignoring that comment, Spike turned to the filly with her hoof up. “Yeah, gems. My teeth are really hard – *not for ponies,*” he stressed, “and I’ve been able to bite through diamond since I was a baby.”

“Do they taste nice?” she asked shyly.

“Well, they do to me.” He smiled at her. “I don’t know how they’d taste to you, though.”

“Can you breathe fire?” asked the next pony he nodded to.

“Yes,” Spike replied. “But I don’t think Miss Cheerilee would think it was very safe, so we’re not having a demonstration. Next?”

“Can y’ fwy?” asked the troublemaking colt. Spike winced.

“Not... not just yet,” he said, a twinge of pain streaking along his back.

Shyly, the tiny little filly who had been pressed fearfully against Apple Bloom slowly raised her hoof. Spike tried to look as unthreatening as possible – quite an achievement, he felt. “Yes?”

“What’s that fur of?” she lisped, huge leaf-green eyes round.

Spike carefully laid his foreleg along the grass in front of him. “It’s not fur,” he said gently. “I have scales instead.”

She looked at Apple Bloom for reassurance, and then over to Miss Cheerilee, who nodded.

“Go on, Sweet-Pea,” Apple Bloom urged softly.

Then the miniscule little pony slowly inched towards him, and laid a trembling hoof on his foreleg.

“Oooh,” Sweet-Pea squeaked. “*Smoove.*”

“Y’hear that? The li’l lady thinks y’re *smooth*,” Apple Bloom giggled in his ear, and he rolled his eyes.

“Funny. Real funny. Anypony else want to see?” He raised his voice to the rest of the little ponies, and slowly, one by one, the class converged on him.

“Warm,” said one in surprise.

“Duh, he breathes fire.”

“Ugh, this is *stupid*,” declared Diamond Tiara. “That dumb lizard’s been around for ages. Why are we wasting our afternoon on this?”

Spike cocked his head at her over the gathered throng of little ones prodding the scales of his foreleg. Several were tentatively tapping his claws. “Well, I don’t know about *you*,” he said pointedly, “but I’d like to go to sleep knowing I’m not in the starring role in anypony’s nightmares.”

“Y’all don’t got much in common; that’s her main ambition in life,” said Apple Bloom dryly. Diamond Tiara haughtily turned her nose up at the farmpony and began whispering vociferously with Silver Spoon.

“She still giving you trouble?” Spike said in an aside to Apple Bloom, and the teenager snorted.

“Hardly,” she said in an amused way. “She just got a beehive in her backside about anythin’ to do with me. Always has.”

Pip sauntered over, his parchment-and-quill cutie mark flashing. “Well, that worked!” he said with characteristic chipperness. “They’re not afraid of you now!”

“Guess not.” Spike looked down to where several of the small ponies were now trying to clamber up his aching back. “Uh,” he said worriedly, “how do I stop them?”

“Traditionally the first step is to wait until they fall asleep,” Pip replied with cheerful sadism.

• • •

Spike held the little white flag of truce in his claws and waved it half-heartedly.

After finally reclaiming his tail from the gaggle of fillies and colts, he had made his way up to the peak of Horsefall Mountain once more, his legs and back groaning and twisting every step of the way. Twilight had wanted to come with him to talk to the dragon, but he insisted on going alone. There was no way he was going to voluntarily endanger any of his friends, and especially his sister.

The wind was colder at the top of the mountain, and his sore muscles were beginning to cramp in the chill as he waited and waited. He kept his eyes and ears peeled for any movement in the trees below him – and then he waited some more.

As the sun slipped away, he began to think the dragon might not ever turn up. His attention wandered to his aching body, and then to his anxiety over the various problems he was facing. Stupid dragon-challenges and possible pony mobs and learning all these skills... he hadn't lied when he told Princess Celestia it was all becoming harder.

“Well?”

The dragon's rumble took Spike by surprise, and he jumped, startled, his flag clattering to the ground.

“Uh, hi,” he said lamely, his pulse racing.

“I assume you wish to beg for the challenge to be called off,” the dragon said, his voice smooth and contemptuous. Spike took a short breath and faced it properly.

“Well, that'd be nice,” he said honestly. “I don't want to die. I was wondering if there was any way I could make it all up to you instead. I could replace your hoard, for example?”

The dragon regarded him curiously, great orange eyes whirling. “You are a very strange hatchling,” it finally said.

“Spike,” he said. “My name's Spike.”

The dragon was silent as it watched him some more.

“And what's your name?” Spike prompted hopefully.

“I do not give my name away so freely,” it snorted. Spike’s brow was slick with sweat.

“Well, what can I call you?” he asked. “It seems rude just to call you ‘dragon’.”

“That is the highest honour one can be accorded,” rebuked the dragon in a tone of disgust. “You still know utterly nothing.”

“I never lived among dragons, did I?” Spike defended himself. “How am I supposed to know what’s done? It’s not like there’s an etiquette guide!”

The great green dragon’s eyes widened, and then to Spike’s astonishment, it burst out laughing. “Ah, little hatchling, you do have a use. You could be a jester!” it jeered.

“All right, no need to be insulting,” Spike muttered.

The dragon lay down on its belly facing him, and its eyes twinkled with mirth. “You can call me Razorfang, since a *name* means so much to you,” it said with a curl of its lip.

“That’s a... nice name.” Spike gulped.

“It is an accurate one.” Razorfang grinned cruelly.

“So I see,” he answered weakly, before pulling himself together. Then his curiosity got the better of him. “So, what else don’t I know?”

“Hmm?”

“About being a dragon,” Spike clarified.

Razorfang huffed, and a fantastic plume of smoke billowed from his jaws. “Everything.”

“Care to be more specific?”

“Why would a warm-blooded little mammal wish to know?” the huge creature jeered.

Spike smothered his irritation under his fear. “Well, let me see now, because I’m a *dragon* and I don’t know anything about being one?”

“You are no dragon.” Razorfang scowled.

“See, that’s what I meant! I didn’t know that just being called *dragon* was respectful, I didn’t know anything about challenges, I’ve still got no idea about this territory thing...”

“Can you feel the pull?” interrupted Razorfang.

Spike blinked. “What pull? Pull where?”

“Back to your den,” Razorfang said impatiently. “The never-ending tugging to where your nest is, the possessiveness, the jealousy.”

Spike frowned. “I don’t...”

But it was true he was almost madly protective of his home, and particularly of Twilight and his position as her assistant. The idea of having to leave had made him so utterly miserable it bordered on agoraphobia, never leaving the library at all for fear of having to abandon his life altogether. The whole Owlowsicous situation had seemed perfectly logical to him, though everypony else had acted like he’d behaved quite irrationally. He’d gone to extreme lengths to remove the owl and restore his place. Finally when it seemed obvious that his niche had gone for good, he had packed it all in to start afresh as far from Ponyville as his infant legs could carry him. He had never even considered trying to find a role in the town outside Twilight, her friends and the library.

Finally, Razorfang’s threat to raze the town with fire filled him with an almost incandescent fury. The library – it was his. *His* home, all his. The other dragon could not touch it. He would kill him first.

Discovering such violence inside himself made Spike release a long shuddering breath, his heart pounding with turmoil. What *was* this?

“Ah, you do feel it, I see,” Razorfang rumbled, amused. “Well, hatchling, *that* is territory. It will expand as you age. All the Forest is mine, the creatures within it mine to hunt and eat.”

“I think mine’s mostly a building so far,” Spike said, trying to cover his moment of confusion. “One that I don’t fit into anymore,” he added.

Razorfang laughed like a distant thunderstorm. “Yes, first territory is always outgrown; a hatchling’s meagre wants are few compared to the mature greed of a true dragon. You will eventually claim the valley, I expect,” he said in a thoughtful tone. Then the great dragon drew himself up in the sudden realisation that he had been almost *civil*. His voice turned ugly again. “That is, in the highly unlikely event that you should live so long,” he purred menacingly.

Spike shook his head sharply and cast away any thoughts of territory and libraries and creepy little owl dudes. “Look, so is it possible for me to make this up to you? I’ll never come into the Forest ever again, I promise from the bottom of my heart, and I’ll replace every last gem in your hoard. Would that work?”

The dragon regarded him with a certain loathing. “Your little life means that much to you?”

“Well... duh!” he said desperately. “I’m sort of attached to it – it’s my life!”

“But why?”

Spike gave Razorfang a perplexed look, and he sighed.

“Hatchling, you live amongst the mammals and you will see generation upon generation of them pass on and die, and you will never truly be one of them,” he growled. “You will sacrifice your true nature and your true diet and be forever in mourning. What life is that for a dragon?”

Spike closed his eyes tightly before opening them again, his gaze full of resolve.

“I know,” he said steadily. “And I’ll watch them go and be sad. And then I’ll make new friends among them, and then again. I’ll know their families, and the families they came from before that. I’ll write them down, who they were and what they did, and read their lives to their descendants. They’ll never be forgotten as long as I’m around to remember them.”

“If you are around to remember them.” Razorfang chuckled darkly.

“So that’s a no, then?” Spike said, disappointment washing over him.

“Correct,” he mocked. “But very stirring nevertheless, hatchling.”

Spike sighed and turned to leave.

“Oh, *such* a shame,” Razorfang crooned sarcastically. “It was such a pretty plan, too.”

“What a jerk,” Spike muttered and began the long trek down the mountain.

“He is limping as well, the poor little mammal,” Razorfang’s voice boomed derisively after him. “What *could* he have been up to?”

“I’ve been trying to learn to fly,” Spike answered evenly and truthfully without turning around. “There’s a lot of crashing involved.”

The dragon roared with laughter – but the laughter died as Spike continued to walk away.

“Hatchling!”

Spike kept walking.

“Hatchling, if you turn now I will tell you why you are failing,” Razorfang said sharply.

Spike ignored him.

“Spike.”

He paused.

The huge dragon’s breath hit him in the back of his neck. “You are such an odd creature,” it murmured.

“I was thinking *almost* the same thing about you,” Spike answered spitefully, trying to keep the quaking from his voice.

“Listen to me,” Razorfang said. “Lock your wings, then move your chest to flap. Not wings alone, chest as well. You must counterbalance the width of your wings. Back rounded and chest concave on the downstroke. Back arched, chest pressed outwards on the upstroke.”

Spike turned his head to see Razorfang’s massive muzzle not twenty ponylengths from where he stood. “Why are you helping me?” he asked bluntly.

“You said it yourself,” Razorfang sneered. “There is no pride in killing an infant. We must ensure you mature somewhat before you die, otherwise where is the sport in it for me?”

Spike met the dragon’s gaze and let the full extent of his anger flash briefly in his eyes, before resuming his steady walk back to Ponyville and home.

Razorfang watched him go, contempt and bemusement warring in his face.

• • •

“Apple comes up, apple comes down,” Spike muttered to himself as he delicately pinched the apple and let it fall, before pinching it again. He was actually becoming quite proficient at controlling his claws now, at least where apples were concerned. Concentrating on the exercise was a final, desperate attempt to stop brooding on Razorfang’s words, which were still echoing in his mind. “Apple comes up, apple comes down. Apple comes up...”

“Bored?”

Spike yelped and pierced his apple.

“Oh, we are terribly sorry,” said a resonant voice from within the shadows. “We did not mean to frighten you, gentle dragon. It isn’t that time of year yet.”

His brow wrinkled. “Princess... Luna?”

“It is indeed your Princess,” she said grandly, stepping from out of the darkness into a convenient patch of moonlight. It seemed designed to highlight the alicorn’s ethereal mane and proud, elegant figure – and Spike didn’t put it past her not to have arranged it beforehand. “How dost thou fare this fine... I mean,” and she cleared her throat, taking the volume down a notch or twelve, “how are you tonight?”

He hoisted himself up and bowed, making an effort to make it as smooth as possible – or at the very least not as ungainly as he generally was. “Um, fine, Princess,” he mumbled.

“My sister told you of my royal presence, did she not?”

“Yes,” he said, ducking his head. “It was in her letter. You said I was a different sort of dragon.”

“I did,” she confirmed, her proud head nodding. Then she tilted it slightly.

“What is the purpose of this apple lifting you do? Is it for... fun?”

“Uhhh, no,” he replied. “It’s practice. See, I’m learning how to control my claws... and my size, and my wings... and my everything, I suppose.”

“Ah,” she said in understanding. “This is an endeavour I know well. Striving for skill and mastery of your gifts.”

“Skill and mastery, I wish.” He rolled his eyes and neatly nibbled the apple from his claw. “I’d settle for not-hopeless.”

“You seem troubled, dragon Spike,” she said after a pause.

“Oh no, no, Princess,” he said with false bravado. Then he slumped. “Yeah.”

She sat down beside him, her mane and tail rippling in a non-existent breeze. “Would you speak to your prin... I mean, to *me* of your troubles?”

He glanced down at her. “I don’t really want to, if that’s okay,” he said. “I’m sort of trying to forget about it actually.”

“Your Pri- I would be happy to *share* your burden.”

“Well, I’ve already spoken to Twilight about most of it,” he said, “and I don’t want to re-hash all of that again, begging your pardon, Princess. The rest... is something I don’t think anyone without scales can help me with.”

“If you wish,” she said, regally inclining her head. “But know that a trouble deferred is a trouble prolonged. That... was a lesson it took me a very long time to learn,” she added softly.

He looked at her, stunned. She bowed her head, her legs folding underneath her with quick, neat movements.

“I would spare you the pain of learning these things if I could,” she said in a far gentler tone than she had previously used. “I am your Princess, though you are no pony, and it is my task to care for and guide you.”

“Maybe later,” he said to deflect her. It wasn’t that he didn’t *like* the princess – it was that he already had somepony to care for and guide him, and that was the study-fixated bookworm asleep in the ancient tree behind him.

“Very well,” she said, and looked up at the stars.

There was a pause full of ear-burning awkwardness.

Spike cleared his throat. “Beautiful night tonight, Princess,” he said encouragingly, and she smiled.

“Indeed.” She pointed out a faint cluster of stars topped by a bright and blazing one. “Do you know what those are called?”

“No?”

She gazed up at the shining stars fondly. “That is the Dragon. See his body, and there the fire he breathes?” She indicated the bright star.

“Oh yeah. Cool.” He craned his neck back, and then winced as his muscles twanged with pain.

“You are hurt?”

“More practice,” he said, studying the stars. Razorfang’s words were still echoing in his head.

“What are you thinking of, dragon Spike?”

He clenched his fangs. “Greed,” he said shortly, “and jealousy.”

She was silent for a moment, prompting him to glance down once more. Then her voice rang out, low and dark. “I... know something of those two emotions. I think I could help. Please, dragon Spike, it would be my honour to listen.”

Her eyes were large and sorrowful in the pale moonlight. He looked away from her, lost in sadness and guilt, and back up at the stars. “It’s not quite the same,” he murmured.

“Tell me.”

He gave in. “The dragon said...” he began haltingly.

“Which dragon?”

“Razorfang,” he sighed. “In the Everfree Forest. He said it is in a dragon’s nature to...”

She remained silent, accepting, listening.

“It’s about the territory thing.” He swallowed. “Amongst other stuff. Too much other stuff. But that really struck me...”

“He said that I’m supposed to be possessive, greedy and... and *jealous* of my territory. I hadn’t thought of it like that – but I am. I *am*. You were wrong, Princess. I’m just like every other dragon,” he said moodily.

“I do not believe that.”

“I once smashed my way through the village because of greed!” he said. “I couldn’t stand to see an owl in the library because I was so jealous!”

“Greed, jealousy and possessiveness have positive traits as well,” she replied matter-of-factly. “They are called by different names, but they spring from the same source.”

He gave her a puzzled look.

“Let me explain.” She turned to him, her exquisite face serious. “Dragon Spike... may I call you Spike?”

“I *wish* you would,” he said.

“These emotions and needs are not evil,” she said evenly. “To deny them is the *true* evil. They must be acknowledged and resolved. If they are inseparable from your very being, as yours are, then *make* them yours. Fold them into you and use them for good. Only when you repress them do they become evil.” She paused and continued very slowly and softly, “Chewing over your grievances in bitter resentment and spite will twist your soul into darkness.”

“But how can *greed* and *jealousy* be *good*?” he scoffed, and she bowed her long, slender neck.

“If it is yours, it is then yours to care for,” she said in a calm, clear voice. “Thus the hopes and dreams of all those who shelter under your wing become *your* hopes and dreams as well. You can strive to see them come to pass – for the good fortune of those who belong to you becomes your reward. You can be jealous with their happiness and tend to it carefully. You can be protective of their safety and guard their wishes, needs and desires as closely and possessively as you hoard your own. You can be greedy of your responsibilities to them. Their pride is yours. Their loves are yours. They are yours, but so too do you become theirs.”

It was like a key fitting into a lock. Spike reeled back onto his elbows as suddenly the very purpose – the whole *point* of him – became clear. Light-headed in realisation, he stared worshipfully at the slight, slender goddess.

“You are very wise, Princess,” he said humbly.

“I am very old.” She smiled. “And I have made many, many mistakes. That is what some creatures call wisdom.”

“That’s something else I meant to ask him...” Spike remembered.

“You wish to know how long you will live.”

“Um,” he said.

“I do not know *all* things,” she said, a smile on her lips. “I am still a pony, though a powerful one. But dragons live for hundreds of lives of ponies, that much I know.”

Spike’s throat tightened unbearably for a moment.

Luna lifted her flawless midnight face to the sky. “You will be here to jealously safeguard your ponies for a very long time.”

He examined that thought and everything it meant. “Good,” he said eventually. “But...”

He’d never really faced up to the inevitability of it, and the realisation was devastating, a dark weight crushing him to the ground. Losing Twilight and the others would be the most agonizing and consuming grief he could imagine. And lose them he would.

“But they’ll all leave me,” he said sadly. “They’ll all die.”

She closed her eyes. “Yes. But you and I, we will not. We endure.”

Then they opened once more, and she looked at him steadily with pools of blackest blue. “And then you will die, and I will not. And I will endure.”

Spike looked at her speechlessly, too choked to speak.

She turned back to the stars. “And when the moon crumbles to silver dust and the sun expands in a glorious conflagration and this world is nothing but a cold cinder in the void, I too shall die,” she said serenely.

Spike stifled a heart-deep sob and fell to his belly, his face buried in his forelegs.

“I am not gone *yet*, however.” Her voice rang proudly. “Neither are you, and neither are they. Do not mourn for the future. It robs the present of all of its joy.”

Spike sniffled, and then sighed emptily. "It seems a long time to live with just memories," he said hollowly.

"That's the excellent thing about memories," she said, her dark eyes shining. "They last. They have another fine quality as well."

"Mmm?" Spike managed.

"You can always make more."

She stood elegantly and her insubstantial mane blew cool and strange across his face. Stars winked deep in its wind-tossed depths.

"Throughout all your years, I will be here, and be your friend," she said. "I hope you will be mine."

He nodded wordlessly.

She touched his shoulder with her curling wing. "I must leave soon," she said, regret in her voice. "The night is still mine, and I must be greedy for my responsibilities."

He managed a noise that was halfway between a laugh and a sob. "I hear that's a... good thing."

She regarded him with a small smile on her lips. "You are indeed a very different sort of dragon," she said, approval in her starlit eyes. "I will visit you again soon."

"Princess..." Spike said thickly.

"Luna," she corrected.

"Luna," he repeated, his face blushing violet at how presumptuous it felt. "Luna... thank you. *Thank you.*"

*Dear Spike,*

*I did say I hoped to be considered one of your friends. Therefore, as your friend, you could have confided in me the situation that has arisen between yourself and the dragon of Everfree Forest. Yet in my role as Ruler of Equestria, it was your duty to tell me. A threat to our citizens is a threat to our land. Imagine then my disappointment when my faithful student Twilight was the one to notify me. It is a happy coincidence that you are no longer taking her dictation or reading her letters before you send them, or I might never have been informed at all.*

*My sister tells me that I am being too harsh and that you have a great deal to think about. I do not deny that you are undergoing a time of great stress. You asked about responsibility. Here is some truth: You have a responsibility to me, your Princess; you have a responsibility as a citizen of Equestria; and you have a responsibility towards those that care for you. You have disappointed me greatly, my dragon.*

*Though I am saddened by your failure of duty and lack of trust, I am still your friend. Do please remember that. I re-extend my offer for help. I have not the authority to overturn twelve thousand years of draconic tradition, I am afraid. But is there anything else I am able to do?*

*Ever your friend,  
Princess Celestia*

• • •

It was raining. Spike was brooding.

He huddled gloomily under his wings and felt the rain pattering down against the stretched pale-green skin and trickling between the elongated fingers. Before him, flecked with raindrops, the letter from Princess Celestia lay. The neat black writing glared at him reproachfully.

“Well, this is just great,” he said to himself. “You’ve seriously annoyed the Princess, Twilight’s probably disappointed as well, and you’re soaking wet. That’s a really promising start to the day.”

He idly wondered if Rainbow Dash would open a hole in the clouds over him, and hoped she might fly by. However, the morning dragged on, and he didn't see hide nor hair of the pegasus. He concluded that she must be away for a show, and sighed gustily.

Then he got on with some more brooding.

Somepony coughed. He opened up his wings a fraction to see the Mayor waving smoke away energetically, a raincoat draped over her head. "Sorry," he said, and unfurled his wings a little more to create a dry space for the political pony to stand.

She scurried under immediately and shook off her dripping raincoat. "I always forget when the weather ponies have rain scheduled," she said. "Never fails. I'm on my way to the office, and down it comes!"

"You have a raincoat," he pointed out.

"I have extensive prior experience of being caught in the rain," she said crossly. "I never leave home without it. Now let me see, how to begin..."

"Is something wrong?" Spike asked.

"Hmm." She pursed her lips and nodded, before craning her neck up to look at him. "I have a report," she said bluntly.

"A report...?"

"Those ponies from the market on Sunday," she went on, confirming Spike's worst fears. "They've been selling at other markets in the area, and they have *talked*. Rather loudly. They are gathering numbers and support. There are rumours of an organisation being formed."

Spike bit his lip, before saying, "Ow!" and rubbing at his mouth. Stupid fangs. "What am I gonna do?" he asked.

"What are *we* going to do," she corrected. "*We* are going to refute them, thoroughly and categorically!"

"Oh. That's good," he said uncertainly.

"To that end, I've taken the liberty of hiring a reporter and a photographer," she said. "We'll have a write-up about you, how does that sound?"

Spike froze.

“We’ll have it published in *Ponyville Press*, *Trottingham Times*, *The Canterlot Sun*, *The Hoofington Herald*, *Clotheshorse Magazine*, *Manhattan Mail* and *Equestria Daily*,” she continued blithely. “It’ll show Equestria the *real* Spike, and these rabble-rousers will be left without a hoof to stand on.”

“W... what?” he said weakly.

“You know! The *actual* Spike, the Ponyville dragon! Who you are!”

’The actual Spike’ swallowed.

“I am not having my citizens run out of town simply because they grow to thirty ponylengths high and breathe fire,” the Mayor said with hard satisfaction. “Those addeplated ninnies won’t know what hit them. Now, I’ve set up an appointment for this afternoon. Are you available?”

“Uh...”

“Excellent! Then I won’t keep you further. Come by the Town Hall at about three, won’t you?”

“Uh...”

“By the way, how are things progressing with that challenge?” she asked with false heartiness. “Quite the nasty shock that was at first! But as they say, no time like the present to take the bull by the horns, eh? No doubt you’re training hard? Upholding the pride of Ponyville?”

“Uh...”

“Splendid, splendid.” She patted his paw briskly, pulled the raincoat over her head once more, and peered out under his wings. “Useful, that.” She nodded to them. Then she ducked out into the driving rain once more.

Spike blinked twice, and then let out a long, heart-felt groan.

• • •

“She said what now?”

“The Mayor wants to do an article on me,” Spike said blankly. The rain had stopped, but it was still wet and miserable out on the streets and very few ponies were braving the damp and the wind.

Macintosh chewed thoughtfully on his strand of hay. “Cos o’ these anti-dragon ponies?”

Spike nodded once, and then scrubbed at his eyes.

“I’m sensin’ that you’re not all that fond of the idea,” Macintosh said dryly, and Spike gave him a dark look.

“What gave *that* away?”

“Might be the way y’re about to jump outta yer skin,” he said. Spike looked at him, horrified.

“I’m shedding? Before a photo? No *way*, can this get any *worse*?”

“Thought you didn’t want no photoshoot?”

“Right! But if I *have* to have one, I don’t wanna be all patchy and flaky in front of all Equestria!”

“Calm down now, hold yer horses,” Macintosh said as he unhitched himself from the wagon full of barrels and crates. “Y’look fine, same as y’ ever did. Uhhh, lately.”

Spike looked up from his minute inspection of the scales on his back. “I’m *not* shedding?”

“Nnnope.”

“Oh. Well, good.”

“I can see why y’ don’t want to talk t’ some reporter or get y’ photo took by somepony y’ don’t know,” Macintosh said thoughtfully. “But if it gets these crazy ponyfolk off yer back, then why not?”

“That’s just it,” Spike said, and his head thumped the cobblestones heavily. “These aren’t ponies who can be persuaded by a silly little article – and it’ll put a big fat target on my back for everypony and anypony who feels the same way. They’ll all know where to find me!”

“Hate t’ be the one t’ point it out, Spike, but y’ ain’t exactly inconspicuous,” Macintosh drawled, adjusting his collar. He squinted at the sun, and then looked expectantly down the street. He seemed to be waiting for something.

“Well, couldn’t this wait until I was even more inconspicuous?” Spike began thudding his head against the cobblestones repetitively. “*Why* couldn’t they wait until I’m as big as Razorfang? No pony in their right mind would attack *him!*”

“Stop that, y’ll give yerself a headache,” Macintosh said, smoothing down his dark blond mane.

Spike slumped over with a smoky sigh. “I officially hate everything,” he said. “Can I start my hundred-year sleep now?”

“Hello there, Spike... oh my, is something the matter?”

The soft little voice broke him out of his dark reverie, and he looked down into Fluttershy’s timid, concerned face. “Hi Fluttershy,” he said moodily. “Oh, everything’s simply *peachy*.”

“He’s upset cos the Mayor’s organised this article an’ photoshoot,” Macintosh explained, his eyes alert and yet strangely soft.

“Oh, I don’t blame him,” Fluttershy said, nodding sympathetically. “They’re simply awful, I hated it so very much.”

Spike shook his head. “*Wonderful*,” he said with expansive sarcasm.

“It’s all right, Spike,” she said consolingly. “At least you only have to do it once. I think. Unless you get famous. Which can happen. But probably won’t. But it could. A dragon’s certainly *new*, and they like new things. But still, probably not. Unless it does. Anyway, they don’t make runways big enough for dragons...”

“I think y’ might be freakin’ him out a little,” Macintosh murmured to her.

“Oh...” She studied Spike’s fixed, glazed expression of horror and frozen body. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said in a tiny voice.

“He’ll be fine, he’s a big strong feller,” Macintosh assured her.

“Are you sure? I have some smelling salts in my cottage...”

“Eeyup, he’ll be right as rain. Just a li’l shock, that’s all. He’ll snap outta it.”

“Well, if you say so...” she said meekly.

“Now, by lucky happenstance I coincidentally seem t’ be free fer the mornin’,” Macintosh said with studied nonchalance, “so p’raps I can walk you where yer goin’, Miz Fluttershy?”

She blushed prettily. “Oh my, well, you don’t have to...”

“I’d like nothin’ better,” he said.

“Well, I’m going to the Post Office,” she said shyly, hardly daring to look up at the big red stallion. “I go every Wednesday.”

“Y’ don’t say,” Macintosh said, his face the very picture of innocence.

“And then I meet Pinkie Pie at Sugarcube Corner...”

“Ain’t it grand t’ have good friends? Now, take my hoof, there’s puddles from the rain most everywhere...”

“Oh, that’s so very kind of you...”

“P’raps I can buy y’ a daisy tea before y’ have t’ go?”

“That would be lovely...”

With their voices fading in his ears, Spike finally snapped out of his paralytic shock. The image of himself in one of Rarity’s fantastical creations sashaying down a runway flickered back into his thoughts – he shuddered violently, all the skin on his back creeping.

Wait... *Rarity!*

He moved as fast as he dared through the town to Carousel Boutique, which in actual fact wasn’t all that fast. Everypony was just so *small*, and he was afraid he’d knock somepony over by accident. Thankfully Carousel Boutique was fairly close. He exhaled in relief when it came into view, and delicately knocked on Rarity’s door.

“Come in!” he heard her sing out.

“Um, I sort of *can't*,” he called back.

“Spikey-wikey!” she trilled, throwing the door wide and stopping at the expression on his face. “Why darling, whatever is the matter?” she asked.

The whole story poured out of Spike, and she gasped and shook her head and tutted at exactly the right places. “My word, that is just simply horrible,” she exclaimed. “An interview! Forcing you to do such a thing! Why don’t they ever ask a pony who *wants* to!” Her voice rose sharply.

“Anyway, I don’t think there’s any getting out of it, it’s all arranged,” he said in a rush, “so I came here. You know the most about this sort of thing – what am I supposed to *do*?”

“Shhh.” She patted his forepaw, and then carefully wiped the rainwater off on her ornate welcome mat. “Just be yourself, stay poised and keep calm, Spike,” she said. “If you like, I’ll come along with you.”

He sagged with relief. “Oh, would you please?”

“*Naturellement!* Oh, I’m so glad you came here this morning, darling, otherwise I simply wouldn’t have had time to prepare!”

“Prepare what?” he asked suspiciously.

“Well.” She held a hoof modestly to her chest. “It was meant to be a surprise, but... oh, I’m too excited, I have to show you!”

She flittered back into the Boutique, and Spike stuck his head inside after her.

“Ah-ah-ah!” She turned and frowned at him. “No smoking around the materials! Hold your breath or go outside, is that clear?”

He sucked in a breath and nodded. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Good. I have delicate fabrics in here that might” – she shuddered – “*discolour*. Anyway, feast your eyes on *this!*”

’This’ proved to be a long narrow sheet of cloth perhaps thirty ponystrides long in striped purple and green. Spike tilted his head and tried to ask the question with his eyes.

“Why, it’s a scarf, can’t you see?” she asked, and her horn flared. The scarf flew from her hooves and wrapped tightly and firmly around his neck, and Spike almost lost control of his breath right then and there.

“Oh that is simply *darling!*” Rarity crooned. “The colours, spot on – oh, I have done it again, I have done it again! So charming, and yes, the length is *just* right for you!”

Spike tugged his head out of the door just in time, and his smoke-laden breath soared harmlessly over the Boutique. He looked down at the scarf and then at Rarity. “It’s so soft,” he said stupidly. He had a sapphire in the library that Rarity had once given him, but this was on a whole different level.

“Only the very *finest* at Carousel Boutique, Spike,” she said, trotting back to the doorway.

“The length is just right?” he wondered as he carefully lifted one end. “Seems a bit long.”

She sighed. “Spike, you persist in forgetting a very basic fact. Long *now*, maybe. Not long *always*.”

He sat back on his haunches to look at it some more: a ploy to keep his blushing face turned away from Rarity. “It looks finished to me. What has to happen to it?” he asked.

“Hmm?” she said absently, studying his scales against the scarf with satisfaction.

“Well, you said *prepare...*”

“Oh, not much.” She waved a hoof airily. “I *was* going to stud the tassels with emeralds and amethysts, but then I thought that would only serve as temptation. So I thought I might make a matching hat...”

“Ah, that’s not necessary,” said Spike quickly. He couldn’t imagine how ridiculous he’d look with one of Rarity’s be-feathered and bejewelled creations on his head. “The scarf is really amazing on its own. I think a hat would just detract from it. Don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, simplicity, purity, of course,” she mused. Then she eyed Spike shrewdly. “Is Twilight coming this afternoon as well?”

Spike shuffled his claws. “Um.”

She tsked. “Spike. Turn your scaly *derriere* around and tell her. I don’t care what silly notion you have in your head this time; she will want to know.”

He hung his head. "I know."

She raised her eyebrows, her blue eyes stern. "If I don't see her at the photo shoot, I will tell her myself."

"Okay, *okay!*" he said resentfully. Then he closed his eyes with a sigh, and opened them to look at her. "Thanks, Rarity."

"*Au contraire.*" She smiled. "It was *quite* the engaging challenge. I wonder if there isn't an entire untapped market out there? Dragons must surely get cold in winter, what with the whole..." – she waved her hoof randomly – "cold-blooded... thing. Perhaps that's something for the next catalogue, hmm?"

He touched the scarf again, and decided not to mention that his fire kept him fairly warm all year round. Perhaps he had a shot at getting a present next year.

"Now go and talk to Twilight!" She shooed him away and he grinned sheepishly.

He made his way back through Ponyville feeling a lot calmer. Ponies glanced up at his nice new scarf curiously, and he held his head up a little prouder. *He* had a gift from Rarity. A specially-made gift, just for him. Though his mind kept flicking back to his conversations with both Razorfang and Princess Luna, he firmly pushed them aside. What matter that he would outlive her? What matter that she was a tiny, dainty pony and he a big lumbering dragon? He would still worship her and the gift from her hooves.

In all the excitement, he'd forgotten Princess Celestia's letter. It was wet against the cobbles when he arrived back at the square, and Twilight was standing next to it, her eyes following the lines rapidly. Guilt washed over him. He halted abruptly as her gaze lifted to his.

"I like your scarf," she said.

"It was a present from Rarity," he said uneasily.

"Come here, Spike," she said in a calm tone, and he slowly sidled up to her. "I'm not angry," she continued, "I'm not even disappointed. I just wish I could say the same for the Princess."

Spike averted his eyes.

“You should have told her, Spike,” she said implacably. “If you’re serious about wanting to stay here with me and the others, you’re going to have to remember that there are certain rules that govern this town. And number one is that it is *Equestrian*, and Princess Celestia cares about everypony in it. That includes *you*.”

“I’m sorry, Twilight,” he said in a small voice. “Can you forgive me?”

She snorted and batted at his scarf with one hoof. “It’s the Princess you need to say that to. You’re just lucky I sent that letter. She’d be even more hurt if the wait had been longer.”

“Yeah, I know,” Spike said, eyes sliding to the ground again.

“So why didn’t you write?” she asked.

“I did... I just...” He squirmed a little. This situation with the Princess had been the whole substance of his brooding earlier that morning, and he wasn’t even sure how to explain his conclusions.

He knew that he didn’t want anypony endangered because of him. This whole mess was his fault, and he needed to see it through. He didn’t want Princess Celestia or Princess Luna or especially Twilight to bear the full brunt of Razorfang’s malice and cruelty. He guessed that even immortal alicorn sky goddesses could be burned by dragonfire. He *knew* that unicorns could.

And there was another reason, far stranger and more selfish: somewhere deep inside him had awoken a fierce pride at Razorfang’s challenge. His fear of the huge creature and his dread of death were still as healthy as ever, but that peculiar egocentricity that constituted *territory* was screaming silent defiance almost constantly. It was *his* village and *his* library and *his* friends, and thus *his* fight. His, Spike’s, and no pony else’s. Half of him wanted to crow proudly like a rooster from the rooftops, and the other half wanted to hide like a mole – and never come out. Worst of all, he didn’t have the faintest idea how to explain it to Twilight.

Horseapples, but he was so *confused*. Territory and hopelessness, pride and fear, sorrow and greed, worry and laughter, shame and love... he was vaguely amazed his head wasn’t exploding from the sheer pressure of it all.

Twilight tapped his knee with one hoof. “All right, wake up. You’ve been standing there looking pole-axed for a whole minute. Did Big Macintosh turn up this morning?”

“No, wait,” he said urgently, snapping out of it. “I have to tell you something...”

He told her the Mayor’s mad idea and the even madder reasoning behind it, about the reports of growing dragon-prejudice outside the environs of Ponyville, and about his fear that he was about to become a big, purple target. “And I don’t even know how to talk to reporters, Twilight!” he concluded, waving his claws in the air in frustration. “They’re gonna ask me things and I won’t know what to say!”

She looked at him disbelievingly. “How do you get yourself *into* these things, Spike?”

“It’s a gift,” he said wryly.

“Well, Mayor Mare’s got a point,” she said, “but I can see your reasoning too. I think you’re right, though – she didn’t give you a chance to protest because it’s all already organised.”

“I *hate* being right,” he grouched.

“Now *that* I don’t believe,” she said archly. “You just have to stay calm, okay? Answer the questions politely, and if you don’t know, then you don’t know. Three o’clock, did you say?”

Spike nodded.

“Then you’ve got plenty of time for some practise, don’t you?” she said. “Come on. If you do an hour of writing practise, an hour of fire-practise, lift up Tom twenty times to strengthen your chest and back muscles *and* pick up all your apples at lunch, I promise I’ll give you another moustache.”

“Won’t be as good,” he sighed.

“I’ll try my horn off.”

“You can’t buy me with moustaches,” he said with wounded dignity.

“I’ll make it *cuuurlyyyyy*,” she cajoled.

He gave her a sidelong look. “You’re on, Sparkle.”

• • •

The moustache wasn't nearly as luxuriant as the one he had sported as a baby, and Twilight had practically drilled her hooves through the ground trying to conjure it, but it was marvellously, magnificently curly. He twirled it around his claws with debonair flair all afternoon until, sooner than expected, the magic wore off. It disappeared with a soft 'pop!' as they made their way towards the Town Hall.

"Aw," he lamented. "My moustache!"

"Well, I know what I'm giving you on your birthday this year." Twilight smiled. "You wouldn't have been able to wear it in the photos anyway, Spike. No pony would believe that you're only a kid with that thing on your face!"

"But... my moustache!" He turned puppy eyes on her. "I worked hard for that moustache!"

"So did I," she replied dryly, and he harrumphed.

"But Tom is *heavy*," he grumbled. "First Rainbow Dash tries to kill me, and now you."

She lifted her eyes heavenwards. "Riiight," she drawled. "So you're gonna try and build up your flight muscles lifting feathers, then?"

"Oh, ha, ha," he said witheringly. "Still too heavy," he added.

She poked him in the side, and he pulled a face at her.

"*HOLD ZAT POSE!*"

"Huh?" Both Spike and Twilight turned to where the voice had come from, and there was a sudden, blinding flash of light. Spike blinked furiously to clear the awful white blotches from his vision.

"Bah! Patheteek!"

Twilight squinted at the black, blue and white blur. "Photo... Finish?"

"Uh oh," Spike whispered. "Rarity's meeting us here."

"Oh, this'll be fun," Twilight whispered back sarcastically.

“Yes, it is I – Photo Finish!” the photographer declared in her heavy accent. “And you! You are spoiling... *ze magics*... with your talkings and your walkings. You will take *ze* pose once more – *ze* dragon with *ze* making of *zer* face and *ze* pony with *ze* hoof on *zer* dragon’s side. You pose – *now!*”

Spike simply looked at Twilight in confusion. “Did you catch any of that?”

“Ooooooh,” Photo Finish said approvingly. “Yes, yes, with *zer* frowning eyes and *zer* teeth shining in *ze* light and *zer* greyness of *zer* street behind all *ze* purples and blues and greens...” Another flash of light made Spike’s sight fuzzy.

“Ow!” he complained.

“Can you stop that until we’re ready?” Twilight said irritably, rubbing at her eyes.

“I, Photo Finish, live only for... *ze magics*,” the pony declared. “And *ze magics* wait for nopony.”

“Can they wait for a dragon just this once?” Spike grumbled.

“Waiting? Fah!” Photo Finish scoffed. Then she barked, “Pony out of shot!”

Twilight was whisked away with a strangled yelp.

“Now,” the photographer breathed, “show Photo Finish somezing...”

The flash went off once more, and Spike sat down on his haunches heavily. The thump as he hit the cobbles was rather loud. He shook his head to clear the dancing spots of light from his vision.

“Yeeeesss,” she said eagerly, snapping off a few more pictures. “So confused! So puzzled! The very picture ov bamboozlement! With *zer* purple largeness and *zer* teeth goink sparkle and ting! *More light!*” she barked, and two showily-dressed ponies immediately set up large spot lamps that made Spike feel as though he were undergoing some bizarre interrogation.

More photos got snapped, and Spike looked around for Twilight desperately.

“Less light!”

Spike grimaced, wings half-unfurling in annoyance.

“Good, good, with ze faces and ze wings! *More light!*”

Spike flinched, his wings flattening against his sides.

“Wunderbar!” Photo Finish crowed. Then the bark came once more: “Scarf comes off!”

A little gasp made Spike turn around, and he met the wide, upset eyes of Rarity. She was dressed to perfection in a set of beautiful rain-boots and a jaunty sequined cape, but her face was filled with distress. She had lifted one hoof halfway to her mouth, pausing in the middle of the street in remembered hurt.

He straightened his neck, his jaw clenching.

“Scarf stays on,” he said firmly as hooves froze in the action of reaching for him.

Photo Finish gasped, and then leaned forward to stare through her bug-eyed sunglasses at him. “But ze scarf is distracting! It takes away ze raw impact of zer dragon’s natural power und size! Where is ze boldness? Where is ze statement?”

“What, you think it makes me look smaller?” Spike looked down at the overlong scarf in surprise, and then over at Rarity once more. She gave him a tremulous smile. “Well, it *is* just the right length for me,” he said, smiling gratefully back at her.

“Oooh,” breathed Photo Finish, and snapped another picture, “zer smile und zer warmth of ze eyes, yes...”

“Oh, and I’d like to mention that the scarf was made for me at Carousel Boutique,” Spike said determinedly. “Can I do that?”

Twilight shrugged at him, elbowing from behind the two assistant ponies. “Well, you just did.”

“In the article, I *mean*.” He rolled his eyes. The flash went ‘whomp’ once more, and he shut them hurriedly. “Maybe it should be mentioned under the photos?”

“Yes, yes, Carousel Booteek, yes.” Photo Finish dismissed this, and then huffed. “Scarf is too long. Dragon is *terrible* model, too stubborn, not obedient, not enough... *magics*.”

“I’ll show her ‘magics’,” Twilight whispered to Spike, and he chuckled. Another flash went off.

“Excellent under ze light, shiny with all ze scales and such,” conceded Photo Finish, snapping a few more pictures. “But where is ze refinement? Ze elegance? So clumsy. So awkward. Wide-angle camera only, ach, is too *limiting*. Oh, Floottershy! How I, Photo Finish, miss your delicate grace and your dainty little schneezes.” She sighed. Then she barked, “Now! We finish!”

Her camera bounced and folded itself up, and Photo Finish immediately began walking away. Her assistants scrambled to pick up all the equipment as the photographer sauntered past him.

“That’s it?” Spike asked, thoroughly perplexed.

The blue pony gave him an unimpressed look. “I, Photo Finish, have captured... *ze magics*. Now, we have the thing at the place, where we must make ze art bloom und live once more. And so...” She turned her head and gave the street a thousand-yard stare. “...*We go!*”

And abruptly, she was gone.

“That is one weird pony,” Spike said, nonplussed. Rarity and Twilight came up to stand by him, and he gave them both a hopeful look. “Was that okay?”

Twilight giggled. “To be honest? You looked kind of lost the whole time.”

“I’m sure they’ll be lovely photos,” Rarity said, “and Spike?”

“Yes, Rarity?”

“Thank you for...” She looked askance for a moment, and then up at him. “For not letting her take the scarf off you. It all felt like history repeating itself there for a moment, you know?”

“Well, thanks for making it just the right length,” he said, grinning.

“I think I’m in a few of those photos,” Twilight said, “and with me for scale, nopony’s going to think you’re *that* small just cos of a scarf.”

“Oh, Twilight, of course not,” Rarity sniffed, “but it’s the *illusion*, don’t you see? A designer needs to know these things. Even though Spike’s size will be apparent, nopony’s ever seen a dragon wearing a fuzzy scarf before, especially one that’s too big for him. It makes him appear more accessible.”

“You mean I don’t look accessible?” he said in mock-surprise. “I’m gonna need another scarf.”

Twilight shook her head and began to walk into the Town Hall. “Come on, you two. Let’s get this over with.”

After the two mares had entered the Hall, Spike stuck his head through the door and gently tested the width of the frame with his shoulders.

“No luck?”

“Nope,” he sighed, and lay down on the front steps with his head inside.

“Well, it’s nothing we didn’t already know,” Twilight said philosophically.

“I was really hoping I’d be able to do this *inside*.” Spike laid his head on the cool floor. “This is embarrassing.”

“Yes, I imagine it looks rather peculiar from the outside,” Rarity said.

“Rub it in,” Spike huffed. Smoke rose in a little puff from his nostrils.

When it cleared, a brown unicorn stallion with a fedora perched rakishly on his streaked black mane and horn was smiling at him glossily. “Heeeey!” he said in a rich, oily sort of voice. “You must be the big guy I’ve heard so much about! Name’s Scoop. Freelance reporter, and winner of the Ponitzer Prize two years running. Put it there!”

He held out a hoof. Spike took it awkwardly in his claw and shook very, very carefully.

“Hi, I’m Spike,” he mumbled.

“Who doesn’t know that, Spike, you’re the next big thing, kid!” Scoop said in a jolly, cheesy manner. “So let’s get ourselves comfy here, and we can get this show on the road, huh?”

Twilight and Rarity shared an alarmed look, before leaning closer to Spike. “Just keep calm,” Rarity said in his ear. “I’ve had to do some interviews for *Clotheshorse* before, and the most important thing is not to lose your poise.”

“Rarity,” Spike muttered as Scoop pulled a notepad and a pencil from a saddlebag and settled himself down to begin writing, “I don’t *have* any poise!”

“Yes, that is rather a problem,” she said worriedly.

“Just be yourself and answer what you can,” said Twilight.

“I’m doomed,” Spike said gloomily.

“So, Spikey – can I call ya Spikey? – let’s start with some basics, hey?” Scoop grinned a smarmy, shiny grin. Spike smiled weakly back. “You’ve been here how long?”

“Most of my life,” Spike answered, his voice shaking a little. The pencil began scribbling frantically. “Uh, Twilight and I moved from... Canterlot... when I was...”

“He was a baby then,” interjected Twilight.

“He was about so tall and very sweet,” Rarity said indulgently, holding her hoof up to show his infant height.

“Nice, nice,” Scoop muttered, horn flaring and pencil wobbling furiously. “Ticking all the demographic targets, love it, love it... and so you’ve never lived anywhere but Equestria? Never with other dragons, f’rinstance?”

“No,” Spike said. “I’ve always lived with ponies.”

“What do you say to those parents who are worried that you’re going to start behaving like a true dragon and begin eating foals?” asked Scoop conversationally, as though he hadn’t just caved in Spike’s chest with a metaphorical icepick. The words ‘*true dragon*’ rang in his ears like a struck bell.

“What...!”

“Spike would never do such a thing!” declared Rarity.

“I wouldn’t! Who said this? What parents?” Spike gasped. “I’ve never eaten pony in my life! Twilight is my *sister*! I’ve barely ever eaten *meat*!”

“A vegetarian dragon!” Scoop exclaimed, his horn flaring and the pencil skittering across the page. “This is gold, baby, gold! How about how big you plan to get? You see any problems trying to fit into Equestrian society?”

Spike was still gasping. “*Plan to get?*”

Scoop shrugged. "Plan, grow, whatever."

"I don't have much choice!"

"He has good friends and a loving sister who will do anything to help him adjust," said Twilight firmly.

"Right, right." Scoop sounded a little disappointed in that answer.

"I can see a *lot* of problems trying to fit in," Spike muttered.

The pencil flicked to attention. "Oh yeah?"

Spike gave Twilight and Rarity a panicked look. They made encouraging gestures at him.

"Well, if you haven't kind of noticed, I don't even fit in the door," Spike said hesitantly. "It's going to be a lot of work, and I'm going to have to find a lot of ways to compromise. It'll be worth it in the end though... I get to stay here, in my home, with my friends, in my territory..."

"Ooooh, *there's* a loaded word, kiddo, good one, nice hook," Scoop said, his eyes alight with enthusiasm. "So on that note, Spikey, what about any savage dragon instincts you're repressing? Think they'll come out in a blaze of big fiery death?"

Spike regarded the reporter incredulously. "Are you crazy?"

"It's a fair question." He shrugged. "So? How dragony are you?"

"Well... apart from the *obvious*," he snapped, "I don't actually know anything about being a dragon at all. How am I supposed to know what's dragon and what's just me?"

"Hmm." Scoop nodded intently. "So you're saying you don't actually *know* if you're about to turn all flame-monster-of-doom?"

"I'm saying," Spike grated, "I will never hurt anypony, ever. I don't eat them, I don't hunt them, and I'm kinda fond of a few of them."

"Of course, the 'sister', right?" Scoop turned to Twilight. "That's you, huh?"

"Twilight Sparkle, Doctor of Magic," she said in an icy voice.

“Right, the Princess’s little protégée, hm.” He hummed, tapping the pencil against the notepad. “How do you reply to those ponies who say that keeping a dragon is a direct violation of Equestrian health standards and a threat to our way of life?”

“I say they should come and meet Spike,” she said, evenly and acidly.

“How about the allegations that allowing you to keep the dragon is a blatant sign of Princess Celestia’s growing instability?”

“I repeat, if the ponies who are saying this come and meet Spike, they will see that he is not dangerous. Princess Celestia knows that.”

“There are some who consider that keeping a dragon in a pony settlement is cruel to both dragons and ponies alike,” Scoop said, his eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, it’s so much better to be dumped beyond Equestria where I know nothing and nopony at all,” Spike said sarcastically. “Or better yet, into one of the great Forests of Equestria where the resident dragons will barbecue me alive for trespassing.”

“Besides, I don’t *keep him* like he’s some sort of pet,” Twilight said, her expression stony. “He’s his own dragon, he keeps himself most of the time.”

“You hatched him, right? As part of the entrance examination to the School for Gifted Unicorns?”

“That’s right.”

“The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons considers that entrance exam a violation of draconic rights, and that taking eggs from their parents for a test of magic is cruel and barbaric. What answer can you give them?”

Spike blinked. “There’s a *society*?”

Twilight set her jaw. “I would say that I had no choice in the matter. I was a foal myself, too young to consider any ethical quandaries. But even if I could go back in time, I wouldn’t change hatching and raising Spike for the whole of Equestria.”

“A *society*?”

“And Spikey, what do you think your real parents would think of your life amongst ponies?”

He looked helplessly at the reporter. “I haven’t ever really thought about it – a *society*? You’re *kidding*?”

“Twilight, you had to take on the nurturing role to a creature that will outweigh you a hundred times over? How do you manage to be his authority figure?”

“Creature?” Spike protested.

“He was smaller than me until a few years ago,” she answered in a controlled voice. “Besides, Spike has enough respect for me to listen to what I say. *Mostly*,” she added for Spike’s own benefit. He gave her a sheepish look.

“What about the accusation that your relationship with the dragon is...” Scoop paused delicately, “unhealthy?”

“WHAT?” Spike roared.

“Spike, calm *down*,” Twilight hissed. He panted in fury, smoke billowing in gusts from his mouth, before getting himself under control. Twilight turned back to the stunned reporter and fixed him with a furious look. “Spike is my little *brother*, and I love him,” she spat. “I would never hurt him!”

“Twilight is *my* big sister,” Spike snarled. “And I love her!” The slimy insinuation made him see red. “I would *die* before I hurt her!”

Scoop swallowed hard. “Uh. Sorry.”

Spike gritted his fangs and tried to calm his anger as the shaken reporter levitated his notepad again. The pencil wobbled nervously on the page.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Spike managed stiffly.

“You got quite a... set of lungs there, Spikey old pal,” Scoop said, his voice faint. The fedora teetered as the reporter trembled.

Spike suddenly felt ashamed of himself. Here he was frightening a pony when he’d *sworn* he’d never do such a thing if he could help it. “I really didn’t mean to,” he said more sincerely. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, it’s...” Scoop took a big, shaky breath and grinned. The grin was a lot less smarmy. “Shall we just move on?” he suggested.

“Excellent idea,” drawled Rarity.

“Okay, uh... back to you... Spikey old pal,” he said, and cleared his throat. “Do you... ahem... plan to settle in Ponyville permanently?”

“Yes,” Spike answered promptly.

“And by permanently, do you mean *really* permanently? See, what I’m getting at is that dragons live...” Scoop began.

“Look, I know what you’re going to say,” Spike interrupted. “But Ponyville is home, and the ponies here are my *family*. Even when they d...” He broke off, and looked at the floor, blinking hard. There was a silence.

“Spike,” Twilight breathed, horror-filled.

“Well,” he rasped, and then shook himself. “Even when... then. It’s still going to be home. And they’ll have families too, and so their families will be mine. I’ll look after them. I’ll always look after them.”

“Do you have any long-term plans for Ponyville?” Scoop asked in a more normal tone of voice.

“Well, I’m going to build a house, and I’m going to protect the town, and I’ll, you know, just help out.” Spike took a deep breath and then looked directly at Twilight and Rarity, trying to convey his absolute sincerity through his eyes. “I’ll be here to help out for a long, long time.”

The two unicorns gazed at him, dumbstruck. Twilight had tears in her eyes.

“Help out how?”

“Well, my friend Pinkie Pie had heaps of ideas,” Spike said. “I’ve already started. I moved a rock that was blocking the old stream to the lake the other day.”

“What else do you plan on doing?” Scoop leaned forward.

“At the moment I’m learning a lot of stuff,” he said with a little sigh. “It’s hard work. But I’m hoping to give skyrides to unicorns and earth ponies once I learn to fly, and when I’ve gotten better at handling my fire I’ll be able to help with heaps of things, like heating water and Winter Wrap Up. Plus I’ll be able to cook again!”

“You like to cook?” Scoop asked, taken aback.

“He makes the best dandelion and wild rocket quiche you have *ever* tasted,” said Twilight. Her eyes had not left Spike, and understanding and sorrow glimmered in their purple depths.

“Seriously?” Scoop pulled a face. “Dragons who cook, who knew.”

“We did,” Rarity pointed out a little smugly.

Scoop flicked through his notepad, frowning. “I think we’re just about done,” he said, more than a smidgeon of relief in his voice. “Any closing remarks?”

“Yes,” Rarity said with aspersions. “Drop the smarmy act, it’s *terribly* gauche and annoying.”

“I think he’s asking Spike,” Twilight murmured, still gazing at him.

He gave her a small, sad smile before turning back to Scoop. “Look, I know that my staying here is going to freak a lot of ponies out at first,” he said. “But I’m not like all the stories, I promise. I’m working really hard to make sure I can’t hurt anypony, even by accident. And it’s scary, I know, to meet somepony so much bigger and stronger than you – believe me I know! But I’m just Spike on the inside, and I’m not really that different from Twilight or Rarity or you. I’m just a kid still, a kid who loves his friends and family and home.”

“Nice,” Scoop said appreciatively. “Very nice. That’s the best quote yet.”

“I just hope that everypony gets used to the idea eventually.” Spike sighed again and lowered his head onto his paws. Twilight immediately laid her cheek against his forehead.

The reporter’s horn glowed and the notepad and pencil zipped back into the saddle-bag. “I think that’s a wrap,” he said, exhaling. “Sorry for...”

“The crass insinuations? The horribly intrusive questions?” Rarity bit.

“It’s my job to ask ‘em, lady. I gotta,” he said apologetically. “If I don’t, everypony else will. For what it’s worth, I hope this works out for you, Spikey.”

“Thanks,” Spike said grudgingly, and he pulled himself out of the doorway so the reporter could exit. Scoop doffed his fedora as he left, and began trotting up the overcast street.

Twilight and Rarity joined Spike on the Town Hall steps. “Well, that was horrible,” he said.

“Well, it’s all over now,” Rarity said.

“Thank Celestia,” Twilight added.

“I’d better get back to the shop, dears,” Rarity said in a subdued voice. “Sweetie will be home from school any minute.”

“Rarity? Thanks,” Spike said quietly.

“Any time,” she said with a small, tight smile. Spike watched her go, her cape sparkling against the grey, wet street.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Twilight asked softly.

Spike immediately knew what she meant, and shook his head. “No. I’m not going to mourn for the future,” he said, though his heart twisted inside him. “I’m *not*.”

“That’s a very deep insight,” she said, leaning against his foreleg.

“Princess Luna came to see me,” he confessed. “She helped with all the stuff Razorfang said to me. She came up with that one – I’m not *that* clever.”

“Don’t put yourself down like that,” Twilight scolded him, and pressed her head against his foreleg tenderly.

He snaked his head down to nuzzle her mane. “Don’t be sad for me, Twilight.”

She nosed him softly, her eyes squeezing shut. “Don’t forget me, will you?” she whispered.

“That’s crazy talk.” He smiled, his throat tight and his heart full. “Like I could ever forget you.”

• • •

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I'm so sorry. You're right when you say I should have told you, and you're right when you described all the reasons. I'm ashamed that I didn't think to write to you straight away, and I should have known that you'd want to know, not only for Ponyville's sake but for mine as well.*

*The reason I didn't tell you, well, I hadn't really thought about why until I received your letter. Then I started thinking about it, and I came up with two reasons. I don't know if they're any good, and they're sure not an excuse.*

*The first one is that I don't want anypony to get hurt because of my mess. I'd never forgive myself, ever, especially if it were somepony I care for. That does include you and your sister, Princess. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings.*

*The second one is hard to explain. I spoke to the dragon of the Everfree Forest, and he started telling me about territory. I realised I've been territorial my whole life without really knowing it, and I think this was related. I sort of consider the library mine, you see, and that's starting to change to include all of Ponyville. A little voice inside me keeps screaming that I should be the one to protect it and no pony else. It sounds stupid when I write it down, but it's true.*

*Like I said, I don't know if these make any real difference. I just thought I owed you an explanation. I really am so sorry.*

*So you're aware, I've done an interview that's apparently going out in a whole bunch of newspapers around Equestria. It was the Mayor's idea. There's a group of ponies from outside Ponyville who are seriously anti-dragon, and she received a report that they were becoming stronger and more organised. I'm hoping this article might deter some of them, but mostly I think it paints a big fat target on my big purple back.*

*Your friend,  
Spike*

*P.S. I've asked Twilight to read this letter so she also knows my reasons. I haven't done a very good job of being open with my friends lately. I promise I'll work on it.*

*P.P.S. You or your sister wouldn't have enough magic to affect a fully-grown dragon, would you? I know you said you didn't have the authority to step over draconic tradition, but maybe just this once? Please?*

*P.P.P.S. Tell your sister hi.*

Spike threw himself into the business of carving and cutting basalt as though he'd received a mining cutie mark. Pinkie Pie, bubblegum-pink hard-hat in place, oversaw the entire operation. It had never been more apparent that she had been raised on a rock-farm – crazy rock-pile-in-party-hat moments excepted. She ruled the dig with an iron hoof, albeit one that bounced about occasionally.

“Now the vertical incisions,” she hollered over the sound of scraping rock. Spike nodded, huffing, and began the laborious process of tracing his claw over the cliff-face. Applejack leaned herself against the wall, the spirit level braced between herself and the rock. A shallow groove quickly deepened under his talons.

“Okay, block's ready!” Pinkie said brightly. “Carefully now, or the whole thing shatters! Twilight on safety standby!”

Spike shook rock-dust from his claws, nodded to Applejack to clear the way, and then brought his whole weight to bear on the prepared cube. The crack and grind of tearing rock sang out through the gorge once more as he ripped the stone from the cliff, and it tumbled ponderously free. He sank back to his feet, panting and dripping with sweat.

“That's seventeen!” Pinkie said, looking down at the checklist under her feet.

“Only seventeen!” Spike groaned.

“We've only just started.” Pinkie shrugged. “Dashie, can you get on clean-up?”

Rainbow Dash cracked open an eye from where she lazed on her ubiquitous puffy white cloud, before leaping up and zipping about their feet with nonchalant ease. The stone dust that had collected was whirled into a gritty grey tornado, before settling down on the scrubby sandy banks of the gorge's river.

“Done,” Dash said dismissively, already settled back on her cloud.

Spike sighed enviously. Flying still eluded him, even with Razorfang's advice.

Pinkie squinted at her checklist again, before looking up at the afternoon sun. “We should probably stop for the day,” she mused.

“But we've only got seventeen!” Spike protested.

“Spike,” Rarity said firmly, her careful coiffure sprinkled with rock dust. “We’ve been at this since early morning, and some of us could do with a rest. The cliff will still be here tomorrow.”

“Besides, you still have to lug all seventeen back to the field,” Twilight pointed out, “and you’ll be way too tired to even move if we keep this up.”

“*And* we skipped lunch,” added Applejack. “I’m plumb *starvin’*.”

“Good work, everypony!” Pinkie beamed at them all. “We’ll get back to the old grind in a couple of days, whatcha say?”

Everypony except Spike groaned. He nodded eagerly.

His cart sat in the town-side edge of the gorge, awaiting the basalt blocks. It was an old train cart, once used for hauling lumber. With the wheels modified and strong chains attached, it made a more than serviceable wagon for the basalt blocks.

He ducked his head under the last block and carefully allowed it to roll to the hollow between his shoulder-blades where his wings met his back. Tom had spent an inordinate amount of time in the last few days resting there between lessons, and he was now quite proficient at balancing rocks. Straightening his legs slowly, he walked over to his cart and allowed the huge cube to slide in amongst its sixteen fellows.

Twilight gave him a speculative look. “You’re definitely stronger, Spike.”

He looked up, taken aback. “I... I suppose. Wasn’t that the whole idea?”

“That rock’s twice as big as Tom, and you moved it easily.” Pinkie smiled.

“Sides, sugarcube, you’re lookin’ a mighty sight healthier than y’ were too.” Applejack nodded approvingly.

“I do?”

“You’re a better colour,” said Twilight, eyeing him with a critical expression.

Spike looked down at his dust-covered feet. “You must have real good eyesight to see under all this.”

“Oh, learn to accept a compliment,” Dash snorted.

“You look... more streamlined,” Rarity said thoughtfully.

Spike tried to restrain the joyous preen, and couldn't. He threw out his chest proudly.

“Thanks, Rarity!”

“Easy, Romeo,” Twilight murmured, her horn flaring. The chains attached to his cart flew into the air and settled around his neck and shoulders.

“She thinks I'm *streamlined*,” Spike whispered giddily.

“I heard,” she said, amused. “Get lugging, big guy. Fluttershy should be finished at the Animal Shelter by now, and you can go get started on this afternoon's lesson.”

Though the cart was weighted with seventeen huge blocks of stone, various tools and five ponies, Spike practically pranced his way back to Ponyville. *She thinks I'm streamlined!* kept bouncing through his head. Twilight and Pinkie Pie giggled at him most of the way, and Rarity kept indulgently smiling at his exuberance. Dash and Applejack were having some sort of guessing competition in the back of the cart.

Their cheerful progress was halted by Fluttershy racing to meet them, a fluttering paper in her mouth. “Mmmph!” she said urgently, her usually timid eyes wide and wild.

“Er, wanna try that again without the interference?” Rainbow Dash suggested.

Fluttershy spat the paper to the ground, her wings fluttering anxiously. “Oh, I wouldn't go into town, I really wouldn't!” she gasped.

“What's happened?” Twilight half-stood.

But Rarity had glanced at the paper Fluttershy had dropped. “I think I can guess,” she said.

Spike carefully smoothed out the tiny thing, and Twilight levitated and enlarged it. His own face, surrounded by fuzzy scarf, smiled shyly back at them.

“‘The Biggest Kid of All: Spike, the Ponyville Dragon, by Scoop Headlines’,” read Pinkie Pie.

Spike began to read along, wincing at the pictures – particularly his baby photos.

## THE BIGGEST KID OF ALL

### Spike, the Ponyville Dragon

by Scoop Headlines (Photography by Photo Finish)

*Exclusive Interview Page 4!*

(Scarf made by Carousel Boutique)

He's not even an adolescent yet, and he can't fit through the door. His 'big' sister is three times smaller than him. He's the most efficient predator in Equestria, and he doesn't eat meat. He's lived his whole life amongst ponies and not his own kind, and he's desperate to keep it that way. But by far the strongest impression one takes away from meeting Spike, Ponyville's resident dragon, is one of love and hope.

Hatched in Canterlot by Twilight Sparkle (DMag, DThau Res, BMag (Hons), DipThau, BFriend), Princess Celestia's famous protégée and the Element of Magic, Spike began life as no more than a test to be passed. His egg was procured by the research division of the Canterlot School for Gifted Unicorns to be hatched by aspiring candidates during the entrance examination. This controversial practice has since fallen into disuse. To this reporter's knowledge, Spike is the only dragon hatched from these 'examination eggs' that has remained in Equestria. The last known was Huffy, dragon companion of Trixie, the well-known touring magician. Huffy, a female purple and white dragonet, left her pony friend due to 'creative differences' whilst Huffy was still an infant. She has not been sighted in over a decade.

Sparkle, however, proved to be exactly what the doctor ordered for Spike. A foal herself when he hatched, she spent no time on ethical or moral crusades regarding her new 'little brother's' origins, but diligently set herself to seeing to his care and needs. Spike has had an education this reporter rather envies, and all the love that is essential to any infant. As a result, the affection between the unlikely pair is overwhelmingly apparent, though they have more than their fair share of the banter and bickering that any sibling knows too well.

For many years, he referred to himself as her 'number one assistant', fulfilling the role of a helpmeet and library aide. Small, soft-clawed, unwinged and unthreatening, Spike was a regular fixture in the Canterlot library, and a permanent shadow at Doctor Sparkle's side. Then the pair moved to Ponyville following the Nightmare Moon crisis, and Spike's life became complete.

As a sometime offsider of the famous Elements of Harmony, it was inevitable that Spike would find himself drawn into their lives and adventures from time to time, winning

himself some small acclaim in the process. As he was still an infant and less than half the size of any pony, no great weight was placed on his draconic nature. He was simply one of a group of good friends, living together in a place they all loved. It wasn't until his first great growth spurt that problems really began to arise for the young dragon.

According to close sources, Spike virtually disappeared at this point, to the extent that many new foals didn't even know that a dragon lived in Ponyville. It was later revealed that he had been hiding within the library for months at a stretch, ashamed of how much and how quickly he had grown. Never a terribly graceful type, he had become disastrously clumsy and cumbersome. Only when he finally outgrew the library was he forced to venture out into the streets of Ponyville once more. His reappearance has been greeted with mixed reactions, to say the very least.

At three times the height of a pony at the shoulder, and (estimably) close to twenty times the weight, Spike is now an intimidating sight. His claws, teeth and wings have grown in, and although his muzzle is not the length of an adult dragon's, neither is it the snub of an infant's. His neck and tail are beginning to take on that characteristic sinuous quality, extending his length even further, and one hesitates to guess what his full wingspan is.

It is difficult to remember, in the face of this, that Spike is still a child. An unusual, brave and intelligent child, perhaps, but still a child. He is at the stage when our colts and fillies are looking forward to their cutie marks and moaning about school. Spike does not have this luxury. He spends his time trying to control his new size and strength in a world destined to become ever more diminutive to him.

He refers to Ponyville as 'territory', but hastens to clarify that he does not consider it as a dragon normally considers territory. Ponyville is not his hunting ground, nor is it ever likely to be so. Spike has never and will never eat pony (his reaction was rather vehement on this point), and is in fact a talented vegetarian cook. According to Doctor Sparkle, he makes a mean dandelion and wild rocket quiche.

Territory, to Spike, seems to mean something a little different. He wants to keep Ponyville safe, and be its living history-keeper. He plans to stay there for his whole natural life, so he says (See exclusive interview, Page 4), and as he puts it, 'just help out'. He has already unblocked the Horsefall Stream, and wants to give earthbound ponies a taste of the clouds by giving them skyrides. He is building a house behind his beloved sister's library. He wants to stay with his friends. He hopes to be accepted.

With growing anti-dragon discontent surrounding Ponyville, and the inevitable interest of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons, it is to be hoped that

everypony realises at least one thing – Spike is himself, an individual, and not a ball to be kicked around some ideological field. In his own words, “I’m just Spike on the inside, and I’m not really that different from... you. I’m just a kid still, a kid who loves his friends and family and home.”

*Turn to our exclusive interview on Page 4 for more!*

“Well, that turned out much more favourable than I expected,” Rarity said in surprise.

“Did they have to use that photo?” Spike cringed, glancing over the photo of his newly-hatched self stuffing his tail into his mouth. “I thought I burned all of those!”

“Mum and Dad kept a few for me,” Twilight smiled. “And I’m sure they took a few at the School for Gifted Unicorns.”

“You’re soooo cute,” Fluttershy crooned at the paper. “Widdle baby waby Spikey-wikey.”

He winced. “Must you?”

“Well, you were cute.” Twilight shrugged.

“Cute,” confirmed Pinkie.

“Sorry, Spike, you were cute,” sniggered Dash.

“Oh, shut up,” he grouched.

“So what’s happening in town?” asked Applejack.

“Oh, it’s simply awful,” Fluttershy said. “There are ponies everywhere holding placards and the Mayor has a megaphone and there’s shouting and the policeponies have been called...”

“The policeponies!” echoed Spike, Twilight and Pinkie.

“Yes, and there are slogans and everything.” Fluttershy wrung her hooves. “I couldn’t stay and wait. When the reporters saw me and remembered that I was one of the Elements of Harmony, they started pelting questions at me and chasing me – oh, it was worse than modelling!”

“Oh, Fluttershy!” Rarity swooped down upon her friend and hugged her tightly. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Fluttershy said in a small voice, “but oh, Spike, you mustn’t go into town! They’ll just *swarm* you, all these protestors and Dragon Society-ponies and reporters... they’re all here for you!”

Spike looked over his shoulder helplessly at Twilight. “What do we do?” he asked.

“I’m glad you said *we* this time,” she said warmly, before her brow creased in thought.

“Big Macintosh told Apple Bloom who told me that I shouldn’t hide any more,” Spike said worriedly.

“Pardon?”

“I *think* I followed that,” Applejack said.

“I agree!” Rarity said in a ringing voice. “You belong here, Spike!”

“True, but getting mobbed wasn’t on the wish-list,” he said pointedly.

“SO? What can they do?”

“Huh?” Six pairs of eyes swung to Pinkie Pie. She snorted.

“You’re a *dragon*, Spike,” she said.

“I... may have noticed that a time or two,” he said, eyebrow rising. “Where are you going with this, Pinkie?”

“So what can they do?” She grinned. “Are they gonna attack you? Like, *reeeeally*? I don’t think so. Attack a *dragon*? Even *annoy* one? Like, duh!”

Spike blinked, before turning away. “I... don’t want to be like that,” he mumbled. “I don’t want to frighten them...”

“So don’t.” She shrugged.

“She has a point,” Twilight said.

“Twilight!” he said in anguish. “They’ll all be yelling at me! And there’ll be photographers and reporters and everything!”

“Ignore ‘em,” was Rainbow Dash’s flippant response. “Pinkie Pie’s right. We’ll mind our own business and just get on with it.”

“Besides, Spike,” Twilight said, “if they do take pictures, what will they see?”

He hesitated.

“Spike carting six ponies,” offered Fluttershy.

“Seven friends and a cart,” Pinkie supplied.

“Oh,” said Spike faintly.

“Giddyup, you,” Twilight said, and he scowled. She smiled sunnily. “Oh, just give me that one,” she teased.

“You’re in trouble,” he sniffed and began to pull his cart again. Rarity and Fluttershy hauled themselves back in as the wheels creaked into motion once more. Butterflies began to dance madly in his stomach as he neared the outskirts of the town.

“Twilight,” he hissed.

“Thought I was in trouble?” she said lightly.

“You *are* trouble,” he growled. “But seriously, what do I do if they ask me stuff?”

“Trust your own judgement, Spike,” she said. “Ignore the stupid questions. Answer the ones you like. We’ll only be passing through the square briefly, so be patient.”

“I’m not good at patient,” he sighed.

“Says the dragon who disappeared, and I quote, ‘for months at a stretch’.”

“That’s different,” he protested.

“Quit yer whinin’, Spike,” Applejack said, but gently. “You’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Hey, how come she can promise and I can’t?” Dash said indignantly.

A pained chuckle escaped him despite his growing unease, and so it was that the first camera flashes caught him smiling. “Ow!”

“Ooooh, that brings back awful memories,” whimpered Fluttershy.

“There, there, dear,” Rarity soothed her.

“Spike! Spike!” A cacophony of shouts greeted him along with the blinding flashbulbs, and he paused momentarily in their onslaught before pushing on with renewed determination. Microphones were shoved close to his head, and he lifted his chin higher so that they couldn’t reach. The pegasi amongst them found that no difficulty, and simply took to the air.

“Spike, how do you feel about the protests outside Ponyville Town Hall?”

“Spike, *Mare’s Monthly* is dying for your recipe for Dandelion and Wild Rocket Quiche!”

Spike gritted his fangs and pressed on through the mob. He could feel reassuring hooves against his flank, and knew that his friends were offering silent support.

“Spike, is it true that you’ve never been taught your own rich customs and heritage?”

“Spike, my paper is offering twenty thousand bits for an exclusive lifestyle interview!”

“Spike, my station is offering *fifty* thousand for a live interview with Big Bouffant!”

“Spike, the RSPCD is offering you sanctuary, do you intend to accept?”

“Spike, do you feel that inciting ponies to protest against you is the way to ensure you stay in Equestria?”

“Spike, is it true you’re donating your shed skins to fashion designer Rarity of Carousel Boutique?”

“Spike, *The Evening Show with Glasses Grimsby* will offer you one hundred thou for you to do a segment...!”

Spike closed his eyes and pushed through, through, through. With every careful step he could feel the press of ponies against his forelegs growing fiercer.

“Twilight...” He turned his head back to her, his eyes wild, “I think we’re closed in... I can’t walk much further. There’s too many, I’ll hurt somepony.”

“I can see that,” she said worriedly. “Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea...”

“Keep goin’,” said Dash with grim determination. “I’ll clear ‘em.”

She took to the sky, wings whirring, and Spike squashed his envy flat. Celestia knew how much he’d like to be able to fly away right at that moment.

He was distracted from Rainbow Dash’s upcoming acrobatics by a new roar of voices. They had just entered the main square, and the protesters had spotted him.

“Oh. My. Word,” breathed Rarity in horror.

There were three distinct groups. One group was holding placards reading, ‘DRAGONS? NOT IN MY BACKYARD!’ and ‘EQUESTRIA FOR PONIES!’ amongst other similarly bigoted sayings. A familiar blue-green and peach unicorn glowered at him from amongst them, a banner over her head declaring ‘PARENTS FOR A PEACEFUL EQUESTRIA!’

The second and least numerous group held placards reading ‘RSPCD: FREE THE PONYVILLE ONE!’ and ‘SAVE SPIKE!’ He caught his breath in incredulity.

“That’s the society?” he asked.

“That’s gotta be them,” Applejack replied hoarsely. “You need freein’, Spike?”

“At the moment, freedom from crowds’d be favourite,” he muttered.

The last group was full of familiar faces, and it was with a flush of gratitude that Spike saw Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Big Macintosh, Derpy Hooves, Cheerilee, Pip, Granny Smith, Zecora, several of Dash’s Wonderbolt friends and even tiny little Sweet-Pea gathered underneath a sign with Apple Bloom’s artistic hoofprints all over it that proudly announced, ‘PONYVILLE FOR SPIKE’.

“Oh,” he said softly, a little catch in his throat. Apple Bloom waved at him frantically, and soon the whole group of his extended friends were waving and cheering him on, drowning out the hollered slogans of the ‘Parents’ and the RSPCD.

“Go on, then,” Twilight urged him, and he began to press carefully through the crowds once more.

Right at that moment, the worst possible thing happened.

A familiar feeling began to rumble in his stomach, and fluid began to slosh into his flame-ducts. “Oh no, not now!” he gasped.

“Spike?” Twilight said, alarmed.

“You’re rumblin’, sugarcube...”

“Message...!” Spike managed, before clamping his jaws shut. Perhaps the message would just burn up in his mouth?

From the inevitability of the feeling overtaking him, he didn’t think so.

“Fluttershy!” Twilight barked, and the pegasus was abruptly fluttering at Spike’s ear, her voice low and urgent.

“You can’t stop it?”

He shook his head.

“Then we have to control it,” she said. The surrounding reporters and photographers seemed to realise that something was wrong, and the press of ponies began to back away, their eyes wide.

Spike breathed through his nose shallowly, trying to control his panic. What if he burned somepony! There were ponies *everywhere*! It would be a riot! He tried to concentrate on Fluttershy’s voice, but his rising panic was commanding all his attention.

“You have to use your softest flame,” she was saying, “the thin wavering one, the one that happens when you whistle. Spike, you have to use that flame. Spike, are you listening?”

Spike could feel the press of flammable gas in his chest and throat, and tears began to swim in his eyes from holding it back. He whined fearfully through his nose.

“Spike. You *will* listen to me. *Right. Now!*”

His eyes snapped to attention.

“Your softest flame,” Fluttershy snapped. “Aim high.”

Obediently, he let a trickle of the gas escape, his neck tilted skywards. A thin, curling green flame emerged, winking into a letter at the very tip.

“Now stop,” Fluttershy commanded as the scroll tumbled softly to the ground. “Um, if you would,” she finished in a tone far more reminiscent of her usual one.

There was a bemused silence, and then a reporter asked, “It happens a lot where you’re concerned then, when fire turns into scrolls?”

“Spike can send messages,” Twilight said shortly. “His flame can be used as a conduit. It has to do with being hatched by magic.”

“Slavery!” hollered one of the RSPCD ponies, his ‘DIGNITY FOR DRAGONS’ shirt askew.

“Uh, no,” Spike said. “I’m okay with it really...”

“Oh, sure looked like it,” sneered the activist pony. Then he looked taken aback at himself for sneering at a *dragon*.

“It’s just that there’s an awful lot of ponies here today,” Spike continued, “and I don’t have the best handle on my fire just yet. Fluttershy’s helping me.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back bashfully.

Big Macintosh’s dreamy “eeyup” could be heard all over the square.

“You could have *killed* somepony!” screeched the greenish-blue unicorn amongst the ‘Parents’ group. “We won’t stand for it! The PFAPE will see you and your beastly kind gone from all Equestria!”

Thinking of Razorfang, Spike snorted, “Yeah, good luck. We’re not all kids.”

At that moment with an almighty BOOM, Rainbow Dash broke the sound barrier. The Sonic Rainboom spread across the sky in colourful concentric circles. Startled, the assembled ponies shrieked and flinched, and Spike took advantage of their distraction to haul his heavy load across to the Ponyville crowd, carefully nudging the confused hordes out of his way with gentle forepaws.

“Nicely done.” Macintosh nodded to him approvingly.

Spike beamed at them. “You guys... I...”

“Don’t say anythin’,” Apple Bloom said briskly, holding Sweet-Pea’s hoof. “We wanted to.”

“But...”

“Now you jest hushit, you young whippersnapper!” Granny Smith said in her old cracked voice, shaking her stick at a point somewhere beyond his ear. “If somepony’s goin’ to go tryin’ to take our dragon away, they’re goin’ to have words with me, y’ hear? An’ if I want t’ go protestin’, well there ain’t nopony old enough to tell me otherwise! You brought back our ol’ stream where mah Toffee proposed hitchin’ to me. Yer good to mah kin, mah farm an’ mah village. Yer our dragon, an’ I’ll whip the tarnation outta anypony who says otherwise!”

Spike reared back at the old pony’s vehemence. Apple Bloom and Macintosh shared a glance, before grinning at his discomfiture.

“Granny’s always like that,” Applejack said, helping the others climb down from the cart.

“She’s... very firm about things, isn’t she?” Spike faltered.

Applejack only chuckled.

Sweet-Pea, pink and tiny, nervously crept out from behind Apple Bloom’s shadow. “Smooove?” the tiny foal squeaked, and Spike slowly ducked his head to allow the filly to stroke the fins either side of his head.

“Very smooth.” Apple Bloom nudged him.

“No it wasn’t,” he sighed, smoke rising. He could hear the pop and clack of cameras working overtime as the little filly patted his head, and wondered sourly if that was a Lifestyle or a News column sorted. “That was almost a disaster.”

“Thank the stars for Fluttershy, then,” Scootaloo remarked.

“I hear that,” he replied.

“So how was that...?” panted Rainbow Dash, coming to a halt. Rainbow trails were beginning to fade behind her.

“Perfect,” Twilight assured her. “We managed to get to where we’re surrounded by friendly faces, at least.”

“Well, I dunno if I got another Rainboom in me to get us outta the square,” Rainbow Dash said in exasperation.

“It was awesome!” Pinkie enthused, and Spike nodded, careful not to jostle Sweet-Pea.

“Thanks, Dash!”

“EVERYPONY, NOW LISTEN UP!” The Mayor was standing on the Town Hall steps, her mane dishevelled and a megaphone held to her mouth. “I HAVE HAD QUITE ENOUGH OF THIS! IF YOU WANT TO PROTEST PEACEFULLY, FINE, HAVE AT IT, KNOCK YOURSELF OUT AND WELCOME! BUT IF YOU ATTACK OR RESTRAIN OUR CITIZENS GOING ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS, THEN IT BECOMES A MATTER FOR THE POLICEPONIES, WHO I MIGHT ADD, ARE ON THEIR WAY!”

“She seems tense,” remarked Pinkie Pie.

Twilight giggled, and Spike snorted, and suddenly they were all laughing, the tension bleeding away all at once. “This is so crazy,” Spike chuckled, unable to stop.

“So it’s just another normal week in Ponyville, then?” sniggered Dash.

In all the excitement, none of them remembered the letter.

• • •

“AAAND STROKE!”

Spike pushed his wings down, shooting forwards faster than thought. He opened them again laboriously. The pressure was amazing.

“AAAND STROKE!”

Once more he swept them down, trying to arch his back as the great green dragon had told him. Unfurling his wings from the downstroke was immensely hard. He’d much rather cart rock around. Pressing his chest forward, he readied himself for the next burst of speed.

“AAAND STROKE!”

He brought them down again, and then remembered about bringing his hindquarters level. They felt as though they were beginning to sink. Unfortunately, this broke his concentration when it came to keeping the rest of him afloat, and the three of them – Spike, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy – began floundering in the river.

“Whoops!” he managed, before his head bobbed under briefly.

“Spike!” hollered Rainbow Dash. “What happened!”

“Lost it,” he garbled, mouth full of water. Steam rose in tendrils and he shook his head briskly, trying to unblock his ears. “Sorry, sorry!”

Fluttershy was paddling valiantly as she made her way back to him, her hoof hooking over his foreleg. “Ooof,” she said. “Well, that was going... quite well until... just then.”

“What did you try and change?” Rainbow Dash asked, also hauling her sodden self over to him and hooking a hoof over his shoulder.

“Tried to lift my tail,” he explained, steam billowing.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re already level. That’s why we decided to try this in water, right? So you could float?”

“Felt like I was sinking,” he muttered, and she sighed.

“Look, it doesn’t matter,” she said. “We’ll just try again, right?”

“Right,” Spike said, his face falling.

“Chin up, Spike,” said Fluttershy. “You’ll get this, I’m absolutely sure of it.”

“Yeah,” he said despondently, before carefully rolling in the water so the two pegasus ponies could climb aboard his shoulders once more.

“AAAND STROKE!” Rainbow Dash barked.

He brought his wings down yet again, shooting fast as an arrow across the surface of the gorge’s river, and steeled himself for the immense pressure of the upbeat.

Dash made him swim the length of the river using only his wings four times, and he was utterly exhausted by the time they finally let him go. ‘Flying’ in the water had been

Fluttershy's idea, and so she had been present for that lesson. He was to see her the next day for yet another fire lesson as well. Lessons and exhaustion were now something he was quite familiar with.

He bade the two ponies farewell, and then proceeded to a quiet pool he had found whilst still very small. He had always liked it, and to his delight it seemed the perfect size to him now rather than imposingly big or frustratingly small, as so many things were nowadays. He blew a thin stream of green fire over the top for a few moments, before clambering into the now-warmed water with a sigh. Bliss.

"What is the purpose of that?"

Spike yelped, and inhaled a huge amount of water. Orange eyes were glaring at him from the treeline.

"You enjoy scaring me out of my wits, don't you?" he accused.

"It affords me some small pleasure," acceded Razorfang with pleased cruelty. "And of course, it is so easy to do."

"I'm not in the Forest, I'm not even holding a flag, so why are you here?" Spike snapped, annoyed at being interrupted.

"Grown bold, haven't we hatchling?" Razorfang snarled, and Spike rolled his eyes.

"My name's Spike, you proved you can use it last time, so quit with the hatchling thing," he said crossly.

"My apologies. *Spike*," the great green dragon said with oily malevolence, and his name was spoken like the promise of death. "Now answer the question."

"It feels nice," Spike said, fed up with Razorfang's games. "At least it did, until you showed up. Now I'm tense again."

"Call yourself a dragon? You moan and complain..."

"...just like a mammal, blah, blah, blahdy *blah*." Spike closed his eyes and slid down further in the water. "If you're going to kill me now, make it quick. I'm too tired to make a fuss and my water's getting cold."

There was a silence.

“You are not afraid of me any more,” Razorfang said, and there was an odd note in his voice. It sounded almost... *approving*.

“Course I am,” Spike snorted. “But you think you’re the only thing I have to deal with? Go away, Razorfang. I hurt too much, and your advice stinks, and I can’t fly. You get to legally kill me soon enough, anyway. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to play with your food?”

“No.”

Spike cracked an eye open.

“Playing with food is an essential stage in the development of young dragons. It prolongs the exquisite moments between life and death, between surface and reality, between soul and meat.”

“Sounds stupid,” Spike yawned, eye closing once more. “Also, gross.”

There was another pause.

“But that is how it was explained to me,” Razorfang said in a low voice.

“Still gross,” Spike mumbled. Razorfang made an unidentifiable noise, and then his head emerged from the trees.

“So you still cannot fly.” Razorfang settled himself down at the water’s edge and peered down scornfully at the smaller dragon. “You have put into practice what I have told you?”

“I said before, your advice stinks,” Spike slurred. The water was sooo nice.

“What is your wingspan now, hatchling?”

Spike opened his eye again and glared at the mammoth beast.

Razorfang snorted fire through his nostrils in a show of barely-concealed impatience.

“Spike. Your wingspan?”

“I think...” Spike thought back to Macintosh’s lessons on distance. “Um... maybe a bit wider than I am long. But not by much. Not real sure. Keeps changing, keep growing.”

“They should be wide enough. Spread them.”

Spike snorted. “No chance. Also? *Also* gross.”

Razorfang looked at him perplexedly. Spike groaned, and rolled over in the water. A more alert part of him was wondering why he was doing this, but the rest of him just didn't care enough to protest. It was too much, he was too tired, and the world was too crazy. He spread his wings.

“You have enough span to support yourself in the air,” Razorfang pronounced after a moment's deliberation. “There is more bulk on you. You *have* been working, little one.”

“Not that little,” Spike mumbled, his wings collapsing back into the water. So. Good. “Don't wanna die.”

“And should you survive, what of your life amongst those silly short-lived coloured things? Have you thought about my words to you?”

Spike beamed up at the huge dragon, who seemed taken aback. “My ponies,” he said happily. “My ponies, not yours, not anydragon else's. *Mine*. I'm gonna look after 'em.”

“Ah,” Razorfang said with soft menace. “Now I see your territory.”

A fire ignited inside his mind. Spike launched himself to his feet with a sudden and shocking burst of strength, surprising even himself. “*Mine!*” he snarled. “You won't hurt them! *You won't hurt them!*”

Razorfang seemed braced for an attack, forelegs stiff with tension and neck curved in firing position. Although Spike longed to lunge at the gigantic dragon and tear his throat out, something stopped him. Purple eyes were watching from his childhood. He glowered fiercely at Razorfang instead, his body poised for action. The tableau held for some moments, the silence broken only by Spike's heaving breath.

Finally Razorfang seemed to realise something, and his frozen pose relaxed infinitesimally.

“Sit down, little one,” he grunted. “Lie back in your strange hot pool. There is a lesson here for you.”

Spike, his mind still on fire and his chest heaving, glared suspiciously at the other dragon. “What?” he said.

Razorfang leaned forward slowly, dangerously. “That is what it felt like when I caught you eating my jewels.”

Spike sat heavily in his warm water, the fire draining from his mind. He was abruptly angry with himself for almost losing control like that, and scowled fiercely at the other dragon.

Razorfang regarded him with distant puzzlement, like a bug who had learned a trick. “You should have attacked me,” he said bemusedly. “You should not have been able to stop yourself. No dragon can, not when true territory is threatened.”

“I’m a better dragon than you, then,” Spike retorted. “I don’t need to.”

It was something he’d heard Twilight say a million times. Not to retaliate. Be the better pony – or dragon, in his case. But the old pony saying seemed to strike a huge blow to Razorfang, who opened his gargantuan jaws in amazement and anger, great black smoke billowing everywhere. “You... better than *me!*” he roared. “You, who cannot even fly! You, who squat there in water and live amongst mammals and cannot play with your food!”

“At least I try new things,” Spike said with shaky defiance. The great dragon’s wrath was like witnessing a natural disaster.

“You barely even know what it means to be a dragon!” Razorfang snarled. “You still smell of eggshell, stupid little infant! You, a better dragon! There is no way upon this earth that you could ever be a better dragon!”

Spike lifted his chin bravely. “I’m not a bully,” he said, standing up once more. “And I don’t give up easily. Neither do I have some stupid set of awful rules to tell me what – or *who* I am!”

“You... you pathetic mammal hatching!” Razorfang bellowed in outrage.

Spike rolled his eyes. “Mammals don’t hatch.”

Razorfang blinked, and then to Spike’s huge astonishment, he burst into laughter. Great gusts of smoke billowed and furled about him as he laughed and laughed, roaring with mirth.

“Calm down, it wasn’t that funny,” Spike said tentatively. The older dragon seemed nearly frantic with hilarity.

Finally Razorfang settled somewhat, barrel-sized tears of laughter hissing to the ground. He sighed out the last of his laughter, and regarded Spike with amusement. “You have a point.”

“About mammals?” Spike asked, his eyebrow quirking.

Razorfang didn’t answer. Instead, the huge creature unfurled his wings. Each was easily twice the breadth of the whole length of Spike – from purple snout to tail-tip.

“Watch, little one,” he said, and the force from the downbeat almost sent Spike under the water once more.

“I don’t much like that name either,” Spike called after him, watching the great dragon climb with long, majestic strokes into the late afternoon sky.

• • •

Sleep was elusive that night. Spike was pestered by reporters for several hours, but he pointedly ignored them and their frankly horrible questions until they simply gave up and went away. A few photographers had hung around and snapped shots of him eating his dinner – apples, what else? Plus a couple of amethysts, courtesy of Rarity – bidding Twilight goodnight and settling down in his usual place in the library square. He closed his eyes firmly against the camera flashes and tried to will his tired body to sleep, sleep, *sleep*.

He had started to drift off when a small voice at his ear brought him back to wakefulness, and he started abruptly. “Unnh!” he blurted.

“Sorry,” said the pony sheepishly. He could see a vague outline, and from the voice could tell that it wasn’t a pony he was acquainted with. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but I’m trying to get some shut-eye here,” Spike said sharply. “It’s been a long day.”

“I get that. Again... sorry, I’ll just...” The pony fidgeted as though he were going to move away, but didn’t. Spike cocked his head.

“Is something wrong?”

A small beam of light fell across the stranger’s face, and Spike recognised the leader of the RSPCD with a small shock. “No, I’ll just... I’ll come back later, you’re tired...”

Spike sighed. Knowing he was likely to regret this, he folded his forepaws under his chest and jerked his head at the pony. "Come on, sit down then. You can lean against me, it gets cold out here at night."

"Seriously?" the pony squeaked, his eyes alight with a colthood dream. "Oh *wow*, that is... wow, thank you!" He scurried around to Spike's side and sat down beside him, before gingerly leaning against his side.

Spike snorted. "I'm not made of glass, you know."

"Oh, I... er," the pony stammered, but he did stop trembling and leaned against Spike's side with a little more confidence.

"So what's your name?" Spike asked, wondering whether he'd have to lead the whole awkward conversation.

"Just," the pony answered shyly. "And of course I know yours..."

Spike sighed. "Everypony in Equestria knows mine now, it seems. I *knew* that article was going to make trouble, but it was all already organised."

"Why did you do it, then?" Just wanted to know.

"Because I hoped otherwise," Spike said with a snort. "And the Mayor seemed so certain it was a way of getting the anti-dragon ponies off my case. Well, you saw how that worked. Are they all still camped in front of the Town Hall?"

"Yeah," Just said darkly. "Close-minded, blinkered idiots. They're too afraid to come near you, even when you're sleeping, so they're still picketing the Town Hall."

"They're probably not all that bad, you know." Spike yawned, fangs glinting. "Just afraid, like you said."

"You're *okay* with them?" Just asked incredulously. "All the things they were shouting? All those lies about dragons? All that stuff about parents and foals, *designed* to tug at ponies' heartstrings?"

Spike scowled. "Of course I'm not. I'm still a dragon, in case it's slipped your notice. But I'm beginning to realise that it doesn't matter so much what anypony else thinks, as long as I'm sure I'm doing the right thing. And so far, it feels right. This'll pass." *One way or another*, he said to himself bleakly, thinking of Razorfang's challenge.

“That’s big of you,” said Just, before he snorted. “Sorry.”

“No fat jokes,” Spike said dryly.

“Actually, I wasn’t expecting you to be so...” Just floundered for a moment.

“Handsome?” Spike suggested. “Debonair? Charming? Dashing? Stop me when I hit the right one, okay? Amazing? Suave?”

“Stop!” laughed Just. “Well, that’s another thing, I guess...”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t think you’d be funny.”

“Hey, I am a carefully crafted barrel of laughs, I’ll have you know. What was the first thing?”

“Well, we’ve known about you for some time – the RSPCD, I mean – and last we knew, you were a little round fellow that spent all his time in a library. And you look, well...”

“I’ve been working out,” Spike replied. Just laughed. Spike found that vaguely offensive. “No – I’m serious,” he insisted.

“Oh.”

“So, the RSPCD, huh? How come I’ve never heard of you before this week?”

Just shrugged. “Don’t know, we’ve been around for decades. It all used to be a lot of work, caring for abandoned examination hatchlings and re-homing them outside Equestria. Then we got the laws passed to stop using dragon eggs for those entrance examinations to the School for Gifted Unicorns. Everything petered out after that. Huffy was the last case before you, and we haven’t seen her for ten years. I hope she’s okay.”

“Huffy... was the Great and Powerful Trixie’s sister, right?” Spike remembered the name from the article.

“Trixie didn’t see it like that, and neither did Huffy to be honest,” Just admitted. “Huffy saw Trixie as her pony, but Trixie saw Huffy as a symbol of her power and greatness.” He sighed. “Poor Huffy. I often wonder if she was from the same clutch as you, you know.”

Spike was stunned. “You’re kidding. I had other brothers and sisters?”

“Dragons lay up to five eggs, though usually only three or so hatch,” Just parroted, as though reciting something learned so long ago it was barely a fact anymore. “They can be kept indefinitely as long as they are stored in a warm place in magical stasis. It’s entirely possible she was your sister. She was purple and white – white where you’re green. Lovely cerise eyes. Very smart – lived up to her name though. She could be amazingly impatient.”

“Was she funny?” Spike wanted to know. It seemed incredible that there had been another dragon like him, brought up by ponies – by a pony he had *met!* – and that she could have been another sister to him.

“Not really,” Just mused. “She was pretty angry when I met her, though. She wasn’t as big as you are now, still only a baby really. She was just starting her first growth spurt, and her wings were starting to grow out.”

Spike winced. That had hurt.

“Anyway, we lost her,” Just said sadly. “She ran away. She always was so impatient, and we weren’t working on her emancipation fast enough for her, I suppose.”

Spike stared out at the night, feeling a little bereft though he’d never even heard of Huffy before that day. “Is there any way to be sure?”

“Of what?”

“Of any of it.” Spike looked back at the saddened activist pony at his side. “Can we check the School’s records to see if Huffy was my other sister? Can we find out if there have been any unexplained fires or noises near where she disappeared?”

Just brightened a little. “Yeah... yeah, those records are available... Hey, thanks!”

“No charge, just let me know what you find out,” Spike replied.

“But how about you?” Just abruptly changed tack. “Are you really happy here, with all this hoopla going on around you?”

“I told you, it’ll pass,” Spike said. “And I’m not leaving. This is home, and I’m happy when I’m here.”

“Just checking,” Just said hurriedly.

“Look, Just...” Spike decided to get to the point. “You seem like a nice guy, and you really care about dragons. I like you. I could sure use your help, if you’re willing to give it. But please ask first, okay, and don’t try and make my decisions for me again?”

Just seemed subdued. “Sorry, Spike... I guess when you’ve seen all the things I’ve seen ponies do to young dragons – turn them into slaves, abandon them, use them as a portable gas-stove... I suppose I got carried away with the unfairness of it all.”

“I’m fine,” Spike said gently. “Ponyville is home, and Twilight loves me. Things... aren’t so hot right now, but they’ll get better.”

He stared out into the night again, and wished that he could talk to Princess Luna once more. “They’ve got to.”

“You can do it!”

“Come on, Spike!”

“We believe in you!”

“Gimme an S! Gimme a P! Gimme an I!...”

“Take a deep breath and go!”

Spike took a deep breath and gazed over Sweet Apple Acres’ transformed fallow fields with a sick, sinking feeling. The obstacle course seemed to leer back at him.

“I know you can do this, Spike!” Twilight’s voice called.

He let his eyes wander over the various tasks. He had to make his way around a course of barrels without knocking over a single one – and they seemed horribly close together, in his opinion. He had to sort a mixed crate of apples, eggs and new season’s peaches without bruising or crushing them. He had to hit three successive targets with his fire, each progressively further away, and all of varying sizes. There was an old plough that he had to melt with his very hottest flame. He had to lift a dismayingly large rock and carry it for what seemed a truly sadistic distance, all the way up to the barn. Finally, there was a balloon attached to the very top of the barn’s apple-surmounted weathercock, higher than he could reach on his hind legs. He had to fly up there and get it.

Fat chance.

“Your faith in me is much appreciated and completely misplaced!” he hollered back at Twilight, his eyes glued to the torture-track before him.

“Oh, c’mon, Spike! This is a total cinch!” Rainbow Dash yelled impatiently.

“Give it yer best shot, kiddo!” Applejack called.

“Remember, it’s just a test!”

“I can’t believe *Twilight* just said that,” he muttered to Big Macintosh.

“Would you jest get yerself out there already?” Macintosh drawled. “Y’done most o’ this in yer lessons, after all.”

*Not flying, I haven't!* “Yeah, but not all at once, and not with an audience!” Spike glanced back to where his friends were standing. A small crowd of Ponyvillians and press had also gathered there. Cameras were already held at half-mast. Apple Bloom had brought out the apple-stall and was doing a brisk little trade.

He was now sullenly accepting of the trail of photographers and reporters that followed him wherever he went. It was a real pain in the tail, though, when the sound of cameras clicking from the lakeside interrupted his bath-time. He'd resigned himself to being the curiosity of this week – perhaps of this year. It was intrusive and humiliating, but there wasn't much he could do about it until his house was built. Even then, he was sure, they'd stake out his door. He'd never thought he was all that interesting to watch, even when trying to complete an obstacle course.

He would have loved to be a spectator himself. Or perhaps the commentator. He liked being the commentator. With a twinge he remembered doing the announcing for the Running of the Leaves with Pinkie Pie. As spotlights went, that was one he'd rather enjoyed. This one *stunk*.

His friends were cheering enthusiastically amongst the smattering of other ponies. Rainbow Dash looked impatient to try the course herself, and Fluttershy appeared almost as nervous as he was. Rarity was demurely holding a pair of opera-glasses to her lovely eyes, and Applejack was biting the rim of her Stetson. Pinkie was wearing a rather mad purple and green hat that sprouted wings on either side, and a tail trailing down the back. He blinked. He was a *hat* now? He raised a perplexed eyebrow at her, before chalking it up to another of the mysteries of Pinkie Pie.

Twilight was smiling at him. “Go on,” she mouthed.

He took another deep breath, shook out his tense shoulders and nodded once.

“Okay then,” Macintosh said in his slow, deep way. “When I kick this bell, give it yer best shot. Ready?”

“No,” Spike grunted through his clenched teeth, staring at the barrels before him.

“Too bad,” Macintosh said cheerfully, and his powerful hind legs kicked the bell clear off the post.

Spike resisted the urge to run. He swallowed once, and then began to carefully navigate the barrels as slowly as he could. Controlling the length of his tail had proved to be a real challenge, but he unfolded and curled it around the obstacles as delicately as he could. In

one or two places the barrels were so close together that he reflexively held his breath in a futile attempt to make himself skinnier. He inched through, step by cautious step, his wings held high out of the way. It was with a huge sigh that he finished the barrel-weave.

“Goooo Spike!” Pinkie Pie screeched, and he winced.

“Uh, thanks Pinkie!” he called back. “But I’m not done yet!”

“I know!” She shrugged, calling over the cheers of his other friends. “But that was just in case you needed a little extra oomphing!”

“Oomphing?” he repeated to himself, and then shook his head. Refocusing on the crate in front of him, he wilted. Eggs *and* peaches? “Now that’s just being mean!” he shot back at Macintosh.

The red farmpony looked smug. “Eeyup.”

Three empty crates stood beyond the mixed one, waiting to be filled. Spike bit his lip unthinkingly, and then *unbit* it hurriedly. Jeesh, fangs, when would he learn?

He pushed the three crates closer to the mixed one, and looked challengingly back at Macintosh. “Never said I couldn’t,” he said defiantly.

“S’pose I never did,” Macintosh agreed, his expression sour. The reduced distance meant Spike wouldn’t have to carry the foodstuff to its crate. Still, picking up uncooked hen’s eggs in dragon-claws was tough enough, in Spike’s opinion.

He set himself to the task. His claws flickered with practised ease over the apples, trembled over the peaches and moved at a glacial pace around the eggs. He forced himself to breathe once spots began to dance in front of his eyes. Sweat began to run down his neck.

A hush had settled over the watching ponies. Every time he picked up an apple, they leaned forward. If it was a peach, the intake of breath was audible. If it was an egg, you could have heard a pin drop. In Canterlot.

By the time he was nearing the bottom of the crate, his brow was pouring with sweat. There was a further surprise for him, however – the lowest layer wasn’t filled with eggs. It was filled with tiny cups – that were in turn brim-full of water. He shot a glower at Macintosh, who crossed his front hooves complacently.

“That’ll learn yer to move things around,” he was told.

Spike growled under his breath, and tried to pinch the first tiny little cup between his claws without spilling a drop. Water splashed over his thumb-claw, and he hissed in frustration. Carefully setting the cup down on the combed earth beside him, he steeled himself once more and set about the rest.

Finally the crate was empty, and he wanted to collapse in a pile right then and there. The water had spilled twice more, but he had given up being irritated at Macintosh or even at himself. *Just get it over with*, his internal monologue chanted as he backed cautiously away from the wobbling water-cups, and turned to the next challenge.

There was a line drawn in white paint on the ground, and Spike dutifully stood himself behind it. Squinting at his first target, he took a controlled breath and opened his mouth.

The blast of flame was tightly concentrated and very short. The bucket resting over the top of the first, closest pole rattled under the blast, the side charring black. To the sound of cheers, he looked back triumphantly at Fluttershy and Applejack. The first was stock-still in anticipation, peeking out from underneath her pink mane. The second had left off biting her hat and was now biting her hooves.

The second pole was further away, and the target wasn’t a bucket. It was an apple, and he realised he had to *roast* it. That meant tempering his flame over a distance. Squaring his shoulders, he eyed it sternly. “No apple’s gonna get the better of *me*,” he told it, and released his fire.

The red skin blushed darker and began to wrinkle under the soft, gentle flame that flickered over its surface. He continued blowing the thin stream of his mildest fire over the apple until it had shrivelled and wrinkled up completely. He stopped, panting. That sort of thing required far more control and finesse than anything big and showy.

The last pole was a distressing distance away, and the target was the smallest yet. A little wisp of hay was tied to the tip of the pole. He looked back at Fluttershy in alarm, and she gave him an encouraging little nod, before ducking back under her mane. Applejack was now gnawing her foreleg. The silence was so thick you could *walk* on it.

He gulped, and turned back. The hay had been dipped in red paint, and he realised that he was meant to singe it off.

Without burning the rest.

“My friends are all evil diabolical geniuses of the first degree,” he breathed in dismay.

He’d never tried anything along these lines. That much control over his fire was never something he’d expected to have. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained, he supposed. Taking a shallow breath, he screwed up his nerve, gave the tiny hay tuft a diamond-drill stare, and fired.

To his amazement, the trickle of flame that curled from his jaws unfolded easily and elegantly over the stretch of ground to delicately flick the hay-tip gently. A little hiss told him that the wet paint had been burned, but the rest of the stalk did not blacken and char. It didn’t even twitch. He didn’t bother closing his mouth as the fire died away, but stared stupidly at his achievement, slack-jawed.

“YOU DID IT! YOU DID IT!” Fluttershy yelled wildly, and Spike was startled out of his stupor by the uncharacteristic sight of the shy pony hugging Applejack around the neck and jumping up and down.

“I did it,” he said blankly, still staring at the hay, before turning to his jubilant friends. “Hey, *I did it!*”

They hollered and whooped back at him, and quite a few of the other spectators did as well. He beamed at them all, flushed with victory and happiness.

“Well done Spike, but y’ ain’t done yet,” Macintosh reminded him quietly.

“So what’s next?” Spike turned back, still smiling. “It can’t be harder than – oh.”

The old plough was suspended in the air in a blacksmithing vice. Underneath it, a mould sat waiting for the melted metal. It would require the absolute hottest flame he could produce, and the tightest focus. That horrible, horrible word, focus.

He immediately straightened, jerking his head to Macintosh to step back out of the way once more. A hush fell over the little crowd as they gathered the nature of the challenge, and there was some whispering amongst them as they debated the use of a dragon in blacksmithing on a more regular basis.

He’d produced that green-white flame several times since that first lesson, but he’d always had Fluttershy coaching him through it. This time he was on his own. Lengthening his neck, he drew in the very largest breath he could, his sides expanding with its volume.

For good measure, he took in a little more. His wings half-unfurled and his shoulder-blades slid apart as his ribcage expanded, and he began to tremble from containing such an amount of air.

Then with a tearing, crackling roar, he sent it barrelling along the roof of his mouth, along his hard palate, through his tightly pursed jaws and into the cracked old metal. It wasn't white-green, or even normal green. With a start, Spike realised he'd stumbled upon yet another new sort of fire. This flame was so hot he couldn't even see it though his watering eyes.

The old plough pinged and crackled and began to glow red hot within seconds. Only a few moments later, the *plink* of liquid sounded in the trough of the mould beneath. His heart leapt inside him, and he redoubled his efforts. Through blurred vision he could make out the plough's shape softening and running like butter in a saucepan.

His mighty breath stuttered to its close, and he dragged in another. Without pausing he again sent the superheated flame screaming at the lump suspended above the mould. His whole skull was buzzing like a hive from the force of the fire pouring from his mouth.

A *clunk* signalled that the lump had grown too small to be held by the vice and had fallen into the mould. He took another huge gulp of air and aimed carefully at the bobbing red-hot island in the sea of silver. Once more he roared that invisible, furious flame. The lump bobbed a few more times, shrinking like an ice-cube in summer, before he could no longer make it out at all.

He sucked air into starved lungs and prepared to do it again, his eyes now flooded with boiling tears. As he reared his neck into position, a touch against his side made him stop. "I think y' might have done it, Spike," Macintosh said.

"I... did?" he said hoarsely, his head swinging back blindly. The pony was a red blur beside him.

"Filled that mould neater than pie in a piecrust," he said, and there was pride in his voice.

"I did?" Spike repeated, voice gravelly, and rubbed his forepaw against his stinging eyes.

When he looked back, the mould was filled to the brim with gently rippling silver, and he blinked a few times. "Wow. Sweet."

There was silence from the crowd. "Did they not like that?" Spike croaked.

“I think that was a bit more than they was willin’ to handle,” Macintosh said dryly. “That last fire o’ yours is a mighty scary thing.”

“Oh.”

“Cheer up now, y’ almost done.” Macintosh nudged his side, before squinting. “Also, yer sorta soundin’ a little hoarse. Need a drink?”

“Do I ever!”

Spike sank to the ground as Scootaloo ran forward, a tub filled with water on her back. Spike gave her a grateful smile and then practically lunged for it, grabbing it in one paw and tossing the water down his throat. The hiss when it touched his mouth was very loud and he sighed in relief from amongst billowing clouds of steam. “Ow. Oh, that is soooo much better. Ow.”

“You all right?” Scootaloo asked. “Hey, that was *awesome!* And the way you got that hay-stalk! Amazing!”

“Thanks, Scoot,” he said tiredly. “Gotta finish.”

“You look kinda rough, Spike,” she said doubtfully as he struggled up again and eyed the rock he had to carry up to the barn.

“Can’t stop halfway through,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“If you say so,” she said, picking up the tub and moving back.

“Right,” he croaked, and then cleared his throat. “Right,” he said again, glaring at the rock.

It was larger than Tom. It was larger than the basalt blocks he’d been carting for his house. He wondered how they’d got it into the field at all.

“It took twenty ponies.” Macintosh answered the unspoken question in a murmur.

“And I’m supposed to lift it all on my own,” he muttered back.

“If y’ gonna hurt yerself in any way, best t’ stop now,” Macintosh said, but Spike shook his head.

“Can’t stop halfway through,” he said to himself, and ducked his neck against the rock, bracing his back and rolling it down into the hollow between his wings.

His eyes bugged out immediately, and his knees trembled. “Gnnnph!” he choked, breath stolen away.

“Y’ gonna do yerself a mischief,” Macintosh said worriedly. “Shoulda known it was too heavy. Put it down, Spike.”

But Spike was taking a step, and then another. His legs wobbled like wet noodles, but he strained onwards. The stubbornness he’d always possessed and had always thrown into childish things was now in full control – and by Celestia and Luna and everything good, he was going to get the stupid rock up to the barn.

“No matter what!” he grunted through gritted fangs, and took another, stronger step. Macintosh’s protests fell silent and he began to keep pace with Spike. The soft sounds of hooves in loam told him that his ‘audience’ was also following. Under the dizzying weight, he vaguely wondered how sweaty and violet his face was. No doubt he looked truly ridiculous.

He watched the ground passing underneath his claws. It seemed to move torturously slowly. Under the crushing weight of the giant rock, he puffed and panted and hauled one foot in front of the other, his claws dragging against the soft earth. His throat still burned and his back felt as though it was being pulverised. He shook that thought away and took another heaving step, and then another.

“Not far now,” Twilight’s voice whispered from behind him.

He looked up. Though his eyes were still a little sore and stinging, he could see the large red shape of the barn before him – closer than he had imagined! He took another step, his pace quickening as the finish neared. His neck straightened and he staggered onwards, tail stiff with tension, up to the barn’s side and allowed the massive rock to slide off his back. It landed with a dull boom, and rolled a little distance before rocking to a standstill.

Spike huffed smoke through his nostrils at it contemptuously, before careening to the ground in a pile of purple scales.

“What *is* it with you and showing rocks who’s boss?” Rainbow Dash’s voice asked, and he made a husky noise of irritation.

“I’d say that was more a case of not being beaten,” Twilight said, proud and fond and worried all at once. “Spike? Are you okay? Have you hurt yourself?”

“Mmmph,” he managed, and slumped over some more.

“You look like a beaten-up suitcase,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Real nice,” Applejack said tartly.

“I calls ‘em how I sees ‘em.”

“You are *not* attempting to fly in this condition,” Twilight said.

“Gotta finish,” he rasped, hauling himself upwards.

“Spike...”

But Twilight didn’t get to complete herself before his wings extended and swept into the all-important downbeat. His mind flickered back to Razorfang, and he tried to emulate the giant dragon’s movements the previous day. His tired legs pushed away from the ground and he beat once, twice...

*I’m doing it*, he thought, incredulously, joyously. *I’m...*

THUMP.

He landed heavily on his hindquarters, agony racing up his spine. He screeched and crumpled on the spot, a jumbled heap of wings, limbs and pain.

“Oh, you silly dragon,” Twilight gasped, racing towards him. He turned his ringing head to her. Stars were winking in and out of existence before his eyes.

“Sorry... Twi...”

“What possessed you to try and fly in this state?” Twilight demanded in a rushed voice, her hooves running over him, checking for damage. She sagged in relief when she found no injuries, and continued in a lower tone. “You should have listened to me, Mister Stubborn.”

He was too beaten to even protest the name. He made a mumbled noise of apology, and drooped even further into his untidy jumble of purple aches and pains.

“Spike, it was just a test,” Rainbow Dash spoke up once more. “Just a way of seeing where you were at with everything, and pushing the boundaries a bit. You didn’t have to finish it all, you big idiot, and you sure didn’t have to try and fly!”

“Can’t anyway,” Spike mumbled.

“You *can*,” Dash insisted automatically. “We just haven’t found the right exercise for you yet.”

“The ground an’ I...” Spike slurred, “have a ver’ *special* relationship.”

“Well, now we know he’s perfectly fine,” Rarity commented, “if he’s making dreadful jokes like that.”

“Rar’ty?” He raised his head and smiled unsteadily in the direction her voice had come from. “Didja see me... liftin’ that rock? An’ my fore... I mean, fire... I did good fire.”

“You certainly did, dear.”

“Spilled the water. Can’t fly. But I did... real good fire. Didn’t knob a bury, either. Knot a balloon. *Knock a barrel.*”

“We should get him home,” Twilight sighed.

“Home,” he agreed wholeheartedly. He felt like he’d been wrung out like a dishcloth.

“How?” Rainbow Dash asked, eyeing his prone bulk with scepticism.

Spike himself answered by slowly, creakingly dragging himself to his feet with a gigantic groan. Then he appeared to sag on the spot. “Ow,” he said pathetically.

“Oh, poor Spike,” Fluttershy said, her tone sympathetic. “I’ll heat up some towels for you and we can put them over your shoulders when we reach the square. How does that sound?”

“Heavenly,” he croaked.

“How do you manage to have a competitive side when there’s no competition?” Twilight asked.

“Natural... talent,” Spike replied with a wobbly grin.

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“I am one big bruise,” Spike moaned.

“It’s your own fault,” said Twilight heartlessly, laying another hot towel over him.

“Pony of stone,” he accused.

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, that’s why I’m here with heated towels and salve, instead of inside my nice cozy library.”

Fluttershy rose into the air in order to lay another towel over his back. He groaned in relief, and practically melted all over the cobbles. “Sooooooo goooooood,” he burred. “Arrghunnnggh, oh *yeaaaaaah*.”

“We found his off-switch,” Twilight said dryly to the other pony. Then her eyes widened in alarm and surprise. “Pr... Princess?”

Spike raised his head eagerly, muscles protesting. “Luna?”

But it was a tall white alicorn with a pastel-rainbow mane that stood before them, her hooves bound in gold filigree. Spike tried to pull himself upright in order to bow, but Princess Celestia held one hoof up to stop him. “You should not rise, judging from the sight of you,” she said.

His brow furrowed. “Um, Princess? Is something wrong? Not that it’s not great to see you...”

She looked along his length silently, before inclining her head. “Indeed, I should not call you ‘little’ anymore,” she said.

“Princess!” Twilight found her tongue and ran to greet her mentor joyously. “It’s so wonderful to see you!”

“And you too, Twilight Sparkle,” Celestia replied, though there were tense overtones in her normally warm voice.

“Something *is* wrong,” Fluttershy said in realisation.

Celestia turned her regal head from her protégée back to Spike. “When you didn’t answer my last letter, Spike, I wasn’t very concerned. I thought you might still be mulling over

my offer. But then one of my advisors brought this morning's O-HAY! Magazine to me..."

The Princess' horn flared, and a trashy-looking sort of magazine fluttered into existence.

"Spike's SHOCKING Secrets Revealed: What They're Not Telling Us!' By Gossipy Rag," read Twilight. "Oh no."

"A conspiracy reaching to the highest authorities of Equestria: Exclusive Proof!" Fluttershy looked up from the magazine cover with a wince. "Oh... oh dear."

"We left the letter in the square yesterday," Spike realised with horror. "And there were all those reporters everywhere..."

"One of them obviously found it," Twilight sighed.

Princess Celestia looked stern and just a bit puzzled. "My little ponies – and dragon – what are you saying? My letter arrived... during a press conference?"

"More like a siege," Spike muttered. "Princess, I'm so sorry. It arrived just as we were walking into town, and there were reporters and protestors everywhere. We were so preoccupied with trying to contain my fire that we totally forgot the letter."

She sighed and closed her brilliant lavender eyes. "I see."

"I really am sorry," he said humbly. "I seem to say that a lot lately... especially to you..."

"The damage is done." She waved a hoof in dismissal. "And your lack of answer is now explained."

"Uh." Spike scratched at his head. "Yeah."

"Do take better care of your mail in future," she said in a long-suffering tone, though a twinkle began to wink from within her eyes once more. "Apology accepted."

Spike released a smoky sigh of relief. "Phew, thanks Princess!"

"Don't you want to know what the letter said?" she asked, and Twilight leaned forward, her eyes liquid with hope.

“Oh, so can you magically intervene in this fight, Princess?” she asked. “We’ve been so worried!”

“Patience, my faithful student,” Celestia said. “I believe this... Gossipy Rag... has *helpfully* printed the whole letter. Page twenty-six, if you would.”

Twilight glanced back at Fluttershy, before her horn flared and the magazine flipped open, the pages ruffling by magic to fall open at a shot of Spike hauling the wagon with his friends riding inside. He looked rather pleased, and Spike remembered how happy he’d been at Rarity’s compliment.

“You look almost... smug, Spike,” Fluttershy said, her brow wrinkling.

“They’ll have chosen that picture especially for that reason,” Twilight growled. “Here’s the letter.”

“Could you?” Spike asked her, and she nodded, horn glowing brighter. The magazine grew to twice its size, and he bent to it, frowning.

“Dear Spike,” he read,

*“Your apology is accepted, but your reasons are not. Setting aside your fears for my personal safety, I would have held it my duty, as your Princess and as your friend, to aid you in the smallest of ways through this difficult time. I am sure that my sister, Twilight, and your friends feel much the same way. Furthermore, I understand that acting contrary to an instinctual urge is difficult, but I have already stated my case here. In any case, let us consider this affair over and done with. You are forgiven.”*

*“I have just read the article and interview published by one Scoop Headlines, and I must say you have comported yourself with true honesty and feeling in this matter. Well done. It is a trying thing to be singled out amongst the many for public scrutiny, and my thoughts are with you. Remain calm, remain strong, and remain yourself. Always remember your friends are with you. I hope construction on your house is going well?”*

*“To answer your second postscript: Although I indeed have the power to affect a fully-grown dragon, politically it is impossible. I am afraid I cannot influence any outcome of this challenge. It is an intrinsic and ancient part of draconic culture, and they would see my involvement as a desecration. It pains me to write this. You see, your article will attract attention from outside Equestria as well as within it, and there will be considerable interest from the dragon clans about you. Should their magicians discover that I am interfering in*

*an ancient and traditional rite of combat, I will be signing Equestria up for invasion. The situation is very tense as it is. Wyrmland's ambassador has already questioned me quite harshly regarding the origins of your egg.*

*"I am so very, truly sorry that I cannot magically assist you in this matter. Perhaps I can help in the matter of the unrest here in Equestria? I believe that sending my Royal Guard would only exacerbate the situation, but publically acknowledging our friendship may soften some hearts. Furthermore, I would like to invite you to the Grand Galloping Gala in two weeks' time as a special guest. This would be a fine opportunity to display your good intentions to the most influential ponies in the kingdom. Your friends are also invited, and do tell them they are allowed – nay, encouraged – to liven up the festivities as they did the last time they attended. Be warned, the Wyrmland ambassador will likely hound you into agreeing to leave Equestria to be with others of your kind. As you have repeatedly said, Ponyville is your home now. Hold fast to your convictions.*

*"Please let me know if you agree to this proposal. I look forward to your answer.*

*"In friendship,  
Princess Celestia*

*"P.S. My sister also says 'hi', and asks if she may visit you again soon? P.C.*

*"P.P.S. Could you please send your recipe for Dandelion and Wild Rocket quiche? I haven't had a good one for nearly three centuries now. P.C."*

Spike fell silent and looked up at the Princess. "Grand Galloping Gala?"

"What does the article say about the letter?" Fluttershy hovered over his shoulder, her eyes racing over the page.

"A whole lot of horseapples," Twilight growled. Naturally she had read ahead.

"Twilight! Language!" Spike said, shocked she would swear in front of the Princess. Celestia looked grim, and a little amused.

"In this case I feel that my faithful student is fully justified in her choice of words," she said. "It is a despicable, scurrilous load of nonsense and conjecture."

"Lots about how you and the Princess are conspiring against the ambassador, lots about the challenge being a barbaric and primitive ritual, lots about your 'instincts' and plenty of insulting things about dragons in general," Twilight fumed.

“I don’t exactly disagree about the challenge,” Spike muttered.

“And even a horrible bit of... of *hooey*,” Twilight spat Applejack’s word in her simmering irritation, “saying that you were dangerous simply by bringing the Wyrmland’s attention to Equestria. As though they haven’t always known that dragons lived within our borders!”

“Calm yourself, Twilight Sparkle,” Celestia said. “It is a ridiculous slander indeed, but it can be easily punctured. I will make a royal announcement tonight to refute the allegations.”

“That’s not going to help against that ‘Parents for a Peaceful Equestria’ lot,” Spike said glumly.

“That is the name of the group against you?” Celestia asked, and tsked when he nodded. “Such a transparently emotional ploy.”

“I don’t think they’re ever going to be accused of being intellectual giants,” Spike replied.

“The Grand Galloping Gala again?” Fluttershy said, her face flustered. “Oh dear, I thought that was all done with.”

“Now, now, Fluttershy.” The Princess’ lips twitched. “It was a long time ago. I’m sure they’ll all simply, ah... love you.”

Twilight made a choking sound, and Spike stifled a snort as Fluttershy turned the colour of curdled milk.

“What do you think?” the Princess continued smoothly, as though poor Fluttershy wasn’t dying of mortification on the spot. “Is it a good plan?”

Spike shrugged, and then cringed as his back creaked like a rusty hinge. “Sure,” he said, “as long as you don’t send any letters halfway through.”

She smiled. “No fear of that, my dragon.”

“One thing though,” Twilight said matter-of-factly, having recovered her composure. “That’s only a few days before the challenge. Are you sure that’s a good idea, Spike? Perhaps you should stay at home and rest up...”

Spike considered it. On the one hand, he rather liked the idea of holing up in Ponyville. Meeting stuffy, fancy, stuck-up ponies wasn't his idea of the best of times. Besides, why should he waste what could be one of his very last nights at a stupid Gala?

Because he shouldn't think that way, he realised with a chill racing down his spine, for the same reason he was continuing to build his house. He had to make plans for his future. He had to go on as though his existence didn't have a looming deadline. He had to believe that he would survive, and continue to embrace all the ridiculous, painful, humiliating and wonderful complexities that make up life. He had to hope. Otherwise he might as well walk up to Razorfang's cave and ask him to end it then and there.

"I'll go," he said.

Celestia smiled gently at him. "I thought you might. I will send the tickets tonight. How many?"

Spike glanced at the rather morose Fluttershy. "Uh... how about I get back to you on that one?"

She inclined her head. "Very well, I await your letter. And Spike?"

He looked back to her, neck pinging with pain. "Yeah? I mean, yes, Princess?"

"Do try not to lose them," she said with a small smile. He blushed.

"So, *do* you know the origins of Spike's egg?" Twilight asked suddenly, her eyes tracing the article once more.

The Princess looked taken aback. "Excuse me, Twilight Sparkle?"

She gestured to the magazine with one hoof. "I was just re-reading the letter, and you said you'd been questioned by the Wurmstadt ambassador about it. Can you remember anything about it?"

Spike looked uncertainly from Twilight to the Princess. He wasn't actually sure he wanted to know the answer to that question. His family was the purple unicorn, and she was all the family he wanted. He didn't want to know if his first family had lost him, or worse, rejected him.

"I am afraid I was not aware of the details at the time, my faithful student," Celestia replied. "The School for Gifted Unicorns made these arrangements in my name without

my consent. I believe the practise started many decades ago, when an abandoned dragon's clutch was discovered by a Professor of the School. She made hatching them part of the examination, and it proved so effective a method of determining magical ability that it became a tradition. I put a stop to it once the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons brought it to my attention. As for Spike's egg, the School itself has records of where it sourced the dragon eggs from, I believe."

"Just, the President of the Society, is helping me with that," Spike said. "He offered last night." Twilight gave him a sharp look.

"Then you have gained a very passionate and vocal advocate," the Princess said, her ethereal mane rippling in a non-existent breeze.

"Spike, are you..." Twilight began, but he hushed her quickly. The Princess raised her eyebrows at him.

"There is a problem?"

"Well." Spike squirmed. "He's gonna find out which clutch my egg was from, sure... but it's mostly to find out whether Huffy, Trixie's dragon, was my other sister."

"Your *other* sis... oh!" Celestia smiled warmly and broadly. "You would not, then, consider a dragon to be your real sister and Twilight to be your adopted sister?"

"Twilight *is* my real sister!" Spike said indignantly, and then subsided as he realised how stupid he sounded. "I mean, I know we're... different, and I guess I'm adopted... but she's my sister. She *is*. Even if I end up having a million brothers and sisters, Twilight is still my sister. That's all there is to it."

"Territory?" the Princess asked delicately.

Spike's eyes blazed. "Precisely."

Twilight blinked. "I'm territory?"

"Not in the traditional sense, I expect." Celestia tilted her head. "He means to protect you."

She looked gobsmacked. "Spike, you ninny. I protect you!"

He gave her a steady look. "Nope, not for this. Not in this way."

“Perhaps you should explain further,” the Princess suggested gently.

Spike squared his shoulders and turned to face Twilight and Fluttershy fully. “Okay. Right then. Here’s sort of how it goes. Ponyville is mine, and I protect it. They’re my ponies. I look after them. *Especially* you, Twilight. You’re mine. My sister.”

She stared at him. “And am I my own pony as well?”

“Oh yeah, that too,” he allowed. “Do what you like, as long as it makes you happy. That’ll make me happy. Whatever *doesn’t* make you happy, though... answers to me.”

“Does that go for all Ponyvillians?” Fluttershy ventured.

He beamed. “Yup.”

“I just get all the brotherly love on top, I get it,” Twilight said blankly. “Uh... wow, Spike. You’ve given this... a lot of thought.”

“It is well done of you, my dragon,” Celestia murmured. Spike’s chin lifted happily, and he took a deep breath filled with contentment.

“Thanks, Princess.”

“I think I need to think about this some more,” Twilight said in a stunned voice.

“You? Thinking too much? Shock and awe,” Spike teased. That seemed to snap her out of her trance, and she scowled at him.

“Oh, funny dragon,” she said with heavy sarcasm. He grinned at her.

“Thanks for noticing,” he said cheerfully. Just thinking about his village, his ponies, about what could be, filled him with a sense of rightness and comfort. His territory, his ponies. His to protect, to look after and care for. It was a much-needed panacea in the midst of the escalating chaos of his life.

“So that’s what you meant when you...” Twilight began, and stopped. Spike glanced sidelong at her, knowing she was going to bring up that moment during the interview with Scoop.

“Yeah,” he said softly.

“Wow,” she breathed.

“Really, all of us? You’re going to look after all of us?” Fluttershy asked again, her pupils wide with affection and wonder.

Spike nudged her with a forepaw. “My pony,” he declared, and then poked his tongue out at her. She giggled.

“Spike, that’s... sort of amazing,” Twilight said. “But don’t you want anything for yourself?”

“That *is* for me, Twilight,” he said patiently. “I could have just claimed any place, you know. First territory was the library, but I’ve outgrown it. So I could have picked anywhere, yeah? But a place doesn’t make you laugh, or cry, or smile... unless it has memories attached. What makes memories? Friends do. Family. Ponyville has all that for me – but most of all, the *ponies* of Ponyville make it what it is. And they’ll be mine, and I’ll be theirs, and I’ll look after them.” He smiled faintly. “I told you this.”

“Not... in so much detail,” Twilight said in a hushed voice.

He shrugged again. “Well, that’s sort of it, anyway,” he said peaceably. “Hey, remember you mentioned about a hoard? I really don’t think I’m gonna need one. My hoard’s alive and growing all the time. And it talks to me.”

“Oh, *Spike*,” Fluttershy gasped.

“*Very* well done,” the Princess said quietly, and she bowed her elegant head to him. He jerked his own backwards in startled surprise.

“Uh... it wasn’t all me,” he said, embarrassed at this show of respect from the premier monarch of the country. “Your sister helped.”

“I could sense her hoof in some of that,” she agreed. “Greed and jealousy?”

He nodded once, his face becoming grave. “Tell her to drop in anytime.”

The Princess looked skywards, and then back to him. “I must leave,” she said regretfully. “There is a delegation arriving from the Eyrrie, the Griffon capital. I must be in Canterlot to greet them.”

Spike lowered his head in a bow. “Princess, thank you... and once more, I’m so...”

“Forgiven,” she interrupted him, but with a smile. “It is past, Spike. Put it behind you.” She looked up at the sky again, her mane rippling and flowing gracefully, before looking back to the three of them. “I will see you all soon, at the Gala. Farewell, my little ponies, my dragon.”

With a flash of light as bright as the sun, she winked out of existence.

“Oh, that was so... *embarrassing*,” Fluttershy said, before she turned to Spike, a question in her eyes. “*We’re* your hoard?”

He wriggled in discomfiture, shucking the cooled towels from his back into a pile. “Sorta. Well, we all saw how I took to hoarding when I was little, and *that* wasn’t exactly my finest hour. I think this can be a way to channel my normal dragon greed without triggering any unnatural greed-growth. Besides, *hoard* is such an... ugly word. Can’t I call you my gems instead? Nope, that’s no good either, it sounds like I’m going to eat you...”

“I knew you’d claimed Ponyville,” Twilight said in a subdued voice, her ears drooping, “I just didn’t realise how personal and... and possessive it was.”

“Dragons *are* possessive, Twilight,” he reminded her. “You’ve probably read all about it. Wait – what am I saying, of course you have. Well, I’m no different there. I just had a few pointers in how to direct it.”

“Possessive, jealous, greedy, protective, eloquent, powerful, stubborn, proud, short-tempered, cunning and inscrutable,” Twilight recited, eyes widening. “Why didn’t I ever connect all that with you?”

“Hey, I’m not inscrutable!” Spike protested. Then he paused. “What’s inscrutable?”

“Hard to understand, or mysterious,” she answered absently. She was gnawing on one hoof.

“I don’t think I’m either of those,” he said, wrinkling his snout. “And I’m sure not cunning. I’m not eloquent, or especially short-tempered, I don’t think... Anyway, don’t worry that you never saw me like that before. I’m pretty glad of that, actually. It means I was always just Spike to you, not Spike, a dragon – even when I was little. That means a lot.”

Her eyes, already wide, widened even further. Then to his great astonishment she threw both hooves around his neck, took a deep shuddering breath, and began to cry quietly. “Tw... *Twilight?*” he exclaimed, one great paw rising to brace her trembling back.

“You’re... just growing up so... so *fast*,” she sobbed.

“Hey!” he said, alarmed. “No, wait, Twilight, I didn’t mean to make you cry!”

“You didn’t make her cry,” Fluttershy said suddenly, and Spike turned confused green eyes on her.

“I didn’t? Then why’s she crying?”

“She misses the way you were,” Fluttershy said. “You’re thinking of all these things yourself, working it all out on your own without her help. You carried a boulder today, and melted a plough, and then told her mentor about claiming your territory. The press are hiding around every corner, and she misses the little baby she used to carry on her back. You’ve changed a lot, Spike. You’ve taken on a lot of those traits she just rattled off, you know. You’re such... such a *real* dragon now. You’re not the baby dragon we all knew.”

“Yes I am!” he exclaimed in horror. “I still am! I’m still me!” His foreleg tightened around Twilight, holding her close. “Twilight, listen, please! I know this is a lot to take in, and believe me I’m still trying to get my head around most of it. But no matter what, I’m always going to be your number one assistant, okay? No matter *what*.”

“Number one assistant,” she mumbled against his green-scaled chest, and then buried her face against him. “Oh, *Spike*, it’s not just that... it’s, well... and then, what if they find your real family? You said I was your real sister, and that was all there was to it, but maybe you’ll feel differently if another dragon...”

“Never,” he said staunchly, his claws stroking gently through her mane. “Never.”

“I love you,” she said, and her hooves held on tighter to his neck.

“I love you too,” he said, a lump rising in his throat. “And I miss it too, you know. I miss my basket. I miss my blankie. Sometimes I think I can still hear it calling my name... ‘Spike, Spike!’” he called, and then sighed, tucking his head over hers. She nuzzled closer into his neck. “What happened to my blankie anyway?”

“You sneezed,” Twilight said in a thick voice, sniffing.

“Oh yeah,” he said, and chuckled. She laughed a little damply herself.

“I thought I’d go mad every time you had a cold,” she said.

“Knock on wood,” Spike said hurriedly.

“I miss your little snores at night,” she said. “Now I can hear you from all the way out in the square.”

“I miss falling asleep on your back when it was late,” he murmured. “I always felt so safe, knowing you’d get us home.”

“You had so many nightmares about the Mayor in that clown wig.” She giggled tearfully.

“Don’t remind me.” He shuddered.

“It’s stupid,” she sighed, pulling herself away a little to look into his face. “You’re right here, I talk to you every day, and I still miss you.”

He said nothing, but gazed at her.

“Your eyes are the same,” she said quietly. “That’s about it, really.”

“I’m still me, Twilight,” he pleaded. “I really am. Don’t *you* be the one to believe otherwise. Not *you*.”

“I know,” she said. “I do, really. It’s just...”

“I get it.” He let his eyes drop to the ground. She put a hoof against his face and raised his eyes to hers again.

“Not that,” she said, smiling through her tears, “not just how big you are, or how much you’ve changed physically. How *wise* you’ve become.”

He stared at her, taken aback. “Uh, Twilight, you’re talking to Spike. *Spike*. Remember? The dragon who lost the Princess’ letter, got himself into a challenge, can’t fly, didn’t tell the Princess about said challenge, almost flattened himself for a stupid little test...”

She shook her head in fond amusement. “Changed the whole meaning of territory, stood up for his beliefs, let a bunch of foals use him for a jungle-gym, wouldn’t let Rarity’s scarf be taken off, freed the Horsefall Stream, didn’t back down in the face of prejudice and hysteria and hate.”

“Okay, it sounds awesome when you put it *that* way,” he said.

“Soon you won’t need me at all,” she said sadly.

“Now I know you’re out of your mind,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I’m only a kid! You’re my big sister! I’m always gonna need you, and I am *never* letting you go!”

“One day you’ll have to, Spike,” she said, barely audible.

“Knowing you, you’ll be the voice of my conscience by then,” he retorted. “And anyway, when that day comes, you’ll still be here, inside my head and my heart. You’re gonna be with me every day of my life, Twilight. I am never, *ever* letting you go.”

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, strands of her mane catching in the finned scales at his jawline.

“Wise,” she whispered.

“Oh, get away, bleagh, mushy stuff,” he said, embarrassed. Blinking, he looked around. “Where’d Fluttershy go?”

“I think she must have wanted to give us some privacy,” Twilight said in a shattered sort of voice, and Spike looked down at her, cradled within his foreleg. He made a decision.

“Well, we can’t do this the old way,” he said, “but maybe we can get a teeny weeny little bit of it back...”

She gave him a suspicious look through red-rimmed eyes. “What are yooooooh! Spi-i-ike!”

His name became a squeal as he raised her over his head, snaking his neck under her kicking legs and depositing her on his back. He could feel her hooves scrabbling against his scales before she sat down heavily between his shoulder-blades. His back complained vociferously, but he ignored both it and the screaming of his limbs as he stood.

“Whoooah... oh... ah, Spike!” Twilight squawked as he drew himself up, her forelegs hooking around his neck in a chokehold. He turned his head to look back at her, his neck arching easily, and she glared up at him. “Warn me next time!” she growled.

“Sorry.” He grinned sheepishly.

“What are we *doing*?” she said in exasperation, and he cocked his head.

“Well, I can’t ride on your back anymore, so logically you’ll have to ride on mine,” he said. “Where do you wanna go? You can fall asleep if you like. That was always pretty cool.”

She gaped at him.

“Seriously, where do you wanna go?” he prodded.

She blinked, and then smiled though her eyes were still watery. “Why don’t we just do a turn around the town? Maybe we’ll run into somepony we know.”

“That’d be nice.” He smiled back. “Let’s go for a pony-ride.”

“Dragon-ride.”

“Whatever. Ready?”

“Hi-ho Spike,” she giggled, and leaned against his neck companionably.

“I am *way* too sore to rear up on my back legs like you did.”

“That’s okay, the ground is far away enough as it is.”

“Is it okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Actually, it’s nice. I see why you liked it.”

“And if you turn around, you can see where we’ve been.”

“That’s a very old joke.”

“The old ones are the good ones, they say. Hey, Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think Fluttershy is scared of me?”

“What? What makes you say that?”

“Well, she said I was such a *real* dragon now... and, well, she’s afraid of dragons. Big ones. Wings and teeth and stuff. I hope I don’t have to draw you a picture.”

“You’d need a lot of purple crayon.”

“Oh thanks, kick a dragon when he’s down, that’s real nice.”

“I don’t think she’s afraid of you at all, Spike. She was certainly quite... uh, apprehensive about helping you with your fire at first, but she overcame that fairly quickly, didn’t she?”

“I suppose...”

“She’s your friend. She knows you, Spike. She knows you wouldn’t hurt a horsefly.”

“I... well, it can’t hurt to ask, I guess.”

“Mind you don’t hurt her feelings. You know how sensitive she is.”

“I’d never hurt her, Twilight.”

“Of course I know, you possessive dragon you. You know, your gait is...”

“Reptile, remember? My spine bends in different ways to yours.”

“Oh, of course! I should have realised. It’s really very high up here. Look, I can see Sugarcube Corner!”

“Yep. And you can see the Boutique from the top of the next street.”

“You *would* know that, you big sap.”

“I’m merely an appreciator of beauty. That’s all.”

“Oh, *merely*.”

“Critic.”

“Spike?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks.”

“Hey. What are number one assistants for?”

She fell asleep on his broad purple back. He walked on through the golden afternoon, thinking of simpler days.

“Muffin call!”

Spike awoke with a slight groan. His muscles, sore and aching from yesterday, had stiffened and tightened unbearably overnight.

There were books all around him, scattered in haphazard piles around the square, and a grey pegasus grinning cheerfully at him as she flapped before his nose. He blinked and reared his neck back a little to focus on her. She tilted her head, one eye beaming at him and the other beaming off to the library.

“Uh, morning, Derpy,” he mumbled. His throat was still quite sore.

She waved a bundle of letters. “Muffins for you, Spike!”

He frowned a little. He didn’t normally get his mail the usual way. He had a far more convenient system. Who was sending him letters?

“Right, right,” he rasped, pulling himself together and holding up a forepaw slowly. She deposited the letters into his talons with what he considered reckless abandon, almost skewering herself as she flopped forwards through the air. He snatched his forepaw back with a quick intake of breath, letters in his palm, and anxiously darted a look back to her. She saluted brightly, entirely unharmed.

“Thanks,” he said doubtfully. Then he thought of something. “Hey, Derpy, are those protestors still camped in front of the Town Hall?”

She nodded, one eye glaring off at the library. “They sure are. They’ve got signs and muffins and bedrolls and muffins and everything.”

Spike thought for a moment, heart sinking. If those ‘Parents’ ponies were still camped in front of the Town Hall, he’d find another way out to his lesson this afternoon. Despite what Macintosh and Rarity had said about not hiding any more, he wasn’t a sucker for punishment. He wasn’t going to willingly sign up for abuse if he didn’t have to.

“Well, see you muffin, Spike!” Derpy’s voice trailed behind her as she pinged through the deserted square like a pinball.

“Thanks, Derpy,” he called back. “See you muffi– I mean, later!”

He shook his head with a small snort, and then began to study his bundle of letters. There were quite a few. Most were simply addressed to ‘Spike, Ponyville Dragon,’ but one was addressed to ‘Mr Spike, c/o Ponyville Square, Ponyville,’ and looked rather official. He was beginning to slit open the envelope with his pinky-claw when he became aware of a light weight shifting in the hollow of his back.

“Mmmhnnnn,” Twilight mumbled in her sleep, and nuzzled her head against a green spine.

He smiled slightly, lowering the letter. She’d woken up after their ‘dragon-ride’ with a burning curiosity, and denuded the entire library of every book referring to draconic culture, physiology, and history it possessed. Spike looked around at the stacks of tottering books, and his smile became a grin. She had been in such a study-frenzy that she hadn’t even squeaked about leaving the books out all night.

He carefully picked up *Scales Before Their Eyes: An In-Depth Study on Equine-Dragon Relations in the Modern Day* and tilted it sideways, watching the pages ruffling. Not a single picture in the whole thing. Twilight sure liked some dry and dusty stuff. *The Collected Poetic Works of Silverclaw*, sat beside *Diseases of the Dragon: From Abated Heels to Zigzag Throat*. The *Encyclopaedia Draconequus Vol.7, DRA-ERG* was held open at “DRAGONS” by the bulk of *Misunderstood or Monster? Dragon Facts and Myths*. Spike squinted closer at the spine of one red book, and flushed when he read, *Big and Hot! A Guide For Maturing Dragons*. He shoved the embarrassing thing underneath *Dragons in the Smoke: A Memoir*.

There were heaps and heaps and heaps of books. Boy, was he pleased he wasn’t able to file them all away any more!

Twilight yawned loudly, and he felt her legs stretching out. “Morning,” he said quietly.

“Mmmph,” she said in a muffled voice. He looked back at her, curled up again in the hollow between his shoulder-blades. *Territory and You: All a Dragon Needs to Know* was serving as her pillow. Her foreleg was firmly wrapped over her eyes. “S’too early.”

“I’ve gotten used to it, sleeping out here,” he said.

“Early,” she insisted.

“This is a turn-around,” he chuckled. “You telling me that it’s too early.”

She growled under her breath, her other forelimb wrapping around her head as well. Then she sat up abruptly, eyes wide. “The books!”

“You look like a purple and pink haystack,” he sniggered. She scowled at him, but it turned into a grimace as she looked around and took in the explosion of paper around them.

“I fell asleep...” She winced. “Will the dew have got into them, do you think?”

Spike tilted his head. “I’ll dry ‘em off if it has,” he offered. “Least I can do.”

She ran a hoof over her mane. “Can you do that without...”

“Burning them?” His eyebrows knitted. “I *think* so. I’m beginning to trust my fire a bit more... after yesterday, anyway.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and if that doesn’t work, we can always spread them on my side.” He shifted a little. “Twilight, are you okay if I stand? I am so, so stiff, I’ve just *got* to stretch...”

She looked a little startled. “Oh, I didn’t think of that! And here I am using you as a great big heated bed...”

“It’s fine,” he said sincerely. “It’s good, actually. I like that you stayed out here with me again. I’ve just got to get this kink out of my back before I go completely crazy. That rock was soooooo heavy.”

Twilight carefully slid down his shoulder to the cobbles, her magic carting the book after her. Spike stood up as fast as possible, his joints creaking, and proceeded to stretch himself as thoroughly as he could. The *pop* of his bones made him groan in relief. “Ooooh, better. Better,” he croaked.

Twilight was giving him an alarmed look. “That sounded awful,” she said.

“Better,” he said with a pained smile.

“If you say so...” she said. “Hey, what are these?”

She had spotted the letters. “Oh that,” Spike said hoarsely as he arched like a cat, forelegs straight and shoulders hunched. “Mail for me... got from Derpy. Was gonna open... but saw all the books...”

She picked up the official-looking envelope with a little frown. “Mr Spike, c/o...” she muttered.

Spike sat down on his haunches and took the letter from her delicately. She watched as he pulled the letter from the envelope with precise, cautious movements and smoothed it out on the pavement.

“You’re getting really good with your claws,” she said with admiration.

“Thanks,” he replied modestly, “but it’s only a letter. Letters are easy.”

“Is it big enough?” she asked. “I can enlarge it if you need it.”

“I can make it out,” he assured her, before squinting at it. “It’s from Just!”

“About your egg?”

“Yeah! Listen to this!” Spike began to read aloud. “Dear Spike, hoping this finds you well, yadda yadda yadda... oh, here we go! ‘We’ve discovered that your egg was acquired by the School for Gifted Unicorns not as one of a clutch, but singly. It was donated eighty-seven years ago by the estate of the famous unicorn explorer, Living Stone. It was kept in magical stasis in the School’s Trophy Room for so long because of Doctor Stone’s position as a famous alumnus of the School. It was only put forward for examination-hatching at all because we at the RSPCD had managed to get laws put into practise inhibiting the import of dragon eggs for exam use, and it was the only one left. There’s no mention of where Doctor Stone found your egg in the School’s records...” Spike trailed off. *Eighty-seven. Eighty-seven.*

“Keep reading,” Twilight said in a low voice.

Spike glanced down at her, and then peered back at the letter. “...’perhaps you could try Living Stone’s travel journals?” he finished weakly.

Twilight bolted for the library immediately.

Spike sat back, his eyes staring at the piece of paper but not really seeing it. Was his egg really so very old before it hatched? That made him actually... well, quite old. A very old... child.

Twilight came charging back out of the library, all tangled mane and determination, her horn surrounded by a corona of magic and yet another book trailing through the air after her. She sat directly before him and immediately buried her face in it.

“It’s the right one!” she crowed.

Spike flinched as a cloud of dust arose from the thin yellow book entitled, *Doctor Living Stone: I Presumed! The Journals and Recollections of an Adventurer and Dragon-Slayer*. He’d never have allowed it to get so dusty. Perhaps he should have a word with Owlwiscious.

“I know I read something once, there was an egg, and a purple...” she muttered under her breath, flipping pages rapidly. “Where is it, where is it, wait! No, that’s not... a-HA! This is it! Neighvember twenty-first,” she read aloud in a rushed voice, before raising her eyes and giving him a significant look, “almost exactly one hundred and twenty years ago...”

His mouth was dry as ashes.

She turned back to the dusty old memoir, her voice slowing as she read, “...’bivouacked down on the side of Smolderberg Mountain. Flushed out a spiffing young dragoness: purple, with pink markings. Lost seven porters. Lovely little fight – Purple dragon claw will look rather jolly over the mantelpiece’...”

By the end of the entry she was almost whispering. She stared at the yellowed old pages. “I read that years ago,” she said blankly. “You were teething, sleeping there in your little basket, and I didn’t make the connections. I never thought it might be...”

“Purple... dragoness...?” Spike rasped. His stomach had dropped through his feet. Ice was closing about his mind.

“Purple with pink markings,” Twilight said, her normally bright voice still muted.

“He...?” Spike began in a dead, flat voice. “That was...”

“He killed your mother,” she said. “He just killed her, just like that...”

“She killed all those porters,” he said hollowly. “She killed too. What happened next?”

Twilight swallowed hard, searching his face with worry in her deep purple eyes, and then turned back to the journal. “Neighvember twenty-third,” she read, her voice limping through the words. “Found dragoness’ clutch. Three eggs. Down seven porters thanks to the dratted beast – can’t carry all of the damn things back. Got one trophy, anyway – purple spotted affair, a real beauty. Others will die without their dam’s fire to warm them. Bloody waste. Head Porter Zephara angry about the whole bally business – nasty row after dinner’...” Twilight faltered, and stopped. There was a long, painful silence.

It was something he’d always wondered about, if only a little. He’d never known if he truly wanted the answer. Still, he’d always thought he’d feel *something* if it one day presented itself. He was sure he was supposed to feel more than just... empty. It was like he was encased in ice.

“So that’s how I came to Equestria...” he said, still in that horrible dead voice that didn’t seem to come from inside his body. “A dragon-slayer killed my mother and stole my egg, and left my other siblings to die...”

“Spike...” Twilight said wretchedly.

He jerked his head up, trying to come to terms with the hugeness of that – the awfulness. His throat felt like it was studded with thorns. “Well, I was right about one thing,” he muttered.

Twilight put a hoof on his paw, and he resisted the urge to jerk it away. “What?” she asked softly.

“I didn’t want to know,” he said, and closed his eyes as tightly as he could.

“Spike, I’m so sorry,” Twilight said helplessly. He nodded his head, and took in a giant shuddering breath.

“It’s all done with,” he said in a toneless voice. Then he snorted. “It was done with *a hundred and twenty* years ago.”

“Does this...”

He finally glanced down. She was gazing up at him, her lip trembling and her pupils huge in sympathy and worry. The sight of her almost cracked that icy shell that had formed about him.

“Does this...” Twilight repeated again, her ears drooping, “...*change* anything?”

He stared down at her, unseeing, for a long moment.

Then the previous day washed over him in a flood of warmth, and the ice melted. “No,” he said. “No, it doesn’t change a thing. So what if I don’t have another family out there? That’s... that’s okay. *You’re* my family anyway. You and the pony gang.”

She gave him a tremulous smile. “Are you going to be all right?”

He considered that, and then his eyelids pressed closed once more. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. Not yet, but I’ll be fine.”

Her hoof rubbed the back of his claw in slow, tender circles. “I’m here,” she said.

To his relief, he didn’t want to pull away any more, and when he spoke he sounded like himself again. “I know,” he replied. “Is that letter still there?”

She glanced over at it. “Had you finished? I mean, even if you hadn’t, did you want to?”

“Not really,” he said reluctantly.

“Maybe I can?”

“Be my guest,” he snorted, and lowered himself down to rest his head on his forepaws. She levitated the letter over, even as she stroked his fins comfortingly.

“Let’s see...” she said, looking at the letter with an expression mixed of anger, distaste and sadness. “We were around here, no, you read that part... here we are... oh, he writes that the records regarding Huffy are far more detailed. Her dam was the dragon of the Cindery Catacombs, and her sire was the dragon of Tanglevine Forest. Hers was one of four eggs in a clutch. Their dam abandoned them after her mate left her to return to his territory.”

“Whoa,” Spike said, taken aback. “Do dragonesses often abandon a clutch?”

“Quite often,” Twilight sighed. “Once the eggs are laid, the male starts to feel the pull back to his own territory. For the female, this is bad news. Given how possessive they are, it can be a toss-up between trying to keep their mate, or keeping their eggs. If the mate wins the toss, the dragoness will chase him and her eggs will die without her fire to keep them warm.”

Spike frowned. “Sounds awful.”

“Evolutionarily it’s not all that great either,” Twilight added, her critical scholar’s expression in place.

“Well, now I know why the world isn’t overrun by dragons,” Spike said tartly.

She leaned her head against him. “Spike, seriously,” she said, “are you going to be all right? That was quite a shocking piece of news...”

He dropped his gaze. “I just... look, I’ll think about it. But I meant it, what I said before... Nothing’s changed.”

Her madly tangled mane swung as she shook her head. “Something’s changed, Spike. You know now that your mother was the dragoness of Smolderberg Mountain, and that she was purple and pink. You know you were laid a hundred and twenty years ago, and that she died the same year. You know you had two siblings. You know that when Living Stone died your egg was donated to the School by his estate’s executors, and it stayed there in the trophy room until my exam.”

He stared at the yellow journal with anger and bitterness flickering in his heart. “I suppose.”

“And there’s another thing too,” Twilight added in a softer voice. “You know you were wanted very much.”

He frowned. “I do?”

She smiled faintly. “Only one dragon defended that nest. There’s no mention of a mate in Living Stone’s journal. That means your sire had already left for his home. But your mother was still there with your egg, wasn’t she?”

Spike raised his head a little, his eyes lighting up. “Oh... oh yeah... She mustn’t have followed him. So the eggs were more important!”

“Important even in the egg.” She nudged the side of his face.

“Well, I don’t like to brag,” he said with a fair attempt at his usual faux-modest, humorous tone. The strain in his face and voice must have been apparent, because Twilight’s expression told him he wasn’t fooling anypony. Still, she decided to let it slide, and looked back at the rest of the letters.

“Have you looked at those yet?”

“After that first one, I’m a little leery,” Spike said wryly. She laughed shortly in agreement.

“I can understand that,” she agreed. “Let’s get it over with.”

Most of the letters were horrible, and it took all of Spike’s willpower not to go spiralling back down into the dumps again. “YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN SCRAMBLED!” one blared in scratchy hoofwriting.

“HOW DARE YOU LIVE NEAR OUR FOALS AND BRING SUCH DANGERS TO OUR HOMES!” another shrieked.

“i hopes that you get ded in the chalenge dragns not belong with pony’s you shuld die or fly away to wear dragns live an not be with pony’s n.e. more,” read Spike’s particular favourite.

“You are pathetic, a dragon wanting to be a pony,” sneered yet another.

“IF THAT DRAGON DOES NOT KILL YOU I WILL DO IT MYSELF YOU ABERRATION,” was the worst, the words pasted together with letters cut from magazines and newspapers. They glared at him ominously.

He was ready to immolate the lot in disgust and fury without opening the last few, when Twilight handed him another with a small smile on her face. “Read that,” she said.

He gave her a suspicious look, and bent to read it.

“You are a true inspiration, and if I could meet you, Spike, I would shake your claw.”

He looked up, face clearing. “That’s a nice change of pace.”

“Here’s another.” Twilight passed another letter over to him, and his jaw dropped slackly as he read,

“I think yore amazing, Mr Spike, and so does my mum and dad. We think yore really brave, and I think yore really cool, and I want to be a dragin when I grow up.”

Twilight passed him the last letter silently. He took it in equal silence, and read:

“Don’t give up, Spike, our little friend (who is not so little anymore). We are rooting for you. Signed, the Canterlot Palace Guards.”

Twilight looked down at the envelope for a moment, before looking back up at him. “Good morning to you too, Spike,” she said, and gave him a crooked smile.

He smiled back ironically. “Are all our mornings going to be like this now?”

• • •

“Oooof!”

All the air was expressed out of him as he shunted the basalt block from his back with a now-practised heave. It thudded on top of its fellows. He nudged it into position with his nose, and then stepped back to view the neat row proudly. A huge square of grey stones, two blocks high, now nestled in the foundation trenches he’d dug. A gap in the square indicated where the door was going to be.

“Rarity on standby!” Pinkie Pie barked, her hard-hat in place.

Rarity looked up from filing her hooves. “Hmm?”

“Spike’s got to fire that block,” Apple Bloom said, frowning as she studied the plans. “Pinkie, can you look at this for a moment?”

“Oh, of course, of course, safety, indeed.” Rarity’s hoof-file flew into her saddlebag with a flash of her horn, and she stood to look expectantly over at Spike. “Ready!”

Spike gave her an adoring smile. “I’m always ready for you, my lady,” he said dreamily.

Her lips twitched, and he abruptly realised he’d spoken aloud. He hid his burning face as Pinkie turned back to him. “Spike,” she said impressively. “You may fire that block!”

Spike began to draw in his breath, even as Pinkie, Rarity, Apple Bloom and Big Macintosh lowered safety goggles in front of their eyes. When he was tremblingly full of air, he blasted the cube with that furious, invisible fire for as long as he was able. It began to glow dully where the flame touched it.

“Keep going!”

Spike dragged in another breath and fired at the stone’s other facets. After the flame had passed, the basalt had become black and charred, almost shiny-looking. When the whole cube had been treated, he let the fire stutter to a halt. It flickered into wavering green before petering out, and he swallowed against his dry throat.

“And that’s the foundations finished!” Pinkie Pie crowed, her hooves up in the air. “Well done everypony! I say this calls for a party!”

“Sure does!” agreed Apple Bloom.

“Uh, I have a flying lesson this afternoon,” Spike said.

Pinkie seemed to deflate on the spot, before rapidly inflating. “Okie dokie lokie! We’ll have it tomorrow! How does Sunnybank Park sound to everypony? I’m bringing cake!”

Spike looked around at Big Macintosh, Apple Bloom, Pinkie and Rarity. “Sounds good to me.” He shrugged. The others made similar noises of agreement.

“Oh, that’s so exciting!” Pinkie squealed. “I can’t wait to get started on the food and the decorations and the balloons and the streamers and the pranks and the punch and the games and the music! Oh, I’ve just GOT to run home and tell Gummy right now!”

She began to rush off, before seemingly stopping in mid-air. “Hang on, we need more ponies for a proper Pinkie-Pie party!” she exclaimed, curls snapping back from the interrupted velocity.

“Well, darling, why not simply invite more ponies?” Rarity said, rolling her eyes.

“Oh my goodness that is such a superly amazingly awesomely good idea!” Pinkie said, blue eyes huge with excitement. “I’ll invite Twilight and Applejack and Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash and Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo and oh hi, Zecora! Wanna come to a party?”

Spike’s head whipped around to see the zebra shaman smiling at them all, her saddle-baskets overflowing with strange-looking plants. “Hello there, Pinkie Pie, my dear,” she said in her warm, smooth voice. “And what is it that brings you here?”

“We’re helping Spike build his house!” Pinkie said brightly. “I’m forepony, and Big Macintosh is second in charge today, and Apple Bloom is on technical and Rarity is on safety cos you need a unicorn on safety, and Spike is doing the building!”

“I’m the grunt,” Spike said dryly.

“Oh, now I see the size of it,” Zecora said, eyebrows rising as she took in the huge low basalt square. “A house where a dragon can fit.”

“That’s the idea!” Pinkie beamed. “Anyway, we just finished the foundations, and I said this calls for a party! And Apple Bloom agreed with me, which I thought was just so fantastically terrific that I started making up plans right there for a party in Sunnybank Park, and then Spike said he had a flying lesson this afternoon and I said how about tomorrow and everypony can come tomorrow and I sure hope you can too!”

“You collectin’ herbs again, Zecora?” Apple Bloom asked as Pinkie tried to catch her breath.

“Young Apple Bloom, you are correct, these herbs and berries I collect.” Zecora nodded.

“Why don’t she ever just say ‘eeyup’?” Big Macintosh whispered to Spike. He shrugged.

“So will you come, huh, huh, huh?” Pinkie leaned to the very tips of her front hooves, her face inches from Zecora’s.

“I’m sure I’ll have a lot of fun, so I will very gladly come,” Zecora told Pinkie, smiling. The party pony gave a great gasp of joy, before she zipped away in a streak of pink lightning. Her pink hard-hat rattled to the ground seconds later.

Zecora turned puzzled eyes on them. “That response seems oh so strong! I hope I have done nothing wrong?”

“She’s just being Pinkie Pie,” Spike said with amused resignation.

“She’s always like that, dear,” Rarity said with a lovely smile. Spike stifled a longing sigh. “Oh, Zecora, I’ve been meaning to ask you something for *ever* such a long time! Do tell me, have you ever thought of growing your mane long? I have this new hat design, I can’t pull it off, but *darling*, it would be simply to *die* for on you...”

Zecora’s eyes twinkled. “You are too kind, sweet Rarity, but my mane is long as it can be.”

“Oh,” Rarity pouted. “And I was so hoping to try it out on you.”

“Does it require a longer mane? With short, will it not work the same?”

Rarity pursed her lips. “Maaaaaybe...”

“Do you still have that Nightmare Night wig?” asked Apple Bloom.

Zecora rubbed her chin with a hoof. "I think that I can dig it out," she said doubtfully, "it's somewhere in my house, no doubt."

"Oh, could you, could you please?" Rarity batted her eyelashes pleadingly. "And would you consider posing in my hat for the brochure for the upcoming summer collection?"

"With such a flattering request, my answer can be only yes." Zecora smiled.

"Yes!" Rarity crowed, before toning it down to 'ladylike' levels again. "Ahem. Oh, thank you, thank you so much, Zecora! Oh, it is going to be *marvellous*..." Rarity continued to speak excitedly to herself, lost in her own world as she began to trot briskly back to the village. "...so *thrilling*, and those stripes... oh, *I-DEA!* I absolutely must try a striped gown, so perfect for summer..."

She seemed to realise that she was leaving them behind, and turned back to call, "I'll see you all tomorrow then!"

"Creative frenzy," Spike explained as Rarity hurried off.

"She gets them a lot, Sweetie says." Apple Bloom nodded sagely.

"Um, Zecora?" Spike said then, a little shyly. She held up a hoof to stop him.

"I know what you are going to say," she said gently. "No doubt you'll say it anyway. But let me first say this, my friend: I will support you to the end."

Spike blinked. "But... why? I mean, you don't know me all that well, no offense, Zecora... and yet you were there in the square the other day, supporting me... and yeah, I was going to say thank you so much for that... but..."

She tipped her regal head, golden neck-bands clinking. "I think you are forgetting that... *I* once was shunned and whispered at. I too have had my share of stares, and rumours foul were once my cares. I know what it is like to be a dreaded curiosity."

Spike ducked his chin. "Oh," he said, subdued. "I remember."

Zecora eyed him shrewdly. "I am amazed you recall that," she said. "You were an infant, small and fat."

"Hey!" he said indignantly.

Apple Bloom hid a snicker, and Macintosh emitted a very, very quiet, “Eeyup.”

“I think she’s tryin’ t’ say that ya look a whole heap different now,” Apple Bloom said, a grin tugging the corner of her mouth.

Spike sat down petulantly. “Wasn’t that fat,” he grumbled.

“Y’ weren’t skinny,” Macintosh said.

“Well, how skinny were you as a baby?” Spike challenged.

“He was a great big apple puddin’ of a foal, if Granny’s pictures are t’ be believed,” Apple Bloom said wickedly. Her brother gave her a very warning look.

“One more word outta you, Bloom, an’ I bring out *your* foal pictures next time we got company. Even the one in the barn on th’ haybales.”

Spike’s eyes widened and Zecora leaned closer as Apple Bloom flushed the colour of a nectarine. “Oooh. This sounds *good*,” Spike said with relish.

“Oh, don’t hold back on our account, this tale you surely must recount!” Zecora grinned at her young friend.

Apple Bloom cleared her throat. “I mean, I think Zecora’s tryin’ to say that yer lookin’ pretty fit an’ sharp these days, Spike,” she said diplomatically.

Spike glanced down, before dismissing himself. “I got big. It happens.”

“Yeah, but you got skinny first cos y’ grew too fast,” Macintosh remembered. “I remember thinkin’ how could somepony so danged big an’ strong be so scrawny, back when y’ first came outta that there library. Y’ had that stretched sort o’ look some of our fillies an’ colts get when they hit a growth spurt. Y’ takin’ on more muscle now.”

Spike looked back down at himself. Maybe his chest did look deeper? “I am?”

Macintosh nodded leisurely, chewing his hay-stalk. “Yer a whole heap stronger than y’ were when you had that first lesson,” he said in his deep, easy drawl. “But y’ control it better now that y’ve done a bit o’ work on it.”

Surprised and pleased, Spike smiled at the farmpony. “Wow, thanks, Macintosh!”

“Don’t you go thinkin’ that means y’ can relax, now,” Macintosh warned him.

“No, sir!” Spike saluted sharply, still smiling.

“Come on, Bloom, gotta get back t’ the farm.” Macintosh nudged her. “Gotta get started on them pies fer Rainbow Dash’s friend.”

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes. “I ain’t ever seen a pony who likes pie so much.”

“He’s no slouch at the dinner table,” agreed Macintosh. “Be seein’ yer later, Spike, Miz Zecora.”

“See you!” Spike said as they turned back towards the town.

“I hope to see you very soon, Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom!” Zecora said.

Spike turned back to his house, studying the foundations with pride. “It looks good, doesn’t it?” he said happily. “I did those blocks myself, you know.”

“You should be very pleased indeed.” Zecora nodded as she looked over his hard work. “It looks to be all you will need.”

“Well, it will once we’ve got a bit further than the foundations,” Spike allowed. Then he grimaced. “And put a roof on it, and a door, and some walls might come in handy at some point...”

“There is a great deal left to do,” agreed the zebra, “but your good friends are helping you.”

“I’d be a mess without them,” he sighed. “It’s all gotten a bit crazy lately. Lessons and protests and dragon stuff and interviews and fan mail and hate mail and all... They’re sort of holding me together right now.”

“I cannot say I understand,” she said, and touched his forepaw with a kind hoof. “I am not a dragon in pony land. But I do surely sympathise, and I do think your friends are wise.”

“Yeah,” said Spike heavily. “They’re amazing. They’re all behind me one hundred percent; they’ve been just so supportive. Especially Twilight – I think I’d be in pieces if it wasn’t for her. Like this morning...”

He paused. His mother, his egg, Doctor Stone. He threw the thought away violently. He didn't want to think about it.

"You must be strong, my young dragon," Zecora said, eyes serious. "This thorny path you walk upon is not a road for the faint-hearted. But you must finish what you've started."

"I know." Spike looked back at the foundations of his house, and steeled himself. "I mean to."

She gave him a compassionate look. "Ah, you are still so very young, with such challenges yet to come..."

He winced. "You heard about that, I see."

She nodded. "That dragon lives not far from me, and all his movements do I see. He often leaves his smoky cave, and watches as your way you pave."

Spike scowled. "Great, Razorfang is spying on me. That's just great. Now I can add a dragon to my stalker list, along with fanfillies, reporters, photographers and anti-dragon nutcases."

"I think he only wants to see. Perhaps you are a novelty?"

"Oh, goody." Spike closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his snout between two claws. Then his eyes flew open as a wild idea occurred to him. "Zecora! Oh, horseapples, why didn't I think of this before! Zecora, could you please brew up something for me? Something to make me bigger or stronger – or fireproof even! Please?"

She shook her head reluctantly, and the wild hope died in his chest as she said, "No medicine or healing brew can have any effect on you. Your constitution's far too tough; a dragon's made of sterner stuff."

He wilted. "Well, it was worth a shot," he mumbled in disappointment.

"I only wish I could do more," Zecora said apologetically. "There is so much for you in store..."

"Tell me about it," he griped to himself.

“You have your friends to set you right,” she said. “And they will see you through this fight.”

“My friends,” he mumbled, and then straightened his shoulders. “Yeah. My friends. You know, I’ve got *another* flying lesson with Rainbow Dash this afternoon. She just won’t give up. Big Macintosh has been helping me control my strength... I didn’t really know him before, and he’s a real good friend now. Fluttershy and Applejack helped me with my fire, and it’s *so* much better, Zecora, nopony’d believe it! Pinkie and Twilight and Rarity designed my house – Rarity made me a scarf, and Pinkie’s got so many awesome ideas, and Twilight...” He stopped, his heart clenching, and then continued in a slower voice. “They’re all helping me with my house, too... it’s amazing. No dragon ever had better friends. I’m really lucky, even if everything is messy and complicated and occasionally completely and totally awful...”

Zecora regarded him for a long moment, her expression unfathomable. Then she spoke, and her voice was distant and far away. It almost sounded like she was chanting.

“There is a saying from my home. It matters not how far I roam; I see the proof of it each day, in every small, essential way. Young dragon, how it so fits you, and all the trials you now go through.” And then she leaned forward, her dark eyes boring into him. “No matter how different, strange or wild... it takes a village to raise a child.”

Spike stared at her, flummoxed by her sudden change of demeanour. “Z-Zecora?”

She gave him a small smile. “I too will be there for you, and I will help you see it through.”

He wasn’t able to muster any words, but stared blankly down at the zebra.

She turned and began to make her way through the field to the Everfree Forest path. “I will be seeing you again,” she said serenely, “at Pinkie’s party in the glen.”

“Uh, it’s at Sunnybank Park,” Spike said, still rather flummoxed.

Zecora threw an arch look back over her shoulder. “That doesn’t rhyme.”

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“SWING A LITTLE TO THE LEFT!” Applejack hollered from the ground.

“EASY FOR YOU TO SAY!” Rainbow Dash yelled back, the rope around her waist zipping and snapping in the strong wind.

“My mama didn’t bring me up to be a tugboat,” Spitfire grouched.

Spike was frozen stiff in terror, his wings locked and outstretched. Attached to him by guide-ropes around his chest were Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo, Spitfire and Soarin’. The pegasi were dragging him through the air like some sort of giant scaled carriage.

“Like takin’ a balloon for a walk, she says,” grunted Scootaloo, flapping valiantly to try and steer his unwieldy frame. Below them, Applejack and Winona ran frantically, calling instructions to his ‘handlers’. “Yeah, right! A balloon that weighs a *tonne!*”

“I’m pretty sure I weigh more than that,” Spike said through gritted fangs.

“Now he tells us,” Soarin’ sniped. “Whose crazy idea was this?”

“Who you callin’ crazy?” Dash snapped at her teammate, and he rolled his eyes before pulling against his rope once more.

“I’d really appreciate it if we could get down soon,” Spike said in a strangled voice.

“No way, José,” Dash gritted, straining on her rope. “You are gonna... fly... *today!*”

“Oh look at that, I’m flying, now can I PLEASE get down?” Spike garbled.

“You’re *gliding*,” Spitfire corrected him shortly, sweat running down her golden face as she towed him. “WE’RE the ones doing all the heavy wing-work!”

“There had better be pie after this,” Soarin’ muttered. “I’m only in this for the pie.”

“Oh, ponyfeathers!” swore Dash as Spike’s wing banked a little against the wind once more, and he began to veer to the right again. “Fluttershy, can you give me a hoof here?”

Fluttershy flew as hard as she could to the left to bring him back to straight. “Oh my goodness, oh my goodness, oh my goodness...” she puffed.

“OKAY, HE’S STRAIGHT AGAIN!” Applejack yelled from far below. Winona barked enthusiastically.

“Guys, I don’t like this...” Spike moaned. The ground was quite a long way away, and he felt powerless and vulnerable being dragged along like a massive kite.

“Tough!” Dash puffed.

“Holy horsefeathers, he’s got a lot of side,” wheezed Spitfire.

“What does that mean?” Spike asked. His whole body was rigid with fear and trepidation.

“Means you move a lot of air,” Scootaloo said, her mane plastered to her forehead with sweat. “Your wings displace a massive amount compared to ours. That’s why it’s so scootin’ hard to keep you straight in a crosswind like this.”

“Then maybe we should fly into it?” Spike said in a strained voice. His wings were burning in their outstretched position, but he didn’t dare move a single muscle.

“And turn you into Equestria’s biggest parachute?” Spitfire asked sarcastically. “Don’t you know *anything* about wind-resistance?”

“Leave off, Ess-eff,” Rainbow Dash growled.

“Sorry, Dash,” Spike whispered hoarsely.

“Next time, *remember* what I tell you, huh?” she hissed back. “Especially in front of my *captain...!*”

He cringed internally.

“Well, it’s a bit weird,” huffed Soarin’. “A dragon who won’t fly...”

“It’s not *won’t*,” Rainbow Dash said, flapping violently.

“It’s can’t,” Fluttershy said, her face apologetic.

“I just can’t get the hang of it,” Spike said. “Sorry, but I guess that makes me a bit weird.”

“You’ve got glidin’ down pat,” Scootaloo said encouragingly, hauling on her rope.

“Yay,” Fluttershy cheered – as much as she could.

“Yeah, yay,” Spike said with tight irony. “Gliding, wow.”

“It’s... an improvement... on swimming,” Dash managed pointedly.

He had to give her that one.

“Let’s try something, Spike,” Rainbow Dash said then. “Can you feel that crosswind?”

Spike could definitely feel the leading edge of pressure against the front ridges of his right wing. “Yeah?”

“Next time you feel that wing wantin’ to bank against the air, do it,” she puffed.

“I don’t know if that’s such a great idea, Rainbow,” Spike said in a strangled tone.

“Gotta try sometime,” she said.

“You’re all attached to me,” Spike said, his voice quite a lot higher than normal. “If I lose it, we all go down!”

“You’re not gonna lose it by banking on a crosswind,” Dash snapped.

“But...”

“Do it!”

Spike stifled a whimper and leaned into the wind carefully.

“Turning right, everypony!” Rainbow Dash hollered, as he began to veer around in a broad circle.

“Ohmygoooooosh,” Spike moaned as the ground spun strangely below him.

“Whoa, relax, Spike!” Scootaloo said, taken aback.

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d hit the ground as many times as I have!” Spike hollered back over the ripping sound of his wings tearing through the air.

“You’re doing it, Spike!” Fluttershy said. “That was a perfect turn!”

“You can straighten up now,” Spitfire said, unimpressed. Spike was certainly grateful that Dash had brought in her Wonderbolt teammates to help him, but boy were they making him feel hopelessly inept. Which he supposed he was, but it wasn’t nice to point it out like that.

Then again, he'd once stuffed them inside a water-tower, so perhaps they were just getting a bit of their own back.

He shifted his weight between his wings until he was flying level again, and Dash nodded to him, her face shiny with sweat. "Think you can remember that when you go broadside again?" she puffed.

He nodded meekly.

"You're doing very well," Fluttershy managed between wingbeats. "It took me far longer to learn, you know..."

"I feel – I feel *ridiculous*," he replied, changing his word choice at the last minute. He didn't want to admit to how helpless and defenceless he felt in front of Spitfire and Soarin'. The wind tried to turn him, but he mimicked his earlier motions and remained straight.

"Now you've got it!" Scootaloo said triumphantly. "Now you..."

A sudden updraft sent him shooting higher and higher into the air, and his wings locked in terror. For a moment all five ponies were dangling breathlessly at the ends of their ropes. Then Rainbow Dash reacted faster than thought, followed by the other two Wonderbolts a second later. They started to try and haul him across the updraft. Scootaloo shook her head to clear it, before joining in. Fluttershy seemed to have been dazed by the sudden jerk upwards, and she swung at the end of her rope like a pendulum.

"It's no good!" Soarin' roared over the tearing wind. "He's got too much air! We can't get him off the updraft!"

"PULL!" Dash howled. The four ponies pulled with all their might. Spike eyed the ground that was still slipping further and further away with horrified dismay.

"It's not working!" hollered Scootaloo.

"Come... ON," Rainbow Dash bit, her wings a blue blur.

Spike's pupils were pinpricks of fear as he watched the little shapes of Applejack and Winona growing smaller and smaller. The howl of the wind steadily rose in pitch and volume as they continued to rise... and rise... and *rise*...

“This column’s got to taper eventually!” screamed Spitfire. “We’ll pull him off the top of it!”

“I’m gonna be a crater!” Spike choked to himself.

Then out of the corner of his wide-blown eyes, he glimpsed a yellow and pink blur begin to turn and roll. Fluttershy, still barely conscious, was being spun out of her rope. The knots must have loosened when she was jerked to the end of it by their sudden ascent.

“Rainbow Dash!” he howled.

She couldn’t hear him over the scream of the wind, her whole body straining, all her attention on getting him off the updraft. He looked over in a panic to Scootaloo and Soarin’, who were in a similar state. Spitfire looked like she was snarling, her strain was so apparent.

He desperately turned from one to the next, yelling their names. It was no good – they were all yelling at each other, but no pony could hear anymore. With a cold, sick shock Spike realised that he was the only one who had noticed Fluttershy’s situation.

With an almost balletic grace she slid out of the rope entirely, her mane and tail trailing gracefully as she began to free-fall through the air. Spike’s vision seemed to tunnel in on her – her unfocused aqua eyes, her feebly twitching wings, her lolling neck.

A memory broke. “My pony,” he had told her, and he’d stuck his tongue out. She’d giggled.

Flames filled his mind once more.

“*Fluttershy!*” he suddenly roared in a huge gush of smoke. Without even stopping to consider *how*, he swept his wings once and ducked his head under the hooves of the ponies still valiantly trying to drag him from the updraft. Four very, *very* startled pegasi clattered against his back, their forelegs clamping to his shoulders and spines, holding on reflexively.

“Sp...ike?” Dash gasped in his ear.

He growled fiercely, and his forelegs slammed down tight against his underside as he arched himself downwards. His wings flattened against his body, his snout and neck elongating slightly, as he sped straight as an arrow for Fluttershy’s tumbling form.

“Look, it’s Fluttershy!” shrieked Scootaloo.

“We’ve gotta save her!” gasped Spitfire.

“We’re still tied to Spike!” screeched Dash.

“I’m gonna get her!” Spike roared.

“You’re gonna kill us!” Spitfire howled.

“I only wanted some pie!”

Spike ignored them all, eyes fixed on Fluttershy. His vision had seemingly sharpened under pressure, and he could see every feather in her wings, every strand of her mane.

“She’s gettin’ closer!” Dash gasped.

“*So’s the ground!*” Spitfire yelled angrily.

Spike opened his wings as he drew level with Fluttershy’s tumbling form, and the updraft caught him immediately, throwing him skywards once more. He growled as Fluttershy dropped away from him sharply and plunged headlong after her into another vertical dive, wings snapping against his sides. His whole body plummeted like a missile after his friend.

“Listen to me!” Dash grabbed the fins at his jaw and yelled directly into his ear. “You’re going to have to dive *across* the draft! Aim right at Fluttershy, and catch her in your claws!”

He shook his head in horror. He’d hurt her for sure, what with the fantastic agitation thrumming through his body and his whole mind in flames.

“You telling me that you can pick up an *egg* in those claws, but you can’t save *Fluttershy*?” Dash screamed at him.

Spike’s eyes narrowed.

Arching himself once more, he swooped neatly into the updraft in a smooth arc and grabbed Fluttershy with one foreclaw. It was as fast and simple as a swallow plucking an insect from the air.

Everypony gaped silently as he sped on through the updraft, wings still pressed to his sides, cutting through the air as true as a thrown spear. It had all happened so fast. Spike began to emerge from his furious fog, and the fear started creeping back into the corners of his mind. What in Celestia's name did he think he was *doing*?

A few dragon-lengths later the air pressure dropped dramatically.

Unfortunately, so did they.

"Okay, you're past it, you're past it, open your wings and *flap!*" gabbled Spitfire.

"Updraft's gone!" Soarin' blubbed. "We're a pancake!"

"Spike, spread 'em!" Dash hollered.

He wrenched his wings open again. Something deep inside him urged him to beat them twice, and so he did. His chest rhythmically moved in the reverse direction.

"Oh. My. Gosh," Dash breathed.

He beat his wings again, even as his neck extended to its full length once more, and three of his limbs flattened against his body tightly, the other cradling Fluttershy close to his chest.

"Uh..." said Soarin' in the sudden, shockingly peaceful silence. "What was that?"

"Spike... Spike, you're *flying*," said Scootaloo in a strangled voice.

"Don't make me think about it, or I'm gonna lose it!" he said, just as strained. He brought the claw that was holding Fluttershy's limp form before his eyes – fearing that he was going to see blood.

To his dumbfounded joy, she was whole. Even better, she was stirring. She regarded him blurrily.

"You're not a butterfly," she mumbled, eyes puzzled.

He could feel a foolish, elated smile beginning to crease his face. "Nope," he agreed goofily. "But I *can* fly... Fluttershy, I can fly!"

She blinked, smiling back vaguely. "Silly little friend, of course dragons can fly," she said.

Spike held her against him, his heart racing at the thought of losing her like that. He beat his wings again without thinking, and the extra momentum carried them across a downdraft without a bump. Part of his mind was now gibbering madly in fright, but most of it was strangely numb after the heart-stopping panic and red-tinted rage of the previous five minutes.

“She’s okay?” Spitfire asked, an apology in her tone. Spike beat his wings and nodded. It made his whole body swim strangely through the air.

“Oh, don’t, I’ll be airsick,” Soarin’ said in a green voice.

“You. Get airsick,” Scootaloo said, flatly disbelieving.

“There’s a difference between being pilot and passenger,” he said defensively.

Rainbow Dash leaned down to his ear once more. “That,” she said quietly, “was truly awesome. And for the record? Knew you could do it.”

“I don’t know *how* I’m doing it,” he answered, flustered and elated and numb all at once.

“I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, if I were you,” she snorted, before rubbing his head with rough affection.

“One question...”

“Yeah?”

“*How do I land?*”

“I did it!”

Spike tore over to the edges of the Everfree Forest in the falling night. His wings flapped joyously every few moments, and he soared upwards briefly before bounding to the ground once more, his momentum never halting.

“I did it! I did it! Wooo-*hoooo!*” he cried, launching himself skywards and beating his wings twice, then sweeping them back against his body to speed horizontally for a few moments. His feet hit the ground running, and he threw back his head in delighted laughter.

“Hey, Razorfang! Razorfang! Were you watching?” he called in exhilaration. “Did you see that? Did you see me?”

A snarl rumbled through the forest, echoing strangely. The trees rustled, their canopies trembling, and birds flew out calling mournfully as great heavy footsteps approached.

Not even such an intimidating entrance could dampen Spike’s spirits. He shifted excitedly from forefoot to forefoot, his wings half-unfurled and quivering.

The smell of smoke and fire grew closer, and the green dragon’s huge muzzle finally protruded from the trees, breaking off branches as it emerged. Spike didn’t wait for Razorfang to speak.

“I did it,” he said breathlessly. “I flew. I *saved* somepony!”

“I saw,” Razorfang snapped.

Spike threw his chest out, dizzy with pride. “Whatcha think?”

Razorfang gave him a look filled with detestation. “I was *trying* to *sleep*, hatchling.”

“Spike,” Spike corrected, rolling his eyes.

Razorfang growled thunderously. The echoes took some time to dissipate. Spike’s blood froze momentarily, but his excitement was too enormous to be squashed for long and he began to bounce on the balls of his feet.

“Seriously, whatcha think? Wasn’t it *cool*? I saved Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash said –”

“You risked your life to save some pathetic mammal,” Razorfang hissed.

Spike blinked, and then his eyes narrowed. “Yeah, I did. What do you care?”

Huge fangs gritted. “I find it intolerable that a *dragon* should risk his life for one of those... those...” Razorfang broke off, lip twisting in disgust.

Spike jutted his chin forward stubbornly. “You want to kill me,” he reminded the great dragon. “You keep saying you’re going to kill me! So what do you care what I do with my life?”

Razorfang reared up angrily, smoke billowing and flames flickering behind gritted teeth. Spike was given a sharp and chilling reminder of how mammoth the grown dragon truly was. “And you will deserve it, hatchling!” he bellowed. “You deserve death and more for that miserable stunt!”

Spike tucked his chin back in, reeling back against the blast of hot air, one eye squinting closed. Then his brow furrowed and he pulled himself up. “Now wait a minute,” he said crossly. “That was my pony, and she was falling, and I saved her. I protected what was mine, I rescued my friend, and I flew. I finally, finally *flew*. What part of this makes me deserve being barbecued?”

Razorfang panted through his nose, orange eyes slits of anger. “You could never understand.”

Spike set his jaw. “Explain it, then!”

The great dragon landed back down on his forepaws, and the *booms* as they touched the Forest floor were heard not with the ear, but rather rattled the teeth and bones. “No,” he said flatly.

Spike lifted his head challengingly. “Are you scared?”

The green wings unfurled, and Spike was treated to yet another display of Razorfang’s vastness. He shied away as the older dragon roared at him. The cavernous mouth glowed before him, the oily sheen of gas in the air, and Spike rubbed the sweat from his brow when the dragon had finished.

“You done now?” he asked, his sardonic tone not quite hiding the trembling of his voice.

Razorfang was breathing heavily, and his chest rose and fell in anger. “I will *enjoy* killing you!” he bellowed in rage, his neck soaring skywards. “Scared, indeed!”

“Ah,” Spike said shakily and defiantly. “So you *are* scared.”

Razorfang seemed to expand even further with outrage and fury, and Spike swallowed hard before saying in as firm a voice as he could muster, “You don’t get to intimidate me, just because you’re bigger.”

Razorfang leaned forward, neck snaking closer to Spike. “But I do, don’t I?” he whispered cruelly, and Spike had to force his limbs to stay still. Every muscle wanted to bolt for the safety of Ponyville.

“Look, what’s wrong with admitting you’re scared?” Spike managed, waving a claw randomly. “I can freely admit that you scare the living daylights out of me. Why can’t you admit that you’re scared of explaining yourself?”

Razorfang paused, before sitting himself back onto his haunches. His head towered over all but the very tallest of trees, and he utterly dwarfed the younger dragon. “I am not *scared of explaining myself*,” he said contemptuously.

Spike also sat back onto his haunches. “Then explain! Why do I deserve to die for saving Fluttershy?”

Razorfang ignored that, and regarded Spike for a long moment. “You need to work on your landings,” he sneered.

Spike huffed smoke through his nostrils in frustration. “Do you always ignore questions you don’t like?”

That was blithely ignored as well. “You dragged your hind feet, tripped, and ended up snout-first in that little lake.” Razorfang smirked. “You have to stretch out your forelegs to land neatly.”

Spike scowled. “It was my first landing! I think I did okay!”

“You would have done better without those useless creatures clinging to your back,” muttered Razorfang.

“We’re not going to agree on that,” Spike said through clenched fangs.

“Evidently not,” Razorfang said sourly.

“But what did you *think*?” Spike blurted, half-standing again and his wings unfurling slightly. “Did you see me dive? And I caught her and didn’t hurt her at all!”

Razorfang sighed heavily, anger still lighting his orange eyes. “It was... acceptable,” he said.

“Oh, don’t hurt yourself or anything,” Spike grouched. “I thought it was *awesome*, and Rainbow Dash said so too.”

“And who is this Rainbow Dash?”

Spike’s chest puffed up once more, and he tossed his head proudly. “Only the *fastest* flyer in Equestria, that’s all! She’s one of the Wonderbolts, and the only pegasus ever to do a sonic rainboom!”

“Ah.” Razorfang glowered. “One of your precious ponies.”

Spike bristled. “Yeah, she’s mine. Claws off.”

“With such praise from *such* a source, why do you require my opinion so badly?” asked Razorfang mockingly.

“You see any other dragons around here?” Spike threw back. “Of course I wanted to tell you! Anyway, I thought you’d be interested. You’re the one who told me about the chest thing!”

Razorfang seemed to rock backwards for a moment, eyes stricken, before he fixed Spike with a long, cool stare. “It would have been dishonourable to kill a...”

“Oh, leave off,” Spike interrupted with a snort. “I know you’ve been watching me. And you just admitted it.”

The great green dragon lowered his vast sinuous body down to the ground, and crossed his forelegs with arrogant nonchalance. “You afford me some amusement,” he said. “I have not been so diverted for nearly a century.”

Spike wrinkled his snout. “I don’t dance on request, you know.”

“Pity.”

Spike sighed. He should have known better than to expect more from a dragon who continually stated his intention to kill him. He sat back onto his haunches and glared at Razorfang. “You’re a bit of a jerk, you know that?”

Razorfang chuckled darkly.

“I was so excited about finally flying,” Spike continued, his voice growing more heated. “I was obviously an idiot to expect you to care about that. I bet you’ve never cared about *anything*. It’s all distant and dragony and killing with you, isn’t it?”

Razorfang’s eyes widened, before they slitted in anger. “You have no idea of what you are talking about,” he growled.

“Then for Celestia’s sake, explain!” Spike exclaimed.

“Fine!” Razorfang stood, abruptly immense and threatening once more. “You protect those foolish creatures! You are proud of it! You have even *claimed* them as territory! Have you any idea of what they have done?”

“Yes,” Spike said. “They used to hunt us.”

“We were numerous! We were powerful! And we hunted them, oh yes!” Razorfang bellowed. “We hunted the wretched mammals in return! And why not? They called us rogues and monsters, and forced us from our territories. They drove us away! They sent their tricks and their avalanches and their ambushes, smashing in our heads with boulders, piercing us with their harpoons and killing us as we took our century-long sleep! And you! Here you stand, swearing by their gods, saving them and calling them yours!”

“They *are* mine!” Spike retorted.

“They will use you and discard you,” Razorfang hissed.

“They *won’t*.”

“If they cannot drive you out, they will kill you!” Razorfang raged. “As they have always done!”

Spike swallowed. “They’re not all the same,” he said, and to his ears it sounded weak, even if it was the truth. “They’re my family. They’d never hurt me.” The horrible death-threat from that morning flickered to mind. He dismissed it roughly.

Razorfang bared his teeth. “Your family were *dragons*,” he snarled. “Imagine if they could see you now, little mammal in a dragon’s skin...”

“Well, they can’t, can they?” Spike said furiously. “Because they’re dead!”

“And who killed them, little hatchling?” Razorfang demanded. “*Who killed them?*”

Spike held his gaze for a moment, and then his eyes dropped to his feet.

“I thought so,” Razorfang rumbled in vicious, joyless victory.

“It was a long time ago,” Spike mumbled.

“A long time to a pony is no time at all to a dragon,” Razorfang said with silky menace.

Spike squared himself. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “They *are* my family now. They’re raising me and helping me, and they’re the ones that love me. What else makes a family?”

Razorfang glared at him, breathing heavily.

Spike regarded the furious older dragon, his mind racing, and abruptly realisation struck. “Oh,” he said blankly. “Oh, this is *personal*, isn’t it?”

Huge green claws raked at the ground. “You will leave,” Razorfang grated.

“Who died?”

Razorfang’s slitted pupils expanded in shock. “What?”

“Somepony... *somedragon* died. *Somedragon* close to you.” Spike tipped his head and studied Razorfang – his heaving chest, his wild eyes. “Ponies were behind it, weren’t they?”

There was a long, loaded silence full of hatred.

“My mate,” Razorfang eventually ground out. “My two children.”

Spike bowed his head. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

“As you say,” Razorfang bit sarcastically, “it was a *long time ago*.”

“No time at all...” Spike said quietly, “to a father.”

Razorfang's eyes slid shut with dreadful finality at that word. His mighty body seemed to stiffen with pain and a low moan escaped him.

Spike squeezed his eyes closed as well, unable to bear the sound of the dragon's mourning. It was purest agony made audible.

"They were so strong, my sons," Razorfang said in a rasping voice. "I was so proud of them. They grew to be such fine dragons... My boys, my two boys..." He swayed slightly, his mammoth head hanging low. "It has been so long, so long, so very, very long..."

Spike understood something then. Razorfang... was *lonely*. He was old, alone, sorrowing and angry – and utterly weary of being old, alone, sorrowing and angry. He peered up at the fierce, hooked face with a great pity welling in his heart. "You stayed with their mother, then?" he asked.

Razorfang snorted softly. "She had to chase me off. I returned as many times as I could to watch our boys grow, and to pay court to her again and again. Oh, but she was lovely... lovely... *lovely*. Her eyes sparkled red as rubies, she knew all the old songs and chants by heart, and she loved to fly." He opened his great orange eyes, and they were soft and longing. "She so loved to fly."

"How did it happen?" Spike asked, his voice hushed.

"She would not leave her cave," Razorfang said, rage flickering in his tone. "The mammals asked and threatened and pleaded, but she would not leave the place that was hers – had been hers for centuries – had been her clan's for time out of mind. They bided their time, and when it came, they took their chance. They waited until she began the Long Sleep, and they collapsed the cave. A... a boulder crushed her skull."

Spike's breath stopped entirely.

Razorfang continued haltingly, his deep, sonorous voice the very sound of grief. "My sons... my sons flew back to their hatching-place when they heard of it, and killed all responsible. Then the mammals rose up... and destroyed them as well."

He lifted his chin, his snakelike throat convulsing as he swallowed laboriously. "They were so young," he rasped. "They were barely grown."

"What about you?" Spike whispered, horrified.

The booming, rasping voice dwindled to a rough whisper. "I awoke sixty years later."

Spike took a hesitant step towards the giant creature. Razorfang's eyes flicked towards him warily, and Spike sat down once more. "Razorfang..." he began, and then stopped.

"There is nothing you can say," Razorfang rumbled painfully. "I told you before, you cannot possibly understand. You are barely hatched."

"But I can sympathise," Spike said, remembering Zecora's words. He bowed his head again, his shoulders slumping. "I'm so sorry, Razorfang. I'm so, so *sorry*."

Razorfang grunted, shifting his shoulders. He looked somehow perturbed by Spike's apology. "Well. Enough. It is done and gone and they are lost to me forever. But you? You have discovered something, I take it?"

Spike gave a half-shrug. "I... don't know how to feel about it," he said, feeling uncomfortable and slightly exposed. "I never knew them."

"What happened?"

"My mother died while I was still in the egg," he mumbled unhappily. "My father had left. An explorer killed her, and took my egg for a trophy. There were two others. He left them there alone."

Razorfang snarled in an undertone. "Your dam, your clutchmates. Stolen from you. And yet you still protect them."

"They're not all like that," Spike insisted. "Some are, sure, but not all. Are all dragons alike?"

Razorfang frowned. "Of course not."

"There you go, then," Spike said, nodding. "Neither are ponies."

"Surely you must wish revenge?"

"That explorer has been dead for eighty-seven years. Would punishing everypony else bring my mother back? My... clutchmates?" Spike tested the unfamiliar word.

"They were your family," Razorfang persisted.

"They were," Spike allowed. "But my family is made of ponies now. I'm not going to turn on them for the mistakes of the past. Not ever."

“I think you are foolish, little one,” Razorfang sighed, “but I cannot fault your loyalty.”

“Like I said.” Spike stood, stretching, and looked up at the night sky. Stars were beginning to wink within its depths. “They’ve raised me and helped me and loved me. I know they’ll never hurt me. They have faith in me – why shouldn’t I have faith in them?”

Green eyes met orange, and this time Spike didn’t drop his gaze. He steadily returned Razorfang’s stare. Finally, the older dragon shook his head slightly, before lowering it to his forepaws.

“We will never agree,” he rumbled darkly.

“Probably not,” Spike said sadly, and turned to go.

Razorfang’s voice made him pause. “Spike,” he said in a distant rumble, “it was a fine first flight.”

“Thanks for the help,” Spike said in a subdued voice. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Spike turned and began to lope back to the village, wings spreading for the downbeat. As he climbed into the air, orange eyes watched him go with sorrow lingering in their depths.

• • •

The next morning dawned cold and crisp, and Spike was treated to another bundle of hate-mail. He incinerated each horrible, abusive letter after reading it, and that made him feel somewhat better. As before, there were several declarations of support as well. He smoothed them out carefully, wondering if it would be the polite thing to answer them.

One in particular made him pause. It was unsigned, but the envelope was a familiar dusky blue.

*‘Don’t let anypony tell you who you are or aren’t – but don’t pretend to be somepony you’re not, either. You’re lucky to have a pony like Twilight Sparkle who isn’t too proud to tell you what you mean to her. The day I lost my dragon was the day I lost my only friend.’*

He stared at it reflectively for a moment, before getting to his feet and trundling over to the library. He knocked very, very cautiously, wary of his claws on the wooden door. Even so, it rattled on its hinges as his knuckles struck it. “Twilight?” he called hesitantly. “You awake yet?”

There was no answer. She must be still asleep, he reasoned, tucking the letters under the door carefully. Looking up at the rosy dawn, he squared his shoulders and went to start another day.

• • •

“Here’s the hero of the hour!”

Applejack clapped her hoof against his shoulder as he approached the group in Sunnybank Park. He grinned sheepishly down at her.

“Sorry if I frightened you, Applejack,” he said.

“Don’t you go apologisin’ now,” she said sternly. “Y’ scared the everlovin’ apples right off my flank, but I’m mighty glad y’ did. Poor Fluttershy’d be in a right state if you hadn’t decided to shock us all silly.”

He smiled awkwardly, feeling both proud and bashful. Applejack chuckled at his expression before shooing him towards the main body of the group. Twilight looked up from the punch, her eyes lighting up.

“Spike!” she called.

“He’s here?” Pinkie squealed, her wide blue eyes – and she could hardly miss him, he thought wryly – darting here, there and everywhere. “Oh! He’s here!” she crowed when her roving gaze finally locked on him.

Streamers and balloons were strung up in the trees, and tables covered with brightly-coloured cloths and heaps and heaps of food had been set up. Blankets were spread upon the ground, and he noted with gratitude that several had been pulled together to form a square large enough for him to lie on. Two apple barrels were set nearby. Bouncy music filled the air, and a banner was stretched over the little gathering that read, “CONGRATULATIONS SPIKE!”

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo were racing around the park kicking a ball, whilst Big Macintosh and Soarin’ seemed to be having an in-depth discussion about pie-making.

Twilight, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were clustered at one of the tables, and Rarity was reclining demurely under a large sun-umbrella with Sweetie Belle and the rather bored-looking Spitfire. Zecora was amusing a small group of younger fillies and colts with her amorphous shape-changing powders, and Mayor Mare was sitting amongst them, watching avidly and clapping her hooves more enthusiastically than any. Cheerilee looked on indulgently, occasionally speaking to Mr and Mrs Cake.

All eyes turned to him at Twilight's call, and he ducked his head under a branch carefully as he approached. "Hey, everypony!" he said, grinning self-consciously.

"Spike!" Everypony immediately left off what they were doing and rushed to him. He laughed happily as Apple Bloom tackled one of his forelegs, and Scootaloo fluttered up to his face and 'body-slammed' his nose. Twilight beamed proudly as they all clustered about him, patting his sides, cheering and congratulating him.

"...and that *dive*, Spike," Scootaloo was babbling. "I mean, *whoa*. You have got to teach me that one!"

"Well, I don't think I did anything all that differ--"

"...for your house, Spike!" Pinkie Pie was saying. "Because it's a Foundation-Finishing Party, but we're making it a Spike Can Fly Party as well!"

"I hear you have made quite the splash," Zecora congratulated him, "up in the air, with Rainbow Dash!"

"It finished with a splash, yeah." He smiled ruefully. "Landings are not my strong..."

"Darling!" Rarity trilled. "I was so thrilled when I heard! Oh, you must be over the moon! Flying – and in such dramatic circumstances...!"

"I'd be happy to take..." Spike began, only to be interrupted by Rainbow Dash.

"It was all my teaching, you know," Dash said cockily. "I'm only the most awesome teacher *ever!*"

Spike smirked at her. "You're the most stubborn..." At that moment, a pink and yellow blur threw itself against him, and he jerked backwards a little.

"Oh, Spike," Fluttershy gasped, "Oh Spike, oh Spike, oh Spike, oh Spike..." And she flattened herself against his chest.

“Are you feeling...” Spike started, concerned. He’d only seen her for a few moments after they’d hit the lake before she was whisked away by tender hooves.

“Hey, Spike, would you mind toasting the marshmallows?” Pinkie asked brightly, bouncing gently.

“Sure, no...”

“...finished in no time flat!” Apple Bloom exclaimed. “I bet yer gonna be glad when you don’t have t’ sleep in the square no more!”

“Well, yeah, but it’s really not that...”

“Dude, I hear you can cook!” Soarin’ said eagerly. “You got any pie recipes?”

“A few, but not any apple...”

“Oh, Spike!” the Mayor said, “remind me later, I have some news to give you!”

“Okay, Mayor M...”

“...yer hungry later, I got y’ some apples over there,” Macintosh said, jerking his head.

“Thanks, Macin...”

“I really am sorry about my attitude yesterday,” Spitfire said. “You saved her life.”

“Oh, all in the pa...”

“...so when Pinkie invited me, I took the liberty of inviting some of the children.” Cheerilee smiled. “They were so excited about meeting you, you should see the artwork from that day!”

“I’d love...”

“Psst! Want some help?”

Spike turned to see Twilight smiling slyly at him. He nodded desperately.

Twilight put her hoof to her mouth and whistled sharply. “Everypony, one at a time!” she called.

“Thanks, Twi,” he said gratefully.

“You were starting to look sorta panicked there.” She smiled, reaching over Fluttershy’s head to rub his face fondly. “You could have done that yourself, you realise.”

“Can’t whistle,” he said innocently. “Fangs, you know.”

A click and flash from the bushes made the congregation turn their heads sharply, and Spike stifled a groan.

“They still botherin’ you, Spike?” Applejack asked.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck with one forepaw and looking around at everypony reluctantly. “I can’t really stop them. I’ve gotten used to them following me everywhere. You’d think they’d get bored – I mean, I spent the whole day practising. Not exactly thrilling photo material.”

“Perhaps we could get you a disguise?” Pinkie suggested.

Spike gave her a long look that spoke volumes.

“We’ll just ignore them,” said Rarity firmly.

“Sorry,” Spike sighed.

“Now, it ain’t your fault, Spike!” Applejack stamped her hoof. “You can’t be held responsible if *some* ponies have their heads stuffed firmly up their...”

“Applejack!” Rarity hissed.

“Never mind all that, it’s time to party!” Pinkie exclaimed, throwing her hooves up in the air. Streamers flew from them in a colourful waterfall, and everypony laughed and cheered again before moving towards the food, the games or the blankets once more. Happy chatter filled the air.

“Great party, Pinkie!” Spike said appreciatively. “Thanks so much!”

“Well, you’re the most specialest, hard-workingest, nicest and flyingest dragon I know!” She beamed.

“Pinkie Pie, he’s the *only* dragon we know,” Rainbow Dash pointed out in an undertone, eyeing the punch.

“You’ve done a heck of a lot in a short time, sugarcube,” said Applejack.

“I’ve sort of *had* to,” he replied ruefully, and sat on the picnic blankets spread out for him, bracing Fluttershy against himself carefully. Something began to patter up his tail, and he jumped, startled. Turning, he saw three or four of the small foals frozen in the act of clambering up his back.

“Oh, are they annoying you?” Cheerilee asked. “Children, come away from there...”

“Nope, they’re fine,” he answered, smiling at them. “They just surprised me, that’s all.”

They grinned back impishly, and one immediately began to slide from his back all the way down his tail.

Fluttershy had not stopped hugging him the whole time. He rubbed her feathered back gently. “Are you feeling better?” he asked her. “I tried to ask before, but everypony was sort of talking all at once.”

She made a little noise of assent and nodded, before she looked up at him with wide eyes. “Oh, thank you so much, Spike,” she said fervently. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Well, I guess you’re not afraid of me now, if you ever were,” he joked.

“Oh no.” She shook her head and smiled shyly. “I’ll never be afraid of you, Spike, even when you’re a huge, gigantic, terrible, enormous, teeth-gnashing, sharp scale-having, horn-wearing, smoke-snoring, could-eat-a-pony-in-one-bite, totally-all-grown-up dragon.”

He blinked. “O... kay.”

She hugged him again, her wings spread to plaster against his chest. “You’re my friend,” she said simply.

A soft smile crossed his face, and he lowered his head to nuzzle against her mane. “Thanks, Fluttershy.”

He looked up to where several ponies were dancing along to Pinkie’s jam. There was Pinkie, naturally, and Soarin’, Apple Bloom, Rarity and Sweetie Belle – and watching at

the edges was Big Macintosh. He seemed a little uncomfortable, and Spike remembered that the laconic pony didn't really attend many parties. An idea dawned.

"Hey, Fluttershy, you wanna dance?" he asked.

Twilight's head turned faster than light, her eyes wild. "Uh, Spike, you probably shouldn't..."

He huffed. "Not *me!* Fluttershy! Just because I'm not going to doesn't mean that everypony shouldn't!"

Twilight looked apologetic. "I shouldn't have said that – you can dance if you want to..."

"I don't wanna even *think* about how ridiculous I'd look," he snorted. "No way, Twilight, especially when there's a camera in every tree."

She laughed. "You have a point."

He batted his eyes mockingly. "Do you think I'd make the front page? I'm giving myself ten points every time I do."

"You're pretty ahead on points, then. What's an editorial worth?"

"Eight. And any lifestyle piece is worth three."

"I wouldn't mind dancing," Fluttershy spoke up timidly. Spike raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Twilight.

"Great! You two go have fun, I'm going to stay here and eat some apples," he said cheerfully. Then he glanced back, and added, "Also, I'm working on a career as a playground slide."

Twilight shot him a look that demanded an explanation, and he returned with one that said, 'Later!' She sighed gustily, before taking Fluttershy's hoof and dragging her over to the grass where the other ponies were dancing.

Spike craned his neck to see Macintosh's reaction. Initially awkward, lumpen and out-of-place, the red farmpony abruptly drew himself up straight, dark green eyes zeroing in on Fluttershy immediately.

Spike grinned to himself in triumph. *Bingo.*

“What are you looking so happy about?” Sweetie Belle asked in a muffled voice as she flopped down before him, her mouth full of candy.

Spike schooled his face hurriedly. “Oh, just happy to see everypony,” he lied brightly. “So... how’s that production coming along for Miss Can Belto?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s *Bel Canto*.”

“Oh.” Privately Spike thought ‘Can Belto’ suited Sweetie better. “So? How’s it all coming along?”

Sweetie Belle seemed to quiver with suppressed excitement for a moment, before she launched into a detailed, enthusiastic and candy-garbled description. Spike listened, nodding, even as he kept one eye on the dancing ponies and the circling Big Macintosh.

“Oh, come *on*,” he said to himself. He hadn’t thought Macintosh would be so nervous!

“Sorry, what was that?” Sweetie Belle asked, peering up at him.

“Nothing, nothing,” he said hastily.

Pin-the-tail-on-the-pony was being set up against a big old oak. Spike glanced casually over Zecora, Rainbow Dash and Spitfire setting it up, his eyes not really taking it in. Then he had to look again, double-taking to see that the picture wasn’t a pony, but a dragon, and it was at least four times larger than it usually was. They must have made it especially so that he could play as well.

His heart constricted with happiness. *This* was what he had meant. Razorfang could never understand this.

As Sweetie Belle went to fetch more candy – he’d asked for anything made by Twist, if available – he dragged one barrel of apples closer and began to deftly pick them up one by one. He could toss them quite easily from his claws to his mouth now, and munched away contentedly.

“Whoa,” he heard from a nearby bush.

Spike smirked to himself. Let the whole of Equestria know it: He was an *expert* at eating apples.

He checked the dance floor once more, and had to bite his tongue – which really *hurt* – to stop himself from cheering when Macintosh finally screwed up the courage to ask Fluttershy to dance. Twilight caught his eye, shook her head and smiled.

“Meddler,” she mouthed at him. He shrugged, before grinning merrily, popping another apple into his mouth.

“Twist made some canes! I grabbed a bundle,” Sweetie Belle said, trotting back with a basket floating before her. “And look! Somepony got you this!”

Spike peered into the basket to see a pile of jewels topped with – his mouth began to water – a couple of black opals. “Oh, wow...” he said, staring at them with huge eyes.

She laughed at his expression. “You should see your face!”

He reached into the basket as carefully as he could. His index claw got caught in the straw, but he unhooked it easily and drew out one of the iridescent, lovely-looking rare gems. “They... look... delicious,” he drooled, staring at the flickering colours, the trapped fire in its dark depths. It was almost hypnotic.

Sweetie giggled. “So eat ‘em!”

*Almost* hypnotic – and very definitely delicious.

The afternoon filled with laughter, fun and games. Spike proved that he was *still* terrible at pin-the-tail-on-the-pony – or dragon. A purple-and-green-frosted cake was brought out, and Spike blew out the candles very, very cautiously as Mr and Mrs Cake looked on with baker’s pride. His water-barrel had been pranked – somepony had added green food dye. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie both looked rather too ingenuous to be innocent.

He was talking to Spitfire about some sort of harness for the air-rides he would give when the Mayor bustled up to him. “Oh, Spike,” she said briskly. “Congratulations, my dear! I’ve been up to see the foundations, and I must say work seems to be going well!”

“Thanks, Mayor Mare,” he said, relaxed and happy. Then he remembered that she had some news, and he tensed a little. “Did you need to tell me something?”

“Oh, of course,” she said, a hoof swiping at her eyes. “Yes, oh, thank you for reminding me! Now, it’s not the best news...”

“And the crowd is *shocked*,” Spike muttered sarcastically.

“...but never you fear! We’ll refute these silly ponies yet!” The Mayor stamped her hoof down. Spike regarded her a little wearily.

“The ‘Parents’ group again?” he asked.

“Why, how did you know?”

“Maaagic,” he drawled.

She gave him an odd look, before continuing. “Well, they’ve started rallies in the surrounding villages, I’m afraid. A petition is being circulated through Equestria as we speak, and they have repeatedly stated that they intend to continue their vigil in front of the Town Hall. That really is terribly inconvenient, you know,” she remarked, and Spike sighed.

“I can imagine,” he agreed.

“The worst-case scenario would be if these rallies surrounding Ponyville decide to converge on us at the same time,” the Mayor said thoughtfully. “The policeponies of Ponyville have been made aware of this possibility, and are on maximum alert.”

Spike winced. “And how do they feel about it?”

The Mayor looked surprised. “Why, Spike – they’re as much a part of Ponyville as the rest of us, and they’re just as adamant that you should stay.”

Spike blinked, astonished. “Wow, really? But I’m making so much work for them...”

She snorted. “To hear Detective-Inspector Nosey Parker tell it, it’s about time Ponyville stopped being the dullest beat in Equestria.”

“Ponyville, dull?” Spike raised an eyebrow sceptically.

“For the policeponies,” clarified the Mayor. “Parasprite infestations, Ursa Minors and major magical incidents don’t tend to come under their jurisdiction.”

Spike thought about that for a moment, and then shrugged. “So, we just wait and see whether all these rallies join up and head here?”

The Mayor inclined her head. “That’s about all we can do at the moment,” she said. “That petition worries me more than the rallies, though. That will circulate throughout the whole of Equestria, far further than our little corner of unrest.”

“I’m going to the Grand Galloping Gala this year,” said Spike. “Princess Celestia thinks that if I can influence all those important ponies, they might swing the situation for me.”

She gasped. “The Princess!”

Spike nodded. “Yeah,” he said, a little in awe himself. “I know.”

The Mayor frowned then. “Well, I hope it works,” she said dubiously. “I really do.”

Spike gave another gusty sigh. “Me too.”

Pinkie flopped down before him, puffing from her exertions on the dance floor. “Pheeeeew!” she panted. “That was super-duper! You should really...” She stopped, her eyes narrowing. “You were happy before. Why aren’t you happy?”

Spike shifted a little. A foal skidded down his tail, whooping. “Uh, well...”

Pinkie rounded on the Mayor, her eyes flashing. “Why did you have to do that?” she said indignantly. “He was happy – and now his smiles are all topsy-turvy!” She blew at her curl in exasperation. “A-*gain!*”

“Pinkie, it was important news,” he said reluctantly.

“I am terribly sorry for springing it at your party,” the Mayor apologised. “I should have told you earlier, perhaps.”

“No perhapses, sort-ofs or maybes about it,” Pinkie said, curls bouncing as she shook her head. “You know what’ll cheer you up?”

“A party?” Spike suggested, his lips quirking.

“Oh, look! Here’s one I prepared earlier!” she giggled, and tugged a little at his forepaw. “Come on! It’s time for marshmallows! You get to show off with your fire, and we’ll all be ‘oooh!’” She pressed her hooves against her cheeks in comical amazement.

He laughed. “Just like that, huh?”

“*Ooooh*,” she repeated solemnly, eyes round and earnest, tugging at his forepaw again.

His laugh grew a little louder. It was hard to stay down when Pinkie was around. “Okay, point me in the direction of these marshmallows,” he said, standing slowly to allow the last few foals to skid down his tail. “And prepare to be amazed,” he added, pointing a claw to the sky.

“That’s the spirit!”

Marshmallows were roasted in no time, followed by apples which were then smothered in cinnamon. It was actually a lot of fun to toss the apple in the air, blast it, and catch it, and Spike was surprised to find that he was enjoying himself immensely. “You know, I’ve really missed cooking,” he told Twilight.

“Well, what’s stopping you?” she asked, leaning against his side and licking cinnamon off her hooves.

“Uh, I can’t fit in the kitchen?” he said pointedly.

“Spike, you can cook without a kitchen,” she scoffed. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

She made him dig a little pit, and then she lined it with rocks and twigs. Bananas were sliced into two lengthways, sprinkled with chocolate and wrapped in foil. Then she made him blast the rocks until they glowed, and the foil-wrapped packages were nestled amongst the ashes.

“There,” she said in satisfaction.

“I would have added some butterscotch sauce in there,” he said critically. “Maybe some nutmeg.”

“Yes, oh mighty head chef. You see either of those at a party?” she huffed. “We’re working with what we’ve got here.”

“Okay, okay, touchy,” he said, holding up his claws.

After ten minutes had passed, Twilight suggested he fish out the packages. The banana was smooth and softened, and the chocolate had melted.

“If you don’t want the foil, I’ll have it,” he said eagerly.

“It’s all yours,” she said, shaking her head.

The bananas were a resounding success, even if they weren’t the easiest thing to eat with hooves. Everypony ended up with a smudge or two of chocolate around their mouths. Rarity almost went into a hoofkerchief frenzy trying to clean them all up.

The sun had well and truly set by the time the party wound to its inevitable close. Spike sighed contentedly, full of apples, cake, gems, candy, marshmallows, banana and foil. “That,” he said drowsily, “was awesome.”

Pinkie burped. “Uh-huh.”

“Manners,” Rarity snapped, before covering her own mouth surreptitiously.

“I don’t think I can move,” Soarin’ said.

“Where’s Fluttershy?” asked Apple Bloom, yawning.

Spike grinned against his chest.

“She went for a walk,” slurred Scootaloo, “with...”

“We’ve got to clear this all up!” Spike interrupted loudly.

Twilight rolled her eyes at him. “Subtle as a sledgehammer,” she whispered.

“Working under pressure here!” he whispered back.

“Eh.” Rainbow Dash waved a hoof dismissively. “Cleaning shmeaning.”

“Yeah!” Pinkie agreed, flopped over on her back. “Cleaning shmeaning bleaning feaning cheening dreaning pleaning...”

“It has to happen, Pinkie dear,” Mrs Cake said.

There was a collective groan from the rest of the party-goers. “I do believe I ate a lot,” Zecora muttered, “and now I’m feeling not so hot...”

“Well, sooner we start, sooner we finish,” Applejack said, hauling herself to her feet with a groan.

Pinkie made a disconsolate sound, and also got to her hooves. “Okie... dokie... lokie...” she managed, and started to pack the leftover food into one of the baskets.

Spike lurched upright, and then sat heavily on his haunches. His stomach was uncomfortably full, which was a rare occurrence these days. “If you hear a great big boom tonight,” he remarked as he slowly began to pull down streamers, “don’t worry, that’ll just be me. Exploding. From too much food.”

“Great party,” Scootaloo agreed groggily.

All the tables, baskets and party paraphernalia were eventually stacked inside Big Macintosh’s wagon, and the picnic blankets were piled on top. Sleepy foals were ushered away by the Cakes and Cheerilee, who softly called their goodnights.

“Where in the hay is that durn’ brother o’ mine,” Applejack muttered. “He’s got to get this thing back t’ Sugarcube Corner.”

Spike ignored Twilight’s knowing look with lofty disdain. “I’ll do it,” he offered, and walked forward to the wagon. Heaving it under his foreleg again, he began a three-footed stagger back into the town.

“Landsakes, kiddo, I didn’t know you could do that.” Applejack tipped her hat back to watch him.

“S’how I get the wagon back to the farm,” he puffed. Urgh, he was starting to feel a little sick. Perhaps the foil had been a bad idea? He considered it. Nah.

The walk back to Sugarcube Corner seemed a lot longer than usual to Spike. Of course, the fact that he was full to the eyebrows and hoisting a wagon could have had something to do with that.

They bade farewell to Zecora once they reached the Town Hall. The camped protestors watched them with glittering, malevolent eyes under their snapping banners and signs. They didn’t attack, but neither did they say a word – which was almost more oppressive. Spike could feel their glares against the scales of his back as they turned down the street to the bakery.

Eventually Sugarcube Corner rose up before them, and Spike lowered the wagon with a sigh of relief. “That’s a *lot* easier when I haven’t eaten so much,” he said.

“Well, that’s that then,” Dash said, yawning. “Night, everypony, and congrats, Spike! Now we work on landings, and gettin’ you some totally radical moves!”

“Landings first,” he said emphatically.

• • •

Spike was woken from his sleep by the sound of hooves approaching. He jerked himself upright.

“Who’s there?” he called anxiously. The conversation with Razorfang and the death-threat in his mail flickered through his mind. He backed away a little, his wings unfurling unconsciously. “Who is it? Show yourself!”

“It is I, Luna,” came a voice in the shadows.

Spike almost collapsed with relief. “Oh Princess... I mean, Luna... oh thank goodness. You scared me out of my scales!”

She was barely a suggestion in the darkness. Tints of light glanced from her silvery shoes, her cutie mark and her glossy dark eyes. “You are far more wary than you were last time I visited,” she said.

“Well...” Spike sat down and tried to calm his racing pulse. “A lot of stuff has happened since I saw you, Pri- I mean, Luna.”

The light of the waxing moon caught her smile. “I have been reading over my sister’s shoulder.”

Spike ducked his head. “I know.”

“You have claimed Ponyville and its ponies as your territory,” she said calmly, moving to sit gracefully beside him. “You worry about the challenge, and wished to know whether my sister or myself could affect the outcome with our magic. You have sought information regarding your egg. You have become an object of fascination and scandal for the press. The ponies arrayed against you have become more numerous.”

“That’s not even all of it,” Spike muttered. She cocked her head, her crown glinting.

“There is more?”

He sighed, his head dropping forward. “Yeah,” he said reluctantly. “But before we talk about it, could we pretend there’s nothing wrong for a couple of minutes, and that we’re just two friends saying hello?”

Her laugh chimed like silver bells. “Of course we can,” she said. “Hello Spike.”

“Hello, Pri- Luna – I’m sorry, I keep *doing* that...”

“You will become used to it,” she assured him.

He was glad for the darkness that hid his blush. It was just so... *presumptuous*. He cleared his throat. “How have you been?”

She folded her hooves before her. “I have been well. And you?”

“Uh...”

“Is this couple of minutes not complete?”

“Not yet,” he said hurriedly. “How’s Canterlot?”

“Quite busy,” she replied, obviously humouring his need to talk about something else. “A delegation from the Eyrie arrived earlier this week, and they are proving troublesome. The Griffons wish to secure a presence in Equestria. Their high mountain peaks are not as fertile as ours, and their population is expanding.”

Spike remembered Rarity’s words upon meeting Gilda. “I thought Griffons were rare?”

“They are compared to my little ponies.” Luna smiled.

“I bet those are some complicated negotiations.”

“You would be correct.”

“That reminds me, actually,” Spike said thoughtfully. “Where’s Wyrmsstadt?”

She looked at him, eyes narrowed. “You have had dealings with the ambassador?”

He shook his head. “No, but it was in your sister’s last letter. The one everypony from here to Appleloosa has read,” he added sourly.

“Wurmstadt is beyond the borders of Equestria, high in the Firestorm Ranges,” Luna said.

“And that’s a dragon city? Where the government is?”

She tilted her head. “Very few dragons would lower themselves to shoulder such menial and selfless responsibility, and even fewer would ever consider leaving their traditional territory to do so,” she said. “There is no formally recognised dragon government, and the Wurmstadt is not a council, nor is it a city.”

He frowned. “It’s not? What is it then?”

“The Wurmstadt is the oldest and the greatest of the ancient dragon caves,” Luna said matter-of-factly. “It is inhabited by the eldest dragon living, the dragon of the Wurmstadt. She is the source of the greatest clan in the world, and she is the one who looks after dragon interests, as it were.”

He blinked.

“They say she has grown strange in her old age, and that is why she assumed the duty,” Luna continued. “Yet her majesty and might is unchallenged. None would dare gainsay her. She has taken it upon herself to speak for all dragons – but always through her ambassador. She rarely ventures from her glittering caves. When she does, she blots out the whole sky.”

“Whoa,” Spike breathed, flopping back down onto his elbows. “That’s... whoa.”

“It was she who brokered the treaty with my sister.” Luna raised her eyes to her starry night. “I saw it all from afar. Dragons ceased to be hunted as rogues and monsters, and ponies were allowed to live safe and untouched within a dragon’s territory. It is still quite a recent treaty, only a century old, and not all dragons have adapted as easily as ponies. Their generations turn far, far more slowly.”

Spike was silent, thinking. The clans – Princess Celestia had mentioned the clans. Magicians too. She had said they would be interested in him: a dragon raised by ponies undertaking an old and traditional challenge. She had said the Wurmstadt’s ambassador would want to convince him to leave Ponyville, leave Equestria. And go where? To the Wurmstadt, to this ancient dragoness?

He gritted his fangs. Fat chance of that. He was *never* leaving Ponyville.

“Is this relevant to those things you do not wish to talk about for a couple of minutes?” Luna asked.

“I guess a couple of minutes is up,” he grudgingly relented.

“Then would you please tell me what has happened?” She leaned forward, and the cool strange feeling of her mane brushing against his forepaws made him tremble.

“Uh...” he said, “I found out where my egg came from. It’s... not a nice story.”

She lowered her eyes. “Ah.”

“I also discovered why Razorfang despises ponies so much,” Spike continued in a subdued voice. “It’s not a nice story either.”

She raised her silver-clad hoof, and placed it comfortingly upon his. The metal was cold, and he shivered again.

“I’ve had it running through my head ever since,” he sighed. “That awful letter made things ten times worse. I was *finally* beginning to forget about it at the party, and then the Mayor told me...”

“What is it she told you?” Luna asked.

“That the surrounding villages are also holding rallies,” Spike said heavily. “Plus there’s a petition against me... and it’s circulating throughout all Equestria!”

She was still, her eyes closed and her face stony.

“Oh, but there’s some good news,” he added with a half-hearted show of optimism. “I finally got the hang of flying.”

Her eyes opened, and she smiled at him. “Well done.”

He smiled crookedly back. “Thanks. Oh, and the foundations for my house are finished.”

“So the situation is not as black as you paint it,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“I think I’m beginning to realise that nothing’s ever completely one way or the other,” he said with another sigh.

She inclined her elegant head. “This is true. Very wise, Spike.”

He blushed a bit more. “Um. Thanks, Pr-Luna. That’s sort of what Twilight said too.”

“Twilight Sparkle thinks you are wise?”

He snorted. “Mostly I think she thinks I’m growing up too fast.”

“Everypony thinks their child grows up too fast,” she said softly.

He stared at her for a long moment, and then asked hesitantly, “Luna?”

“Yes, Spike?”

“I...I keep wondering what my parents would have thought of me,” he blurted in a rush. “And I don’t *want* to care about it because Twilight is my family now, but still, I can’t help but *wonder*. Would they like me? Would they be disappointed? Or angry that I’m not” – he swallowed – “not much like other dragons?”

She looked at him compassionately. “I am so, so sorry, Spike... but we will never know.”

“I’ll never know,” he repeated in a small voice, and then bowed his head once more.

She leaned against him, offering the comfort of her presence. Above them, the cluster of stars she had called the Dragon twinkled against her glorious night.

*Mr Spike  
c/o Ponyville Square  
Ponyville*

*Dear Spike,*

*Some information has come to light concerning Huffy. I have been following up your suggestions from the last time we spoke, and there have indeed been some clues as to her whereabouts.*

*When she ran away ten years ago, she and Trixie were performing in Palfreyton. Most ponies (including myself, I am ashamed to admit) believed that Huffy must have run into the nearby Palomino Woods. Yet when those woods were searched, there was no sign of her. Further, the Palomino Woods have had no unexplained fires or noises since her disappearance.*

*However, Palfreyton is only three days' canter to the great Brumby Bushlands, and that is a different tale. There have been three different fires in that huge, sprawling forest, the first occurring almost exactly ten years ago – three weeks after Huffy ran away. There is a pall of smoke hanging over the western edge of the Bushlands that has not moved for the last six years, which would be consistent with Huffy's maturation. Finally and perhaps most conclusively, there is a rumour circulating the nearby villages concerning a 'great and powerful' creature that lives within it. As the Brumby Bushlands have always been home to strange and unusual beings, these signs have unfortunately been overlooked.*

*Tomorrow I intend to enter the Brumby Bushlands and discover whether the creature spoken of is Huffy. I am counting on her remembering me, even though our meeting was long ago and she was very young. Several other members of the RSCPD are accompanying me. If you do not hear from me in three days, please inform the authorities of my actions.*

*Thanks to your suggestions, Spike, we may finally be close to finding a dragon we failed so many years ago. It is worth any risk.*

*Sincerely,  
Just Cause  
President, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons*

• • •

Spike heaved backwards at the stump. It came free far more easily than he was expecting, showering clods of earth from its roots as it tore from the ground. Big Macintosh's eyebrows rose slightly – the only reaction visible.

“Might be that we need to go back t’ the drawin’ board,” he said in his slow, deep way.

Spike let the stump of the old apple tree fall from his claws. “Huh?”

“Well, bein’ that yer stronger than y’ were, p’raps we need t’ do a few more exercises?”

Spike screwed up his face. “If you think so,” he said.

“Now, don’t be like that,” Macintosh said. “Won’t take nearly so long as y’ won’t be startin’ from scratch.”

“I guess,” Spike allowed.

“Use these stumps fer practisin’,” Macintosh suggested. “Try applyin’ yer strength slowly instead o’ all in one go.”

Spike eyed the next one, and nodded. “Right.”

He dug around the stump, his claws easily digging through the rich musty earth, before setting them firmly around the base. Then he very slowly leaned back. Applying his strength incrementally was harder than it sounded, and he had to restrain the urge to yank the thing out immediately. The stump jerked slightly as he plied it with a little more, and then came free in a rain of soil.

“That’s more like it.” Macintosh nodded approvingly.

“How many more?” Spike asked, throwing the stump aside.

“I’d say there’s only ‘bout two or so more. Won’t take y’ no time at all.”

Spike rubbed at his forehead with the back of one forepaw, leaving a streak of dark dirt, and moved on to the next. “Okay then, stump, you are comin’ *out*,” he told it, and began to slowly employ his strength, his muscles gradually tightening.

“Must say, it’s right kind of you to offer t’ do this,” Macintosh said, chewing his hay-stalk.

“No... problem,” Spike replied absently, concentrating on keeping the tension escalating smoothly instead of jerkily.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed what yer doin’ about the place.” Macintosh leaned back. “Yer bein’ a real help t’ us, Spike.”

The stump came free, the long taproot sliding out from the ground. “Well, you’ve been helping me.” Spike shrugged, and moved on to the next stump. “It seems only fair to help you back, yeah?”

“But t’ move the water-tower, rake the fallow fields fer plantin’ with yer claws, pull up these ol’ stumps, heat up that water fer Granny... seems a little...” Macintosh tilted his head back, searching for the words. “Y’know?”

“Just... trying to help...” managed Spike, gripping the final stump and beginning to pull.

Macintosh eyed him steadily. “An’ it hasn’t escaped me that yer bein’ a help in other areas too.”

Spike pulled the stump free, and gave Macintosh an artless look as he dusted his claws off. “Don’t know what you mean,” he said innocently.

Macintosh snorted. “Don’t play dumb wi’ me, Spike. I saw y’ pushin’ Miz Twilight an’ Miz Fluttershy t’ dance at that party.” He adjusted his heavy collar, before a tiny smile flitted across his large red face. “Don’t think I can thank y’ enough fer it.”

“So it went well?” Spike asked. “Your walk?”

“It did,” Macintosh allowed, “an’ that’s all I’m sayin’ on that subject.”

Spike squashed the little shout of delight bubbling up inside him. “I’m glad.”

“Eeyup, well,” mumbled Macintosh with a mix of happiness and uncomfortableness.

Spike snickered to himself, and began to pile the stumps. “What should I do with ‘em?”

“Charcoal, y’ think?”

“Charcoal it is.” Spike nodded. Taking a few paces back from the pile of gnarled old wood, he took a deep, measured breath and roared at them for a couple of seconds. Green fire flickered over the stumps, and it caught immediately.

“Nicely done,” Macintosh complimented him.

“Thanks,” Spike said modestly.

“What have y’ got planned fer the rest o’ the mornin’?” Macintosh asked as they watched the old stumps burning merrily.

Spike picked dirt from his claws, his shoulders slumping a little. “Well, Twilight wants to have a sort of brain-storming session about the... the fight,” he said. “We’re all meeting after lunch. I’m hoping somepony comes up with *some* sort of strategy, because I got nothin’.”

“I see,” Macintosh said. “Well, y’ got some clever friends, an’ no doubt they’ll come up with somethin’.”

“I’ve got my claws crossed,” Spike agreed. “I just wish we could think of something to do about all the stupid press as well.”

“They still not lettin’ up?”

Spike growled. “They’re staking out the gate of Sweet Apple Acres as we speak, waiting for me to start back into town. I’m sick of everything I do being front page news. Has that burned long enough, do you think?”

“Eeyup.”

Spike dug briskly into the ground for a moment, and then began to shower the burning woodpile with earth. The flames doused almost immediately, and smoke began to rise as a neat pyramid of soil formed around the former bonfire. He blew out the flames that still rose from the top, and stepped back to view it. Within the cairn of earth the wood would continue to blacken and burn, but at a far slower rate. “Might need to keep an eye on that for a day or two,” he said, frowning at it.

“I’ll be doin’ that.” Macintosh walked forward to stand alongside him, his head tilted. “Ever thought o’ charcoal burnin’ as a trade?”

“Along with everything else?” Spike gave a short laugh. “Maybe I can fit it in somewhere.”

“Spike!”

The call came from within the rows of apple trees, and Spike jerked his head around to see Apple Bloom racing at full gallop towards them. “Oh, Spike, y’ ain’t ever goin’ t’ believe it!” she yelled.

“Bloom, slow down,” Macintosh scolded. “Y’ gonna trip.”

“I ain’t gonna trip, Big Macintosh!” She scowled at her brother as she neared, her sides heaving. “Spike, it’s all over Equestria!”

Spike hid a wince. “Hooray, more news?”

“Yeah, but this is different!” she exclaimed as she halted before him. “Sapphire Shores...”

“Hang on – *the* Sapphire Shores?” Spike interrupted.

“She’s gone an’ written a song about y’!” she said with wide amber eyes.

“A song?”

“Yeah! It’s called ‘Full of Fire’ an’ it’s so sad an’ nice,” Apple Bloom enthused. “It’s all over the radio, an’ everypony’s playin’ it!”

“It’s sad?” Macintosh asked, brows knitting.

“F-full of *Fire*?” Spike squawked. *Oh, ponyfeathers!*

“Oh, it’s *so* sad,” Apple Bloom said wistfully. “S’all about wantin’ to stay with yer friends, how yer full o’ fire to be with ‘em an’ protect ‘em even though the whole wide world don’t want y’ to... almost made me cry, I don’t mind admittin’. It’s all slow an’... an’ *poignant*, all about a tragic sort o’ hero, carryin’ on against the odds, all alone an’ heart-broken an’ brave...”

“Apple Bloom,” Spike said uncomfortably. “I’m... er, right here...”

“But it was sooooo sad!” she sighed dreamily.

“I have... a song written about me. By Sapphire Shores. A big, tragic, sad song,” he said blankly. Then he shook his head. “My life is so bizarre.”

Macintosh seemed to be having a coughing fit.

“An’ the chorus is so *romantic’ly tender an’ movin’*,” Apple Bloom continued with a soulful expression. “It goes, ‘Cos I got a heart under these scales that’s beatin’ only fer home, an’ at the end o’ the day I don’t wanna be alone... An’ I’m tellin’ y’ true, I’m not so different from you, why can’t y’ hear me saaaaaay... I’m full o’ fire t’ staaaaay,’” she warbled. Horribly.

Spike closed his eyes in mortification. “Oh... *shoot*.”

Macintosh’s coughing fit was getting worse.

“I’m never going to live it down,” he said. “Never. Twilight is going to torture me *mercilessly*.”

“Ah.” Macintosh straightened up somewhat, wiping his eyes with his hoof. “Aha, uh, well I’m sure she wouldn’t...”

“She would!”

Macintosh began coughing again.

“Oh, horseapples, Pinkie will sing it bouncily at me,” Spike said in horrified realisation. “And Rarity will be kind at me, and Fluttershy will say it’s nice, and Applejack’ll hide her grin, and Rainbow Dash will laugh *forever*.”

Macintosh doubled over, tears squeezing from his eyes.

“You might want to get that cough checked out, Macintosh,” Spike growled.

Apple Bloom gave him an adoring sort of smile. “Just wait ‘til Sweetie Belle hears! I bet she’ll perform it fer the whole village!”

Spike turned on his heel and began to march towards the gate. “I gotta go.”

“Spike?” Apple Bloom called after him, her tone puzzled.

“Later!” he said, his face violet with embarrassment.

“Okay...” she said dubiously.

He was greeted by the now-familiar flash of camera bulbs as he neared the gate of Sweet Apple Acres. "Spike! What do you think of the new hit single from Sapphire Shores, the pony of pop?" one press-pony asked.

Spike let his head drop to his chest and groaned loudly.

• • •

Twilight greeted him with a smirk tugging the corner of her mouth.

"Don't," he warned her.

"I see you've heard the news," she said, eyes twinkling.

"Just. Don't," he said, and sat down heavily on the cobbles, pulling his wings over his head with his forepaws. "I'm never coming out," he said in a muffled voice. "I'm staying under here forever. Just build around me, okay?"

She giggled. "Oh, Spike, it's not all that bad..."

A green eye glared at her between folds of wing. She burst out laughing. "Okay, okay, so it *is* that bad. Still, it could get some ponies to change their minds about you, and that's a good thing, right?"

"Twilight," he growled. "It's called *Full of Fire*. *Full of Fire*, Twilight!"

She snickered, and nudged his wing. "I know," she said wickedly. "How much of it have you heard?"

"Too much," he moaned.

"Did you like the bit about 'soaring above my sorrows'..." She began chuckling again. "I think that's my favourite line."

"I hate everything and everypony," Spike said.

"Come on out," she coaxed. "We've got to get started on this planning session."

"You're all going to be snickering at me," Spike said mournfully. "The whole of *Equestria* is snickering at me. And I thought it was bad before..."

"Spike," Twilight said gently, "no pony's snickering at you."

“We’re snickerin’ at that totally uncool, un-rad and un-awesome *song*,” Rainbow Dash’s voice said. Spike peeked out from under the trailing edge of his wings to see her swoop in to the square. There was a smirk on her face as well, so Spike clamped his wings back down.

“Well, look at this, wouldja?” she said. “Big old scaredy-dragon, scared of a silly little song.”

“A song,” he grated through the folds of his wings, “by Sapphire Shores. About me. Called *Full of Fire*.”

Twilight burst into laughter again. “Oh, sorry, sorry!” she gasped, trying to calm herself once more.

“Sure you are,” he grouched.

Dash was definitely sniggering now. “Well, looks like you’re not actually ‘soaring above your sorrows, flyin’ on wings of hope’...” she quoted with what Spike felt to be intolerable smugness.

Twilight fell backwards into another gale of laughter.

“Now, that’s not very nice,” Applejack’s voice piped up. “Teasin’ on poor Spike just cos some fool filly wrote a bunch o’ hooey about him.”

“And put it on the radio,” guffawed Twilight.

“All... over... Equestria!” Dash hooted, before joining Twilight in another round of giggling.

“Save me, Applejack,” Spike whimpered. “They’re destroying my will to live.”

“Come on out o’ there, Spike,” she said comfortingly. “I won’t let ‘em, what was it... break the heart under them scales...” And the farmpony too began to chuckle.

Spike growled. His friends? Sadists.

“You guys!” Pinkie Pie’s voice squealed. “You guys, have you heard it? Isn’t it just the most catchy hoof-tapping party-popping danciest tune you ever heard? I’m gonna put it in my jam – first song, pride of place! – and if anypony asks I’ll be all, ‘That’s all my

friend Spike!’ and they’ll be all, ‘WOW, Pinkie Pie, you know Spike?’ And I’ll be all ‘Hey, sure I know...’ Hey, why is Spike under his wings? Is he hurt? Oh no, he’s not hurt, is he?”

“Depends on what you mean by hurt,” Applejack chortled.

“He’s dead of embarrassment,” Spike said, muffled. “RIP Spike.”

“Ooooh,” Pinkie said.

“He’s apparently staying under there forever,” Twilight said weakly. Spike could just imagine her wiping tears away from her eyes.

“For-EV-er?” Pinkie said, horrified.

“Oh dear,” said Fluttershy’s voice. “Forever, goodness, that’s quite a long time...”

“Well, the poor darling,” Rarity’s voice said sympathetically. “Such a mortifying thing to happen, and so *tacky*...”

“Not. Helping,” he snapped.

“Spike, please come on out,” Twilight coaxed him. “Promise we won’t laugh anymore. Look, it’s all out of our systems, okay? Come on out, and we can get started on this challenge...”

Spike hesitantly unfurled his wings, peeking out at them. He was dreadfully aware of his violently blushing face and humiliated expression.

Five mares stifled a snicker. Rainbow Dash wasn’t so restrained and rolled over, kicking her legs as she convulsed with hilarity.

“Ignore her, darling,” Rarity said, though her lips were twitching. “She’s just jealous she never had a song written about her.”

Dash sat up abruptly, bristling with indignation. “Hey! I could totally have a song written about me!”

“You see?” Rarity said, her eyes rolling skywards.

Spike tried to control his burning face, and gave up. “I. Am. SO. Embarrassed,” he said.

“Sorry, Spike,” Twilight said. “It’s just...”

“It’s an awful song, I get it,” he sighed, his wings flopping dejectedly behind him.

“Actually it’s a really good song,” Pinkie piped up.

“It’s only because we *know* you that, well...” said Fluttershy shyly.

“It don’t fit you in the slightest,” Applejack chuckled. “It’s all sad an’ tragic...”

“Don’t get us wrong, you’ve got some of that goin’ on,” Dash interjected.

“But it doesn’t exactly... mesh with the Spikey-wikey we’ve known for so long,” Rarity said.

“The one who’s funny, snarky and occasionally silly, snores like a thunderstorm and does things like streak dirt over his forehead and forget about it,” Twilight finished fondly.

Spike rubbed at his head, and his forepaw came away black with soil. He blushed even harder, if possible. “Just... well... thanks, guys, but... seriously, *please* don’t quote it. Ever.”

“You got it,” Dash grinned.

“Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!”

“No problem, sugarcube.”

“Certainly not! Repeat that vulgar thing?”

“Oh, of course not, if that’s what you’d like...”

“Blackmail material for years, wasted,” Twilight said.

“You’ll get yours, Sparkle,” he threatened. She smiled sunnily.

“I look forward to it. Now, shall we get started?”

Spike sighed explosively and folded his wings on his back neatly. He carefully avoided the sympathetic, amused eyes of his friends as they settled down around him. Twilight’s horn glowed briefly, and a quill and parchment slid from her saddlebag. “Okay then,” Twilight announced. “I think we should start by listing the known weaknesses and strengths of our combatants...”

“Who?” Applejack whispered to Pinkie.

“Spike and Razorfang,” Twilight clarified.

“Oh. Why didn’t y’ just say that, Twi?”

“She likes showing off her education.” Spike couldn’t resist the dig after all that teasing. Twilight gave him a mock-glare.

“Oh, snap. Now, can anypony think of anything?”

“Well, Razorfang’s reaaaaally big,” Spike said thoughtfully.

“Size,” Twilight muttered, writing it down.

“But...” Spike screwed up his face. “I don’t think he’s as fast in the air as me. At least, it didn’t seem so when I saw him fly that one time. Maybe it has something to do with how much air he displaces?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Dash said. “It’ll take him longer to get in the air as well. Kinda like how I can get in the air faster than you... or anypony else for that matter.”

“Speed, lift-off faster.” Twilight scribbled. “Hmm.”

“Definitely stronger than Spike,” added Applejack.

“Oh yeah,” Spike agreed fervently, remembering gigantic green claws raking the mountainside as though it were sun-warmed butter. “Loads stronger.”

“Would he be as agile, though?” asked Rarity thoughtfully. “Spike threaded his way through all those barrels last week, after all...”

Spike could feel his cheeks heating again, and he ducked his head a little. “Uh, I don’t think he’s all that agile,” he mumbled. “He seems kinda old, to tell the truth. He’s got a *lot* of reach on me, though.”

“Reach,” Twilight repeated as she wrote, “agility... strength...”

“How about your fire?” asked Fluttershy. “Can he do that green-white fire, or the invisible one?”

Spike frowned. “I don’t know. I’ve seen him flame a few times, but his fire’s always been, y’know, normal. Big, but normal. Really, really, *really* big... but red. Not green.”

“Ah,” Twilight said in a business-like way. Spike recognised her lecturing tone with resignation. “That’s another side-effect of being hatched by magic, Spike. Your flame is a different colour, and acts as a conduit for small, inanimate objects, like letters. Razorfang obviously hatched naturally, and so his fire has no special ability.”

“Except the ability to turn me into a piece of toast,” Spike said pointedly.

“Ahem, well,” Twilight said, her eyes shifting back to her list. “Yes, apart from the... obvious.”

“Didn’t you once say you were fireproof?” Pinkie asked.

“Sorta,” he hedged. “Normal fire’s okay, and of course my fire can’t hurt me, but...”

“Razorfang’s singed him before,” Twilight reminded them. “Remember? When he was a baby. He can be burnt.”

“It all depends on the fire,” Spike sighed. “And unfortunately... dragonfire’ll do it.”

“Still, that means *your* fire’s just as likely to get *him*.” Rainbow Dash shrugged.

“Did you ever see that fireball he blew at me?” Spike demanded. “He’s got a lot more flame than me, let me tell you.”

“I bet he ain’t as clever with his claws as you,” Applejack said.

Spike frowned. “I don’t think so. But he’s a lot bigger than me, and his scales are a lot harder...”

“Armour,” said Twilight in realisation, and began writing again.

“He only has to be lucky once,” Spike said glumly. “I have to be lucky *all* the time.”

“Now, please don’t think like that, Spike,” Fluttershy said.

“You’re twice as awesome as that mean ol’ bully!” Rainbow Dash declared.

“Unfortunately he’s five times as much dragon,” Spike said dryly, and rubbed at his eyes. “This doesn’t look terribly optimistic, you guys.”

“Well, we haven’t finished yet,” Twilight said. “What else do we know about him?”

“Could you make him so terribly cross that he loses his concentration?” Rarity suggested.

“Well...” Spike said, “probably. He’s got a real short temper. But...”

“But...?” prodded Twilight.

“I don’t much like the idea of doing that,” Spike confessed. “It doesn’t seem... right.”

“Keeping your opponent off-balance is a perfectly acceptable strategy under the circumstances,” Rarity said with a touch of indignation. Spike squirmed.

“Yeah, I guess...” he said, troubled, “but... it doesn’t seem right. The sort of things I could use to make him angry...”

“Are the sort of things you *shouldn’t*,” Pinkie said perceptively.

“That’s right,” Spike said in relief, glad that *somepony* understood it. “I mean, if I brought up his family, or his territory, it would be a sure-fire way to get him seeing red... but...”

“That’s very principled of you, Spike, but can you really afford to have such high-minded morals in this situation?” Twilight asked him with scarcely-concealed worry.

“Probably not.” He sighed again. “But it doesn’t matter. I just couldn’t stand it if I did that to anydragon else. It’s... it’s just *wrong*.”

“Very decent of yer, Spike,” Applejack said dubiously.

“Very suicidal too,” grumbled Dash.

Spike ignored that. “What else have we got?”

“Hmm, well, your aim is no doubt better than his,” Twilight said thoughtfully.

“I can attest t’ that,” Applejack said. “Darn good pupil.”

“You can swim!” Pinkie offered brightly.

“Not really appropriate to the situation, Pinkie,” Dash pointed out.

Spike met Twilight’s eyes. “Hang on,” she said slowly. He nodded, before leaning towards the party pony intently.

“What do you mean, Pinkie?” he asked.

“Well, you could lure him to a lake or river because you’re so much *zippier* than him,” she said, bouncing gently, “and that’d put his fire out for a little while, wouldn’t it?”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Applejack said enthusiastically.

“Perhaps you could use your aim to get mud or something in his eye?” Fluttershy suggested.

“Great idea, Fluttershy!” Twilight enthused, writing furiously.

“Can you fly while you’re carrying a rock?” asked Rarity.

Spike frowned. “Don’t know,” he admitted. “I can try...”

“Well, you could drop one on his head,” she said with satisfaction. In response to the resultant disbelieving looks, she sniffed, a lofty expression on her face. “Just because a pony is *ladylike*, doesn’t mean she can’t –”

“Suggest braining a dragon with a rock?” finished Dash, and Rarity pursed her lips.

“Well, if you will *insist* on using such a common sort of phrase,” she said haughtily.

Spike lowered his eyes. He wasn’t all that keen on that idea either.

Rarity noticed. “What, is that one no good as well?” she asked, nonplussed. “It’s simply not my day, is it? Do remind me not to design anything this afternoon, it’s sure to be atrocious.”

Spike rubbed the back of his neck, his mind awl. “It’s a *good* idea, Rarity,” he said. “They both were. It’s just...”

“Spike?” Twilight nudged him.

“He’s had a really rotten deal, all right?” Spike burst out. “His family were killed, and he’s been alone for ages and ages and ages and it’s turned him all sour inside. He’s so *lonely*, Twilight. He helped me with the flying, yeah? And he’s told me a lot about being a dragon, even though he might turn on me any moment if I stick my foot in it. He spies on me just for something to do, I think. I interest him. I’m the first *new* thing he’s come across in Celestia knows how many years...”

“Spike, you can’t forfeit your whole life just because you feel sorry for him,” Twilight said.

“I know! I just... I don’t get it. I don’t get *him*,” Spike said, and slumped over onto his belly and elbows.

“You an’ everypony else,” Rainbow Dash muttered.

“Maybe that’s it, then,” Twilight said, gnawing the tip of the quill as she thought. “Maybe you need to ask somepony who’s not a pony about him...”

“I don’t know any other dragons, Twilight,” he said wearily. “Razorfang’s got this issue with explaining himself. I don’t think he’s likely to spell it all out for me.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” She shook her head. “Ask the Wyrmsstadt ambassador at the Gala.”

“Oh, right.” He blinked. “I forgot about that.”

“Well, you’ve got a lot on your mind,” Rarity said kindly. “All this press, the protests, the challenge, all that work...”

“...That song...” interjected Pinkie.

“Yes, *thank you, Pinkie*, that song, your house...”

“I get the picture,” Spike said, feeling rather overwhelmed hearing it rattled off that way. “Holy guacamole, how did everything get so complicated?”

“You outgrew the library,” said Applejack dryly.

“Oh.”

“Did the Princess send the tickets?” Fluttershy asked.

“Yeah, yesterday,” Spike said. “Seven of ‘em, as before.”

She stifled a small whimper.

“Come *on*, Fluttershy, it’ll be fine,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Oh my goodness,” she murmured nervously, eyes downcast.

“Hey, it can’t be worse than strolling in after somepony’s written a completely embarrassing song about you,” Spike said with a wry smile.

“I suppose,” she sighed.

“Control,” said Pinkie suddenly.

“What?” Six pairs of eyes fixed on her curiously. Pinkie leaned forward, her face uncharacteristically serious.

“That’s what Spike’s been doing all month, isn’t it?” she said, eyebrows high and blue eyes wide. “Learning control. That’s what he’s *really* got over silly cranky lonely old Razor-face.”

“Razorfang,” Twilight corrected.

“Potato, eggplant.” She shrugged breezily.

“Eggplant?” Applejack wondered to herself.

“Control,” Spike repeated sourly. “Yeah, that’s a word I know and loathe.”

“That’s gotta be worth more than size and strength and fire and all that... thatness,” Dash said, tossing her mane.

“I think...” Fluttershy piped up, before subsiding timidly.

“No, go on, Fluttershy,” said Twilight.

“Well,” Fluttershy said, “I think – with dragons, that is – that you have to be very brave, and stand up to them. They respect that... I mean, that’s what I’ve noticed, I could be wrong...”

“Good thing our li’l Spike’s the bravest dragon there is, then!” said Applejack.

“Yeah,” Spike said with a sinking feeling. “Uh, good thing.”

“Hmm.” Twilight tilted her head, regarding her list with a pensive expression. “Well, that’s a great start,” she said finally. “Good work, everypony! I’m sure we’ll be able to get something out of all this.”

“Keep thinkin’ about plans, you guys,” Rainbow Dash ordered, a touch of the Wonderbolt in her voice. “We’ll stump this big bully yet!”

“I do hope we were able to help,” said Fluttershy.

“Thanks so much,” Spike told them all sincerely.

“Are you feeling more confident now?” asked Rarity. He gave her a shy little smile.

“Well, a bit,” he replied, not really wanting to confess to the dread building somewhere in his stomach. He was just so outmatched, no matter how they plotted and planned.

“Good t’ hear,” Applejack said heartily.

“I have to get back to the animal shelter,” said Fluttershy. “I really am so sorry...”

“Don’t be,” Spike said as the others also began to stand. “Thanks for all the help.”

As everypony made their goodbyes, Rarity gestured to Spike to lower his head to her level. “Spike, darling, I wonder if you’d come by the boutique tomorrow,” she said.

“Another scarf?” he asked in amazement, and she laughed, waving one hoof elegantly in dismissal.

“Oh no, dear, not this time... but it *is* a surprise for you,” she said airily.

“I get another surprise?” he said, awed. Rarity gave him a demure little smile.

“You’ll see,” she said mysteriously.

Rarity waved with practised grace and began to make her way back to Carousel Boutique. Spike straightened up, staring after her wistfully. She was so very... small.

“What’s on your mind, Romeo?” Twilight asked softly.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking it off. It didn’t matter.

Twilight began to sing under her breath. “I’m not so different from you, why can’t you hear me say... I’m full of fire to staaaaay...”

“That’s *it*,” he growled, rounding on her. She shrieked with laughter and cantered for the safety of the library, a juvenile dragon tearing after her and shouting threats.

• • •

*The Great and Powerful Trixie,  
Cob & Co Coach House  
Seaddle*

*Dear Great and Powerful Trixie,*

*As you've probably guessed from the size of this letter, this is Spike. I'm writing for two reasons: First, to thank you for your sentiments. That's the most honesty I've ever seen from you, even if you couldn't sign to it. We've had our differences, but your letter showed a different sort of pony, one who is willing to admit to her mistakes and move on. I'd like to be that pony's friend.*

*About your advice: I'm definitely trying not to let anypony's opinions tell me who I am, but it's not always easy, especially when you're such a big target. I know I'm the luckiest dragon in history to have a sister like Twilight, and she means the world to me too.*

*The second reason I'm writing is to tell you that I might have news of your own sister. I've been told the story of yourself and Huffy, and there's a slim chance that you may be reunited with your friend after all these years.*

*I'm not sure if you remember your dealings with Just, the leader of the RSPCD. He's been following up some leads I suggested in locating Huffy, and he believes he has found a trail. I hope to have confirmation in a few days time, if all goes well. I sure hope it does. I hate to get your hopes up if this lead doesn't pan out, but it just didn't seem fair not to tell you.*

*I'm sending this the normal way, but if you want to contact me a bit faster, you can send it via magical signature (that's how Twilight puts it, I don't understand it myself). It'll be sent through my fire that way.*

*Sincerely,  
Spike*

• • •

*"Oh... my!"*

Mayor Mare stepped off onto solid earth once more, a foolish grin on her face. "Glad you enjoyed it," Spike told her cheerily.

“Oh... my!” she said again, her eyes sparkling and her mane swept back by the wind into an aerodynamic cone.

“Let me take care o’ this,” Applejack whispered to Spike, and led the stunned and beaming Mayor away with gentle hooves.

“So, who’s next?” Spike looked up at what once had been quite a long queue, but had now dwindled to only three or four ponies. The rest were sitting on the grass above the cliffside, watching and laughing and talking after their flight. “Only four? Okay, hop on up.”

“You sure y’ can carry me along w’ three others?” Big Macintosh said dubiously. “I ain’t exactly no light-weight.”

“Piece of cake,” Spike said, crouching down once more. “Come on, everypony, on you get!”

“My turn, my turn, my turn!” Sweetie Belle said with glee, stepping lightly onto Spike’s knee and then skittering over his back to where seats had been strapped.

Spike had gotten used to the odd feeling of metal-shod hooves on his scales. “Strap yourself in, now,” he said to Sweetie as Macintosh gingerly tested Spike’s knee with one large shaggy hoof. Turning back to the big red stallion Spike huffed, “Come *on* already.”

Macintosh looked a little put-out. “Jest makin’ sure,” he said defensively.

“It’s fine, I’m strong enough, I promise, come *on*,” Spike said. “Did you want to fly or not?”

That decided him. Macintosh scrambled up Spike’s side as quickly as he could, strapping himself into one of the seats with astonishing speed.

The last two waiting to be seated were a pair that Spike wasn’t familiar with. He smiled as unthreateningly as he was able as they hesitantly made their way towards him. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Spike.”

“We know,” said one of the ponies in a drawling, state-the-obvious sort of way.

“I’m Lyra Heartstrings,” said the other pony, ducking her head shyly. She was a mint-green unicorn with a streaked mane. Her cream-coloured friend straightened, tossing her pink-and-blue curls.

“Bon-Bon,” she said.

“Nice to meet you,” Spike said, and jerked his head towards his harness. “All aboard?”

The pair rather tentatively began to clamber up his side, placing their hooves delicately, and Spike snorted. “You’re not going to hurt me, if that’s what you’re being so cautious about,” he remarked. “Tough scales, you know.”

“Oh,” Bon-Bon’s voice said sheepishly. She yanked her friend up Spike’s side, and they grabbed the seat before Macintosh. Spike turned his head to peer down at everypony, neck arching.

“Could you move over to the right a little?” he asked Lyra. “I’m not exactly evenly balanced.”

She looked a little startled, but shunted over within the makeshift seat and strapped herself in with a flare of her horn. Spike smiled. “Thanks.”

“Right,” said Scootaloo, flying to a point above Spike’s head and addressing his four passengers. “These are the safety rules. You better listen up, because every dragon is different, and the rules won’t be the same if you fly on another one.”

“Is she kidding?” Spike heard Lyra whisper to Bon-Bon.

“In case of emergency, *don’t* – and I repeat *don’t* – jump off Spike. We have a unicorn standing by if he hits a sudden downdraft or something...”

“I’m fine with downdrafts,” Spike protested.

“...but she can’t catch all of you *and* a dragon, so just stay put. Keep your seatbelt on at all times, and the pilot better not tell you to take it off, otherwise he’s lookin’ at a tail-kickin’.”

“Who gave you this job anyway?”

“I volunteered. Now, *shhh*. Please keep your hooves close to you at all times, and please don’t tickle the pilot mid-flight.”

“Did you make all this up too?” Spike asked, eyebrow raised.

“I’m doin’ my civic duty,” Scootaloo said piously. “Cheering, whooping and yells of ‘YEAH!’ are strongly encouraged, and you may talk to your pilot as long as he’s not bein’ a grumpy-pants. Which he is, so don’t talk to him.”

“You are in so much trouble.”

“*Full of Fire*, Spike.”

His claws bunched in the soil of the clifftop as he blushed. “I hate you,” he grumbled.

“I know,” she said sweetly. “Lastly, though yelling is encouraged, it is advised that you keep your mouth shut for the lowest hundred metres or so, cos swallowing a bug often offends.”

“Are you done?”

“I’m done.” She grinned.

“Twilight?” Spike turned his head around to where his sister stood. Her hoof was pressed against her lips, and her eyes were watering slightly. “Oh, go on, laugh,” he said wearily.

Her hoof flew away and she immediately burst into chuckles. “Oh...” she gasped, “that’s... going to be the end of any... argument from now on...”

Spike rolled his eyes heavenwards. “This’ll pass, it’ll pass, it’ll all pass,” he muttered to himself.

“Hate to say it,” Lyra said shyly, “but it’s made double platinum.”

Spike’s head thudded to the ground heavily as everypony began to giggle at the spectacle of their dragon embarrassed beyond belief.

“Okay, all right, leave ‘im be,” Applejack said sternly, though mirth danced in her green eyes. “I promised I wouldn’t laugh at him about that silly song no more, an’ I won’t. Twi, you quit that right now before you hurt his feelin’s. All o’ you, cut it out. Spike, I think yer ready fer lift-off... leave these hay-brains behind until they’ve come to their senses.”

Spike shot her an endlessly grateful look. “Applejack,” he said, “I am now your slave forever and ever.”

“Get on with yer, flyboy.” She shooed him. “Twilight, pull yerself together now. You ain’t able to save squat all doubled over like that.”

“Ohhh...” She breathed out the last of her laughter, pulling herself together. “I’m sorry, Spike... it’s just...”

“Hilarious, I know,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I guess it’s okay from *you*, though. I’d be wondering who replaced you if you weren’t teasing me about this.”

She perked up. “Did you just...”

“That is *not* permission,” he said hurriedly.

She raised wide purple eyes to his. “Did I say that?”

“Are we flying this *year*?” Sweetie Belle asked. “I’ve been looking forward to this!”

Spike shook his head sharply, refocusing on the matter at hoof. “Right. You ready?”

“Ready,” she nodded, and set herself at the edge of the cliff. “Which way this time?”

He squinted down at the ravine, the dam blocking one end. “That way, I think,” he nodded towards it.

“What is it with you and water?” she asked.

“Insurance,” he said, spreading his wings. “Rainbow Dash is still at rehearsal, in case it escaped your notice. Okay, in three, two, one...”

His legs pushed away from the clifftop with a mighty thrust, and his wings beat once, twice, three times, before filling with a soft zephyr that carried them serenely through the air.

The cliff-start wasn’t necessary for these flights, but with her usual flair for the dramatic Mayor Mare had insisted on it. The ravine could easily be seen from the town, and the spectacle of a dragon flying ponies around all afternoon might soften a few of the protestors’ hearts. Just as she had predicted, she had been one of the very first to get an air-ride. She’d loved it so much she hadn’t stopped lining up all afternoon.

The ponies on his back all drew in a loud breath as the ground dropped away from them, and Bon-Bon whimpered as the ravine opened up below. Spike ducked his head a little

and then swooped upwards, his wings tipping open to the sun, before levelling. “Yeaaaaah!” Sweetie Belle whooped.

“Not bad, huh?” he threw back over his shoulder, banking a little to turn towards the dam.

“This is...” Macintosh sounded completely overawed.

“Wow,” Lyra breathed. “The world is so...”

“Far away,” choked Bon-Bon.

“Beautiful,” Lyra stressed. “This is amazing! Thank you so much, Spike!”

“You’re welcome,” he called back, and beat his wings twice more to gain some more height. “Everypony okay back there?”

“I...” Macintosh gasped.

“Big Macintosh seems to be catching bugs,” Sweetie Belle giggled. There was the *snap* of a jaw being closed, and Spike chuckled a little as well, picturing Macintosh’s face.

“Is it always like this?” Macintosh asked, a note of wonder in his voice.

Spike thought of his first flight, and winced. “Uh, depends on the weather, really,” he said evasively.

“It’s so peaceful,” Lyra said.

Spike considered that as he beat his wings once more and then locked them, ghosting through the air. The breeze was warm and gentle, belling under his wings easily and carrying them aloft through clear and silent stillness. He could hear it ruffling at the ponies’ manes, and zipping and snapping at the stretched edges of his wings. It *was* peaceful.

“I never thought of it that way,” he said.

“You’ve been too busy showing off,” Sweetie Belle said, her hoof digging him in the side.

“Hey, I resent that,” he said defensively. “I’m *not* showing off, I’m just...”

“I know, Spike, just teasing you. I get it.”

“I don’t,” Bon-Bon said, sounding confused.

“Spike’s been havin’ some problems with some neigh-sayers,” Macintosh began to explain.

“Anypony who hasn’t been living under a rock knows that,” Bon-Bon snorted.

“All those protestors in front of the Town Hall,” said Lyra.

“Right,” agreed Sweetie Belle.

“Well, this might go some way towards changin’ their minds,” Macintosh finished.

“I’m just trying to help,” Spike said.

“Well, I’m appreciating it,” said Lyra. “This is *wonderful*. Look, you can see our reflections in the dam!”

Spike glanced down. His own face, his body elongated and rigid, skimmed over the surface of the glittering water.

“Look at those wings,” whispered Sweetie Belle.

Spike blinked. “What...?”

“Spike, you look...” Macintosh paused.

“What?” His brow furrowed. “I look what? Really purple? Really tired? Really big? What?”

“Oh no, not those,” Bon-Bon said, her voice hushed.

Spike wrinkled his brow. “Do I still have dirt on my forehead? I thought I got it all off...”

“Spike,” Sweetie Belle said. “What they’re trying to say is...”

“You look... magnificent,” said Lyra quietly.

Spike almost forgot to breathe. “I *what?*” he squawked.

“Well, nopony’s ever gonna accuse y’ of bein’ vain,” Macintosh drawled.

Spike looked down at his reflection once more. He tried to regard himself dispassionately, as though he were looking at somepony else. It was hard to overlook all the changes in himself that he had resented for so long.

And then it *clicked*. His wings, broad and motionless as he glided, were huge and splendid in the sunlight. His neck and tail moved with sinuous grace, his powerful claws tucked against his long and gradually strengthening body. His head was stretched towards the horizon, framed by his fins. His scales glittered like underwater jewels.

He gaped for a moment, and then grinned fiercely. Bright white fangs glinted back at him. "Lookin' good, Spike, lookin' *real* good," he murmured in wonder. It had been a very long time since he'd last said *that* to his reflection.

"Maybe I spoke too soon," Macintosh muttered dryly.

"You seeing it now?" Sweetie Belle patted his back with her hoof.

"Yeah," Spike breathed. "Wow... how come I never..."

"Too close to the problem," Bon-Bon said sagely.

"That's..." Spike regarded himself with a touch of awe. "I look..."

"You look like a dragon," said Lyra.

"Surprise, surprise," Sweetie Belle said with a lilt of amusement in her voice.

"Everypony's wondering what Carousel Boutique's gonna do with your shed skins, you know," Bon-Bon said. Spike blinked, his eyes jerking away from the water.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"It's all over *Clotheshorse Magazine*."

"Every fashion magazine is writing about it," said Sweetie Belle. "Rarity hasn't stopped gloating for *weeks*."

Spike glowed for a moment at that thought. "Well, if Rarity..." he began.

Abruptly at that moment some sort of dark, fast-moving shape came hurtling past them. It sprang out of nowhere, moving so rapidly that he never saw it coming. It passed barely

a pony-stride from his head, shooting up through his vision with deadly intent. Spike yelped in alarm and banked left, his heart leaping into his mouth. “What was *that*?” he gasped as he turned sharply, his wings beating frantically for more height.

“There!” yelled Lyra, her hoof visible in the corner of his eye as she pointed. He followed it to see some sort of wicked-looking spear tumbling back down towards the dam.

“That’s a harpoon!” Sweetie Belle shouted with sudden anger.

“Har-harpoon?” Spike spluttered.

“Celestia above,” Lyra gasped.

“They might have another!” blurted Bon-Bon.

“If it gets Spike, we’re all dead,” Lyra said in horrified realisation.

“Spike, get outta here!” Macintosh roared. “Back t’ the village! Go!”

“Hold on, everypony,” he said unsteadily, his mind reeling in shock, fury and fear. He tipped his weight further left and banked on his wingtip, veering sharply around to face the cliff once more. He could make out the purple and orange blurs that were Twilight and Applejack, and the rest of the crowd were all converging upon them, peering over the cliff, calling to the airborne dragon and ponies, and pointing at the harpoon now splashing into the water.

He beat his wings as fast as he could. “Keep an eye out,” he barked, his pulse juddering in his ears. The cliffside drew ever closer as he shot towards it like a bullet. “They might try again!”

“Can you see anypony down there?” Bon-Bon hollered.

“No!” Lyra yelled back. “We’re going too fast!”

They were speeding like a missile now, Spike’s wings pushing the air behind him with frenzied force as he raced for the cliff. Rage was clawing at his mind, rage that somepony would *dare* endanger his ponies, but it was drowned under the freezing fear that a second shot might come at any time.

“Almost there!” Macintosh shouted.

“We’re gonna crash into all those ponies!” Sweetie Belle shrieked.

“Everypony, move back!” Spike roared as he backwinged at the edge of the cliff. Twilight, her face pale lavender, ran towards him instead.

“Are you okay? Are you okay?” she yelled frantically to him. “Spike, are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” he said in a quaking voice.

Her eyes were wide and wild. “Is anypony hurt?” she yelled. He shook his head, backwinging furiously.

She seemed to sag on the spot for a fraction of a second, before drawing herself together. Her horn glowed, and invisible hooves pushed the crowd back gently. Spike lifted himself over the lip of the cliff and thudded to the ground, immediately sinking to a crouch. His whole body was trembling, he realised somewhere under his shock.

“Those cowards!” Twilight hissed in fury, her forelegs immediately wrapping around his neck. “Those cowards, those pathetic cowards...”

Spike tried to slow his madly hammering heart, tried to stop the gasping that seemed to judder up through him from the soles of his feet. “That was a harpoon,” he said thickly as she held his head tightly. “A harpoon.”

Somewhere, far away, somepony was helping his four passengers disembark and the knots upon his seated harness were being untied by unicorn magic. He could hear Scootaloo’s voice, but couldn’t make out her words. He couldn’t concentrate. His mind was racing over the same few things: the death-threat, the talk with Razorfang, a *harpoon*.

Somepony had just tried to kill him.

“Why didn’t they try that earlier?” Applejack asked, anger shaking her tone.

“Because he didn’t fly over the dam earlier,” the Mayor answered, her face troubled and her tone shaken. “I’ll wager that we’ll find the device that fired that... that *thing* at the lakeside. They must have been waiting for him to try that direction.”

“How did they know?” Spike asked in a small, quivering voice.

“We didn’t make these rides a secret, Spike,” she sighed.

“Somepony just tried to kill me,” he said hollowly. Twilight’s hold grew tighter.

“They’re gonna regret it, mark my words,” said Applejack grimly.

He swallowed, his whole body trembling. “I just want it all to stop,” he said.

“I know,” Twilight murmured, her hoof stroking over the top of his head. “I know.”

“Why won’t it *stop*?” he demanded unsteadily, and then hid his face in his forepaws.

“Oh, sugarcube,” Applejack breathed unhappily.

The crowd watched wordlessly as their dragon struggled with his fear. His sister clung to him fiercely, her silent tears sliding onto scales that glittered like underwater jewels.

“Name?”

“Spike.”

“Oh, it’s you...”

“Start writing, constable, and leave the talking to me. Now, can you tell us about the incident, lad?”

“Uh...”

“Go on, Spike. Just tell him.”

“Just give me a moment, Twi... Sorry, Detective Inspector, I’m still...”

“Understandable. Just take your time.”

“Breathe, Spike.”

“...Uh, okay. Well, I was giving rides to everypony who wanted one this afternoon...”

“What were the nature of these rides?”

“Huh? Oh, flying. For the earth ponies and unicorns and all. A friend suggested that I show those ponies who’d never get the chance otherwise to see what the sky can be like.”

“I say, do you plan to do it again? Love to have a crack at that.”

“Not...not anytime soon, Detective Inspector.”

“Just call me Parker, lad, everypony else does. And what happened?”

“It was the last group. There were four ponies...”

“Can you name ‘em all?”

“Yeah. Two are good friends of mine, Macintosh Apple and Sweetie Belle.”

“That’s Big Macintosh and that singing filly, ain’t it?”

“That’s right. The other two were a couple of ponies I’ve seen around the place, but haven’t really had the chance to get to know. Their names were Bon-Bon and Lyra... Lyra – I can’t remember her other name.”

“That’s okay. So you were carting these four ponies on your back?”

“Yeah. I was taking off from the cliff’s edge at the bottom of that steep street to the west of Ponyville, you know the one?”

“Do I ever. Half the road accidents in this burg happen on that street.”

“Well, mostly I’d been flying over the ravine, but I decided for the last flight to take them over the dam. It must have been around four-thirty or five o’clock at this point...”

“Closer to five.”

“Thanks, Twilight. Anyway, as we’re gliding over the lake, this... this harpoon comes out of *nowhere* and almost takes my head off!”

“Hmm. We’ve secured that harpoon, lad, and it’s no new piece of equipment. Looks old.”

“It still works, that’s for sure.”

“That it does. Now, no harpoon like that can actually come out of nowhere, so we’ve got some of my best ponies combing the ravine and the lakeside for the launching equipment right now.”

“Would it still be there?”

“A weapon that heavy’d take a long time to set up and launch. Doubt they’d stick around to pack all their gear up neatly once the thing’d been fired.”

“Good point.”

“What happened after the shot?”

“Well, I flew as fast as I could back for the cliff top, and everypony got off my back. That’s sort of everything relevant that I can remember about it, Detect... uh, Parker.”

“Well, that’ll do for a statement, son. Got several more eyewitness accounts as well. Don’t you worry none, lad, we’ll find out who did this.”

“Thanks, um, Parker.”

“Come on, Spike. Let’s get you to Applejack’s.”

• • •

*Dear Princess Celestia and Princess Luna,*

*I’m a bit shaky right now, so please excuse the claw-writing. Somepony made an attempt on my life this afternoon. It’ll probably be in all of tomorrow’s papers.*

*I was giving air-rides in the ravine from three o’clock onwards. For the last ride, I decided to turn towards the dam, and as we were gliding over the water somepony shot a harpoon at me. It missed my head by only a pony-stride, and I was able to get my passengers back to Ponyville safely.*

*I know I’m going to see you both tomorrow, but first I have to get through tonight. Wish me luck.*

*Sincerely,  
Spike*

• • •

*Dear Spike,*

*We will be sending a contingent of Palace Guards to escort you to the Gala. They will arrive tomorrow afternoon. We have made a joint announcement proclaiming this attack to be utterly deplorable and against everything equine, draconic or otherwise, and furthermore declaring you under our personal protection from all Equestrian citizens. Should anypony attempt to harm you, they will be met with the full force of our displeasure.*

*Before you ask, I am afraid the above declaration will not be effective against dragons. They consider themselves subject to their own traditions first and foremost. Even She of the Wyrmland cannot gainsay them. – P.C.*

*Don’t allow yourself to give in to fear and despair, Spike. We are thinking of you. I will protect Ponyville tonight, you have my word on it. – Luna*

*We were so shocked to hear your news, Spike, and so very relieved to know you are safe, my dragon. – P.C.*

*We must find the culprit behind this as soon as possible, not just for your sake, Spike, but for Equestria's. You see? I am being greedy for my responsibilities again. – Luna*

*With the anti-dragon unrest within our borders and now this attempt on your life, the Wyrmsstadt ambassador will no doubt be calling this a breach of treaty. For my sake and the sake of my little ponies, please speak to him at the Gala. He is so incensed he will not listen to me. – P.C.*

*I will meet you tomorrow with the Palace Guard, and fly with you back to Canterlot. My sister must stay here and greet all the fine fillies and gentlecolts. It is sometimes a blessing being the lesser-known one. – Luna*

*Keep your chin up, Spike. – P.C.*

*Remember, we will endure. – Luna*

• • •

It was a very quiet group that camped inside the barn at Sweet Apple Acres that night. Twilight was adamant that Spike should not be sleeping alone and unprotected out in the square anymore, and the barn was the only building in Ponyville he was able to get into. He bedded down in the scratchy straw, his mind churning. Twilight, Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy stayed with him, nestled against his warm side and sheltered from the chill night air by one wing. Their soft breaths told him that they had fallen asleep long before it came to claim him. He stared at the barn's wooden walls, his fear shrieking in his head.

He didn't want to die. He didn't *want* to. He was so young, just a child, and he had so much to learn and so much that he loved. But it appeared that his whole life was barreling towards its end – either at Razorfang's teeth and claws, or at the hooves of rabidly prejudiced ponies. Did dying hurt, he wondered morbidly, heart pounding. Or was it like falling into the blackest of black sleeps?

Worse than the fear was the constant howling of his rage at the back of his psyche. How dare they try to touch his ponies. How dare they try to hurt them. How dare they try to make his good intentions the instrument of their deaths. How dare they – *how dare they*. His fury tore at him, tugged at him. Every instinct in his body wanted to storm into the night, roaring flame and retribution. Only that crippling fear stopped him. He felt like he

was some sort of bone to be torn into pieces by two ravening dogs, neither of which would relent.

Eventually he fell into a troubled, restless sleep.

The next morning began in equal silence. The four of them moved slowly as if any gesture might shatter the moment. Fluttershy seemed unwilling to let go of him, her wing or her hoof reaching out to brush against him every few seconds as though checking to see whether he was still there. Pinkie Pie was strangely solemn and her curls had loosened from their usual tight springiness to a wavy mass that somehow seemed more forlorn than her sullen poker-straight style.

Twilight stared out of the barn door for ages, her gaze unfocused.

When she finally turned back to them, her voice was curt and her face full of panic and desperation. “Okay,” she said, “we need answers. Fluttershy, can you please ask Rainbow Dash to check Cloudsdale for anything suspicious? Pinkie, take a walk around town and see if your Pinkie Sense can’t pick anything up.”

Pinkie looked apologetic. “It doesn’t work that way, Twilight...”

“Just try!” she barked, and then slumped a little. Spike reached out a forepaw, gently touching her side. She stiffened and drew herself up carefully. It was like watching a fragile puzzle piecing itself back together. “I’m going to check my books,” she said grimly.

“Would there even be anything in there about something that happened only yesterday?” Spike asked, his voice muted and dull.

“I don’t know!” she snapped as she rounded on him. Her eyes looked terrible, and her face began to crumple as she gazed at him. She visibly steeled herself, though tears began to well as she repeated in a softer, slightly quavering voice, “I don’t know. But it’s worth a try. Dragon-hunting has been banned for a hundred years, so somepony either has a huge problem with dragons that goes even further than the protestors’...”

“Or a harpooning cutie mark,” Pinkie interjected.

Twilight gritted her teeth, blinking her glossy eyes. “I’m going to find out, anyway.”

“And me?” Spike lifted his gaze to meet hers. There was an empty, hollow feeling in his chest.

“You should stay here,” Twilight said harshly, her eyes sliding away from him. “Stay here... and read. I’ll bring you some books or something...”

“I promised I’d go to the Boutique to see Rarity today,” said Spike, his eyes downcast and his tone uninflected.

“You’ll do no such thing!” Twilight declared in a ringing voice, eyes flashing angrily, before her poise deserted her and she slumped heavily against his foreleg, her hooves wrapping around it tightly. “No, you just can’t,” she said brokenly. “I won’t risk you.”

“Bring the books, then,” Spike sighed, his other forepaw rising to circle Twilight softly. “I’ll stay here.”

“I couldn’t bear it if somepony...” she began, and stopped, her breath hitching. She buried her face against him, hiding her eyes.

He nodded slowly, and tucked his chin over her head again. “Twilight,” he mumbled wretchedly.

She drew her breath in loudly at the sound of his voice saying her name, and whirled for the door. “Just... stay here,” she said, her eyes wet and her face blotchy. “I’ll be back. *Don’t go anywhere.* I’ll be back in just a moment.”

She winked out of existence with a flash, and Spike flinched away from her teleporting. “Twilight...” he repeated dejectedly, lost and afraid and furious.

“She’s a very scaredy-pony right now,” Pinkie said softly. “She’s a big old scaredy scared scaredy-pants.”

“She’s not the only one,” Spike whispered, throat tight.

The morning dragged on and on. Spike sat in stiff, miserable silence as the fear and the rage hissed and muttered in his ears. The barn walls felt like they were closing in on him, shrinking slowly to trap him there forever.

It reminded him horribly of his long, shuttered life in the library, frightened of himself and of being seen. He couldn’t go back to that. He’d learned too much; he’d outgrown it.

Fluttershy and Pinkie left, to be replaced by Applejack and Apple Bloom. Big Macintosh stopped by the barn to deliver a few barrels of apples and to wordlessly grip Spike’s shoulder with one shaggy hoof.

It was probably around eleven or so when Twilight returned, her mane still unbrushed and a fierce fury snapping in her eyes. Applejack stood immediately. “What’s been goin’ on?”

“They’ve found the launching equipment,” Twilight said, her tone steely. “It’s definitely made for unicorn use, and it’s at least a hundred and thirty years old, from before the treaty was put into place. Something like that will have been recorded somewhere, so the policeponies are checking museum records and antique listings now.”

“What else?” Spike asked, his heartbeat beating against his ribcage.

She turned to him, and her anger was so palpable that Spike was vaguely amazed that she wasn’t sporting a mane made of fire. “There’s graffiti all over the library,” she replied, her jaw clenching.

Spike’s heart dropped, and then began to burn.

“I don’t want you to see,” she continued. “You’re still a child. You shouldn’t be exposed to that sort of... of...” She broke off in disgust and anger.

“Twilight,” he muttered, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I got *shot at yesterday*.”

“All the more reason!” she retorted angrily.

“Twilight!” He stood suddenly, his fury coalescing into something icy and implacable. He didn’t even notice that he was towering over her. “This isn’t solving anything! I have to go out, I have to *live* my life while I...” He paused, breathing rapidly.

“I can’t let you,” she said. “I can’t risk you.”

“Did you even find anything in those books?” he demanded. Her face said it all. “No. So what’s the point of hiding here until I have to go to Horsefall Mountain?”

“You’ll be safe!” she cried, her bangs swinging into her eyes. “You won’t be subjected to all this... this...”

“I’m a dragon,” Spike stated flatly, his forepaw thudding impatiently against the dirt floor of the barn. “This is going to follow me my whole life – and however short it may be, I *don’t* want to spend it hiding in a barn!”

“But there’s less than a week left!”

“I *know!*” Spike exclaimed. “Do you think I don’t know that? I don’t want to waste it! It’s only some stupid graffiti, Twilight!”

“It was a lot more than some stupid graffiti yesterday!” she snapped.

“You’re not listening!” he said in frustration. “I don’t want to hide anymore! That’s what they want – these ponies with their harpoons and their graffiti and their protests – they want me to disappear! They want me to give up my life one way or another... Well, I’m not going to give them the satisfaction!”

“Spike, you’re only a child still,” she said in a half-commanding, half-pleading voice. “I’m your sister, I have to protect –”

“You can’t protect me from this!” he bellowed, smoke rising from his jaws.

She rocked backwards in shock and refusal, her eyes filling once more. “Yes, I can,” she gasped. “I *will.*”

“Twilight,” he said, “I can’t stand it. I can’t stand *this*. I’m going crazy – I’m so afraid and so angry I could burn the barn down. I need to get out of here, I’ve just *got* to.”

“You spent all those months – *years* – hiding in the library!” she threw at him. He bowed his head.

“I know,” he said heavily. “But Twilight – it isn’t for me, not anymore. Macintosh was right. I can’t hide who I am. I’ve...I’ve grown too much since then to start hiding again now.”

Her breath caught. “You’re not talking about size, are you...”

He shook his head, never taking his eyes from her.

Her hooves planted themselves more firmly, and she raised her tear-streaked face. “I won’t let you,” she said.

“You can’t stop me,” he said sadly.

She held his eyes for a few moments, her lower lip quivering. Then she threw herself against him once more, impacting against his chest so violently it hurt. “I won’t lose you,” she breathed angrily through her tears.

“You won’t,” he whispered. “Come with me?”

She raised her head. “Rarity’s?” she mumbled.

“Yeah. I promised.”

“And you... keep your promises,” she managed through her hitching breath. “I wish you’d just...”

“Twilight, I mean it... I have to *live*.”

She sighed explosively. “I suppose I knew that... but...”

“I get it,” he said, wondering at their strange role reversal as he comforted her. The clamour in his head had retreated as he held her shaking body tenderly, snaking his neck around her to clasp her closely. “I’ll find a way, Twi,” he swore. “I promise.”

“There’s less than a week,” she whispered.

“I keep my promises,” he said, swallowing hard.

• • •

“I can’t believe you two had that big ole fight... just to come here,” Applejack said sourly.

Spike lay outside the Spa, feeling rather ridiculous. “Well, Rarity insisted,” he mumbled.

Twilight snorted bitterly, turning her head away.

The Spa Twins were clambering all over him, their hooves busy with sandpaper and polishing cloths. “Now darlings,” Rarity sniffed, her face covered with some sort of greenish mud that smelled rather like avocado, “Spike should look his best at the Gala tonight. I’ve been planning this surprise for a fortnight.”

“Seems a silly reason to risk your life,” Twilight growled.

“Twilight,” Spike began wearily.

“Now, do not move your ‘ead,” said one of the twins sternly in her Maresailles accent. It was the pink one; Spike thought her name was Aloe.

“Thees is verree delicate,” the other twin, Lotus, said, concentrating as she moved her ultra-fine sandpaper over his face.

“You’re using *sandpaper*,” Twilight said.

“Each scale is being booffed to a perfect shine,” Aloe said reprovingly. “Eet is precise work.”

“Booffed?” Spike repeated to himself, eyebrow raising.

“The face is the most feenicky part of the treatment,” Lotus continued, her tongue poking out slightly as she followed her sister’s work with the polishing cloth. “We are almos’ done ‘ere.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t talk me into any o’ this frippery,” Applejack sniffed.

“Oh, I learned that lesson long ago,” Rarity said liltngly.

“We should go and get ready,” Fluttershy said.

“Yeah, we’ve only got like, six hours.” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes.

“Well, I’d hate to be late,” she said meekly. “It’s so rude.”

“How we gettin’ there this time?” Applejack asked, leaning back on the bench.

Five mares had accompanied Spike through the village to Carousel Boutique to meet with Rarity, and from there all six had escorted him to the Spa. Ponyvillians had all stopped them on their way to commiserate and share their anger over what had almost happened the previous afternoon. It went a little way towards assuaging Twilight’s fears for his safety in public.

A little way – but not much.

“I’ll fly us,” Spike mumbled as a polishing cloth was pushed against his cheekbone.

“And spoil all that work on your scales?” Rarity gasped, before her eyebrows lowered. “Spike! For shame!”

“Well, fastest way,” he managed as Lotus scowled at him for talking.

“What if...” Twilight started.

“There’s not going to be another mad harpoonist hidden along the road to Canterlot,” Spike said sharply. “No pony even knows I’m going to the Gala.”

“They could have guessed,” Twilight said darkly.

“Princess Luna and the Canterlot Palace Guard will be with us,” he pointed out, and Twilight gritted her teeth.

“I still don’t like it,” she snapped.

“C’mon, Twilight, lighten up,” Dash scoffed. “Nothin’s gonna happen.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at rehearsal?” she retorted.

“Nah.” Rainbow Dash waved a hoof airily. “We got all that over with yesterday. Today and tonight are mine.”

“You’re not performing?” Fluttershy asked.

“Nope,” she said with satisfaction. “Tomorrow morning we’ve got a show, but tonight is about workin’ the crowds.”

“You haven’t missed a Gala since you became a Wonderbolt, have you, Dashie?” Pinkie nudged her.

“Not this pegasus,” Dash said smugly. “Gotta make sure I talk to *all* those hopefuls, after all.”

When she realised that everypony was looking at her with a touch of surprise and pride in their expressions, Dash cleared her throat.

“You never did forget that first Gala, huh?” Applejack asked.

“Well, did any of you?” Dash challenged, slightly embarrassed at being caught with such an altruistic reason for attending for all those years.

Fluttershy shuddered. “Never,” she said fervently.

“Am I done?” Spike asked.

Twilight stood abruptly. “You’d better be,” she said.

“Non, non, non, we must yet clean your teeths, shine your claws and straighten your spines!” protested Lotus.

“They’re straight enough,” said Twilight mulishly.

“Loosen up, y’ silly filly,” Applejack hissed. “Y’ being more saddlesore than a train pony after the overnight flier to Appleloosa.”

“Well, don’t I have reason?” she hissed back.

“It’s setting everypony on edge, an’ we’ve had just about enough o’ that,” Applejack said.

“And for some strange reason, nopony could ever guess why and it’s a total mystery to *me* but it seems that it isn’t helping Spike very much,” Pinkie said brightly, tipping her head.

Spike tried to melt into the ground as six pairs of eyes turned to him once more.

“Well, *I’m* going inside to take an herbal bath,” Rarity eventually said. “Girls, your dresses are back at the Boutique. Meet me there this afternoon if you’re leaving now... oh, I did hope we could all walk together. I’m sorry this didn’t quite turn out as I’d planned, Spike.”

He looked up at her as Aloe smoothed some sort of stuff over his claws. “No, it’s fine,” he said, “thanks for organising this for me, Rarity. What can I do in return?”

He was abruptly smacked with a polishing cloth. “Thees is free,” Lotus said sternly. “Our dragon is going to the Gala, and we weesh for him to make a good impression.”

“Eet is just our way of helping.” Aloe smiled up at him as she worked the shiny polish into his claws.

“Oh,” he said dumbly, taken aback. “Wow. Uh, thank you – thank you so much!”

Rarity gave Twilight a very pointed look, before flouncing into the spa, the smell of avocado trailing behind her.

Twilight flopped onto the bench and put her head in her hooves. “I’m sorry, girls,” she sighed. “I’m just all over the place. I haven’t felt this frantic in years.”

“At least you haven’t gone all crazy-eyes!” Pinkie said.

“Oh, *you* can talk,” Rainbow Dash snorted.

“Thank goodness that Smarty Pants doll is still with Big Macintosh,” Applejack muttered.

There was a rumble in the distance, gradually becoming louder. Pebbles began to rattle on the ground. Spike’s head jerked up.

“What’s that?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“It’s... it’s hooves,” Applejack said slowly.

“A stampede?” Fluttershy quavered.

The farmpony shook her head. “S’too... focused,” she said, her brow furrowing. Then she turned back to regard them with wide green eyes. “An’ it’s headin’ this way!”

The seven ponies and Spike all stood slowly as the sound of hooves approached. Rarity appeared at the salon door, dripping wet with her mane plastered to her forehead. “What’s that?” she yipped.

“Shh!” the others hissed in unison.

She looked ready to protest, but subsided as the sound of hooves grew closer. Finally, a veritable *sea* of ponies rounded the corner at full gallop, headed by the Mayor, Cheerilee and the rocketing Scootaloo.

“Spike!” yelled Scootaloo. “You gotta come and speak to him!”

“Tell him to go away!” the Mayor panted, her galloping hooves skidding on the ground. “Tell him to go back to the Forest!”

“What?” He jerked his head back, a dreadful suspicion dawning in his mind.

“It’s the dragon,” gulped Cheerilee. “That dragon, the one from the Everfree Forest. He’s at the edge of town and he wants to talk to you...”

“Razorfang’s *here*?” Spike blurted in amazement.

“Go!” the Mayor implored. “Ask him to leave us in peace!”

“Didn’t you try that?” Spike asked, his thoughts now teetering precariously.

“Of course we did!” Cheerilee blurted. “He won’t leave until he speaks to you!”

Spike immediately turned and began to march through the crowd, who parted obediently to let him pass. Twilight and the others gaped for a moment, before racing after him, the crowd then surging behind them.

“Why’s he here? Why’d he come here? Why’s he here?” Spike muttered to himself. “Why would he leave the Forest? That’s his territory... why invade *mine*? What does he *want*?”

“Are you okay?” Fluttershy asked tentatively.

He gave her a sharp look. He could feel the fire building in his belly, feel the rage building again, once more out of its temporary cage. “He’s in my territory,” he growled.

“I thought Cheerilee said he was at the edges of the Forest,” Rarity asked, cantering to keep up.

“He’s threatening my ponies!” Spike spat.

“I don’t think this is a topic we really oughta pursue, guys,” Dash said slowly, eyeing him.

“Whoa,” gulped Pinkie as they turned to the main street, and the great green bulk of Razorfang came into view. “You weren’t lying about how big he is. He’s extra super-duper big.”

“No” – Applejack gulped noisily – “kiddin’.”

They were abruptly accosted by a familiar greenish-blue unicorn with a peach-coloured flyaway mane and tail. “Make it leave!” she screeched in terror, her hooves banging on Spike in a loud, terrified tattoo. “Make it go away! Make it leave! You’re supposed to protect the town – make it leave! You said you’d protect us! Make it go away! Please, please, PLEASE make it leave!”

Spike had to stop to avoid crushing her. Her hooves continued to rattle against him, but they slowed as she became aware of his furious eyes and the disgusted expressions of his friends.

“I’m going to go see to that,” Spike said through very clenched fangs. Fire was flickering in his mouth – he could feel it. “Now if you’ll just get out of my way...”

The blowsy leader of the ‘Parents for a Peaceful Equestria’ stared up at him for a moment, her jaw slack in fear and humiliation. Then she turned her face away and scurried as fast as she was able through the crowd packed behind Spike.

“Hypocrite.” Rarity scowled after her, flicking her wet mane over her shoulder.

“Forget that loser, and let’s go sort out this big jerk,” Rainbow Dash said with a set expression, thumping one hoof against another.

“You’re not getting involved,” Spike snapped. “Stay behind me.”

Spike led the crowd to the end of the main thoroughfare, forging ahead of them like a spearhead. They faltered and stopped at the edges of the village, hugging to their buildings as though houses could protect them should Razorfang decide to turn upon them. Spike knew that was a false hope. A dragon could smash its way through wood and thatch like matchsticks – he’d even done it himself. Razorfang could flatten Ponyville in moments.

He kept up his pace as the rest of Ponyville dropped away. Twilight and the others kept walking or flying with him, however, as did Macintosh, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom and surprisingly, the Mayor.

Razorfang had definitely noticed him. The orange eyes were slitted with anger. Spike was glad of that. It matched how he himself was feeling.

“Stop here,” he said curtly to the small group who had followed him.

“Yeah, right,” Rainbow Dash said, her forelegs folding as her wings held her aloft. “Like we’d let you face that guy alone!”

“I’m coming with you,” Twilight said.

“Twilight,” he growled in frustration.

“No buts,” she said flatly. “We’re coming, Spike. Lead the way.”

He glowered at her, and she glowered back. “No,” he snarled. “Stay. Here.”

“You didn’t like it when I said that to you,” she challenged.

“That was *different*,” he said. “This could get you killed!”

“So not that different, then,” she said with the air of somepony laying down the winning card.

He let his head fall back in exasperation. “Twilight,” he began.

“You do realise I can hear every word you are saying.”

Spike froze.

Twilight’s pupils had shrunk to pinpricks as she continued to stare into Spike’s face. They both turned slowly to see the giant green dragon staring quizzically down at them. “Um,” said Twilight lamely.

“You are unharmed,” Razorfang said slowly, eyeing Spike over.

“Yeah.” Spike pulled himself up straighter. “Yeah, I’m fine – except for the minor issue of you waltzing up to my village and terrifying everypony in it!”

The green dragon appeared to slump in relief, but the moment was so fleeting that Spike wasn’t quite sure he had even seen it. “You are unharmed. Well. So these are your ponies.” Razorfang smiled slowly, showing each and every ferocious tooth. Spike bristled.

“Yeah, these are them. What do you want? Why are you *here*?”

“Calm yourself, hatchling,” Razorfang rumbled.

“SPIKE!” Spike shouted, his anger slipping out of his control. “Great galloping goddesses, my name is *Spike*!”

A huge great eyebrow quirked slightly. “Tense, aren’t we?”

Spike stifled a roar. “Why are you here, Razorfang?” he repeated.

Razorfang leaned forward, his eyes abruptly snapping with furious intent. “I saw you,” he said, enunciating each word clearly and dangerously.

“Saw what?” Spike snapped back.

“I saw,” Razorfang said with deadly menace, “one of their despicable hunting harpoons fired at you whilst you played at being some sort of servant to these...” he glanced down at the ponies with utter disgust, “...these *things*.”

“Who’re you callin’ a thing!” Rainbow Dash shouted indignantly. Spike shot her a warning look.

“They’re not things, they’re my friends, and I’m no servant,” he said, turning back to Razorfang.

“You were carrying them about like some beast of burden,” snarled Razorfang.

Every pony bridled with offence at the choice of insult. “You wanna be careful which phrase you use,” Macintosh said stiffly.

Razorfang looked briefly surprised, before leaning forward once more, his long hooked face cruel. “They have tried to kill you, little one. What will it take for you to recognise that I am right?”

“You’re *wrong*,” Spike stated.

“Is your memory so poor? Can you not remember my words?”

“I remember every last one,” Spike bit. “They stabbed us with harpoons, sent avalanches, smashed our heads in with rocks, killed us in the Long Sleep. I get it, all right? I’ve been thinking about it over and over ever since *a harpoon actually came at me*. In case you hadn’t noticed – it missed.”

“They will try again,” Razorfang said. “These pathetic pastel things, they *will* turn on you.”

“Now jest hold on an apple-buckin’ minute,” said Applejack crossly. “Who’re you to say that t’ him? You’re fightin’ him to the death in under a week!”

“I’ve tried that angle,” Spike grunted. “He ignores it.”

“See here,” said Mayor Mare hotly. “I am the Mayor of this village, and I can assure you, dragon, Spike is as full a citizen as anypony else!”

“Stupid, pathetic ponies,” Razorfang said with scorn, drawing himself up onto his haunches and towering over them. “You know even less than the hatchling.”

“*Spike*,” snarled Spike.

“You see? He even gives his name out,” Razorfang continued harshly as though Spike hadn’t spoken.

“Why shouldn’t he give his name out?” Pinkie asked, her head tipping. “Are they supposed to be a big special super private secret?”

“They are a covenant, a bond between dragon and clan,” Razorfang said inflexibly. “They are for family, and family alone.”

“I gave him his name,” a clear voice said, and Twilight stepped forward, her head held high and proud. “I’m his family.”

“Twilight, no,” Spike breathed.

“You... are his family,” Razorfang repeated slowly, his head snaking downwards once more to peer at Twilight. “You... a short-lived mammal. You... named a dragon.”

She lifted her chin higher. “I did.”

Razorfang whirled on Spike. “This mammal is your family?” he demanded disbelievingly.

Spike extended a wing, curling it around Twilight and tugging her back against his side. “She is.”

“These creatures tried to *kill* you yesterday!” Razorfang bellowed.

“Twilight would never hurt me!” Spike shouted back.

“It is only a matter of time, hatchling! They will kill you as they killed your mother and clutchmates! Why do you persist?”

“I *love* them!” Spike roared, his fire escaping him as a blossoming green rose.

“Love will see you dead or alone!” Razorfang thundered.

“The treaty –”

“How much worth did they put on the treaty yesterday?” sneered Razorfang.

“One pony!” Spike thrust Twilight away from him as he stalked towards the larger dragon, vibrating in anger, his fire issuing from his jaws in gusts and billows. “*One* pony attacked me! Not mine, not my family!”

“All ponies are the same!” Razorfang jeered.

“You’re wrong!” Spike screamed. His anger had full rein. His wings were half-extended now, and a small corner of himself not consumed by his fury knew that he must look a fearful sight.

“You know I am right,” Razorfang boomed.

“Go back to your stupid Forest!” Spike raged. “You’re wrong, you’re so wrong you don’t even *know* how wrong you are!”

“Poor, poor hatchling,” Razorfang crooned pitilessly. “It is hard to face the truth.”

“That’s not truth! You’re *lying!*” roared Spike, his fire wreathing around him. “Get out of my village, you filthy, filthy *liar!*”

“They are using you,” came the insidious whisper, stabbing relentlessly into Spike’s ears, “and one day they will turn on you.”

“You,” Fluttershy said suddenly, her eyes hard.

“F-F-Fluttershy!” choked Rarity as Fluttershy took off from the ground like some missile of vengeance.

Her wings beat until she was level with Razorfang’s head, her face almost incandescent with fury and outrage. “You...big... *jerk!* You are wrong! *We love him!*”

Razorfang jerked backwards. “Love him? He is a *dragon*, and you are ponies!”

“He’s – our – *friend!*” she fumed. “We would never, *never, NEVER* turn on him! How dare you stand there, you big bully, and suggest that Twilight would ever hurt her own brother! How dare you tell him his own family would turn on him!”

Spike’s breath had been robbed, his maddened anger utterly derailed. A warm glow began to build in his chest as he watched his shyest, meekest friend take on her biggest fear once more – and this time all in his defence. “Wow,” he said stupidly.

“I know, right?” Twilight agreed, sounding equally bemused.

Razorfang regarded the tiny pegasus with something resembling amazement. “I...” Razorfang began.

“You might be powerful, and lonely, and angry, but you have *no right* to say those things! How dare you spout off about something you know absolutely nothing about!” Fluttershy raged. “Ponyville is Spike’s, and Spike is Ponyville’s, and there’s nothing you or anypony else can do to change that! Now go back home to your Forest, and think about what you’ve done!”

Razorfang’s gigantic jaw worked uselessly.

Fluttershy settled to the ground, and stalked back to the group, her wings trembling in anger. Big Macintosh gaped at her for a few moments, before he said admiringly, “Aw, the hay with it.”

With a yelp, Fluttershy was yanked into a tight red-furred embrace, and Macintosh lowered his head and kissed her thoroughly.

“Uh, time and place, guys?” Rainbow Dash suggested weakly.

“I never wanted t’ see mah own brother do that.” Apple Bloom winced.

“Oh.” Rarity touched the corner of her eye delicately and sniffed. “That’s so romantic!”

“Yes!” Spike crowed, before remembering where he was. He cleared his throat. Razorfang’s eyes slid back to him, wide and perplexed.

“What... what about that harpoon?” Razorfang rumbled, his composure somewhat shaken by Fluttershy’s scolding.

Spike levelled a long look at the great green dragon. “Can’t you ever just let me enjoy a moment?”

“Spike,” said Razorfang warningly. At his tone, Fluttershy tore her gaze away from Macintosh to shoot him a stern look, and he snorted fire through his nostrils haughtily.

Heaving a great sigh, Spike reluctantly turned his mind back to the matter at hoof. “There’s a faction amongst the ponies who want me gone,” he said.

“They are willing to break the treaty to do so?” Razorfang pressed. “They are willing to kill their own along with you?”

Spike huffed, feeling his anger bubbling below the surface. “I don’t know,” he admitted in a low voice. “We’re trying to find out. I don’t think that even those protestors would stoop so low.”

Razorfang grunted.

“Why did you come here?” said Spike plaintively. He felt wrung out. He’d barely done anything, and yet he was utterly emotionally exhausted.

The green dragon glanced to where Twilight stood. She squared herself, and ducked under Spike’s wing to press against his side once more, her returning gaze challenging. “That is your... sister,” Razorfang said in a perplexed, slightly repulsed tone.

“She,” Twilight said pointedly.

“She is my sister,” Spike confirmed.

“You... were fighting.” Razorfang tilted his head, still staring at Twilight. “I heard you. You wished her to stay behind.”

Spike dropped his head. “Yeah.”

“We’ve been fighting all day,” Twilight admitted, her hoof lifting to touch Spike’s face apologetically.

“About the stupid harpoon,” Spike said darkly.

“Ah.” Razorfang’s lip curled. “Then she no doubt pleads to be kept out of danger.”

“No.” She scowled. “I was trying to keep *him* safe.”

“Him?” Razorfang blinked.

“I wish you’d stayed hidden in that barn,” Twilight said miserably.

“I can’t do it,” Spike mumbled.

“Of course not,” Razorfang grunted. “You’ve been attacked in your own territory. Every instinct you have would be on fire.”

“Well, yeah,” Spike said, raising an eyebrow down at Twilight.

“Oh, all *right*,” she said.

“To be fair, I didn’t really listen to her about being afraid for me,” Spike said ruefully.

“No, you didn’t!” she said indignantly. “Your life had just been *threatened*, Spike; were you expecting me to be rational?”

“I knew that I wasn’t,” he sighed. “I thought my anger and fear were gonna rip me apart. They still might.”

“And so you began to move,” Razorfang concluded. “You scouted through your territory.”

Spike nodded. “That cooled me off for a bit. Then you showed up,” he added sourly.

“Why did you show up?” Pinkie interrupted once more, bouncing gently on the spot.

Razorfang stood, his vast body turning back to the Everfree Forest. “I had to see,” he rumbled as he began to leave.

“Had to see what?” Spike called after him.

There was no answer.

“I *hate* it when he does that,” Spike grumbled.

Then the click and flash of cameras started, and questions were thrown at him like knives.

• • •

Re-entering the Ponyville Square in front of the library felt a little like coming home, even if the library was covered in awful graffiti and a large bundle of letters rested on the step. Spike picked them up with a sigh. “Ninety-ten?” he asked.

“Eighty-twenty,” Twilight returned gloomily.

“What’s that about?” Dash asked.

“We’re guessing what percentage is hate-mail or fan-mail,” Twilight answered, opening the library door. “Spike, stop looking at that.”

But Spike couldn't stop gazing sadly at the words emblazoned over the trunk of his first real home, his first territory: *Monster, Abomination, Get Out.*

"I told you I wanted to protect you," said Twilight unhappily. "I'll get a bucket and sponges." She hesitated, before touching his paw once and trotting inside.

"I just stared down Razorfang for Ponyville," he muttered.

"You an' Fluttershy both," Applejack agreed. He huffed, before slumping down outside the library and looking at the bundle of letters in his claw.

"Are they always so awful?" asked Rarity, her mane still wet.

"Pretty much," he sighed.

"Hang on." Pinkie Pie squinted at them. "These would have been posted yesterday, right?"

"Yeah?" Spike wondered where she was going with this.

"Well, Spikester." She grinned, "I don't think they're going to be meanie-letters today."

He gave her a puzzled look, before beginning to slit open the letters one by one with a claw. Gradually Pinkie's meaning became clear: most of the letters were in response to that utterly awful song. They were extremely – in some cases unnervingly – supportive.

There was one letter, however, that chilled him to the bone. "Twilight?" he called.

"Just... getting... some sponges..." she called back.

"I think you should see this," he said shakily.

She appeared at the door, a bucket with suds slopping over the edge hovering before her, and a sponge in her mouth. She spat it out, and gave him an exasperated look. If he examined her eyes closely, he could still see traces of her desperation. "What?" she asked.

He held out the letter silently. Words cut from magazines and newspapers glared at them, glued to a sheet of paper.

*'I WON'T MISS AGAIN.'*

She looked up from it, and swallowed hard. "Which was the envelope?" she asked.

“This one,” Rarity said in a subdued voice, her magic scooping up the envelope and hovering it before them. There was no stamp and no postal markings, not a single word.

“It’s somepony in Ponyville,” Spike breathed in horror.

“Now that don’t mean so much,” Applejack pointed out, her voice carefully rational. “There’s plenty o’ ponies here from out o’ town right now – all them protestin’ ponies, the reporters, the photographers...”

“I think you should take this to the policeponies,” Fluttershy said, shifting as she stared at the letter.

“I’ll do it,” Rainbow Dash spoke up, scooping the letter from Spike’s claw and tearing off into the sky.

Spike followed her with his gaze, still feeling somehow empty and wrung out. “Are you okay?” Twilight asked him.

He nodded wordlessly.

“You finished with them letters, Spike?” asked Applejack. Spike glanced down at them, before laying his head on his feet.

“Yeah, I’m done,” he said tiredly. “I’m done.”

“Come on, Spike,” Fluttershy said gently, “let’s get the library cleaned up, and then we’ll go get ready for the Gala.”

He closed his eyes for a second, before hauling himself up again. “Sure.” He smiled at her, though he knew there was no warmth behind it.

• • •

*Dear Spike,*

*The Great and Powerful Trixie is pleased with your message to her. Being as the Great and Powerful Trixie is the most spectacular and talented unicorn in all Equestria, she requires no such help from anypony else to m\_ . . .*

*Oh, ponyfeathers, I don’t care anymore, I just don’t care. Please, if you find out anything about my little Huffy, please, please tell me at once. I’ve missed her so much.*

*Thank you for trying to find her, and thank you for letting me know.*

*Trixie*

Perhaps it wasn't all that long, or perhaps he had become more patient as he grew older – which was *highly* unlikely – but the wait outside Carousel Boutique didn't seem to drag on and on to Spike this time around. He picked idly at his lustrous claws and watched the sun slipping slowly towards the western horizon. His seated harness lay beside him, shining with elbow grease.

He was deliberately not thinking about the events of the last two days. Razorfang and harpoons and protests attempted to dance through his mind, but he methodically and stubbornly squashed those thoughts before they could consume him. He had to be calm and determined in order to get through the Gala. He had to hold it together.

He could occasionally make out the voices of his friends inside the Boutique, and what he heard was intriguing. “Do you think he'll like it?” he heard Rarity say anxiously. “I do hope it doesn't come across as presumptuous... or worse, *tacky*.”

“I think...” he heard Twilight's voice, before her voice became too low to make out.

“He's had such a horrible day,” sighed Fluttershy.

Now he was *really* curious. He pushed himself up onto his elbows and leaned his ear against Rarity's fanciful door.

“It's been a horrible *month*,” Twilight said acerbically.

“That hasn't stopped him yet! He just keeps pickin' himself back up again.” Rainbow Dash sounded very proud of him.

“Well, we can make tonight the most funnest night a dragon ever had in the history of *ever!*” Pinkie declared.

“At the Grand Gallopin' Gala? Pinkie, you *do* remember last time, don't you?” Applejack asked.

“*Pfft* to last time! This has got to be his Best Night Ever!” Pinkie continued. “Everypony's got to be their very smiliest for him, okay? No being all mopey and angry, got that, pony-who-may-or-may-not-be-Twilight?”

“Hmmp.”

“I just hope he doesn’t think it’s... icky,” said Rarity, her voice apprehensive.

“Ain’t no different to wearin’ feathers, t’ my mind.”

“I think it’s totally awesome!” Rainbow Dash announced. “He’s gonna be over the moon!”

“Some ponies might find it a bit... macabre...” Rarity fretted.

“I agree with Rainbow Dash,” said Fluttershy meekly. “I think he’ll be so very pleased.”

“I do hope so,” Rarity sighed. “Well? Everypony ready? Let’s go show him!”

Spike hurriedly yanked his head away from the door, just in time. It opened to reveal his six friends dressed to the nines, their manes and tails expertly coiffed and their coats combed and curried to perfection. They walked out of the Boutique in a line, each eyeing him surreptitiously for his reaction.

“Wow, ladies,” he said, impressed. “You look beautiful!”

“*Ahem.*” Rarity coughed.

“He hasn’t noticed,” Twilight said, shaking her head. Her mane was twisted into an elegant knot at the base of her neck, held in place by a clasp covered in the same shimmering purple material of her gown.

“Noticed what?” Come to think of it, he mused, *most* of his friends were wearing purple. Or green.

“You don’t recognise it?” Rarity’s eyebrows shot up.

“Boys,” Twilight sighed, a smile quirking into place.

“After all, he only wore it for a whole year,” Rainbow Dash snorted.

The bit finally dropped. Spike’s heart skipped momentarily and his eyes bugged out as he stared at them – at their shining, glittering, *familiar* gowns. “That’s...”

“Dragon scales,” confirmed Twilight. “Your old ones.”

He could feel his mouth hanging open like an utter foal.

Rarity, Twilight and Pinkie Pie were all wearing elaborate dresses adorned with his dusky purple scales: Rarity in a slinky jaw-dropping number accentuated with feathers around the hem and shoulders; Twilight in a darker, more severe gown with a slight scooped train; and Pinkie in pleats and ruffles so fantastical that Spike could barely believe it. Fluttershy was wearing the lighter, more delicate greens of his chest and belly, the scales affixed to a floaty gauze that drifted about her like mist. Applejack was looking unusually chic in an elegant pantsuit made entirely of the darker green of his spines, a high-collared shirt, and a golden tie affixed with an apple-shaped ruby tiepin. Her customary hat had been enhanced by a thin, glistening green scaled band. Rainbow Dash was clad in sparkling purple and green stripes with bright gold accents at her throat and mane, the asymmetrical skirt cut to one flank and falling sleekly and stylishly to the other side.

“Do you like them?” Rarity asked nervously, one perfectly sculpted curl dripping over her forehead.

He gaped at them a little more. “How...”

“Well...” Twilight raised her eyebrows, “you did say you wanted to give your shed skins to Rarity... and I’d kept the one from last winter...”

He blinked. “You did?”

She looked a little embarrassed. “Yes. It was a bit big to fit in the storage cabinet, so it was up in the attic for a while.”

“Why?” he said, staring at them all dressed in *his scales*.

“I wanted... well, you see...” she said, her purple-bound hooves glinting as she shuffled them. “I forgot to keep any of your baby scales...”

“Anyway darling,” Rarity took up the tale, “once you’d told that reporter about giving me your old scales, Twilight had quite the idea. She gave it to me to make into dresses so that I didn’t have to wait until next winter. It would have been an absolutely fabulous PR coup for both of us, you see. I could have used it on any part of my upcoming summer range for Hoity Toity, but...”

“But then Princess Celestia invited you to attend the Grand Galloping Gala again,” Fluttershy said shyly, her hoof scratching at the ground in absent nervousness. “So Pinkie Pie suggested we turn it into our gowns...”

“As a statement of sol-id-arity!” Pinkie said. “See? I’ve even got fins in my mane, just like yours! Only yours are green and mine are purple, and I have a mane and you don’t!”

Spike’s eyebrows were threatening to crawl up over his forehead. “Buh...” he managed.

“You... don’t like it?” Rarity said with a dawning horror. “It’s offensive? It’s... *gauche*? Oh no!”

“No!” he yelped. “No,” he repeated in a calmer voice, a silly grin starting to stretch his mouth. His friends were wearing *dragon scales*. “Rarity... it’s *amazing*.”

Rarity’s head whipped back up, a smile beginning to creep over her face. “Really?” she said with uncharacteristically shy pride. “Oh, I was so worried!”

“How... how did you *sew* it?” he blurted.

“Well, it’s a *shed* skin, Spike,” Twilight said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not the whole scale, just the top layer. You know that.”

“A little transparent and quite a lot thinner,” Rarity mused. “Not that it was entirely a picnic to get a needle through it – thank goodness for industrial sewing machines is all I can say. It was quite the challenge trying to find appropriate linings to match your colouring *and* ours, Spike dear.”

He shook his head, trying to clear the dazed wonder from it. “Those are my...” he said dumbly.

Applejack pushed back her hat and cocked one forehoof over the other, boots glinting green. “Yup, sugarcube, we’re in yer scales.” She grinned.

“You could say...” Pinkie giggled, “you’ve got us under your skin!”

He couldn’t find enough words to tell them how grateful he was at such an overt and public gesture of support, so he just beamed at them hugely, his heart swelling inside his chest.

“I think he likes it,” said Rainbow Dash dryly.

“Well, we should get your harness on,” Twilight said in a business-like manner, before looking up at his face once more. “Oh, Spike,” she said then in her old, affectionate way. The very familiarity of it made his heart leap with joy.

“You’re wearing my scales, Twilight,” he said, grinning foolishly.

“I did notice,” she said, smiling herself. “They’re lighter than I thought they would be.”

“Flying creature,” he said smugly.

“Well then, flying creature, we need to get this harness on you,” she said, and her horn blazed with a corona of magic, the harness lifting into the air.

Spike was still so astonished at his friends’ choice of material that it took twice as long to get the harness on him; he kept swinging his head back and forth to examine each gown. Twilight exhaled in irritation.

“Hold still, Spike, I can’t get this buckle done up,” she complained.

“There’s *ruffles* on Pinkie’s,” he bubbled. “And Fluttershy’s is all green!”

Pinkie giggled. “You betcha!”

“Here they come.” Dash nodded to the sky. “Is everypony ready?”

Driving through the air was a platoon of approximately twenty Palace Guards, their golden livery turning a dusky rose in the sunset. They flew in two rows in an ordered phalanx shape in absolute unity, every pair of wings beating at the same time. At the head of the phalanx was a dark, graceful silhouette that Spike recognised instantly.

“Luna!” He half-stood in welcome, his face upturned. Twilight swore under her breath as the harness’ buckles slipped out of her reach once more.

The Princess of the Night smiled faintly as she touched down to the ground before them with the delicacy of a petal alighting on water. Behind her, the Palace Guard flipped their wings to their backs in unison, their hooves clicking together sharply.

“Good afternoon, Spike,” she said, inclining her head. “You look well.”

“Thanks,” he said bashfully, glancing down at his shining scales and burnished claws.

Her brow furrowed. “You are all right?”

He looked up again, and his happiness dimmed a little. “I’ll be okay,” he said in a slower voice. “I’m still pretty shaky, but I have to keep going... to endure, like you said.”

The corners of her mouth turned upwards the tiniest bit, and her eyes grew warm and approving, though she said nothing. Then she turned to the others, eyebrows rising as she took in their glittering gowns.

“Twilight Sparkle,” she greeted the unicorn. “It has been some time since I last saw you. Congratulations on your last Doctorate.”

“Thank you, Princess,” Twilight said, bowing her head.

Luna then looked around at the others. “Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, it is good to see you once more.”

“Good t’ see you too, Princess,” Applejack said, touching her hat.

Her eyes flicked to the sky. “Are you ready to depart?”

“Al...most,” Twilight said absently, her horn flaring. The harness’ straps were cinched around Spike’s waist a little more abruptly than he was expecting, and he made a strangled noise of protest.

“There,” Twilight said in satisfaction. “Ready now, Princess!”

Luna hid a smile behind one silver-shod hoof. “I see.”

“You didn’t have to do that!” Spike hissed at Twilight.

“You simply weren’t staying still long enough for me to do up all the buckles, Spike.” She shrugged.

“Oh,” he said, looking sidelong back at the Princess. She looked amused. “Sorry.”

“Well, we’d best get this show on the road,” Applejack said, pushing back her mane.

“This is gonna be weird,” Rainbow Dash said, wrinkling her nose. “Being *flown*.”

“It’s fun!” Pinkie nudged her. “You’re gonna love it, Dashie!”

“Are you good to go, Spike?” asked Twilight, her hoof resting on his side. Her eyes were still tight with tension, though she was obviously trying to put on a cheerful face for him.

He nodded, and crouched down so that his friends could climb over his knee and into the seated harness. As they clambered aboard and strapped themselves down, he took a deep breath. This was it.

“This is going to completely ruin our manes,” Rarity said in sudden dismay.

“I’ll fly slow,” he offered.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Dash scoffed.

Spike stood carefully, very aware of his precious burden, and turned his head expectantly to the Princess and the guards. To his amazement, one of the impassive soldiers actually gave him a sly wink.

“Night...?” he asked incredulously. “Is that you?”

Sergeant Falling Night’s face was too well trained to show any emotion whilst on duty, but the bat-winged grey pegasus gave a slight nod.

“Sergeant Night!” Twilight exclaimed. “I haven’t seen you in years!”

The sergeant coughed uncomfortably, still standing to strict attention. “Permission to speak, ma’am,” he asked Luna formally.

She rolled her eyes skywards. “How many times must I tell you, Night, there is no need for that when it is only myself.”

“Got to observe the regulations, ma’am,” he said stubbornly. She sighed.

“Permission granted.”

“Hello there, Spike m’boy, and Miss Sparkle,” Falling Night then said in a far more conversational tone, though his posture never changed. “Good to see you too.”

“It’s been ages!” Spike took an eager step towards the old Palace Guard. Once, when he was very young, he had spent ten minutes pulling the most appalling faces he possibly could in front of the on-duty Night, trying to get his expression to crack. Instead he had found himself swept out into the Canterlot Gardens and deposited into a plant-pot on his scaly little rump. Since that day, Sergeant Night had always been a particular friend amongst the Palace Guard. “How’s everypony else in the Fifth?”

“Do you still patrol the gardens outside the library?” Twilight asked, leaning over Spike’s shoulder.

“Yes, they’re all good, send their regards, and yes,” he said gruffly. “Heard you two had settled here, but haven’t seen hide nor hair of you since the Princess here made her first visit to Ponyville.”

“He’s now Captain of my personal guard,” Luna told them. “Though why an alicorn needs a personal guard is still something my sister cannot answer to my satisfaction...”

“Wow, congratulations!” Spike and Twilight said in unison.

“Thank you,” Night said, his stern face softening a little. “And ma’am, without trying to sound rude, not even an alicorn can foresee everything that might come her way. Best to be prepared.”

“Well, you haven’t changed,” Spike said, smiling.

Night looked amused, craning his neck up to Spike exaggeratedly. “Can’t say you have either,” he said, smirking.

“Oh, ha ha,” Spike snorted. “Yes, Spike got big, and he’s going to get bigger. Is that out of the way now?”

“We should be off,” Luna said sternly, though laughter was dancing in her dark eyes. “It is good to see that your spirits are not dampened, Spike.”

Spike crouched a little, the muscles of his hind legs bunching as he readied for the take-off. “You should have been around earlier,” he said. “You could have cut the air with a knife. A *butter* knife.”

Twilight’s hoof poked between his shoulder-blades in response.

Luna gave him a long penetrating look, before her curling wings spread. “Captain,” she said. “If you would...”

“Squad,” barked Night, his head jerking up and his chin jutting out. The platoon of soldiers stepped out of attention, kneeling slightly in readiness. Wings opened in unison with a snapping, rippling sound.

“Whoa,” Applejack said, impressed.

“Utterly unnecessary,” Luna said peevishly.

Night moved to the front of the phalanx and gave his troops a steely glare. “First division to take the lead! Privates Monsoon, Waterwings and Zig Zag to take the flank along with me! Rest of you, fall in behind! We fly at Spike’s pace, understand me?”

“Sir!” the soldiers barked in unison.

“On my mark,” Night said, his wings opening as well, knees bending in order for the first spring into the air. Then he looked back at Spike with exasperation. “Get them things open, boy,” he hissed.

Spike blinked and rushed to comply. The gust of air as his wings flung open blew the soldiers’ manes back, and a few eyes widened. Spike smiled a bit weakly.

“Now!” Night snapped.

Spike took a deep breath and leapt into the sky, his hind legs thrusting from the ground as he brought his wings down in a great stroke. Beating them steadily, he climbed into the blushing late afternoon sky as around him the Palace Guards fell into position. Luna flew beside him, her long neck stretched towards the purple onset of night on the horizon.

Behind his ear, he could hear his friends beginning to chatter. Rarity was fussing over her mane, whilst Fluttershy and Pinkie were peering over his sides. Rainbow Dash was comparing him to a big old cloud that she didn’t even have to move around.

On his other side Falling Night flew with dogged endurance, his perfectly polished armour turning the colour of fire in the sunset. His coppery eyes scanned the ground below tirelessly. “Heard about that situation of yours,” he grunted, never halting his roving search.

“Yeah?” Spike said. “Which one?”

“That dragon challenge,” Night answered. “You done any training?”

“Has he ever,” Rainbow Dash muttered.

“Lots,” Spike puffed as they reached the zenith of their ascent. A warm afternoon breeze belled under his wings, and he locked them for a moment, coasting gently.

“Good,” said Night, approval in his rusty voice. “All the lads are on your side, you know. What’s that down there?”

His armoured hoof pointed down at something metallic ensconced in the midst of the trees. Spike squinted. “It’s... a signpost, I think.”

“That all?” Night dismissed it brusquely and began to scour the ground again.

“I got the note,” Spike said after a small silence. “Thank you – and if I can’t do it tonight, could you thank the others for me?”

Night actually looked up at Spike at that. “Boy, we didn’t do it for thanks,” he said. “I’ve seen soldiers when they’re beaten down by things, fightin’ something they think is too big for ‘em. Seen it too many times. All soldiers complain – hell, that’s what soldiering does to you. But when complainin’ becomes silence, and silence becomes hopelessness, well... the battle’s lost before it’s even begun. You gotta keep morale up.”

“So... it was for my morale?” Spike asked.

Night turned back to the ground, his eyes flitting over the trees and little villages below. “Known you since you were high as my knee, pullin’ those faces at me in the corridor,” he said gruffly. “You could say that.”

Spike fell silent for a moment, touched to the heart. “I...” he began, and paused. “I didn’t think of it that way,” he confessed. “Is that what I am now? A soldier?”

“A soldier? You?” Night snorted. “From what I remember, you don’t get up early enough to be a soldier, boy.”

“I get up early now,” Spike said indignantly. “Sunrise on the dot. You try sleeping outside for a month and see if you don’t.”

“You are fighting, are you not?”

Spike glanced over at Princess Luna. “Well, I’m going to be *in* a fight...”

“No, I do not mean the challenge.” She shook her proud head. “You are fighting. You fight for your right to live your life as you wish. You fight to stay with your friends. You fight against those, both draconic and equine, that do not accept your choice. I believe that is what Captain Night is trying to say.”

Spike blinked a bit, and then focused on the nearing city of Canterlot clinging to the side of the mountain, its spires and turrets brightly lit and welcoming. “I don’t know,” he said. “It sounds pretty cool when you put it that way. It’s not really like that, though. There’s a lot more horribleness and embarrassment involved.”

“Always is,” said Night darkly.

“Those who seek to hurt and humiliate you,” Luna said, her eyes never straying from the onset of her velvety night, “are trying to trap you in a prison of your own making, Spike. They are trying to make you unhappy, afraid and ashamed.”

“I’ve been there,” Spike sighed. “I don’t want to go back.”

Twilight’s hoof on his back pressed down harder.

“There is no point in rewarding them with success,” Luna continued, her mane a floating, star-flecked cloud behind her head.

“Is this some sort of weird pep talk to prepare me for the Gala?” he asked suspiciously.

Luna laughed. “Perhaps.”

“Almost time for our descent,” Night said, nodding to Canterlot.

“Are you ready for the best night ever, Spike?” asked Pinkie enticingly.

“Is Pony Joe’s still open?” Spike asked Night.

The captain chuckled, before regarding the pegasi in front of them with a keen eye. “First division, prepare to descend!” he barked. “Make our landing on the drawbridge, in spear formation! Cloudbank Rush to take point! In your own time, gentlecolts!”

Their necks stretching, the leading division of ponies began to lean forward and down towards the bright lights of Canterlot. Spike hurriedly followed suit, causing his passengers to yelp as they were jerked forward.

“Coulda warned us,” Applejack grumbled.

“Captain Night was shouting it,” Spike said innocently, extending himself and angling his wings to stop his dive from becoming a plummet.

“Oh, why did I bother styling it at all!” Rarity despaired.

Spike backwinged carefully to land behind the semicircle of Palace Guards, who were all standing to impressive attention within seconds of touching down. The drawbridge rattled alarmingly as it took his weight, and he held his breath. “Perfect landing!” Rainbow Dash praised him.

“Thanks, Dash,” he said, straightening up. Beside him, Princess Luna and Falling Night alighted and scanned the arriving guests.

Most were goggle-eyed at the sight of him, but one or two of the more aware ponies registered the elegant Princess at his side and sank into a deep bow. The rest of the crowd soon caught on and knelt amidst a flurry of silk and feathers and sibilant whispers.

“Rise, my ponies!” Luna boomed. Spike winced. The Royal Canterlot voice was hard on the ears. “Your Princess thanks you for your greeting, and welcomes you to the two hundred and eighty-sixth Grand Galloping Gala!”

“Yeowch,” muttered Applejack.

“D’you think she ever gets a sore throat?” Pinkie Pie whispered.

“Shh!” Twilight hushed them. “Come on, let’s go in. Can you hold out your knee, Spike?”

Spike complied, eyeing the gathered ponies warily, who eyed him just as cautiously right back. No pony seemed ready to start a fuss, so he relaxed a little as his friends dismounted.

“Well, that was a nice change,” Fluttershy said, smoothing down her starry scale-flecked gown. “I’ve never been flown before.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, still keeping an eye on the crowd as Twilight unbuckled his harness and floated it to a guardhouse.

“Is it a total disaster?” Rarity asked him anxiously, one hoof hovering over her elaborate coiffure. He squinted.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t look any different to me.”

“It’s fine, come on,” said Rainbow Dash, rolling her eyes. “The Princess is already starting to go in.”

They began to enter the Palace behind the stately Luna and surrounded by Captain Night's platoon. The great entrance hall opened up before them, full of grandly dressed fillies and gentlecolts all waiting to enter the ballroom. Rich tapestries hung from the high ceilings which were crisscrossed with bright silk bunting. There was colour and movement everywhere, and it was all lit by the soft golden glow of great candle-filled chandeliers hanging at intervals over the central red-carpeted walk.

They were greeted by gasps, and the level of noise dropped sharply. Captain Night barked a few commands into the silence, and with a jingling trot the Palace Guards lined the walls. Night nodded to Spike once, bowed to the Princess, and disappeared into the dizzying array of colours and ponies.

Spike steeled himself, setting his shoulders straight and holding his chin up higher. He was what he was, and there was no denying it. Fortifying himself with the memory of his reflection in the dam, he stepped as proudly as he could after the slim, elegant figure, ignoring the murmurs and whispers that followed. As the Princess passed, ponies bowed respectfully to her, resembling nothing quite so much as colourful flowers bending in the wind. As he passed, however, gazes turned from the floor to peer up at him in a mixture of alarm and avid curiosity.

"Well, nopony's screaming," Twilight murmured up to him wryly.

"Give it time," he replied, just as wry. "The night is young."

"Spike!"

He raised his eyes to see Princess Celestia half-rising from a throne on one side of a stunningly-appointed double dais. She stood as he approached, her glorious lavender eyes filled with concern. A line of ponies were arrayed before her, but she moved past them with an eager tread to meet him. "Are you all right?" she asked with worry in her melodious voice.

"I'm fine," he said, smiling down at her. "It's... well, it's been a long day, but I'm okay."

"There is no need to put on a brave face with me, my dear dragon."

He ducked his head a little. "I know, Princess... I'm sort of not thinking about it at the moment. If that makes sense."

She smiled back. "It does. I am so very glad to see you, my friend."

“You too, Princess,” he said shyly. She raised her hoof gracefully, and he took it with trembling caution and bowed over it. The whispering rose to a hissing storm.

Luna stepped beside her sister, dark eyes warm. “I told you I would see him here safely, sister,” she said with a note of smugness in her voice.

Celestia raised an amused eyebrow at her sibling. “Did I ever express any doubt?” Then turning to Twilight, she smiled fondly. “Good evening, my faithful student. I like your choice of attire.”

Twilight glanced over at Rarity. “It’s all Rarity’s doing, Princess.”

Rarity gave a weak little smile.

“Spectacular,” Celestia congratulated her. “You all look wonderful, and of course nopony will miss the meaning behind it, especially with Spike right here for comparison.”

Rarity’s smile grew a little more satisfied, and she drew herself up, her head tossing proudly. “That *was* the idea,” she said modestly.

“You seem tired, Twilight Sparkle,” the Princess said then, her head cocking and her insubstantial mane rippling with the movement. “Is everything all right?”

Spike stepped in hurriedly. “Um, it’s mostly me again,” he said with a sheepish bob of his head. “She’s been worried out of her mind for the last two days.”

“Goin’ clear ‘round the twist,” Applejack agreed.

“I had reason,” Twilight muttered.

“You have the best of reasons,” said Celestia gently.

“I’m okay, promise,” Spike said, his brow wrinkling. “Right here, can’t miss me.”

The unfortunate choice of words made Twilight’s breath hitch. Spike flinched. “Aw shoot, sorry, Twilight,” he said humbly. “That was a stupid thing to say.”

“Twilight Sparkle,” Luna said gently, “to fear the future is just as poisonous as mourning for it.”

“My sister has always been good at thinking long, deep thoughts,” Celestia said, her eyes twinkling. “It is the smaller, day-to-day thoughts that confuse her.”

“Tia,” Luna growled.

Spike snickered a little, and then pulled on an innocent face when Luna rounded upon him, her expression suspicious. “Well, let me welcome you once more to the Grand Galloping Gala,” Celestia said. “I do hope you intend to liven up the festivities again.”

“Well, we haven’t made any plans to,” Applejack said with a deprecating little laugh, “but those sort o’ things do tend to follow us around.”

“You said it, AJ.” Spike rolled his eyes.

“I will be some time, I fear,” the Sun Princess said with a small sigh, glancing back at the line before her dais. “I must greet all the guests – and little sister, I would very much appreciate your help.”

Luna pursed her lips. “If I must,” she said with reluctance.

“I trust Pinkie Pie remembers the ballroom.” Celestia turned back to them. “I am afraid, Rarity, that my nephew is once again attending this year. Unfortunately we have not had the foresight to lay in an apple cake for you.”

Rarity went pink, and then her eyes hardened. “Oh, a lady can always make do,” she said with grim satisfaction. Spike felt a little sorry for the odious Prince at that point.

“The Wyrmsstadt ambassador is also in the ballroom,” Celestia continued more seriously. “He is still very angry about the incident yesterday, and no doubt will wish to speak to you almost immediately.”

Spike gulped. “Right. Okay, not a problem. I’ll talk to him about it, Princess. And I’ll hold fast to my convictions, like you said.”

She smiled up at him. “I never had any doubt of that, my dragon,” she said. “We will join you when we have finished greeting our guests.”

“So, possibly a thousand years, maybe two,” Luna added sardonically.

Bowing to them once more, Spike and his friends moved away from the dais and towards the ballroom entrance. Spike had never been so grateful for high ceilings and

ceremonially large doors before. The doors in question were flung wide to a scene of swirling dancers and spectacular dresses, long white-clothed tables covered in intricate, delicate dishes and sparkling glasses of honeysuckle wine, bustling waiters in dapper ties and waistcoats with hors d'oeuvres on trays, and the elegant chamber orchestra playing from the familiar raised stage.

“Wow, it’s a lot prettier than last time,” mused Pinkie as she regarded the scene of her prior humiliation at the hooves of the fancy party ponies.

“You okay, Pinks?” Dash asked.

Blue eyes rolled. “Ha, as if those snooty party-poopers could keep me down! Don’t be silly, Dashie! Now, what do we do first? Do you wanna try every single one of those teeny weeny posh nibblies, or do you wanna dance? Personally, I’m in favour of doing both at the same time.”

Spike met Twilight’s eyes, and they both began to giggle. “Pinkie, you’re the greatest,” Spike chuckled. “Come on, everypony, let’s go in. I could use a sit-down first. After all, I just got us all here.”

“Puh-lease,” sniffed Dash, “that was no distance at all!”

“You ever tried it carrying six ponies?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“You’ve carried way heavier things than us,” she scoffed.

Spike shook his head and began to step into the ballroom. “But I didn’t carry them for so... so...” He trailed off. A deadly silence had spread through the room at his entrance.

“Head up, sugarcube,” Applejack murmured.

The sound of his claws on the polished marble floor resounded loudly in the hush as they walked through the gaping crowd. Spike lifted his chin once more. It seemed this was to be a pattern for the night: enter a room, shock everypony in it into silence.

Well, the *hay* with that, he told himself sternly. He wasn’t going to pay it any more attention than it deserved, and he certainly wasn’t going to stop a conversation with a friend. He turned his head back to Dash pointedly. “As I was saying,” he said with a slight edge to his voice, “I didn’t have to carry Tom or any of the basalt blocks for my house *nearly* so far – and I wasn’t flying at the time.”

His voice echoed through the cavernous ballroom. Surely these ponies couldn't be *that* shocked, Spike thought scornfully, not if the Wyrmsstadt ambassador was in here as well.

"Are you saying we're as heavy as Tom?" Rarity said indignantly. "Spike! It is very rude to speculate on a lady's weight!"

"Oh, I'd never try and be rude to you, Rarity..." Spike backtracked.

"Where do you want to sit?" asked Fluttershy, her eyes darting around the ballroom.

Spike raised his head once more and squinted about. "Uh, near the stage?" he suggested. "There seems to be a sort of place I can fit in that corner over there. I won't be too near the food or the dance floor, and there's no doors or anything so I won't be stopping some poor waiter from doing his job..."

"Right." Twilight nodded. "I see it."

"I'll go get us some food!" Pinkie exclaimed, eyeing the tables and rubbing her hooves.

"Hey Applejack, I need to find Spitfire and the others," Rainbow Dash said, looking around at the now-whispering crowd. "You wanna come with?"

"Sure thing."

"I must be seen with Hoity for some part of this gathering, I suppose," Rarity sighed. "Such a bore. Fluttershy, would you like to come along?"

"I'll stay with Spike," said Fluttershy, creeping closer to his side. "The fashion industry and I... don't get along so well."

"Okie dokie lokie, you guys! See you in the flashiest of flashes!"

The murmurs once again grew in volume as they split up. Spike, Twilight and Fluttershy made their way to the corner, and by the time Spike lay down on his belly with a slight stretch and a groan, the noise level had tripled from what it had originally been.

"I could really use a drink," Twilight muttered. "My throat's dry from that flight."

"Go on, you two," Spike said, folding his forepaw over the other. "Go get a glass of that honeysuckle wine or something. No need to babysit me."

Twilight gave him a hard look, but relented when he raised his eyebrows meaningfully at her. “Fine,” she capitulated. “I’ll talk to the kitchens about getting you something as well. Fluttershy, could you give me a hoof?”

Fluttershy eyed the now loudly-exclaiming guests with trepidation. “I suppose,” she mumbled.

“Come on, Fluttershy,” Twilight wheedled. “I don’t want to be the only pony in sight wearing dragon scales!”

“Well, when you put it that way...” she said resignedly. “I just hope nopony thinks I’m offering to model again.”

The pair moved out into the crowd once more, Twilight depositing a final pat on his forepaw before disappearing amongst the swirling silks and deafening chatter. He could make out Rarity’s spectacular coiffure in the centre of an admiring audience, and there was no mistaking the line that led to where Spitfire, Soarin’ and Rainbow Dash were talking. He noted proudly that Dash was talking to each pony individually, keeping the line moving.

He couldn’t see another dragon at all.

That made him both disappointed and relieved. The Wurmstadt ambassador didn’t appear to be here, despite Princess Celestia’s warning. He’d been apprehensive about meeting another dragon, especially one that was angry with his home and his chosen land – but at the same time it would have been nice to not be the only dragon for once. Perhaps he could have learned something. As it was, his only examples were himself and Razorfang, and Razorfang wasn’t very forthcoming. Understatement of the century, he snorted to himself, and several of the nearer ponies jerked away at the noise, before turning back to their shouted conversations.

“Well, that’s torn it,” said the cello player from the stage sourly. “We can’t be heard over this racket.”

“Sorry,” Spike said meekly. The dark-maned pony looked startled at having been overheard.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I suppose it isn’t your fault. Technically.” She laid her instrument down and began to resin the bow. “It isn’t like you asked to be a dragon.”

“It’s not all bad,” he replied, his claws fidgeting a little.

The cellist leaned back on her stool. “If you say so,” she said with a bored shrug. “I suppose you don’t know much about music?” she asked, and her dry voice was a little hopeful.

“Actually, I used to be a pianist,” he said proudly. Then he looked down at his claws, and pulled a face at them. “Then I outgrew the piano.”

She blinked, and then barked a short, dusty laugh. “I can see how that would have been annoying,” she said. “Any favourites?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “It’s all music to me,” he said. “I pretty much like it all.”

“I like Beethoofen,” she said, as though placing down a challenge. He grinned.

“Nice! But I like the choral stuff way more than the symponies,” he said. “They kinda bore me.”

Her eyes widened, and then lit up with the glee of a true fanatic. “What do you think of his chamber music?” she asked.

When Twilight and Fluttershy returned, they found Spike in deep conversation with a dark-maned grey earth pony. “No, no, no,” said Spike as he shook his head. “*Tales of Hoofman* is a better duet. Claws down.”

“How can you say that?” the grey pony asked, throwing her hooves in the air. “The one from *Bridle of Figaro* is a million – no, a *billion* times better!”

“*The Pearl Seaponies.*”

“*The Magic Hoof.*”

“Okay, I like all of them too,” he said grudgingly. “Let’s say they’re equally awesome.”

“What about ballets?”

“Huh, maybe Tchaichoofsky? Nah, probably Prokhoofiev.”

“With you on Prokhoofiev all the way. Wow, you have good taste, I’d never have believed it. You must have hated that song.”

“We. Don’t. Mention. The song.”

“Spike?” Twilight said, her eyebrows high. “Who’s your friend?”

Spike lifted his head to her, his eyes bright with excitement. “Hey, Twi! This is Octavia!”

“Hi,” the grey pony said in a dry sort of voice. “You must be Twilight Sparkle.”

“That’s me,” Twilight said, holding up a hoof to the stage to shake Octavia’s. “This is Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy mumbled a greeting under her breath.

“So... you’ve been talking music ever since I left?” Twilight asked Spike, her mouth quirking.

“Yeah, and hey, Twilight, Octavia likes Marehler more than *jazz*! Isn’t that *weird*?”

“It would be if I knew who Marehler was,” she said.

“Do you think we could magic me up a piano someday?” he asked a little wistfully. She laughed.

“Spike, I’ll try my horn off. Now, the kitchen is going to bring out some food for you. Apparently Princess Luna told them about you first, and then Princess Celestia, so they’ve had plenty of advance notice.”

“Did they know that I don’t eat what a dragon normally...” Spike trailed off, looking sidelong at Octavia.

“Vegetarian all the way, apparently,” Twilight confirmed.

“Live and learn,” was Octavia’s only comment.

“Thanks, Twilight,” Spike said.

“Thank the Princesses,” Twilight said, smoothing down her gown. “The poor head chef looked like he was about to burst into tears at yet another pony asking about your food.”

“Huh.” Spike rubbed the back of his neck.

Octavia glanced back to the stage, where her fellow musicians were beginning to ready themselves again. “I better go,” she said, picking up her bow once more. “Spike, it’s been a nice surprise and a real pleasure. I’ll talk to you again soon, okay?”

“Come and see me anytime you’re in Ponyville!” he replied. “I still have to convince you about rock ‘n’ roll.”

“You’re on.” She smiled faintly, before turning to her music.

“She seems nice,” Fluttershy offered, and Spike grinned.

“It was great talking about music again,” he enthused. “I haven’t played piano in years. I wonder if Pinkie still remembers the song we wrote together...”

“Of course I do!” Pinkie’s voice came from underneath a large platter piled high with dainty little dishes she had pilfered from the white-clothed tables. “Anypony hungry?” she asked cheerily.

Spike carefully took the tray from atop her head, and Pinkie beamed up at him. “Phew, thanks, Spike!” she said, wiping a hoof across her forehead. “That thing was *heavy*.”

“I don’t think all six of us can eat that much, Pinkie,” Twilight said dubiously.

Spike lowered the platter to the ground, and delicately pinched a little roll of something fancy. “Suppose I’ll have to help out,” he said, grinning.

“Dragon of Ponyville Village, I request audience.”

Spike started a little at the unfamiliar voice and the strange phrasing. “Uh...” He looked around. “Hello?”

“Here,” came the gravelly voice once more, and a most astonishing being stepped into his line of sight. The newcomer was definitely reptilian, but so small – not even reaching to Twilight’s shoulder. It had two legs rather than four, and bronze wings covered its back like a cloak. Its skin was a coppery green with bronze highlights, and its eyes were the colour of topaz. A golden torque around its neck glinted with precious stones. “I speak for She of the Wyrmland,” he said with a sinuous bow. “I request audience.”

Spike blinked for a moment at the remarkable creature, before hurriedly swallowing the tiny little canapé. “Uh, hi,” he said uncertainly. “Audience... granted?”

The small being swept his wings behind him, trailing their edges along the ground in a peculiarly submissive sort of way, before he looked up at Spike with eyes full of anger. It was the only outward indication of fury concealed beneath a cool, diplomatic exterior. “News of you has reached my mighty mistress,” the gravelly voice rasped. “The

Wyrmland is not pleased with how you have been treated by the hooves of ponykind, Dragon of Ponyville Village. She Who Lives Longest wishes to remove you from danger.”

“I’ve heard about that,” Spike said, “and all due respect to the Lady of the Wyrmland, but isn’t it up to me to decide? Well, I’m choosing to stay. My home is Ponyville and all my friends are there. No pony and no dragon can drag me out of it.”

“None gainsay She of the Wyrmland,” the little ambassador growled. “You would do well to remember that, Dragon of Ponyville Village.”

Spike’s brow furrowed. “Do you have to call me that every single time?”

The being looked taken aback. “So it is true,” he said, “you do not know your own customs.”

“Hey, I know that one,” Spike said. “I’m not supposed to hand out my name, yadda yadda yadda, but ‘Dragon of Ponyville Village’ is one hay of a mouthful. Besides, it’s *my* name. Can’t I decide who to give it to?”

The little creature looked faintly bemused. “I... suppose.”

“Good,” Spike said firmly. “I’m Spike.”

The ambassador hissed quietly between his teeth. “You are young and foolish,” he muttered.

Spike shrugged. “Young, yes, but I don’t think this is foolish.”

“There has been an attack on your life, Dragon of Ponyville Village,” the ambassador continued.

“Do tell.” Spike snorted.

“You would be safest amongst other dragons,” the strange being said, lifting his sharp chin.

“But I wouldn’t be *happiest*,” Spike said. “Look, I know, okay? I know the arguments you want to use. You’re going to bring up the challenge and the protests and the stupid harpoon again. I’ve heard it before. But running away from my problems would be just as useless as hiding from them. It wouldn’t solve anything, and it would put my home in danger.”

“You could carve out another territory,” the ambassador persisted.

“No I couldn’t,” Spike answered bluntly. “It’d just be a place. It wouldn’t be home.”

“Why stay?” the ambassador challenged, eyes flashing. “Why stay when there are protests and petitions against you? Why stay when the treaty has been violated and your life endangered?”

Spike huffed smoke through his nostrils in irritation. “How much have you heard about me?”

“I have spoken to the Great Sun Pony,” said the ambassador stiffly. “She tells me that you insist on staying for ridiculous, sentimental reasons.”

“She’s right,” Spike said, ignoring the ‘ridiculous, sentimental’ part. “I was brought up by ponies. My sister is a pony, my family, my friends. I can’t be what you and Razorfang seem to think a dragon should be. I belong *here*, not in a cave somewhere.”

The ambassador looked shocked. “The Dragon of the Everfree Forest gave you his name?”

“I don’t think it’s his name, actually,” Spike mused. “I think he just gave me something to call him. Something meant to intimidate me.”

“Nevertheless, he gave you a name.” The ambassador frowned. “This bears thinking about.”

“Is that important?” Twilight asked.

The ambassador glanced at her. “It may be,” it answered evasively.

“I hope this isn’t rude,” Spike began hesitantly, “but I’ve never seen anything quite like you before.”

The ambassador’s bronze eyebrows rose. “I am a wyvern, cousin to dragons, basilisks and cockatrices. No true dragon would ever leave their territory to undertake an ambassadorial role, and so She Who Eclipses The Sun employs my people for the task. I am the twenty-third such ambassador.”

“Bit rough on you, though, isn’t it?” Spike tilted his head. “Being away from home for so long?”

“She of the Wyrmland has protected us for millennia,” the ambassador said, his voice ringing with pride. “It is my honour to serve.”

“Ask him about Razorfang,” whispered Twilight in Spike’s ear. He cleared his throat.

“Anyway,” he said, “as I said before, I don’t actually know all that much about dragon customs, and Twilight hasn’t found very much in her books. It looks like dragons don’t willingly give out that information. Is it normal for a dragon to hate... well, explaining anything?”

The ambassador’s wings twitched. Then he burst out into sibilant, hissing laughter.

“What did I say?” Spike asked, lost.

The ambassador composed himself hurriedly, smoothing back the spines over his sleek head. “Ah,” he sighed in his gravelly voice, “now I truly believe you were brought up by ponykind.”

“So they *do* hate explaining anything,” Spike said.

The wyvern gave him an amused look. “It is customary to learn through example,” he explained. “To explain oneself is to not only insult your pupil’s intelligence, but also to hand a potential enemy tools with which to harm you.”

Spike’s brow furrowed. “Seems a bit cold.”

“It is traditional.”

“I don’t think that’ll work for me,” said Spike doubtfully.

The ambassador looked perplexed and a little frustrated. “You are a dragon,” he stated.

“Ten points for observation,” Spike said, eyebrow raised. “I’m a dragon, raised by *ponies*, who likes explanations and wants to stay in his home.”

“Your egg was...”

“Was stolen,” Spike finished, “almost a hundred and twenty years ago. All the ponies responsible are dead.”

“Protests and assassinations are only the beginning,” the ambassador said, his cool diplomatic exterior beginning to crack. “Soon the egg-stealing will begin again. A harpoon has already been thrown!”

“They’re only a small section of Equestria,” Spike said, starting to get a little cross. “These protestors are mostly afraid – and they probably wouldn’t be if dragons weren’t too proud to explain themselves once in a while. The whole of Ponyville wants me to stay. Look at my friends! They’re wearing my old scales to show how much they support me!”

The ambassador regarded Pinkie Pie’s ruffled, gleaming outfit with some surprise. “They are.”

“See?”

The ambassador shook his head. “That aside, it does not negate the threat to you and to dragonkind. You are incensing the pony population with how visible you are – you will become a rallying point. It would be better for you to keep a lower profile.”

“Tell that to the reporters who follow me around,” Spike said. “I didn’t ask for it.”

“Protests will become riots,” the ambassador said in a steely voice, “and riots will see your death, and from there it shall not stop. The killings will begin all over again – the black times will be upon us once more!”

“If you think the Princesses would let that happen, you’re loco in the coco.” Spike snorted.

The ambassador’s needle-like teeth bared. “The treaty...”

“Has been broken, yes,” Spike interrupted. “By *one* pony. These protests and harpoons... they don’t change anything.”

“They could kill you, Dragon of Ponyville Village,” the ambassador growled.

“They might,” Spike allowed, “but they might not. And the chance to stay with my friends is something I’m willing to fight for.”

Luna’s words, in his mouth. They felt right.

The ambassador glared at him, his reptilian face twisted with outrage. “I will be at the challenge,” he grated. “I will see that it is carried out in pure draconic tradition.”

“Look forward to seeing you,” Spike retorted.

The ambassador stalked away, his wings trailing along the marble floor. Spike released a gusty, smoke-laden breath, finally registering how tense he had become during that exchange. “Phew, that was edgy,” he said under his breath.

“I don’t think you convinced him,” Fluttershy said.

“I don’t think he listens to anything anypony ever says to him,” Spike said with aggravation. “Stubborn, proud, short-tempered little...”

Pinkie Pie stifled a snicker. “You were just as bad, you know, Spike,” she pointed out with a grin.

“Stubborn, proud, short-tempered, not-so-little,” Twilight recited, before smiling impishly at him. “For a dragon who insists he isn’t much of one, you’re sure ticking all the right boxes.”

He paused, before wrinkling his nose. “But I explained myself, right?”

• • •

A veritable platoon of aproned waiters brought out a great golden cauldron full of fruits and cakes, and there was even a smaller basket full of aquamarines and rubies. They were some of the most delicious gems Spike had ever tasted, and he wondered if they were of a higher grade than he was used to eating.

He’d met famous pony after famous pony, their names and faces and cutie marks all blurring together in his mind. Even Prince Blueblood had deigned to greet him, his supercilious sneer in place. Rainbow Dash joined them once more after speaking to all the Wonderbolt hopefuls, her face wreathed in a satisfied grin. “Best part of the job,” she declared contentedly.

“The being admired part?” Twilight said dryly.

Rainbow poked out her tongue at Twilight, before smoothing back her mane. “Right! Well, I’m gonna go find Applejack.” She grinned once more. “I think I saw her bending somepony’s ear about dragon-assisted harvesting techniques...”

Pinkie nodded. “All good advertising!”

Rarity returned from her group of admirers, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, darlings!” she said happily. “Fancy Pants has just asked me to dance! Me! Oh, it’s so exciting... now, does my mane look all right? Is the bustle straight on my gown? I mustn’t be mussed – oh, but I mustn’t look unapproachable either. Has my mascara run? He’s gone to get me some wine. I hope I remember all the steps. His assistant is just so glamorous; I can barely breathe in front of her without feeling like some silly country filly. What if I tread on his hoof? I’d be the laughing-stock of the Gala! Oh, girls!”

“You’re lovely,” Twilight assured her.

“You’ll be fine, Rarity,” soothed Fluttershy.

“Oooh! Has Rarity finally found her Prince?” Pinkie said with a sly smile. Rarity flushed prettily.

“It’s only a dance,” she said with scarcely-hidden excitement. Then she tipped her head back and let out a squeal of joy. “*Eeeee! Fancy Pants himself wants to dance with meeee!*”

Spike swallowed painfully. “That’s... great, Rarity,” he said with false heartiness. Twilight shot him a sharp look. “Have fun!”

“Oh, Spike, he’s coming over here,” Rarity said with a flustered smile. “He’s *terribly* impressed by your scales, you know... Everypony was asking me questions about them; I’ve never had so much interest in a design before...”

“Miss Rarity?” a cultured voice interrupted. Rarity froze, eyes glowing.

“Fancy,” she said with trembling poise, “do please call me Rarity.”

Fancy Pants, monocle and urbane expression firmly in place, levitated a glass of wine over to her. “Of course, Rarity,” he murmured smoothly. Rarity giggled, her face turning a delicate shade of pink, and took a large gulp.

“Fancy, you remember my friends Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy?”

“My dear ladies,” Fancy said politely with a graceful bow, before giving them all an utterly charming, handsome smile. Spike absolutely hated him. “You all look divine. Your work, dearest Rarity?”

Rarity dropped her long lashes modestly. “Well... yes.”

“Stunning,” Fancy murmured.

Rarity fanned herself with one hoof. “Very kind of you to say so,” she said warmly. “But they wouldn’t be half what they are without the scales... and on that note, Fancy, let me introduce you to my good friend, Spike.”

*My good friend, Spike...*

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Fancy Pants said, bowing to Spike before standing straight and smiling once more. “I’ve heard so much about you, dear fellow... but the tales certainly don’t do you justice. Your coat is simply astonishing, and in the talented hooves of our lovely Rarity, why, it’s going to completely revolutionise fashion as we know it.”

“Well, she’s amazing,” Spike mumbled in response, his heart heavy in his chest.

“Truer words were never spoken,” Fancy replied, giving her a sidelong, smouldering sort of look. “I hope you don’t mind, ladies, good sir, if I monopolise your lovely friend for a time longer? The band is playing divinely, and I would be a scoundrel indeed if I did not accompany such beauty to the dance floor.”

Rarity quivered, before coquettishly laying a hoof in his.

Spike watched the handsome, sophisticated pony escort Rarity amongst the dancers, and sighed longingly.

“Are you all right, Spike?” Twilight asked him.

He nodded, before closing his eyes. “I suppose it was going to happen someday,” he whispered.

“She’d never intentionally hurt you,” Fluttershy said, her wing brushing his forepaw.

“She’s just so excited it’s bubbling out everywhere,” Pinkie said.

“She’s a pony,” Spike said, quietly and unhappily. “And I’m a dragon.”

Twilight pressed her head against his face. “I love you,” she said. “We all do.”

“Rarity too,” added Pinkie. “I suppose it’s just not in a mares-and-stallions sort of way...”

“It was never going to happen, was it?” Spike asked of nopony in particular, and then rubbed one forepaw roughly over his eyes. “It was just a dream...”

“Dreams hurt when they break,” Pinkie said distantly. “But then you dream another one.”

Spike clenched his fangs, and looked out over the dance floor, where elaborate purple curls bent close to an elegant blue mane. “She’s so beautiful,” he said hollowly. Then his mouth quirked in a wry, pained smile. “She’s so *small*.”

Twilight chuckled. “We all are, compared to you.”

Spike took a deep, shuddering breath. “I guess I’ve known it for a while,” he said. “She knew, after all. And... she never said anything...”

“It doesn’t mean she cares for you any less, Spike.” Twilight pulled back to look him in the eye. “It’s only a dance, after all.”

“It doesn’t mean she can care for me any more either,” he replied, before pursing his lips. “My good friend, Spike,” he quoted ironically.

“Oh, poor thing,” Fluttershy said sadly.

“It’s just a silly foalish crush.” Spike shook himself, trying to will himself into believing it. “Just a crush.”

“This can’t be easy for you,” Twilight said with concern in her luminous purple eyes. “You’ve had a crush on her forever.”

“For-EV-er,” Pinkie repeated owlshly.

“Yes, thanks, Pinkie,” Spike said testily. Then he swallowed against the huge lump in his throat. “She’s a pony,” he repeated with resignation. “And I’m... a dragon.”

“I’m so sorry, Spike.” Twilight nuzzled his cheek once more, her ears drooping in sympathy.

“The first time I saw her, I thought she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen,” he remembered, smiling nostalgically at the memory. Then he sighed once more. Despite all the times he’d told himself otherwise, it *did* matter, and he’d always known it. He’d

always love her, his first crush, but it would be some time before the sting faded. He bade a bittersweet farewell to the Rarity in his memory, the Rarity of his childhood.

He gave that dream-Rarity a final wistful look as she twirled radiantly around the dance floor on the hoof of the handsome, charming stallion. She looked so happy. She would always be special to him. She'd always be the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

His heart squeezed painfully as she giggled at something Fancy whispered to her. He turned his eyes away for a moment, before pulling himself up straight and setting his chin firmly. "She," he choked, "she looks so happy."

"She's one of your ponies, and always will be," Fluttershy said.

Spike's eyes narrowed on Fancy Pants, and he growled. "He better be good to her," he said darkly.

Twilight pulled back from him, her eyes surprised and wondering. Then she laid her hooves either side of his face and squeezed with sudden intensity. "I am so..." she said forcefully, "so proud of you, Spike."

He gazed back at his tiny big sister, and gave a short, melancholy laugh. "I'm pretty proud of me too."

A silvery fanfare abruptly split the air, and Spike jerked away from Twilight in surprise. In the doorway appeared the slim, willowy figures of the two heavenly princesses side by side, their manes streaming in an otherworldly breeze.

“Their Royal Majesties, the goddesses of Day and Night, Princesses Celestia and Luna!” boomed a pony with a slicked mane and a fussy moustache, standing beside the door.

The Princesses began a slow, poised walk into the ballroom, their heads nodding graciously to the bowing and curtsying guests. Celestia looked a little tired of all the formalities, though her usual benevolent smile was still firmly in place. Luna looked as distant as the moon, her face impassive and her head held high.

“Please, my friends!” Celestia called in a clear, carrying voice. “No need to stand on ceremony!” She clapped her hooves, and the orchestra obediently began a waltz. Ponies tentatively straightened from their bows and edged back to the dance floor. A light chatter resumed.

Luna made a beeline directly for Spike, nodding elegantly to the ponies that greeted her on her way. “I saw the ambassador,” she said in a low voice once she had reached them. “I don’t think you have a gift for diplomatic speech, Spike. I have never seen a wyvern so furious.”

He smiled sheepishly. “He didn’t much like what I had to say.”

Her lips quirked. “That was obvious.”

“He was faaaaantastic!” said Pinkie. “He sure showed that slinky little guy what for!”

“It was very dragony around here for a while,” Twilight said, her hoof still resting comfortingly on Spike’s face.

“I did try to explain.” Spike attempted to defend himself, but it was weak and he knew it. He wrinkled his snout. “Well, I didn’t really try to make him feel better about it, I suppose.”

“There was a distinct lack of appeasing the angry ambassador going on,” Twilight agreed, but as she spoke her hoof absently stroked his cheek.

“I might have expected your pride would take a hoof,” the Princess said, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “You may be a very different sort of dragon, but you are still a dragon.”

“No, really?” Spike snorted. Then he realised with a start that he had been flippant at the *Princess*, and sucked in a breath. “Uh.”

Luna chuckled. “Did you not hear my sister? No need to stand on ceremony. Especially you, my friend.”

“Manners, mister.” Twilight tapped him admonishingly. He gave them all a crooked, rueful smile.

“Sorry... guess I’m just not in the greatest of moods right now.”

“We understand, Spike,” Fluttershy said sympathetically.

“Well, the night’s not over yet!” Pinkie declared, before wolfing down a few more of the dainty nibbles from the platter. “Mmmph, uh, ohyeahsogood,” she mumbled, before standing up straight as a ruler, blue eyes bright. “It’s still gonna be Spike’s best night ever! So what if there’s googly gawkers and angry ambassadors and posh ponies who dance with Rarity? We gotta get this party *happening!*”

Twilight froze. “Um, Pinkie... last time...”

Pinkie blew a disdainful raspberry, before stooping to peck up a few more canapés. “Unnnmph,” she said, munching blissfully. Then she swallowed, and popped back upright. “Later! I’m off to find Rainbow Dash; now there’s a pony who knows how to party!”

She was gone in a flurry of crumbs.

“So is she always...” Luna began.

“Yes,” sighed Spike, Twilight and Fluttershy in unison.

“I... see.” Luna blinked a little, before cocking an eyebrow. “Laughter suits her.”

“That’s our Pinkie Pie.” Twilight nodded, her face alight with fond amusement.

Luna gazed in the direction the party pony had disappeared for another moment, her face bemused, before shaking herself slightly and turning back to Spike. “It seems that Celestia’s other purpose in inviting you has been well and truly achieved,” she said. “You have been meeting very important ponies all night, I believe. Many have spoken to us about you, and reported their favourable impressions.”

“Oh good,” Spike said in relief. “There were so many, I was nervous I’d forgotten somepony’s name or something. That would have been embarrassing.”

Luna smiled. “They are very taken with your friends’ outfits as well.”

“That I know,” Spike said with a mixture of sadness and pride. “They look great, huh?”

Her flawless face creased with concern. “Something is wrong?”

Spike shuffled a little. “No,” he said eventually. “Just something ending.”

Luna gave him a long, searching look, before nodding. “Endings can also be beginnings, my friend,” she said gently. “I am testament to that.”

Twilight’s hoof twitched on his face as her head spun towards the slender goddess. She stared at her, before saying tentatively, “Princess?”

“Twilight, you’re sort of smooshing my face,” Spike managed. Twilight glanced back at him to see his cheek squashed beneath her hoof. She jerked it away with a self-conscious little laugh.

“Um. Sorry.”

Spike rubbed at his cheek a little with the back of one forepaw. “So what else did all those posh ponies say?” he asked.

“They are curious, as you might expect,” Luna said, turning her head to view the swirling dancers pensively. “Several have been back and forth from the ballroom all night. Some even went so far as to ask for some sort of demonstration.”

“From *me*?” Spike blurted.

“I did not think it would be suitable,” Luna said. “It is a ball, after all. Perhaps in the gardens later?”

“I don’t know,” Spike said, picking at his claws again. “Lots of ponies get a bit freaked out by my fire.”

“I don’t think the animals would like it either,” Fluttershy put in.

Luna’s head inclined politely. “Then we shall not suggest it. No doubt our sister would announce it immediately to increase our little ponies’ acceptance of you.”

“Uh, Luna?” Spike murmured. “You’re using the Royal ‘we’ again.”

“Oh.” The princess rolled her eyes. “All those guests. Greeting each one with full ceremonial protocol does tend to get repetitive.”

“I remember,” Twilight said with an irritable twist of her lips.

“So what else has been happening in Ponyville since I last saw you?” Luna asked, her horn flaring and a small hors d’oeuvre levitating towards her.

Spike hummed a little in thought. “Well, you know about...” he faltered, and then sighed. “This morning Razorfang decided it would be a great idea to stomp on over to Ponyville. I still haven’t figured out why.”

“The whole of Ponyville saw you stand up to him, Spike,” said Twilight.

“They saw me *yell* at him. A lot,” he said ruefully. “Him being there just got me so mad, and so soon after the harpoon, I guess I just sort of... snapped. A little bit. A snap-ette? A snapino?”

“He was trespassing, was he not?”

“Yep, blatantly.” Spike scowled. “Who knows, maybe he was just trying to make me feel the way he did when I was a baby and ate his gems. Like I haven’t got the point already! Anyway, Fluttershy made him shut up long enough to listen.”

Luna looked with astonishment at the meek yellow pegasus, who ducked behind her mane at the sudden attention.

“She has experience,” Twilight said with a short laugh.

“Oh, I got another letter from Just too,” Spike remembered. “He might have found out something about Huffy – she was the assistant to the Great and Powerful Trixie. He’s in

the Brumby Bushlands right now, looking for her. If I don't hear from him tomorrow, I have to inform everypony of where he's gone."

"Another examination dragon," Luna said, leaning forward. "Another pony-raised dragon living in Equestria."

"Right." Spike nodded. "But Trixie's no Twilight."

"Spike," Twilight said, half-pleased and half-embarrassed.

"I found 'em!"

Pinkie came bouncing towards them, the many frills and ruffles on her dress flopping about comically. She gave them all a bright smile, before looking back over her shoulder. Rainbow Dash and Applejack were walking somewhat unsteadily behind her, and Applejack had a hoof over Rainbow's shoulder as she lurched a little unevenly.

"Is Applejack... drunk?" Fluttershy asked incredulously.

"No, don't be silly, of course she's not drunk." Pinkie waved a hoof airily. "She's *plastered*."

"Am not," Applejack said stubbornly, her green eyes focusing and unfocusing. Then she frowned, swaying, and turned to Dash. "Tell y' what, them fancy... drinks don't even touch th' sides... ain't a patch on Granny's shider... shider... cider."

"Your granny doesn't make cider," snorted Dash, also weaving a little on her hooves. "Callin' it cider is an insult t' perfectly drinkable ciders everywhere."

"You insultin' mah granny?" Applejack glared at Rainbow Dash's ear.

"I'm just sayin' I like a drink that don't... evap...o... evap... turn into fumes in my mouth," Dash said, patting Applejack's shining green-clad back.

"You two are really out of it, aren't you?" Twilight said, her face stern but her eyes dancing with laughter.

"Who says?" Applejack thrust out her jaw pugnaciously. "I'm as raring t' go as ever I was... just you come over here an' say that, y' two wobbly Twilights!"

"*I'm* not the one wobbling," Twilight said.

“Well, at least there’s only one o’ me,” Applejack retorted, leaning more heavily around Dash’s neck.

“Hey AJ,” Dash guffawed, “check out the Princess’ face!”

Applejack raised her head groggily, before she started chuckling as well. “Hoo-ee! That’s the funniest thing I ever did see!” she hooted, before lurching over to Luna and hooking her other hoof over the alicorn’s slender neck. “You’re all right, y’ know that, Princess? You sure do pull the funniest faces... sorta wish you’d stick with jest one head though, it’s makin’ me queasy...”

Rainbow Dash had ended up before Spike when Applejack yanked her over to the Princess. “How come you guys all look so down in the dumpsh?” she demanded, peering at one face and then the next. “What’s happened? Where’s Rarity?”

“Oh, I saw her dancin’ with three fancy city ponies,” Applejack said. “There were three o’ her too, so nopony got left out. I think that’s real nice, don’t you?”

Rainbow Dash evidently wasn’t quite as incapacitated as Applejack, because she gave Spike a piercing look. “That so,” she said.

Spike swallowed, before setting his jaw. “It’s fine, Rainbow Dash,” he said quietly. “She’s happy.”

Her fuschia eyes suddenly brimmed, and she flung herself against him, her wings flopping about drunkenly. “He’s... soo... grown-up...” she gasped, and yanked his head down to give it a fierce headbutt. Stars rotated before his eyes. “You are... *you are*,” she said intently and indistinctly, “you’re so awesome it totally and completely and totally and *totally* boggles my mind. You boggle. *Boggle*. Best dragon ever. EVER. You. You’re... You’re the best...” she bawled, her hoof hooking around his neck. He stood a little to brace her when she suddenly slumped, dangling from his neck like a colourful tie. “You’re the *besht*.”

“Maybe we should think about calling it a night,” Twilight said, as Dash blubbered proudly over Spike and Applejack began to nod onto on the Princess’ shoulder.

“Bit of help?” Spike asked.

“Seconded,” Luna said, her face a conflicting mixture of perturbed, alarmed and amused.

“Here, Rainbow Dash,” Fluttershy said in a soothing voice. “I think I should get you some water.”

“Pfft, water,” Dash said scornfully, before the foreleg she had hooked around his neck suddenly gave way. She landed in a messy pile at his feet. “Whoops,” she said blankly, before breaking into raucous laughter.

That roused Applejack. She jerked away from Luna’s shoulder with a start and a grunt, before reeling away with a, “Sorry ‘bout that... Hey, what you doin’ on the floor, RD?”

“Sittin’!” Dash grinned.

Applejack threw her head back and laughed as well, though this upset her balance and sent her careening across the marble. Spike carefully and slowly halted her stumbling with a forepaw, and she rocked back to sit heavily next to Dash. The pair of inebriated ponies giggled and guffawed nonsensically, and Spike couldn’t help but chuckle at the picture they made.

“Don’t encourage them,” said Twilight reprovingly, though her lips were twitching.

“Jeesh, lighten *up*, egghead,” Dash complained.

“Nopony better be sick on the ride home, or I’m making you walk,” Spike warned.

“I ain’t... gonna be shick,” Applejack said crossly. “This stuff... take a lot more t’ get *me* tipsy. I’m fresh as a duckie. Daily. *Daisy*. I said that th’ first time.”

“Sure you did.” Twilight raised an eyebrow. Then she turned to Luna. “I’m sorry for my friends, Princess,” she said.

“I ain’t! I got the best friends in the whoooooole o’ Equestria!” Applejack said happily, hugging Rainbow Dash around the neck tightly.

“...air!” Dash croaked.

“It is quite all right, Twilight Sparkle,” Luna said, a small smile on her lips. “It is a party, after all. At least there are two ponies here that are enjoying themselves.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “You said it.”

“I can’t *believe* they both got drunk,” Twilight sighed.

“Hey,” Rainbow Dash said unsteadily, shaking her hoof at Twilight with the solemn seriousness of the completely tanked. “Hey. *Hey*. If I wasn’t drunk, hey listen, if I wasn’t drunk? Then I’ve *totally* wasted all that soneyhuckle wine.”

“That’d be a real darn shame.” Applejack nodded owlshly.

Spike tried valiantly to hide his chortles, but he was fighting a losing battle. Eventually they burst out of him in a bark of laughter, a plume of smoke rising above him as he laughed uproariously at them. “You guys...” he panted weakly between chuckles, “are *priceless*, you know that?”

Pinkie also began to laugh at them, doubling over and leaning against Spike. “Oh, oh, oh I know!” she gasped. “We’ve got Rainbow Splash!”

“Appletanked,” Spike countered.

“Rainbow Sloshed!”

“Dash of Spirits!”

“Applejack!”

Spike blinked, and then shrugged. “I got nothin’.”

“Appletini works again,” Pinkie pointed out. Spike harrumphed.

“I was trying for *new* material,” he said loftily.

“I think it’s time to go home,” Twilight said, shaking her head. “I’ll go tell Rarity.”

“Could you please thank your sister for inviting us?” Spike asked Luna.

She nodded. “I will see you in a few days, Spike,” she said. “We will both be there.”

Spike swallowed, before nodding back. “Right. Okay. See you then.”

Luna gently pushed her head under his, the touch of her cool, strange mane making him shiver once more. “Be strong and stay safe,” she told him, before bowing her head to Pinkie, Fluttershy and Twilight, quirking her lips at the two ponies now singing off-key from the floor, and then walking away into the crowd.

“Seeya later, alligator!” Dash called after her, before joining Applejack in another loud, slurred chorus of ‘Full of Fire.’

“Okay, now I *know* we’ve got to get out of here,” Spike said, wincing.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Twilight said. “Fluttershy, do you think you could get some water into those two haybrains?”

“Who’re you callin’ a haybrain!” Dash retorted. Applejack nudged her.

“RD, stick with it, yer makin’ me do all the singin’ here,” she said.

“Oh right...” Dash raised her voice once more. Spike cringed as they warbled, “Cos I got a heart under these scales that’s beatin’ only fer home, an’ at the end o’ the day I don’t wanna be alone... An’ I’m tellin’ y’ true, I’m not so different from you, why can’t y’ hear me saaaaaay... I’m full o’ fire t’ staaaaay!”

“Pinkie, Fluttershy,” he begged.

Pinkie snickered, passing water to Fluttershy. “With their mouths open, it’s easier to get the water in,” she said wickedly.

“I’ll sit on you,” Spike threatened, but Pinkie just laughed some more.

Dash swallowed around a mouthful of water hurriedly, before bellowing, “Soooooaring above my sorroooooows, flying on wings of hooooope, I’ll never give up the baaaaattle, cos I belong, and I’ll be strong; I’ll push on up this slippery sloooooope!” Applejack raised her voice as well on the last long high note, and the two of them tipped their heads back to holler it at the ceiling. Several of the fancy ponies nearby sniffed in disapproval before moving away, their heads held high.

“How can y’ go on denying me,” Applejack sang, her hooves conducting erratically.

“I’m just like you, ooooh, can’t you seeeee!” Rainbow Dash bawled, eyes screwed shut.

“Why can’t you heeeeeear,” they bellowed in unison, reeling about, “meeeeee saaaaaay...”

Sucking in a huge breath, they howled the ending to the ceiling once more. “I’m full of fire to STAAAAAY...!”

Spike sighed in relief as the stupid song ended. Fluttershy patted his paw comfortingly, though she was biting rather hard down on her lip. Pinkie was unabashedly in hysterics, the hoof holding water for Rainbow shaking with the force of her laughter. “Encore!” she squealed, stamping her hind hooves in glee. “Encore!”

“You *dare*,” Spike growled.

“I do say, it is so lovely to hear somepony who appreciates my work,” said a drawling, self-satisfied voice, and Spike raised his eyes with a certain dread to see none other than Sapphire Shores, fantastically made up and dressed in a risqué number bedecked with feathers. Her slanted golden eyes lingered over the two inebriated ponies curiously. “Now what is that fabulous material their gowns are made... of...”

She stopped as she spotted Spike’s claw behind the two singers, and her gaze travelled up and up until she was looking into his face. “Well then,” she breathed. “Heard you were here, but oh, *you* know how it is; you get to signing autographs and suddenly *poof!* Your whole night’s a write off. So many fans, so little time.”

Spike sat back down, wishing that the roof would cave in or the floor open up. “Uh, I guess,” he mumbled. Sapphire beamed.

“Daaaarling. You have been such an inspiration to me,” she cooed, sashaying up to him and fluttering her glitter-encrusted eyelashes.

“So... I hear,” Spike said, leaning away from the deadly eyelashes. Sapphire Shores gave him a sultry smile.

“I hope you enjoyed my little, ah, homage,” she said, tilting her head to the most attractive and photogenic angle. “Everypony else has, you know, and *OW!* It has gone double platinum in no time flat! Se-e-ensational or what, baby?”

“Spike’s not a baby,” Pinkie scoffed.

“Hey, you got yourself an admirer, huh?” Sapphire nudged Spike brazenly. “You work fast, kid,” she said, and *winked*.

“Pinkie’s a friend,” Spike said, brow beginning to furrow.

Sapphire nodded absently. “Uh huh, that’s great, I hear ya – so anyway, you gotta tell me,” she said, leaning close to Spike and dropping her voice to a dramatic whisper, “who designed their *amazing* outfits? Those are your scales, right? Cos they’d be the *perfect*

costumes for my new upcoming 'SAPPHIRE ON FIRE' Equestrian tour! There's a lot of money in it for the right pony..." She paused, and slowly smiled. "...Or dragon."

"Rarity made them," Fluttershy put in, trying to get Applejack to drink some water.

"Rarity of Carousel Boutique, huh?" Sapphire barely glanced at Fluttershy, instead giving Spike an arch look. "I did read something in *Clotheshorse* about her and dragonskin..."

"She's getting my old scales," Spike said shortly, beginning to get annoyed with the pushy, flamboyant pony. "You can speak to her about it; she'll be getting them next time I shed too. That'll be next winter. Ish."

"Darling, that is simply too far away!" Sapphire declared, her intricately bound hoof rising to her mouth. "My tour starts in two weeks! I can't possibly wait that long! No, I'll have to offer for your" – she glanced down at the lolling Rainbow Dash and Applejack, and her eyebrow twitched – "*friends'* dresses. Surely selling them to me for such a fa-a-bulou-s use is better than letting them hang in some old closet in Whatsitville."

"Ponyville," Spike, Pinkie and Fluttershy chorused.

"Gesundheit," Sapphire said.

"Mine's not for sale," Pinkie said with uncharacteristic seriousness, her brows a straight line across her eyes.

"Neither is mine," Fluttershy piped up, before meekly stepping back into Spike's shadow. "Um, I mean..." she faltered, "I'd rather not..."

"Somepony wantin' our Gala dresses?" Rainbow Dash looked around blearily, before spotting Sapphire Shores. "Hey, look AJ! It's Sapphire Surely!"

Applejack snorted, and rolled over. "It's Shores, yer silly filly," she mumbled.

"Oh, whoops." Dash bit her lip apologetically. "Sorry, Miss Surely."

"*Shores*," hissed Applejack.

"That's what I said!" Rainbow said with wobbly dignity. "Your ears are drunk."

"Mah ears ain't drunkerer than your mouth," Applejack snapped.

“What did she want again?” Rainbow Dash peered back at Spike and the others, who were staring a little helplessly at the trainwreck that was a drunken Applejack and Rainbow Dash in front of an Equestria-renowned pop star.

“She wants to buy your Gala dress,” Pinkie explained. “She wants to buy them all.”

“Huh,” Applejack said dumbly, before beaming up at the fancy Canterlot pop star. “Well missy, that’s a mighty fine offer an’ once upon a time I might even have taken y’ up on it, but this ‘ere shiny green suit is as special t’ me as the very first dress Rarity made me, an’ so I’m afraid I have t’ say – no deal.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Sapphire entreated.

“Still no deal,” Applejack said cheerily. “Now quit wavin’ yer money about, it ain’t gonna do no good. This suit’s stayin’ with me.”

Sapphire frowned in surprise, and turned hopefully to Rainbow Dash. “How about you?”

“Nope, I’m not giving up *my* dragon scales either,” Dash declared with the solemn emphasis of the very drunk. “These’re special dresses. These are my friend’s scales sewn by my friend into a dress for me, who just so happens to be their friend... an’ the only way you’re gettin’ ‘em is outta my cold, dead hooves. So there, lady!”

“Rainbow Dash!” gasped Rarity’s shocked and appalled voice from behind them.

“Did I say somethin’ wrong?” Dash swung her head this way and that searching for Rarity, her expression thoroughly puzzled.

“You came on a bit strong there,” Spike murmured to her, and she huffed.

“Well, I’m not gonna sell your scales,” she said, looking wounded.

“Gathered that,” Spike answered, a little smile creeping across his face. He honestly hadn’t realised that their dresses meant that much to his friends, and Rainbow Dash’s blunt explanation had warmed him to the core. It was so like her to defend him, even when he didn’t need it. Drunk or not, she was the most loyal friend a dragon could wish for. “I think half the ballroom gathered that.”

“What,” Twilight said, appearing behind the horrified Rarity and rubbing at her forehead, “has been happening? *This* time,” she added with well-honed sarcasm.

“That, Twilight,” said Rarity in a tight voice, “is Sapphire Shores, the pony of pop, and I believe that ruffian Rainbow Dash has just insulted her!”

“Miss Rarity, a pleasure aaaas always,” Sapphire drawled, “and no, there’s no harm done. I was just asking whether I could buy your friend’s remarkable ensemble for my upcoming ‘SAPPHIRE ON FIRE’ Equestrian tour. She... doesn’t seem all that keen on the idea. But maybe you could whip me up six outfits just as glaaaam-TASTIC? OW! With the dragon scales, of course...”

“Oh,” Rarity said, momentarily nonplussed, before she drew herself up straight. “I’m afraid that there’s very little of the scales left for this year, and only the purple ones at that,” she said in a business-like way. “I could probably only get one outfit out of it, and even then the scales would be more in the nature of an accent rather than the main feature, as with ours.”

“Darling, we’re ponies of the world here,” Sapphire said, smiling. “You’re a business pony, and I’m doing business. Surely you can see to selling me your dress, at least? That purple dazzler would be just fine for the big number about the big guy here.” She gave Spike an ingratiating look.

Rarity set her mouth, and Spike could almost see the bit-signs flaming in her eyes. “Mine’s not for sale either,” she said.

Sapphire gaped at Rarity for a moment, before turning to Twilight, eyes imploring.

“You think I’d sell my brother’s scales?” Twilight asked her coolly.

“You ponies do *not* know how this is meant to go,” Sapphire exclaimed. “I am Sapphire Shores! The Pony of Pop! I’ll make you famous!”

“I don’t need to be famous,” said Twilight. “I’m a *librarian*.”

“Hey, I *am* famous.” Rainbow Dash waved her hoof breezily, before burping loudly.

“So am I,” Rarity said, swallowing hard. “And I am afraid, Miss Shores, that the material in question is seasonal stock and very limited. I can make you the outfit I described before: a genuine *haute couture* Carousel Boutique gown of the very finest quality, fit and fashion. It will be decorated with Spike’s scales, but not encrusted. As for buying ours, well, these dresses are too important to each of us to become mere costumes.”

Sapphire looked from one to the next, her eyes wide with indignation. “Well!”

Turning on her heel, she sashayed haughtily away. “There goes a whole month’s profits,” Rarity sighed.

“She’ll come to the Boutique,” Twilight assured her. “She’s got that song about Spike, after all... even an outfit with *some* scales on it would be better than one with none.”

“I can’t believe you guys all told her no,” Spike said, staring after Sapphire in shock.

Pinkie hauled Rainbow Dash to her feet. “Of course we did, silly billy Spikeface!” she said, grinning. “These are only the bestest and most importantest dresses that Rarity’s ever made for us!”

The others nodded, and he smiled. “I don’t know what to say, guys. It means so much that you wore my scales in the first place... and now this...”

“Don’t say anythin’, sugarcube,” advised Applejack as Fluttershy propped her onto her hooves. “Tain’t nothin’ you should say, anyhow.”

Spike heaved in a huge breath, and released it, before turning to Rarity. “I hope you had fun out there,” he said carefully.

She smoothed a hoof over her coiffure, mussed from dancing. “It went... satisfactorily,” she said modestly. Then she giggled light-headedly, her hooves doing an excited little trot on the spot. “He’s coming to see me this week,” she gasped. “In Ponyville!”

He swallowed again, and his heart unclenched. “Wow, nice one, Rarity!” he said, as everypony either congratulated Rarity or shot him worried sidelong looks.

“It’s just a date,” she said with badly concealed delight.

“Rarity’s got a coltfriend...” Spike sang out mockingly, ignoring the little lurch inside. It would fade.

“Oh, stop!” she said, her face reddening.

“So, if he’s not good to you,” Spike said, suddenly serious, “you know to tell me, right? I’ll sort him out.”

Twilight concealed a smile. “Dragons,” she said in answer to Rarity’s staggered expression.

“I see,” Rarity said with a weak smile. “Is this the possessiveness you were warning me about, Twilight?”

“No, this is your... your *good friend* speaking,” Spike said firmly. “You’ll know when it’s your dragon speaking.”

“It’s late,” Fluttershy said, “and everypony is beginning to leave.”

Spike rubbed a forepaw over his face. “Right, that’s it. The Spike Express is leaving for Ponyville in ten minutes. Let’s get outside.”

He stood once more, leaning back on his heels and stretching his legs out, before beginning a slow, careful walk across the ballroom floor. Luckily he was hard to miss, and everypony mostly got out of his way, though a fairly inebriated Soarin’ had to be tapped on the shoulder twice before he moved.

“Well, it wasn’t the disaster that last time was,” said Fluttershy with relief as they entered the nearly deserted great entrance hall, Applejack’s hoof slung over her shoulder.

“That’s debatable,” Twilight said with effort as she helped Pinkie with the lolling Rainbow Dash. “These two sure wiped themselves out.”

“You should really... lighten up,” Dash said, swinging her head to Twilight’s side and almost knocking their skulls together.

“Suuuure,” Twilight said soothingly. “Come on, Rainbow Dash. I’m sure you’ll be after a hangover cure in the morning, so come by the library, all right? Did you hear that, Applejack?”

“Wha...?” Applejack’s head jerked up from drooping against her chest. “Oh, right, library,” she mumbled, and her head dropped back down with a thump.

“I see you ponies had a fine time,” came a gruff voice, and Captain Falling Night stepped forward, followed by his platoon.

“It was... mixed,” Spike said wryly.

“We’ll see you home, boy,” Night said with a nod. “You didn’t drink, did you? Can’t abide drunk-fliers.”

“I’m underage, Captain,” Spike pointed out.

“Doesn’t answer the question,” Night said, eyebrow lifting. Spike rolled his eyes as they moved into the still, cold night.

“No, I didn’t,” he said exasperatedly.

“Got to check. Those are the rules.” Night shrugged. “Well, get that harness on, and let’s get going.”

“I can’t *wait* to get home,” Twilight muttered to him as she levitated the harness to his back. Spike stood obediently still as it settled around him, the buckles and straps tightening and cinching.

“Me neither,” he said, blinking back up at the brightly lit castle, before turning his face resolutely for home.

• • •

*Spike, we were right. It’s Huffy...*

*...n’t leave the Brumby Bushlands for very l...*

*...will arrive in Ponyville at three...*

*...has agreed to fly us, though reluctantly. I can certain...*

*...I hope you can arrange...*

*...isn’t very trusting of ponykind. I am cautiously optimistic that you can change her opinio...*

*See you tomorrow (or today)!*

*Just*

• • •

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said,” Twilight said patiently, the corona of energy surrounding her horn fading. “No pony sent this note to you, Spike. This was sent by another dragon.”

“That’s Just’s hoofwriting.” Spike frowned. “Why’s it all burnt up? I don’t burn them up when I send them.”

“Assuming it was Huffy who sent this to you, I expect she’s a little out of practise.” Twilight handed him back the charred and barely legible letter. “Have you organised anything yet?”

Spike frowned at the letter. “No, not yet. So I’m right about what it says? Just is bringing Huffy *here*?”

“Are you going to go all territorial on her?” Twilight asked, levitating her coffee and taking a sip.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I might not be able to help it, you realise.”

“Try,” said Twilight, nudging him. “If the very first dragon she meets tries to chase her away, I’m sure we’ll have no chance in convincing her to rejoin Equestria.”

“I’ll do my best,” he assured her, “but if she hurts anypony, all bets are off.”

“I doubt she will.” Twilight leaned back against the library’s front door, black rings of exhaustion under her eyes and her dishevelled mane coming out of last night’s elegant knot in wisps. “She was a baby dragon amongst ponies, just like you.”

“Yeah, but her Twilight Sparkle was *Trixie*,” Spike said. “I don’t think that made her all that well-disposed towards ponykind.”

“Just wouldn’t bring her here if she was going to hurt anypony,” Twilight said logically. “He clearly says that she doesn’t trust us, and doesn’t want to be away from the Brumby Bushlands for very long, but that she’s coming anyway.”

Spike wrinkled his nose. “It’s going to be weird, another dragon that isn’t Razorfang around. I sure hope she’s not as short-tempered as he is.”

“Didn’t Just say she was impatient?”

Spike wrinkled his snout. “So she’ll be around to watch the challenge, I guess?”

Twilight was still for a long moment, before her hoof crept over to touch him softly on the paw. “I guess she will.”

He glanced down at her hoof, seeing it shake a little. Then he raised his head and nudged her with his snout very, very carefully. "I had a good time last night," he offered.

She smiled a little sadly. "I'm glad. You know, I'm very proud of you, Spike."

"You said."

"You were such a grown up last night, what with the ambassador and the situation with Rarity and Fancy Pants and all those posh ponies and even Sapphire Shores... I was sure you'd take her to task for that song, but you just let it slide."

He shrugged one shoulder awkwardly. "It's not worth making a scene about." Then he snorted. "Rainbow Dash and Applejack took care of that for us."

Twilight laughed. "I wonder what time they'll wake up," she mused. "I have the spell ready for when they come by – *if* they come by. I'll bet Applejack doesn't remember a thing."

"At least nopony was sick on the way home," said Spike.

"But Rainbow Dash kept sliding out of her seat," Twilight said with irritation. "I had to hold her there with my magic in the end."

"I didn't notice that," he confessed. "I was too busy concentrating on getting home."

She rolled her eyes. "You were as single-minded as a buzzsaw. I think you could have flown through a mountain and not have noticed."

"Oh, I'd have noticed *that*," he said archly.

She giggled a little, before taking another sip of her coffee and looking up at him pensively. "Are you going to write to Trixie?"

He cringed, and then nodded. "I hope she's like her letter and not like she was before," he muttered.

"Give her a chance," Twilight advised.

"I am, I am."

"Did you say Trixie?" came an excited voice from the square.

Spike and Twilight turned in surprise to see Snips bouncing excitedly next to his slow friend Snails, his ginger mane as spiky and his nose as upturned as ever. The small teen had become a small stallion, but his boundless enthusiasm was completely unchanged. By contrast, Snails had shot up like a well-watered weed, losing most of his lankiness and putting on quite a bit of bulk as he reached adulthood. Now he was a gentle giant amongst Ponyville's stallions. One thing that hadn't changed, however, was his intellect. He was still the last pony in Equestria to understand a punchline.

"Oh no," Spike groaned under his breath. "Those two."

"Be nice, Spike," Twilight admonished him, before raising her voice. "That's right," she told the pair. "We have some important news for Trixie. She may decide to visit Ponyville again."

"Should we put her up in the library?" asked Spike reluctantly.

"She might have her wagon with her," Twilight said. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?"

"Wow, the Great and Powerful Trixie!" exclaimed Snips, his black eyes wide with bubbling anticipation. "It's been years and years and years! I can't wait to see what cool magic tricks she's got this time!"

"Yah, cool magic tricks!" Snails agreed, an amiable grin plastered on his brown, freckled face.

"I bet she's got even more awesome fireworks, and fancy rope-tricks," Snips continued. "I bet there's Catherine wheels, and spinning whizbangs, and wait, Snails! You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"Why do they call it disgruntled when you can't get grunted?"

"Yeah! What – no!" Snips gave his big slow friend an exasperated look. "I *reckon* we should throw a biiiig Welcome Back G-and-P-T Party Celebration Extravaganza! That'd be..." He stopped when he caught Twilight's sardonic expression. "Maybe that's not such a great idea," he finished a little weakly.

"I don't think anypony in Ponyville would be interested after the whole Ursa Minor incident," Twilight said dryly, "and I'm willing to bet that it's the last thing Trixie herself will want. She's going to have her mind on... um, bigger things."

“Bigger things?” Snips echoed in awe, before beginning to jump up and down excitedly. “Like, bigger magic things? Oh, *wow!*”

“Like dragon things,” said Spike. “Seriously, guys, didn’t you learn anything from that whole mess?”

Snips shrank back a little, his dusty blue face darkening. “Sure we did. We learned that Ursa Minors are super scary, and you shouldn’t go wakin’ ‘em up.”

Twilight tapped a hoof impatiently.

Snails blinked a little, before adding humbly, “An’ we shouldn’t believe what everypony says or go takin’ things like that into our own hooves ever again.”

“Just you remember that, guys,” Spike told them.

“Oh, hey Spike?” Snails said after a moment of sheepish embarrassment. “So how you gonna fight that dragon?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been wondering that too!” chimed in Snips at breathtaking speed. “Are you gonna swoop around him and get him all dizzy, huh huh huh? And maybe – *zap bloowee!* – go all ninja on him, or ooh, rain fiery death from above?”

“Fiery death from above!” echoed Snails, nodding slowly.

“Um.” Spike glanced sidelong at Twilight, whose hoof had once more reached out to touch his paw. “I haven’t figured it out yet, you guys. But I will!” he added hurriedly, watching Twilight’s face. She showed no change of expression, though her hoof trembled on his forepaw slightly.

“You’d better shake a hoof, Spike!” said Snips, his thick brown brows beetling. “You ain’t got much time to think up an *awesome* way to defeat the dragon.”

“The early birdie catches the worm,” Snails told him, his face utterly sincere. “That’s what my mamma says, and she’s right: I seen them birds catching worms and they’re always earlier than them little birds missin’ out. Sometimes by only a few seconds!”

“Uh, thanks for that, Snails,” Spike said, his eyebrow raising.

“No problem at all for my good friend who is a big dragon!” He beamed, displaying the gap between his front teeth.

“We’re makin’ flags, cos we know you’ll come up with something,” Snips said, his round little face earnest. “Not something boring, but something *cool* – something *amazing*! Cos you’re like, the best Ponyville dragon *ever*!”

“I’m the only Ponyville dragon ever,” Spike pointed out. Twilight hid a snort behind her coffee cup.

“You are gonna vanquish that dragon so hard,” declared Snips, ignoring Spike’s words. “It is gonna – be – *awesome*!”

“Yah, vanquish the dragon!” Snails cheered.

“Thanks guys,” Spike said weakly, wondering whether these two really understood the situation at all.

“So that was a no on the G-and-PT party, wasn’t it...?” Snips ventured, and Twilight tipped her head, giving him a flat stare. “Right, so that’s a no.”

“C’mon Snips,” Snails said in an exaggerated whisper. “We gotta get goin’. Barber shops don’t open ‘emselves, though it’d be like totally majorly *awesome* if they did.”

“Right, uh-huh, okay,” Snips replied, giving Spike and Twilight a last look. “See you later, guys!”

“See you,” Spike called after the odd pair, and then shook his head. “Those two.”

“Are you sure you want *them* as your ponies?” Twilight asked, and Spike laughed easily.

“Yeah, they’re mine. Even if I sometimes want to knock their heads together.”

“There’s an interesting idea,” Twilight mused, and catching Spike’s look, laughed as well. “Only kidding.”

• • •

*Dear Trixie,*

*Just has found Huffy. His letter is a bit burnt up, but from what we can gather, everypony’s fine.*

*Huffy is coming to visit me in Ponyville this afternoon. She’ll be here from three.*

*Sincerely,  
Spike*

• • •

*Dear Spike,*

*I'll be there.*

*Thank you so, so much.*

*Trixie*

• • •

“Everypony, calm down!” the Mayor shouted into her megaphone. “This dragon has been isolated for a long time and is very scared of ponykind, so if you don’t have business here today, please take your gawking elsewhere!”

“A bit rude,” Spike commented.

The Mayor shrugged. “You’re the one who insisted that we shouldn’t crowd her.”

“I suppose. What’s the time?”

“Just on three,” she said with a cursory glance at the clocktower. “Is everypony ready?”

There was a small group gathered in Ponyville Square outside the library. All six of Spike’s friends were there – a couple looking decidedly seedy, even after Twilight’s magical hangover cure – plus Big Macintosh, Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Mayor Mare and Zecora. A barrel of water and a cart full of apples sat ready and waiting to welcome the dragoness of the Brumby Bushlands. The last of the gawkers quailed under the Mayor’s stern look, and scurried off.

Spike could feel strange butterflies hopping about in his stomach. He was about to meet another dragon *just like him*, one with little to no understanding of their own hereditary customs and immersed in Equestrian culture. “Do I look okay?” he hissed to Fluttershy.

“You look fine,” she assured him, her large aqua eyes kind. “You’re still very smart from last night.”

“Please,” said Rainbow Dash in a green sort of voice, “don’t mention last night.”

Spike smiled fleetingly at that, before a shadow crossed over their faces. Nervously, he tipped his head back to behold a purple and white dragon circling the square, her wings held out gracefully as she banked and turned.

His first thought was, *She’s so big.*

The second was, *Holy guacamole, she sure can fly!*

Huffy was approximately six years older than Spike himself, and had quite obviously begun her second great growth spurt. She was maybe a head and neck taller than he was, and her tail was far more snakelike, curling delicately through the air with liquid grace. Her wings were edged in the same shimmering white scales that adorned her belly, and the fins either side of her head were broader and more lacelike than his, almost like a pair of glittering white fans. The purple of her body wasn’t quite the same as his. He was definitely darker, while she was more a pale mauve. He gaped a little as she swooped in to land, her long neck outstretched and her hind claws extended. She looked around at the small assembly with clear apprehension, her face filled with fear.

Just and two other ponies, all with packs strapped to their backs, slid down from Huffy’s back. Just looked careworn and dirty, his white coat streaked with grass stains and stuck all over with burrs. “Spike,” he said, and nodded wearily at him.

“Hi there, Just,” Spike said dumbly, still staring at the dragon before him. She was eyeing each pony anxiously, before her gaze travelled back to Spike.

“This,” said Just, his voice ringing even through his exhaustion, “is Huffy.”

Spike simply stared at her.

“Say something!” Twilight hissed.

Spike gaped some more. She was...

“Spike!” Twilight nudged him sharply, and he snapped out of it, his eyes blinking rapidly and his breath returning in a gush of smoke. He stepped forward, an absurd mixture of shyness and exhilaration battling in his mind.

“Hi Huffy,” he stammered.

Huge, black-lashed cerise eyes locked onto him. “You’re Spike,” she said, and oddly her tone was just as shaky.

“That’s me.” He nodded awkwardly. “Uh... have a good flight?”

“It was... okay,” she hedged. Her voice was light and sweet, for all that she was bigger than him.

“That’s uh...” He searched his mind desperately. It stubbornly refused to help him. “Well,” he mumbled.

She shuffled her claws nervously. “Thanks for...” she began, and stopped.

“Apples!” Spike blurted, and had to physically restrain himself from smacking his face with his paw. *Idiot!* “I mean,” he said in a calmer voice, “we got you some apples, and some water... if you’re hungry. Or thirsty. Which, you know... it’s a long flight...”

“That’d be nice,” she said shyly, before her gaze dropped to her feet.

Spike wrestled with the numbing weirdness of the moment. He was speaking to somedragon – *somedragon!* – like him! Then he registered the slight trembling of her lip.

*She must be so scared, he realised with a rush of sympathy. She must be so afraid. But here she is anyway.*

He shook himself sharply and then squared his shoulders, lifting his head. “So, anyway,” he said into the yawning silence. “I’m another dragon raised by ponies.”

He took another step forward, before holding out his paw. “And Huffy, it is *so* good to meet you,” he said sincerely.

She looked a little stricken and a *lot* confused, before she drew in a harsh gasp of pure distress and stepped forward as well, grabbing blindly for his forepaw and holding on tightly. “I never thought I’d ever meet another dragon, not one like me,” she confessed in a breathless voice, her larger paw engulfing his. Her white throat convulsed as she swallowed. “I thought I’d be alone forever and ever,” she continued in a rush, as though her words had built up over the years and were now exploding out of her. “I thought I was the last one, the last examination dragon, and no pony would ever understand me and I’d have to stay hidden and alone in my Brumby Bushlands always. I haven’t spoken to anypony in years...”

Her paw was dry and smooth and warm to the touch. Spike sat back on his haunches and wrapped his other paw as far around hers as possible. "It's okay," he said, looking up at her earnestly. "Shh, Huffy... it's all right. You're not alone. I'm the last examination dragon. I'm just like you, Huffy. We're not alone. Everything's okay now."

She sniffed, her cerise eyes beginning to teem with tears. "I never thought..." she said again, her voice hitching. Then her long, snakelike neck wrapped around him tightly, her other forepaw hooking over his shoulder to hold him close.

Spike froze in shock, before tentatively snaking his own neck as far around hers as he could. It wasn't easy, but it was possible. He kept one claw in hers, but slipped the other foreleg around her, stroking her shoulder comfortingly.

It was incredibly strange to touch another dragon. He'd never touched another dragon, not in his whole life. She radiated the same heat that he did, her scales the same hard, smooth plates, her limbs the same mixture of ropy tendon and flat flight muscle. Even her boiling tears, smoking down her muzzle to steam on the earth, were the same. It had been a long time since he had been held; he was simply too big now for any pony to fully embrace. But Huffy could hug him – could hug all of him. She was at once utterly unknown and yet strangely familiar to hold.

She sniffed loudly, before pulling back a little, wiping her muzzle roughly with the back of one forepaw. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't be," he said gently, and smiled at her.

She smiled tremulously back, her eyes glassy. "You know, somehow I thought you'd be taller," she said, laughing a little through her tears.

He gave her a mock-offended look, squeezing her shoulder playfully. "You saying I'm not dragon enough for you?"

She giggled damply. "So you live here?"

He nodded. "This is my village," he said, full of possessive pride. She tilted her head, her eyes doubtful.

"Why..." she began, before pursing her lips. "I think I'd probably go crazy if you landed in the Brumby right in front of me. Shouldn't you be angry at me for being here?"

He jerked in surprise, frowning. “Actually, yeah. But I’m not. That’s weird. I was furious when Razorfang came calling...”

Her cerise eyes widened. “You know *another* dragon?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, still focused on the territory issue. “I wonder... you know, it’s probably because I had something to do with bringing you here. So it’s kinda like an invitation!”

She stared for a moment, before smiling once more. “Thanks for the invitation,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled back.

Her gaze darted either side to the ponies surrounding them. “Don’t you feel sort of,” she hesitated, “big, living here?”

He laughed. “You bet. All the time. But I’m not leaving. Dragon of Ponyville Village, that’s me.”

“I don’t like being this far from the Brumby,” she said uncomfortably.

“I can understand that,” he agreed. “I had to go to Canterlot last night. It’s not that far, but it made me feel sort of itchy. I kinda raced all the way home.”

Huffy’s long-lashed eyes hardened in determination. “I said I’d stay for a few days,” she said. “I can do this.”

“If you need to dash home for a few hours, don’t hesitate,” Spike said gently. She let out a shaky breath.

“Maybe I can invite you,” she offered. He brightened.

“Hey, that’d be great!”

She glanced again at the ponies who were avidly eavesdropping on them. “Um,” she managed, “the... p-ponies. Maybe you should introduce me?”

“Oh.” Spike suddenly realised how rude he had been to ignore the others for all that time. But talking to Huffy was strange – like being in a room all alone together. “Sorry, you guys. Well, here’s Apple Bloom...”

“Howdy!”

“This is her brother, Big Macintosh, and this is her sister Applejack...”

“Sorry fer not standin’ up right at this minute,” Applejack said with a sickly smile.

“This is Pinkie Pie... and she’ll probably throw you a party tonight. You’ve been warned.”

“Sure am!” Pinkie beamed. “It’s gonna be a doozy!”

“Here’s Scootaloo, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and this is Mayor Mare...”

“It is a pleasure to welcome you to Ponyville, Miss Huffy,” said the Mayor, and Huffy coloured slightly, her pale mauve face darkening to purple.

“Um, thank you,” she said timidly.

“This is Zecora, and this is Rarity and her sister Sweetie Belle.”

“Darling, I just *adore* your colouring,” Rarity gushed. The white and purple dragon smiled uncertainly at the white and purple pony.

“And this is my sister, Twilight Sparkle,” Spike finished.

Twilight looked up at the nervous dragon, smiling reassuringly. “Hi there,” she said.

Huffy gave him a startled look. “Your sister? You mean your owner?”

“Nope, I mean my sister,” Spike said.

“He’s my little brother,” Twilight confirmed with a toss of her mane. “*How* many times must I repeat that...”

“That’s... wonderful,” Huffy said, her face wistful. “You’re so lucky.”

He glanced down at Twilight, and nudged her with a forepaw. “Nah, she’s the lucky one,” he teased, prodding her side repeatedly. “Such a handsome and famous brother...”

“With such a vast ego,” she countered, prodding him back, before grabbing onto his forepaw and smirking. “Got you now.”

“Oh yes, I am at your mercy,” he deadpanned. “Oh woe is me.”

“Do you conc-*eeeeede!*” Her voice swooped upwards into a yelp as he raised his leg into the air with her still gripping it. Her back legs flailed wildly as they dangled in mid-air. With a flash she teleported back to the ground, fixing him and the giggling Huffy with a very put-out look. “Oh, very clever,” she grouched.

“Okay, now I believe...” Huffy chuckled, only to be interrupted by another blinding flash of light. She looked sharply at Twilight, who held up her hooves in innocence.

“Wasn’t me.”

“What was...” Spike began.

“Where is she?” A high, histrionic voice rang out, cutting through the confused crowd. “Where is my little Huffy? Where...”

Huffy’s pupils shrank in remembered hurt and shame. “No... not...” she whispered in horror.

The powder-blue unicorn that barrelled into view was far less polished than she had been the last time Spike had laid eyes on her. Gone was the purple spangled cape and hat, and her ice-blue mane was mussed.

Her purple eyes widened as she took in the two dragons – at the larger of the two. “*Huffy...?*” she managed in a barely-audible voice. Her face filled with awe. “You can’t be my little Huffy...” she gasped. “You are. You’re my... oh, *Huffy...*”

Huffy was trembling again, her whole body shaking violently as she regarded the pony who had made her life such a misery that ten years in hiding had been preferable to staying one more day. “Trixie,” she breathed, and Spike leaned against her, trying to impart comfort.

“Just listen to her,” he said quietly, stretching up to her ear.

“Why should I listen to her?” Huffy demanded, whirling on him. “She wasn’t a sister like your Twilight, oh no! I was a *thing* to her! Just a thing!”

“That’s not true!” Trixie wailed.

“Yes it was!” Huffy snapped, and suddenly Spike could see why Just had called her impatient at times.

The Great and Powerful Trixie gazed at her former assistant with helpless sorrow and shock. She sat back down on her hindquarters, her head craning to take her all in. "Look at you. You're so big, you grew up..." she choked.

"Yes," Huffy said, a steely note of anger in her quavering voice. "I did. Without *you*."

Trixie buried her face in her hooves. "Trixie has been..." she rasped.

"Still talking about yourself, I see." Huffy's eyes narrowed. "You never change."

"Tri... I did," Trixie faltered. "I did change. I..."

"Too late for *me*, wasn't it, my owner?" Huffy spat.

"I wasn't ever your... look, I never should have said that where you could overhear me, Huffs..."

"*Don't* call me Huffs," Huffy said icily. "Perhaps you should have said it behind my back then? My servant, Huffy! My slave, Huffy! My *pet*!"

"I'm sorry!" Trixie burst out, her hooves slamming to the ground either side of her, lifting her tear-streaked face. "I'm so sorry! Huffy, I loved you and I never told you and I did nothing but humiliate you and I've missed you so, so much and I still love you! I'm sorry!" She petered out into sobs, repeating "I'm sorry!" between gasping, dragging breaths.

There was a long, incredulous silence.

Then abruptly Huffy lurched to one side as her legs wobbled, amazement and disbelief written all over her face.

Spike lunged to brace her with his back, his smaller body propping her up. "Too many shocks," he grunted to Twilight.

"I think you're right," she said worriedly. "Maybe we should have planned that better."

"You... think?" he puffed, trying to push the woozy Huffy upright.

Trixie raised her blotched, anguished face and scrambled from the ground. "Is she all right?" she demanded of everypony and anypony, her voice shrill with worry. "She'd better be all right, or the Great and Powerful Trixie will perform such great magic upon

you that you'll have to *squelch* everywhere from now on! Fix her! Make her all right! Huffy? Huffy? *Huffy!*"

"Trixie... be quiet," Huffy mumbled, pushing herself off Spike. She still looked quite light-headed.

Trixie immediately shut up.

Huffy seemed to be staring through her former unicorn, rather than at her. The silence dragged on and on as Huffy stared at Trixie. Then she nodded, as though approving something that only she could see. "Okay," she said finally.

"What do you mean, okay?" asked Just, his dirty brow wrinkling.

She turned to him, and took a deep breath. "I'll rejoin Equestria," she said evenly.

Trixie sobbed once in joy, and made to run for her former assistant, but Huffy held up a claw. "No, just wait a moment," she said. "Trixie... I need more time. I can't forgive all in one go. I've been alone for too long. I've nursed my hurts for too long. I'm willing to try and be friends, and I guess I accept the apology... but... I am never going to be your assistant again."

Trixie's eyes filled once more, and she bowed her head. "I understand."

As the unicorn turned to go, Huffy said softly, "I didn't stop loving you, either. Even when I hated you the most. You insufferable egotistical stuck-up bigmouthed showpony."

Trixie spun back around, her face slowly filling with hope. Then she ran like the wind into Huffy's open embrace.

“So you actually have to fight this... this grown dragon the day after tomorrow?” Huffy turned to him, leaning on her elbow. Her cerise eyes were lit with both horror and fascination. “Can’t you just run away?”

Sprawled on his back beside her, Spike stretched his legs a little into the warm spring air and then let them slump. They curled over like a cat’s paws. “Nope. He’ll destroy Ponyville if I run away. At least, he said he would.”

She stared at him. Spike could almost see the thoughts whizzing behind her expression.

“I don’t think the Princesses would let that happen,” he continued more slowly. “I’m sure that if I didn’t fight, they’d protect the village. But I’m not a coward. I’m a dragon, and I have to stand my ground.”

She frowned. “I think you should get out of here. I could invite you to the Brumby Bushlands – they’re so far away that this Razorfang couldn’t get to you.”

He shook his head, and squirmed a little on his back. “I have to stand my ground,” he said again, “because it’s *my* ground.”

She let out a harsh breath. “That’s stupid.”

He smiled. “Probably.”

“But you told me about all those ponies who don’t want you here,” she said, her tone balanced between accusing and confused. “You told me that somepony threw a *harpoon* at you. Why bother staying if you’re facing danger from all sides?”

“Not all sides,” he said. “There are important reasons to leave, yeah, but there are even more important reasons to stay. Anyway, would anypony be able to take the Brumby from you without a fight?”

She hemmed a little, before rolling back over onto her back beside him, her face deeply unsettled. “No,” she admitted, squinting at the sky. “But that’s different. I’m safe in the Brumby Bushlands. Nothing can hurt me there.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Was that always the case?”

“You like asking awkward questions,” she grumbled.

“Guilty,” he said cheerfully.

She gazed at the sky a little longer, and the lines of her face grew heavy and solemn. “I was still just a kid when I ran away,” she finally said. “I was still pretty small, and my wings were just coming in, and they hurt so much I could barely think. Everything was too big and too scary and too horrible for words. I thought many times about going back, but I just couldn’t face...” She paused, and then her voice continued in a stronger tone. “I spent the first couple of years hiding as much as I could. There are some strange creatures in the Brumby, and I wasn’t big enough to challenge them. I ate anything I could find: tree bark, rocks, shrubs, berries.”

“Dragons are omnivores,” Spike said automatically.

“What?”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. His internal Twilight-trained library assistant didn’t pipe up very often, but when it did it usually made him feel like a bit of a klutz. “Just thinking aloud. Please go on?”

She cleared her throat. “Well, that only continued for a couple of years, and then I started to grow. It was frightening at first, because it was getting harder and harder to hide myself. But at the same time I was getting better at doing certain things – hunting food, for example – and suddenly the other creatures were as wary of me as I was of them.”

Spike found himself nodding with approval. “So you started to carve out your territory?”

“I never knew that’s what it was,” she confessed. “I didn’t think it had a name, or that it was a dragon trait. I just knew it was *mine*.”

“That’s the way I feel about Ponyville.”

They were lying in the huge depression in the centre of Spike’s house, looking up at the sky. The jagged, incomplete walls surrounded them, no higher than the foundations in some places and built up to head-height – well, *Spike’s* head-height – in others. Clouds skidded through the blue above them, occasionally pushed by some pegasus or another.

Huffy was far shyer than he’d expected for a dragon who’d been her own carer since she was a baby, but it wasn’t quite like the bashful shyness of Fluttershy. It was a watchful shyness, one that kept its eye on everything that could be a possible threat. It was the type of wariness he sometimes saw in wild animals. She seemed a lot more relaxed around Spike, but only now that they were alone.

After Trixie's dramatic entrance, Huffy had gently released her former unicorn, before turning away. "Show me your village, please," she said to Spike in a low voice, not looking back at where Trixie stood. The showpony's tear-stained face was torn and yet resigned, and she bowed her head in sad acceptance as Spike led Huffy away.

Spike had shown her around Ponyville – judiciously navigating around the protestors before the Town Hall – all the way from the edge of the Everfree to Ghastly Gorge. He had purposefully left his house until last. He was hugely proud of what he'd accomplished in such a short time, and showed it off like a peacock displaying its tail. Huffy had lain down, a little tired after her long flight. Spike had flopped down beside her. Slowly at first, but with increasing confidence, they had struck up a conversation that had somehow eaten up hours.

He found her to be an utterly intriguing conundrum, and she seemed equally fascinated by him. She had asked question after question about his life, first in Canterlot and now in Ponyville. His answers made her grow thoughtful and even bolder. Underlying all their talk was the unspoken mantra of *another dragon like me*. Spike could feel it pulsing in the air between them.

"What are you going to do about those protests?" Huffy asked idly, picking at her claws. She was thinner than he'd first noticed, and he thought it probably had something to do with having to find her own food.

He sighed, his chest rising and falling. "Nothing. What should I do? I might not be around in a couple of days, so why bother with them?"

She sucked in a sharp breath, and rolled over suddenly, her eyes boring into his. "You can't mean that," she said.

"I'd be an idiot if I hadn't considered it," he said.

"You sound as if you expect it," she accused.

He scowled. "That's not fair. I don't want to die. I've been carrying on because if I did anything else I think I'd go completely doolally. I've been building my house, training, helping out, even going to the Grand Galloping Gala for *publicity purposes*." He snorted. "Never thought I'd say that."

"Aren't you afraid?" Huffy asked.

“Of course.” He exhaled hugely. “Sometimes I’m so afraid I can hardly move. I’ve even been so angry I felt like burning down everything I could see. But what good would that do? I’ve got to keep going. That’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“But you still think you’re going to die, don’t you?”

Spike turned back to the sky. “Maybe,” he said finally. “Maybe. He’s so much bigger than me. He’s bigger than both of us put together. Anyway, even if by some crazy miracle he doesn’t kill me, there was that stupid harpoon too. I’ve still got no idea who threw it, and that’s not very comforting.”

“Have the policeponies found nothing?” Huffy’s forepaw tentatively travelled to his shoulder, where it hovered, almost touching him – but not quite.

“Nope,” he said, before swallowing hard. “The letters have been cleared of any magical signature, so they can’t trace whichever unicorn did this through magical means. Same with the launching gear. They found that almost immediately. It isn’t listed as stolen from any antique shops or museums, so it had to have come from a private collection. It’s really old, ‘bout a hundred and thirty years old – which makes it even older than me,” he finished wryly.

“What do you mean?” Huffy’s paw still hovered over his shoulder. The pale mauve of her scales looked somehow faded beside his dusky purple hide.

Spike glanced over at her. “Oh, well... it’s not a nice story,” he said, trying to disguise his anger with a brisk matter-of-factness. “It’s sort of how the School for Gifted Unicorns got my egg. I only found out a couple of weeks ago.”

“Tell me?”

He dragged his eyes back to the sky, and considered it. On the one claw, perhaps Huffy would understand and sympathise, but on the other it would probably only make her more frightened of ponies. “I’d rather not, right now,” he decided, before giving her a smile to soften that statement. “Let’s talk about happier things, like drought or famine or plague.”

She laughed, though her eyes were still very curious. “So you know how you came to Equestria, then?”

He nodded shortly, before pausing. “Wait, you don’t?”

She tipped her head, and her paw finally touched his shoulder tentatively. “No.”

He sat up, rolling over to face her and taking her paw in his. “Huffy, I know how you came to Equestria,” he said. “Just told me. I can go and get the letter.”

Her mouth slowly dropped open as she returned his stare, her breathing becoming faster and shallower. “I...” she began.

He squeezed her paw. “You don’t have to decide right now. The option’s there.”

She licked her dry lips, before her eyes fastened to the churned ground in his house. “I do want to know,” she admitted. “But I don’t. Not really.”

He nodded understandingly. “I felt that way too,” he said. “Still do, a bit.”

She drew her long, willowy neck up, and squared herself. “Please get the letter?” she asked in a trembling voice.

He squeezed her paw again, before getting to his feet. “I’ll be right back,” he promised.

She lowered her eyes once more. He gave her a final look before beginning to run down to the library, bounding over his half-finished wall with a quick stroke of his wings. She looked frightened again, her narrow face filled with apprehension.

“Twilight?” he called breathlessly once he’d reached the open library door. “Hey, Twilight, anypony home?”

“In a minute, Spike!” Twilight’s voice called out, and he tried to squash his impatience. He waited for a few minutes, shifting from claw to claw, before giving up with a small huff and pushing his head through the door.

“Twilight?” he asked again, trying to swallow his annoyance. What he saw brought him up short.

The Great and Powerful Trixie was seated at the replacement table in the main library, and her head was buried against Twilight’s shoulder as she shook with suppressed sobs. Twilight gave him a dangerous look. “Spike, I told you to wait,” she said in a quiet voice that nevertheless rang with irritation.

“Um, sorry,” he said weakly. “I’ll just be... I’ll just go...”

“Wait!” Trixie whipped her head around, her ice-blue mane a mess. Purple eyes locked onto him, and abruptly Spike was having his head hugged fiercely by a travelling showpony. “Thank you for finding her,” she said in a tear-soaked voice. “Thank you.”

“It was mostly Just,” he said, muffled by her strangling hug.

“You helped,” Trixie said, pulling back. With a jaunty toss of her head that recalled her prouder days she added, “Besides, *you* were the one who informed Trixie. I mean, me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, though it sounded more like a question. She didn’t seem to have stopped crying the whole time that he and Huffy had been exploring, and then talking. “Though I don’t see why you’re thanking me if you’re so unhappy,” he said then, his brow furrowing.

She sniffed, and her haughty demeanour slipped over her like a spangled cloak. “Trixie is utterly *fine*, thank you very much. She is only the happiest unicorn in all Equestria!”

“Really,” Spike said, eyebrow lifting. Trixie flushed.

“Of... of course,” she said, but he had seen through her arrogance and she knew it. She sagged a little on the spot, before looking up at him wistfully. “How is she?”

“She’s fine,” Spike said, taking care to keep his tone soothing. Trixie relaxed infinitesimally. “We’re up at my house now. I’m sorry I interrupted.”

“What were you after?” Twilight asked.

“Could I grab Just’s letter?” he said, rather sheepish that he’d intruded on Trixie’s guilt.

“The one...” Twilight’s eyes widened, and she glanced sidelong at the confused Trixie, before nodding once. “Right, it’s upstairs. I won’t be a moment.” She began to race up the curving steps to her bedroom.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Spike asked Trixie, looking with some bemusement at her ragged mane and unkempt coat. “You’re not looking so good.”

She gave him a sharp look. “Trixie is only the greatest and most powerful unicorn in all recorded history,” she sneered. “Why wouldn’t she be okay?”

“Because you look like you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards,” Spike retorted. “And I know your name. You don’t have to keep telling it to me.”

“It’s been... an emotional morning,” she said stiffly.

“You don’t say,” Spike said, keeping his voice as even as possible.

“Did she ask about me?” Trixie blurted, before slamming her hoof over her mouth and giving him a stricken look. Then she gave a small, stifled scream, throwing herself back into the chair behind the table and sinking her head into her folded forelegs. “I can’t keep this up,” she moaned.

“Then don’t.” Spike shrugged, and his shoulder knocked the doorframe, making the tree shudder a bit. He winced and crouched down a little more. “I can see you’re pretty shattered by what happened between you and Huffy all those years ago. You don’t need to hide it.”

Trixie sighed explosively. “I’m too used to it,” she said. “I’ve always done it, even when I was a foal. It was the only way...” She trailed off, and then her lower lip quivered. “I never meant to hurt her so much,” she said, and her purple eyes were filling. “I didn’t even realise I was doing it. She never told me she was so unhappy. I never knew she heard me when I was boasting about owning a dragon...”

“You boasted about *owning* a dragon?” Spike exclaimed.

She nodded her head rapidly, her eyes closing in shame. Two tears escaped the lids, leaving tracks down her ravaged face. “I never told her that she meant more to me... I thought she knew...”

“We can’t read minds, you know,” Spike said, still amazed at the audacity of Trixie’s bragging. No wonder Huffy had hated it. She would have felt like some sort of trophy, and not a living, feeling, sentient being at all. Spike would have been miserable as well. Anypony would.

“Of course I know!” Trixie said scornfully, roughly swiping at her eyes. “I just thought she understood how I felt. We did the show, made bits, I performed, she packed and collected the fares and made the travel arrangements... it had always been that way. I never knew she was unhappy – she never said. Everything was the same as it always was... and then suddenly the RSPCD turned up asking me questions, and before I knew it she was gone. Gone forever. I thought she must have died! I thought I’d killed her!”

“That still didn’t change your ways though, did it?” Spike said. “When I first met you, you didn’t have Huffy and you were the worst boaster I’d ever seen! You were unbearable!”

She clenched her jaw. "I know."

Spike blinked. He hadn't actually expected her to *agree*.

"It's something I learned when I was little," Trixie said, her gaze sliding away from him and focusing intently into a corner. "The strong ones hurt the weak ones. I wasn't... strong. I wasn't much of anything, really. Just a nothing, a nopony. Who cares about a nopony? I thought if I made myself the most amazing thing to come out of Fillydelphia, the greatest unicorn who'd ever lived, bigger than life... then nopony could..." She stopped, clamping her lips together tightly.

"Nopony could hurt you," Spike concluded, and a seed of pity for Trixie sprouted in his heart. She was a guilt-ridden shell of herself, and yet she continually tried to don the trappings of her former glory, all in the name of self-protection.

He could understand pride like that.

"She's nervous," he said into the silence. "She's still very apprehensive about everything to do with ponies. I think she'd be happy to hear you give your explanations, though. Well, I'm guessing; I don't really know. But she likes details, I've gathered." He smiled a little, remembering how she'd pestered him for every detail about greed-growth, and how irritated she'd been that he couldn't really recall all that much. "Wait for her to come to you. She will, you know. She did say that she loves you, even if she can't forgive you just yet. Besides, she's pretty curious. For now though, I think she's only comfortable with me around. It must be pretty scary to go from total isolation to a village, even one as small as Ponyville."

She gave him a wide-eyed look that mingled shock and gratitude in equal measure. "You... you meant it when you wrote that you could be my friend, didn't you?" she said, her voice faint.

He nodded.

She stood slowly and shakily, before walking back to him and hesitantly touching his face with a hoof. He allowed it. "I don't have many friends," she said, her face a mystery.

"You've got another one now." Spike nudged her hoof with a small press of his head. "While you're there, can you scratch that scale? My claws are outside after all, and I don't think this door's going to give me any more chances after the rattle I gave it earlier."

She actually laughed – a natural laugh, rather than her mocking stage-laugh – and began to scratch at his face with the tip of her hoof. Spike screwed up his eye. “Left a bit. Ahhh, that’s it!”

“You feel like her,” Trixie said thoughtfully.

Spike rolled his eyes. “Duh, *dragon*.”

She huffed. “Don’t you dare mock Trixie – or I’ll stop scratching,” she threatened, her voice carrying up into its more histrionic register again.

“Spike, what are you doing? She’s a guest!” Twilight was coming down the stairs, the letter in its envelope hovering before her. “Why are you getting her to scratch your face?”

“Because you were upstairs and my feet are outside,” he explained as if it were totally reasonable.

Twilight shook her head at him with her lips pressed tightly together, before turning to Trixie and gently lowering her hoof. “You don’t have to,” she said.

“He asked,” Trixie said, pulling her dignity about her. “And I agreed.”

“It’s no big deal, Twilight,” Spike said. She gave him an exasperated look.

“On the contrary,” said Trixie, rounding upon them both with a determined expression. “It is a big deal.”

“Huh?”

Trixie shook her ragged mane and lifted her chin. Spike could almost see the cloak streaming from her shoulders. “There has been,” she said grandly, “a revelation. From this day forth, the Great Trixie will be the best and most open-hoofed friend in all of Equestria! Let no pony see her deny a request to scratch her dragon friend’s scales! She will be the very pinnacle of all friendship! She will become – the Nice and Generous Trixie!” She struck an impressive pose, and little clouds of twinkling smoke puffed into existence on either side of her.

“Er...” Spike said, nonplussed. It seemed that Trixie had decided to swing from one extreme to another. “You move fast when you want to, don’t you?” he asked faintly.

“That’s very good to hear,” Twilight said, a merry smile on her face. “Well, Nice and Generous Trixie, would you like a cup of daisy tea? And I can lend you a brush and a curry-comb.”

Trixie jerked out of her heroic stance, her brow knitting. “Does Tri- do I look that bad?”

For answer, Twilight conjured a mirror. Trixie blanched at the sight of her drawn and tear-streaked face, touching the deep circles beneath her eyes in dismay. “I look *awful*.”

“That’s why I asked before,” Spike pointed out. She pulled herself up straighter, looking between them guardedly.

“But there’s something I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?” Twilight asked, dismissing her mirror and cocking her head.

“Why help me?” Trixie asked bluntly. “I completely humiliated your friends. I lied to the whole village. I was the reason those two nincompoops brought the Ursa to town.”

“Because you’re my friend now,” Spike said.

“Because everypony needs second chances,” Twilight said, the smile still pulling at her lips. “The bathroom is upstairs and to your right. Go wash your face, and then I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

Spike nodded to her, smiled at Trixie’s astonished face and pulled his head out of the door. The letter soared to his feet, and he picked it up carefully. “I’ll see you later, you guys,” he called.

“Next time, when I tell you to wait – *wait!*” Twilight’s voice carried out to him, and his smile became a grin as he turned and began to make his way back to his house.

He could make out Huffy sitting stock-still on her haunches, and he wondered why she looked so awkward for a moment. Then he followed the direction of her eyes to the gap in the stones where his door would one day stand, and sucked in a sharp breath. He swore softly, his pulse suddenly thudding in his ears, and began to race towards the half-finished house.

There was a pony standing there. Worse, it was a pony Spike recognised.

Snatches of what she was saying drifted to his ears as he ran, competing with the rasp of his breath and the thud of his heart. The letter fluttered to the ground behind him. "...have a dragon already," the pony said in an imperious yet trembling voice. "We don't need *two* of you. Go away!"

Huffy seemed to shrink as she stared at the bluish-green unicorn with the flyaway peach-tinted mane, though her muscles tensed visibly. What alarmed Spike the most about that reaction was that it didn't seem like she was getting ready to flee – rather, it seemed as though she was preparing to *fight*. "I'm just visiting," she mumbled. "I'm not stayi..."

Spike cleared the wall with a bound, and skidded to stand before Huffy, panting hard. "Did she hurt you?" he demanded.

Huffy's magnificent teeth bared. "No."

"Did she upset you?"

Her eyes hardened. "How can you stand to stay amongst ponies at all?" she demanded hotly.

"Because she's not all ponies," he said, before releasing a slow breath. "Let me take care of this."

"Be my guest," Huffy said, her lip curling with anger.

Spike turned to face the leader of the 'Parents for a Peaceful Equestria', trying to regard her with a dispassionate, unbiased eye. It was quite the task. She was shaking violently, but her head was held high and proud. Her eyes were two pinpricks of utter fear. "What do you want?" It came out as a growl, though he hadn't intended it that way.

"I want that creature to leave!" she said shrilly.

"Her name is Huffy," Spike said coolly, though there were still definite undertones of 'growl' going on. He took another deep breath, hoping to calm himself down. This stupid pony could have driven Huffy to anything. "She's only here for a few days. She came to visit from a long way away."

"She should go back to a long way away!" the unicorn declared, her hair quivering with the force of her trembles. "We don't want you here!"

Spike gritted his teeth. "Right. That's it."

“Spike...?” Huffy began tentatively, but she was shocked into silence when Spike reached out a paw, lifted the unicorn into the air and held her inches from his nose.

“I have had *enough* of you,” he snarled. “Huffy ran away when she was no more than a foal. She’s spent ten years hiding from everypony and everything. She is *frightened of you*. And you think it’s a good idea to come here and berate her? What gives you the right, huh?” He shook her slightly. “You don’t even *live* here!”

The unicorn was cross-eyed in panic as she flopped about in his grip, her mouth slack and her face frozen in a rictus of fright.

Spike jerked the pony closer to his face, fixing her with a glare from one furious green eye. “I can put up with your horseapples,” he said, his tone dark and threatening. “All your protests and slogans and jargon and hypocrisy, I can deal with it. *She* is off-limits. You got that?”

The unicorn nodded frantically, her head wobbling madly on a neck limp with terror.

“Good,” Spike grunted, and put her down.

The unicorn’s legs almost gave way when she found herself on solid ground once more. She immediately drew herself up, and swallowed hard as she met his eyes again. Her mouth opened as though she was about to speak, but no noise emerged.

Spike raised his eyebrows. “Was there something?”

Her mouth remained open and a strangled noise emerged, like a kitten being sat upon. He rolled his eyes. “Oh for Luna’s sake,” he spat. “I’m not going to hurt you. If you’ve got something to say, say it to me. Not her, me.”

The unicorn’s mouth snapped shut, and she blinked heavily a few times, before planting her hooves more firmly. “You...” she began in a rasping, dread-laden voice that trailed off as soon as it had begun.

“Spike,” Huffy said softly. “She was...”

“I know what she was doing,” Spike said with contempt as he watched the unicorn wrestling with her fear. “She was making you afraid again. I returned the favour – and I’ve broken one of my own rules in the process too. Look, I’m sorry, Huffy. Maybe we should go down to the Lake or something, there aren’t usually many ponies there. Might be a few photographers though.”

“No, listen.” Huffy grabbed his foreleg and whirled him around to face her. “You’re not *listening*. She thought I was here to hurt you.”

Spike’s mouth lined up a retort, but his brain had suddenly decided to take a short holiday. He gaped at her, jaw working uselessly.

The unicorn finally found her voice. “You’re...” she said weakly, “you’re the Ponyville Dragon. Not her. She should go away.”

“She should do whatever it is she thinks she should do and not what anypony else says she should do,” Spike said, his mouth working on automatic as his brain tried to catch up.

“Spike,” Huffy said, a glint of amusement now entering her eye. “Snap out of it.”

He closed his eyes, and pinched his foreleg. Opening them, he was still looking into Huffy’s face, which was now definitely amused. “She’s still there, isn’t she?”

Huffy glanced over his shoulder. “And shaking like a leaf.”

Spike whirled on her, his eyes incredulous. “But you *hate* me!”

The pony flinched at his sudden movement. “I don’t like dragons,” she said stiffly. “But if there’s got to be one, it’s going to be you and not some ravening beast from the depths of that foul place near *Palfreyton*.” She gave a genteel shudder.

Spike stared at her for a minute, his mind trying to process that. “So... you don’t want a dragon, but you sort of do, and you want it to be me...” he said slowly.

The unicorn sniffed. “Yes. No. Sort of.”

Spike choked on that for another second, before he began to laugh helplessly. “You’re messed up,” he said between guffaws that felt like they rose from the very soles of his feet. “You are *so* messed up...”

“You chased the other dragon away,” the unicorn said with brittle dignity, and Spike shook his head feebly as his laughter redoubled.

“You think *I* chased Razorfang away?” he said, before wrapping a foreleg around his stomach, rocking backwards against his tail. “Ow. Oh, stop it, it hurts! Me? Baaaahahah! I’m a bug compared to him!”

“But you still did it,” she said, her mouth held so sourly that Spike thought that the admission must have left an awful taste in her mouth. “You still went and faced him.”

“Well, of course I did! This is my village!” Spike wiped at his eyes and looked down at her, hugely entertained. “You’re a total mess, lady.”

“I am a respected shopkeeper!” she said with high-pitched indignation.

“You’re a market stallholder,” Spike retorted amiably, “and a complete and total hypocrite. Look, Huffy’s a visitor, and she won’t be hurting anypony either. *Your* lot are the ones trying to kill, not us.”

“*Kill?*”

“Or have I somehow gained the ability to make harpoons magically hurl themselves at my head now?” Spike looked at Huffy, who had her claws stuffed into her mouth to keep from laughing. “That’s a fancy new skill I’ve picked up. I can see it coming in handy, for – oooh, I don’t know – *nothing*.”

“We would never resort to violence,” the pony said, her head lifting arrogantly. “We will achieve our goals though peaceful means.”

“I know about the protests in nearby villages,” Spike said almost conversationally, scratching his chin. “If they come here all at the same time, it’s going to be anything but peaceful. It’ll be a riot, and you know it.”

“We are trying to *protect* our *foals!*” She stamped a hoof angrily, her fear lost in outrage.

He leaned forward. “I – don’t – eat – ponies,” he said, as clearly and as forcefully as he could. His breath blew the unicorn’s frizzy mane backwards, and she swallowed. Then her head raised once more, her yellow eyes desperate and full of an old, old dread.

“I know,” she replied meekly. “But they’re not all like you. How was I supposed to know that it – that *she* – wouldn’t be like that thing in the Everfree Forest? How do I know that she wouldn’t be like the thing that killed my great-grandparents?”

Spike’s eyebrows shot skywards. “A dragon killed your...?”

The unicorn nodded, and her face became set. “My grandfather was just a foal, and he saw it all. A dragon rampaged through Upper Dressage, destroying the farmsteads. He escaped by hiding under some rubble. He told me the story when I was just a little filly.”

“When did this happen?”

“One hundred and six years ago,” the unicorn said with frosty accuracy.

“Rampaged...” Spike said, and then winced. “Did your grandfather describe the dragon at all?”

“Huge,” she said flatly. “Red and black. Monstrous. Killing and stealing, burning everything it couldn’t steal.”

“Did it have wings?” Spike asked intently.

The unicorn shook her head. “He said it was like a great malformed lizard.”

“Greed-growth,” Huffy said in realisation. “Like what happened to you.”

“Got it in one,” Spike sighed.

The unicorn looked puzzled. “This... makes *sense* to you?”

“Yeah,” Spike said heavily. “It’s a sort of thing that happens when an immature dragon’s greed gets out of control. Their internal magic gets in on the act, and they start to grow. It’s not like growing up normally. You grow up sort of... twisted instead. You don’t get wings, you get obsessed, and you start to hoard like a crazy pony. The more you hoard, the more you grow. It’s fast, too – it can take minutes, even seconds. Then your mind gets muddled and you forget how to talk. It’s weird and blurry, and you can’t remember much.”

“It happened to *you*?” The pony gasped, and began to back away slowly, her eyes once more enormous with fright.

“It won’t happen again,” Spike said crossly. “Rarity snapped me out of it. It only lasted a day, and I didn’t hurt anypony. I still made a huge mess though,” he concluded, in the interests of honesty. “It took *forever* to fix it all up.”

“You... fixed everything yourself, then?” The greenish-blue pony stopped her retreat, and frowned.

“Not all by myself,” he said, guilt flickering in his eyes. “But as much as I could, yeah. I was still only a baby, about half your size at the time. I was very busy for... sheesh, musta been months.”

She gave him a long, speculative look. “I see.”

“So, a greed-grown dragon killed your great-grandparents, and you were raised on the stories.” Spike rubbed his face. “That’s why you’re so afraid of us.”

“I’m not afraid,” the pony said, her face defiant and her voice harsh. Then she stepped back with a screech when Huffy reached out her forepaw towards her. The long, mauve claws hovered in the air a whole six pony-lengths from the unicorn. They hadn’t even come close.

“Yes you are,” Huffy said simply, folding her forepaw back beneath her.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Spike asked. “I can’t keep on thinking about you as ‘the greeny-blue unicorn’.”

“Grape Vine,” the unicorn said, her face colouring slightly. “And I’m *not* afraid.”

“Yeah, you are, and don’t bother denying it,” Spike said. “Hello, predator talking. I can smell you being frightened from all the way over here.”

“Really?” she squeaked.

“Yep.” Spike shrugged.

“So you admit to being a predator, then?” Grape Vine’s face became stony.

“Well, I can’t really pretend that I’m not,” Spike said reluctantly. “Fangs, claws, the whole sackful of bits, you know. But I don’t hunt, and I sure as sugar don’t hunt ponies.”

“You might one day,” she accused.

“Don’t think so.” Spike shrugged again. “I’ve claimed my territory. My hoard is now my ponies. It’s a natural claiming according to the books, based on age and thought and balance, so there’ll be no greed-growth this time. That sort of thing is totally directionless – you just *want*. Territory’s different; you *need*. I don’t have to grab everything in sight, because now I know what I need – and that’s them. My ponies. I’m going to help them and protect them and watch over them. It wouldn’t make any sense to go around hunting and *eating* them.” He smiled, thinking of Luna. “I’ll be greedy in a different way, a better way. I know it’s different from how other dragons think about territory, but then, I’ve been told I’m a very different sort of dragon.”

Grape Vine's mouth pursed as she chewed that over for a few moments. Then she gave the two dragons a fierce look. "I still don't like you," she told them.

"Likewise," Spike said, wrinkling his snout in distaste.

"A beast like you decimated a farming village, killed my great-grandparents and left my grandfather an orphan. I won't ever forget that," she said, and there was a threat implicit in her tone. Spike bristled, his anger throwing caution to the winds.

"Well, a unicorn killed my mother, stole my egg and left my two siblings to die," he retorted. "It hasn't stopped me from loving a unicorn as a sister."

Grape Vine looked utterly shocked. So did Huffy. The white and purple dragon's head had whipped back to him, her mouth open in horror. Her eyes gradually filled with a luminous sympathy, and she curled her tail around Spike's with a delicate, unsure touch. "Spike," she said softly.

He shook his head roughly. "Sorry. Told you it wasn't a very nice story. I shouldn't have blurted it out like that, but she got me cross."

Grape Vine opened her mouth once more as if to challenge that statement, before her head slumped. "I didn't know about that," she said.

"Not many ponies do," Spike said, his jaw tight. "Ponies used to hunt us, and we used to hunt ponies, until a treaty was formed. A treaty that *somepony* broke when they threw a harpoon at me."

"A treaty?" Grape Vine said, dismay creeping around the edges of her voice.

"You run a political movement about dragons and you didn't even know *that*?" Spike asked in disgust, before shaking his head. "Of course you didn't. Yeah, the Wyrmland's not real happy with us right now, and it's mostly thanks to your 'Parents' group. By the way? Obvious name."

Grape Vine began to frown. "A treaty between dragons and ponies... when?"

"A hundred years ago," Spike said. "Too late for me by twenty years, and too late for your great-grandparents by only six."

"What were the terms?"

Spike snorted smoke through his nostrils in annoyance. “Go look it up, I’m not a library,” he growled.

“Is my story like that...?” Huffy wondered aloud, her head snaking around to nestle comfortably against Spike’s shoulder.

“Not that much,” Spike said, still staring at Grape Vine. “But it’s not very nice either. The one I feel truly sorry for is Razorfang.”

“But he wants to kill you!” Grape Vine exclaimed, and Spike gave her a level look.

“Fancy that.”

Grape Vine flushed.

“What happened to him?” Huffy asked, her jaw moving against his shoulder as she spoke.

“His mate was killed by a magical avalanche started by ponies because she wouldn’t leave her home,” Spike said in as even a voice as he could muster. He watched Grape Vine’s face intently, which paled by increments as he spoke. “They smashed in her skull with a boulder. His two sons flew to avenge her, but they were killed too. Razorfang was in the Long Sleep, and woke up long after everypony responsible was dead.”

“Ponies did that?” Grape Vine asked in a small, sick voice.

Spike nodded.

“I didn’t know,” she said, her yellow eyes becoming confused and her blowsy hair getting caught in her rapidly-blinking eyelashes.

“Now you do.” Spike was suddenly tired of her and her narrow, blinkered thinking. She’d actually listened this time, however, which was a vast improvement compared to their first meeting. Still, he didn’t feel like having to explain himself any more, and he was beginning to get annoyed by the shifting tides of hostility and ignorance. He raised his head, and spotted the letter where it had fallen during his dash to intervene between Huffy and the unicorn. “And I have news for Huffy regarding her own egg, so if you don’t mind – push off.”

Huffy gasped slightly at his rudeness, before chuckling guiltily. “Not very polite, Spike.”

“She puts me in a bad mood,” he grouched. “Push off, *please*.”

Grape Vine closed her mouth with an audible snap. Then the leader of the Anti-Dragon movement trotted away from the house with offended outrage leaking from every pore.

“I don’t think you got on her good side, somehow,” Huffy said dryly.

“I’ll lie awake at night and cry about it,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. Then he sobered, dismissing the unicorn from his mind and drawing himself up straighter. “Huffy, do you want to know where your egg came from?”

She paused, before giving him a serious look. “You said it wasn’t as bad...”

“But it’s still pretty bad,” he sighed, turning to face her. Her tail gripped his a little harder, before she nodded again, face impassive.

“I don’t want to, but I think perhaps I need to,” she said, “and like you said, need’s not the same as want.” Her tail twitched, before uncoiling. He could feel her eyes on his back as he walked over to the discarded letter and brought it back.

“Okay.” He opened it up deftly, spreading it out and laying on his belly. “Where is that paragraph...”

“You’re so clever with your claws,” she said as she lay down beside him, openly admiring of his hard-won skill. “Maybe I should pick up apples for a month.”

“It gets old,” he muttered, focusing on Just’s spidery hoofwriting. “Here we go.” He looked up at her. “Ready?”

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, before opening them again and fixing them on his face. “Ready,” she said.

He turned back to the letter. Somehow the sight of her eyes so close had shaken him. They were a clear and perfect blend of pink and purple. “Right,” he said in a cracking voice, and had to clear his throat. “Okay then. Your mum was the dragoness of the Cindery Catacombs, and your dad was the dragon of the Tanglevine Forest. Your egg was one of four in the clutch...”

• • •

“You two seem to be having fun,” Twilight commented as they came back to the library that evening, chatting excitedly. They’d gone flying and swimming, and Spike had shown her some of the moves Rainbow Dash had taught him. In return, Huffy had demonstrated an entirely new flame she had come up with – a sort of fireball that rocketed from her in a spitting, hissing blaze of dark purple. Spike had been a bit surprised at the colour of her fire, somehow expecting it to be green like his. She had been equally surprised to discover green fire, and there had been a friendly contest for a small time. Huffy had a lot more fire, but Spike had a lot more control, and his invisible flame sealed his victory.

“We went swimming,” Huffy said, her excitement immediately snuffing out at the sound of a pony’s voice to be replaced by a subdued wariness. “I haven’t swum for so long. There’s only one waterhole in the Brumby, and it’s too small to swim in now.”

Spike took up the tale, and his excitement was plain for everypony to see. “It was great, Twilight! She can do this barrel-roll, it’s amazing! And she can shoot these fireballs that hit the target from a whole thirty ponystrides away! Huffy’s an incredible flyer. She didn’t believe me when I told her I only got the hang of it a fortnight ago!” He puffed out his chest proudly.

“Easy there, Wonderbolt Spike,” Twilight laughed. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving!”

The apples that had been put aside for Huffy’s welcome were now piled at the side of the Library, stacked there along with Spike’s usual crates and barrels. Spike eagerly grabbed for one of his barrels and yanked the lid off with as much speed as he could manage, before pinching two apples and tossing them into his mouth. “Oh yeah,” he sighed, before grabbing a clawful more and practically cramming them in.

“Chew, Spike,” Twilight said, her eyebrows high. “You’ll choke.”

“Nnnwn’t,” he mumbled back defiantly, and swallowed. “No I won’t,” he repeated more clearly. “Anyway, I was hungry!”

“Don’t you think you should serve your guest first?” Twilight flicked a meaningful glance over to Huffy, who was watching Spike with bemusement.

“Oh, right.” Spike grinned, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, Huffy. What would you like? Let’s see... Macintosh has given us red apples, green apples, yellow apples, some

pumpkins, some – bleagh, why does he keep growing turnips? Why would *anypony*? – aaaand some parsnips, and some potatoes...”

“Apples would be lovely,” Huffy said, settling herself down in the square. “Though I don’t think I can eat them quite like you do.”

“No pony eats apples quite like Spike does,” Twilight said.

“Just stick your head in the barrel.” Spike shrugged. “That’s what I used to do.”

Huffy made a face at that idea, and tried to pick up the apple, her larger claws slicing through the white flesh without any resistance whatsoever. She frowned. “It’s not easy, is it?”

“You’ve got to learn to use *just* the right amount of pressure,” Spike told her, picking up another apple and munching happily.

She tried again, before giving up with an annoyed huff and plunging her snout into the barrel as he had suggested. She ate ravenously, with occasional tearing motions of her head that made Spike feel rather uneasy. She finished her barrel long before Spike had even made a dent in his, and licked her muzzle clean with her long, forked tongue as she waited.

From her perch on the library’s front stoop, Twilight gave Huffy a shrewd look. “You’re used to eating meat, aren’t you?” she asked, though her tone made it clear that it wasn’t really a question. “That jerk of your head, that’s from tearing meat. I’ve seen Owlwiscious do it, and Winona too.”

Huffy’s mouth became a thin, set line, and she reached for another barrel. “I did what I had to,” she answered obliquely, looking anywhere but at Spike.

“So you can hunt?” Spike asked in fascination, leaning forward. “Whoa.”

She scabbled at the lid of the barrel, creating deep scores in the wood, before handing it to him to open. Her eyes still didn’t meet his. He stuck a claw through the lid and yanked it off, handing it back. She took it, but made no move to begin eating again. “Huffy?”

“Don’t hate me,” she said, clutching the barrel and continuing to steadfastly avert her gaze. “Please?”

He frowned. “What? Huffy, why would I hate you?”

Her eyes didn't leave the cobbles. "Because I hunt, and eat meat, and you don't," she said, her voice shaking a little. "You told that unicorn that you didn't and never would. You were *proud* of it. I... I never used to, but I found a dead deer and I was so hungry... I've never hurt a pony, ever, but I've... I had to learn. I would have *starved*..."

His stomach churned a little at the notion, and he found himself wishing he hadn't eaten so fast. "I don't hate you," he said. "The whole idea makes me feel a bit sick, but if it works for you, I don't mind. Besides," he brightened, "maybe you could teach me some of your hunting tricks! I bet that'd come in really handy if I ever have to defend the village from something I can't scare off."

Huffy's eyes jerked to him. "Really? You don't mind?"

"Hey, I just said that, didn't I?" He nudged her.

"Dragons are omnivores," Twilight said, nodding wisely.

Huffy blinked, and then looked between Spike and Twilight with dawning suspicion in her face. Spike flushed, remembering how he'd blurted the very same thing earlier.

"You can eat practically anything. You were alone and young and hungry. You would have died of starvation. We're not going to judge you for eating what you *had* to," Twilight continued, and her hoof reached out to touch Huffy's paw in the same comforting way she usually touched Spike's. His small pang of jealousy faded when he saw how the touch affected Huffy. Her expression shifted from immediate fear to dawning wonder.

"Thank you," she said, almost whispering in relief.

"You'll find that the diet here is pretty low on deer and pretty high in apples, though," Spike said, his mouth quirking.

"You've got no idea how long it's been since I tasted an apple, a proper, grown-by-an-earth-pony apple," she said fervently.

"Dig in, and don't be shy," Twilight told her. "Sweet Apple Acres is getting all the aid they'll ever need and more out of Spike."

"More 'helping out'?" Huffy asked him, and he grinned a little, tossing another apple into his mouth.

“Sort of, yeah,” he agreed. “Sort of payment for services rendered, sort of territory, sort of lots of things. But it all works in my head, promise.”

“You have a very complicated life.” Huffy shook her head, before bending to her new barrel.

Spike exchanged a look with Twilight, before beginning to chuckle. “I say that a *lot*,” he agreed.

“Never stops,” Twilight giggled, levitating an apple for herself out of Spike’s barrel. He scowled.

“You stole my apple,” he said darkly.

“Maybe you can get started on those turnips?” she suggested, and snickered at his resulting growl.

A pair of purple eyes were watching them longingly from the library window. Spike picked up another apple and gave them a surreptitious wink.

• • •

Pinkie Pie’s ‘Welcome Huffy!’ party was in fact a very small affair. Huffy herself seemed bemused and slightly alarmed by it. It didn’t last long, and was more in the nature of a late snack by starlight than an actual party. Spike found himself grateful that Pinkie had restrained her natural inclination to turn it into a balloons-and-cake extravaganza. Celestia only knew how much that would have freaked Huffy out.

Only his six dear friends, Macintosh, Just and Trixie attended. Huffy spent most of the time talking with Fluttershy. That particular conversation was agonisingly stilted; the two shy creatures were practically outdoing each other when it came to awkward pauses and stammering. Huffy’s eyes continually darted between Spike and Trixie, who sat with Twilight, Rainbow Dash and Rarity.

Trixie herself didn’t take her eyes from Huffy once.

Rarity had brought along a few amethysts as a welcome present for Huffy, and Spike gave her a thankful look. Rarity brushed it off with a wave of her hoof, and watched the slim mauve dragon eat her gift with satisfaction. Huffy’s eyes widened, and then lidded in bliss. “Oh my,” she said faintly.

“Been a long time between gems?” Spike asked her.

“Quiet, I’m in heaven,” she said, her eyes still closed.

“So glad you like it, Huffy dear,” Rarity said, smiling.

“Shh,” Spike said, exaggeratedly lifting a claw to his lips.

The party ended. Twilight kissed him goodnight, before ushering Trixie inside. The two dragons hunkered down by the library, and Spike made sure that he was between Huffy and the streets. He couldn’t shield her all that well, but she would most probably feel better with somepony between her and all those strange ponies. The lights in the library switched off, and a cool darkness spread through the square. Spike sighed, and put his head on his claws, his eyes closing.

“Your friends are very nice,” Huffy said, her tone slightly surprised. Her voice was a soft susurrantion in the night.

Spike smiled. “Yeah, they’re great. Did you like talking with Fluttershy?”

“She knows a lot about animals, doesn’t she?”

“She runs the Animal Shelter here in Ponyville,” Spike said.

She giggled. “She sure blushes a lot around that big red one.”

Spike chuckled as well. “That’s a new development.”

There was a small pause. Spike closed his eyes again, his limbs sinking against the warm cobblestones.

“Do you want to visit the Brumby Bushlands with me tomorrow?” Huffy whispered.

Spike shifted. “Sure,” he said, “but how far is it really? I don’t want to be tired for the fight.”

She was silent for a moment. “It’s pretty far,” she said. “I flew all morning and afternoon. I don’t know how you’d go. I mean, you’re smaller than me.”

“I’m fast,” he said.

“You are,” she allowed. “But it’s not a case of being fast, that flight. It’s an endurance test.”

Spike pulled a face. “I hate endurance tests. Did I tell you about that obstacle course?”

She laughed, her body shunting closer to his. “It’s nice here,” she said after a short pause. “Maybe we should stay in Ponyville tomorrow.”

He opened his eyes again, and looked over at her. Her face was half-obscured by darkness, her eyes glinting in the starlight. “Are you sure? You must really want to go home.”

“I do,” she said, “but you’re not going to be tired tomorrow for my sake.”

“It’d be fine if you wanted to sneak back for the day,” he protested. “And I do want to see your home, I really do...”

“Shh,” she said, and her claw wrapped around his once more. Spike was starting to look forward to that touch, the touch of *another dragon like me*. “It’s okay. I’ll stay here until after the fight.”

He opened his mouth to protest some more, and she shook her head adamantly. “I won’t hear it,” she said firmly. “Now get some rest.”

Spike blinked, and obediently laid his head back onto his feet. Her paw was nestled against his cheek. Silence fell over the square once more, and to his somewhat drowsy surprise Spike found that he was perfectly peaceful. His village lay safe and sleeping contentedly all around him, and the warm glow of possessive pride bathed his mind. Beside him lay his newest friend and living proof that he was not alone. The sweet night breezes played over his back, and he could feel sleep approaching like a wave.

Just before the wave broke, he vaguely heard a whisper. “You won’t die, Spike. You won’t.”

He grunted muzzily, before shifting his head over to hers. Her soft intake of breath hung in the air like a raindrop on a spiderweb, but he was too sleepy and comfortable to notice. She burned with the same internal fires as he did. She was so *warm*. “G’sleep,” he ordered, and her neck slowly relaxed, her head sliding beside his.

“Good night, Spike,” she said quietly.

“G’night,” he mumbled, and dropped into sleep between one thought and the next.

• • •

Tomorrow.

Spike woke up the next morning with Huffy snoring softly beside him. His peace was gone. His mind was full of just one word, and all else was shrieking static. On autopilot, he stood and stretched, and with the ease of long practise shoved the fear into a dark corner of his mind. Tomorrow. It was tomorrow.

This could be his last day to live.

He drifted through the day, barely thinking, barely breathing. He forced himself to eat. He had to keep his strength up.

Twilight never left his side.

Everything and everypony became a brightly coloured blur. He tried to fix as many details into his mind as possible, but they ran together like watercolours in rain. He couldn't remember what he'd had for breakfast. Every voice sounded as though it was underwater. He wanted to be annoyed about that, but couldn't.

The time passed too quickly. Far, far too quickly.

He couldn't remember any of it.

He knew he'd done some training with Applejack and Macintosh. He knew that he'd finished a row of basalt blocks on his house, and that Huffy had helped. He knew that dinner was supplemented by all the gems he'd ever wanted. He knew that Twilight and the pony gang slept in the square alongside himself and Huffy that night. He even knew that Pinkie had brought marshmallows. He knew these things had happened.

The details slipped through his mind like water through a sieve.

The final day dawned. He couldn't remember sleeping.

The sun slipped through the sky, counting down the seconds of his life.

“Spike.”

He raised his head to look into Luna's dark eyes.

“It's time.”

There was a crowd gathered at the edges of Ponyville, clustered under the shadow of the mountain. Spike slowly walked towards them as the sun began to set with Twilight and Luna either side of him, the pop and clack of camera bulbs in their wake. Luna was serene as she stepped beside him, but Twilight's head was high and tears ran silently down her face.

The expressions that greeted him were solemn, almost sad. He looked over the faces of his ponies and swallowed hard against the dry knot in his throat. Funny faces, beautiful faces, pretty faces, strong faces, young faces, old faces: he knew them all so well and loved them all so much.

There was Lyra, who'd told him he looked magnificent. There was Snips, who thought he was awesome. There was Cheerilee, who introduced him to foals and took him out of their nightmares. There was the Mayor, who'd worked so tirelessly on his behalf and had been so unfailingly kind. There was Granny Smith, who would attack a mob with her walking frame if they tried to drive him away. There was Derpy, who greeted him every morning with a cheerful, "Muffin call!" There were Aloe and Lotus, who had sent their dragon to the Gala looking his very best, all for free. There was Zecora, who sympathised. Each one had a story attached. Each one was a pony he knew. Each was a friend.

"Look after them," he said to Luna. His voice was barely there.

She regarded him with fathomless eyes.

Beyond the crowd, where the mountain began to slope, stood Princess Celestia, her pristine white coat glistening in the sunset. Next to her stood the small, sinuous figure of the Wyrmsstadt ambassador, his wings lowered in that peculiarly submissive attitude and his eyes as hard as agates.

Atop Horsefall Mountain, silhouetted against the sky, was a giant shape.

Razorfang.

Spike groped for his courage.

Suddenly, a hoof clapped him on the side.

"Good luck," said Big Macintosh. Though his deep easy drawl was tinged with tension, the sound of his voice caused Spike's mind to flash back in time to the sundrenched fallow fields at Sweet Apple Acres. "Remember, stay focused an' keep yer control at all times. Y've worked hard, Spike. 'M darn proud o' you."

He could remember the first apple he'd successfully picked up. He could smell the apple trees, and feel the squish of rich soil between his claws.

"Thanks, Macintosh," he said. "Thank you for everything."

“Oh, Spike,” Fluttershy said in a quavering voice, stepping up from beside her beau and pressing her face against his chest. He wrapped a paw around her back.

“I’m guessing you’re all out of scoldings?” he said. She breathed in sharply.

“You saved my life, Spike. You’re strong. You’re very brave, and you can stand up to him.”

*Stand up to him.* The words rang in his memory, and, as with Macintosh, images of her began to flash through his mind. He could remember the planning session, the way they’d teased him about that terrible song. Plunging through the air after her. Sending her to dance at Pinkie’s party. Fire lessons.

She stepped back into Macintosh’s embrace, and he smiled at them. “Be happy, you two.”

Fluttershy’s hoof covered her mouth.

“Go get ‘em, boss,” said Scootaloo, holding up a hoof. *The scream of the wind, rope tied around his middle. Safety rules. Hooves in his smoke early on a Sunday morning.* He bumped it with his fist, and she exaggeratedly shook her hoof in mock-pain at his strength.

“Spikey-wikey!” Rarity flung herself against him, her eyes overflowing. “Oh, darling, be *careful*. You have to be clever and careful... you have to be *safe*...”

“Rarity,” he sighed, and inhaled the scent of her mane. She was mussed this afternoon; it was most unlike her. Images flickered across his thoughts – scales on a fancy gown, a too-long scarf, Scoop Headlines, the ballroom floor. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, you know that?”

“You’re the best friend a girl could ask for,” she said with a small, pained smile.

He shrugged one shoulder, and gave her a wry look. “I know.”

Her lips trembled, but her smile didn’t falter. “You’re always going to be my little Spikey-wikey,” she said.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Her face crumpled, though she still tried to maintain her smile. Fluttershy reached for her, and held her close. “Go on,” she said.

He watched Rarity break down in Fluttershy's embrace, and closed his eyes heavily. Turning away from them was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do.

He began to navigate once more through the crowd to the Princess and the ambassador. Ponies parted to let him through. The hush was absolute.

Then a party pony broke it. "Hey, Spike?" Pinkie said, her mane once more a forlorn and wavy mass. She gave him an approximation of her usual bright grin, though it didn't reach her great blue eyes. "I have the biggest, bestest party planned *ever*. EV. VER. Don't you go and force me to throw it for somepony else."

*A million ideas and a million giggles, a raging river carrying her away, a pink hard hat on her head, parties and pranks and unexpected wisdom.*

Spike simply grabbed her and held her tight. Her hoof rubbed his face, squishing his cheek fondly. "Silly billy Spikeface," she said, and crossed her eyes at him.

He laughed through a throat that felt like it was lined with blades. "Keep laughing, Pinkie."

Somepony tugged his foreleg. "You've got to come see me perform in Canterlot at the Summer Sun Celebration," said Sweetie Belle, choking a little. "I've got the lead role. You've got to *promise*."

Spike carefully set Pinkie down. She was surreptitiously wiping her eyes. He turned to Sweetie, and ran an affectionate claw down the side of her face. "Can't miss the big-city debut of the best singer in Equestria."

"You'd better not," she said, and, like her sister's, her face crumpled and she turned her head away. Apple Bloom caught her, and rubbed her friend's back.

"Hey, Apple Bloom," Spike said, and he tilted his head at her. They'd grown up together. Well – she'd grown up, and he'd grown up and up and up. "You're one heck of a pony."

Her eyes grew warm and shiny. "You ain't so bad yerself."

*Defending him against a mob. Laughing 'til she wept at the schoolfoals' questions. "Do me a favour, huh?"*

"Sure..." She stopped and sniffed loudly, clutching Sweetie Belle closer. "Sure... thang."

“Fix that wobbly cobblestone in Ponyville Square? It’s been sticking into my stomach all month.”

She burst into loud laughter that she immediately tried to tame. “You got it,” she said, and then grinned at him with a glint in her damp eye. “Go show him how full o’ fire you are, Spike.”

*Singing that awful, awful song.* He growled, and she laughed some more.

“I’m guessin’ that makes it mah turn,” Applejack said, trotting up to him and peering up at his face. He swallowed.

She cleared her throat. “Don’t you be aimin’ with yer eyes now,” she said in a brisk, matter-of-fact way. “Keep yer fire steady and yer chin high, an’ make sure you got enough breath fer anythin’ you’re tryin’. Don’t give that bronco a chance t’ buck, you hear me?”

He nodded. He could see a million Applejacks in his mind: laughing, twirling rope, singing, running. It must have shown in his expression, because she cleared her throat once more, her eyes blinking rapidly.

“I’m behind you all the way, sugarcube,” she muttered. She gave him a brief, tight hug, and then scurried away into the crowd. Spike opened his mouth to call her name as she left, but at that moment a multi-coloured streak of lightning barrelled directly into him and almost rocked him back against his tail.

“Spi-i-ike!” Rainbow Dash howled. “You... you... you *gotta beat him! You just gotta!*”

“Dash, I...”

“You’re the... the... the... most *awesomest fantasterrific* dragon ever, you got that? You *own* that sky, we clear? You’re gonna show that big bully what for!”

He gave her a brittle grin. “Sure am.”

She glared at him. “You can do this,” she said through hitching breaths, “I know you can.”

She’d never given up on him. She never would.

She released a slow, shaky breath as she stepped away from him, her hoof sliding along his scales.

“You won’t die.” Huffy’s eyes bored into him. “You won’t.”

“Huffy,” he said. “It’s been so good to meet you.”

She set her jaw, her neck convulsing as she swallowed. “You’re my first friend in ten years,” she said. “You can’t...”

“I’m not your *first* friend, though,” Spike said. He glanced back at Trixie, who stood by Cheerilee. “I know it’s hard, Huffy, but she wants your forgiveness so much. She loves you.”

Huffy’s eyes clouded. “Spike,” she said, and it was almost a snarl. “This is not about me.”

He smiled at her, before hooking his neck around hers and tugging her close. “Well, if it’s about *me*, then it’s my rules. I want you to be happy,” he said.

She clutched him, her larger claw almost engulfing his shoulder. “Go stand your ground,” she growled against him.

He pulled away from her, setting her claws down gently, and turned to the Princesses. The two goddesses stood tall and still as they watched him. Celestia’s eyes were warm and anxious, but Luna looked at him with a challenge in her gaze.

“Spike,” Celestia greeted him.

He bowed his head. “Princess.”

“Are you ready, my dragon?”

He sucked in a breath, and released it in a long stream of smoke. “I’m never going to be ready for this, Princess.”

“Dragon of Ponyville Village,” said the ambassador implacably. “The sun is setting. The full moon rises. The Dragon of the Everfree Forest waits.”

“Tell me something I *don’t* know,” Spike said. Celestia covered a small smile with her hoof.

“You must go,” the ambassador continued as though Spike hadn’t spoken, though his eyes narrowed with irritation. “I will accompany you. The Magician of Coal Crater will meet us at the mountain to ensure no...” He paused and eyed the Princesses with a certain sourness. “...tampering occurs.”

The tiny part of his mind not consumed with dread piped, *Another dragon? The protestors are going to love that.*

Luna whispered, “Remember, Spike. I am not gone yet, and neither are you.”

The memories almost dropped him to his knees. The cool night – her eyes in the darkness – the touch of her mane on his forepaws – greed and jealousy – *we will endure.*

She steadily returned his gaze, starfields in her eyes.

Then he turned to the most important friend he’d ever had and ever would.

“Twilight,” he said, and at the sight of her, he finally lost it. He choked. He could feel his eyes beginning to prick and steam. She rushed to him and clambered over his forepaws to seize his head in her grip. She rocked gently from side to side, heedless of his boiling tears.

“I’m so afraid,” he said. His pulse was a juddering drumbeat in his ears.

“I know you are,” she said, and he could feel her own tears splashing onto his hide. “Shh, you’re a big brave dragon now. I believe in you.”

“I don’t want to...”

“Hey. What do I keep telling you?” She pulled back to smile at him, her face ravaged by tears and her lips trembling violently. “It’s going to be okay.”

He cradled her in his forepaw and held her against himself as tightly as he dared. He could crush her so easily now. “I love you, Twi,” he said in a voice that cracked and hissed and smoked.

“I love you too,” she said, stroking his scales the same way she had when he was very small and couldn’t sleep. “I love you, little brother.”

“Spike,” said Luna.

“No,” Twilight breathed, and pressed her face against his. “No, I’m not ready.”

He kissed her cheek, uncaring that the whole village could see it. *Stuff* being macho, Twilight was crying. “Turn on a lamp once in a while. You’re gonna end up needing glasses if you keep reading in the dark,” he told her.

She held onto him even harder, and her body shook and shook.

“My dragon,” said Celestia. “I must lower the sun now.”

“Can’t you...” Twilight said.

Luna closed her eyes. “No. It would rip reality asunder and allow Discord back into the world.” Her eyes opened, and they were full of compassion. “The moon must rise, the sun must set, the tides must change, the world must turn. Twilight Sparkle... I have never wished so hard that things could be otherwise.”

He set Twilight down, and had to bite his lip to keep himself from picking her back up. She looked utterly devastated. The pain of his fangs cutting into his mouth was a welcome distraction from the pain cutting into his heart.

He took a long, last look at Ponyville. It basked in the warm glow of the sunset, and the thatched roofs looked like gold.

Then he turned, and began to make his way up the mountain. The ambassador stalked wordlessly at his side.

The looming shadow of Razorfang seemed to swallow everything in its path, and he gulped as he tried to ignore the sudden weakness of his limbs. *Stay focused. Control. Aim with the brain. Chest forward on the upstroke*, he told himself firmly. The babbling of his fear almost drowned it out.

“Hatchling,” came the menacing rumble.

“Spike,” he automatically corrected.

Razorfang’s upper lip curled in a slight sneer. “I feared you were going to stay below with your precious ponies for a time there.”

“It crossed my mind,” Spike said.

“Are you prepared?”

Spike laughed bitterly for answer, and looked around the mountain peak. All was as he remembered, save for the merry little stream that trickled from the summit. It now ran clear as crystal. “So where’s this magician, then?”

“Ambassador. You have requested a magician?” Razorfang frowned. The ambassador inclined his head.

“Dragon of the Everfree Forest, my greetings and my sincere apologies. He is late,” said the ambassador with a look at the skies. “My message was very specific. He was to arrive at sundown.”

“Oh well, can’t duel without the magician, I mean, how would you know if I didn’t have some magical alicorn advantage, huh?” Spike began to back down the mountain, gabbling nineteen to the dozen. “What a shame, was really looking forward to it, oh, well, that’s the way the calcite crumbles. Maybe we can do lunch sometime instead? Anyway, seeya, wouldn’t wanna be ya!”

There was a great, booming thud behind him. Spike froze in the act of taking another step backwards.

Razorfang merely gave him a sardonic glare.

Turning slowly, Spike took in a pair of royal blue clawed feet, a pale yellowish scaled underbelly, and a great horned head. Golden eyes gazed down at him incredulously, and then turned to Razorfang with disgust.

“Dragon of the Everfree Forest,” the newcomer said. “It’s been a while.”

“Magician of the Coal Crater,” replied Razorfang, his teeth snapping over the words.

Sandwiched between two mammoth dragons, Spike suddenly felt very, very small.

“*This* is your opponent? He’s barely more than an egg. Call this a duel?” the blue dragon hissed. He was in fact a little smaller than Razorfang, and somewhat stocky, with a shorter neck and thickset limbs. His head was broad and his snout blunt. “There is no pride in this.”

Spike immediately bridled at the insult, and then checked himself. Perhaps this guy was his ticket out of this mess.

“This hatchling has twice encroached on my territory,” Razorfang said. “He has eaten the treasures that were mine, and he has flooded the cave that was my home.”

“Is it still flooded?” Spike asked.

Razorfang shot him a venomous look.

“Right, so that’s a yes,” Spike muttered.

“That is a duelling offense, that’s true,” the magician said, ignoring Spike. “Oh, very *well*. Do try not to take too long. I’ve got other places to be, you know.”

Spike’s eyebrows shot up. The dragon sounded just like a bored Manehattanite or Canterlotian. He’d heard voices like that at the Gala.

“You are late, magician,” the ambassador snapped.

The magician scratched at the side of his face with dulled blue claws the size of Spike’s whole foreleg. “Keep your feet on, Shorty, you’ve only got two to spare. I’m only here at all because you asked Her, and She insisted. It’s amazing what She sticks her snout into sometimes. I’ll wait over there, shall I?” he said, nodding to the foothills beside Ponyville. “On those little hills. Whose are they?”

“Mine,” Spike and Razorfang said at the same time. Then they glared at each other.

“Whoo-eee,” said the magician, holding up his forepaws. “I’m not getting involved in this one. May I impose upon your hospitality?”

“What does that mean?” Spike asked suspiciously.

“Of course you may,” Razorfang said. “I extend my hospitality to you.”

“Marvellous, I’m famished,” the magician said. “Oh, look down there, it’s a pony village. Haven’t seen one in decades...”

*“You won’t touch them.”*

Spike bared his fangs, wings extended and claws gripping the earth as he glared at the blue dragon. Razorfang rolled his eyes.

“The mammals belong to the hatchling,” he said with irritation. “I will offer you hospitality after the duel. In the *Forest*,” he added for Spike’s benefit.

Spike slowly lowered his wings. “You won’t touch them,” he repeated. “There’s a treaty.”

“Dear me, child, I wasn’t going to. I was just remarking that I hadn’t seen one in years,” said the magician in his yawning sort of voice.

“The treaty has been broken,” the ambassador said grimly.

“No, it hasn’t,” Spike grated. “The harpoon was thrown at *me*, so I get a say – and I say we don’t discard a treaty between two whole peoples because of the actions of one individual.”

The blue dragon suddenly looked interested. “I say, this fellow’s got a mind,” he said with an impressed glance at Razorfang. “What’s your name, lad?”

“My... name? Or my name-name?” Spike asked, very confused and wondering if the fight was *ever* going to start, and if he could keep everydragon talking all night and thus skip the whole thing altogether.

“Not this again,” said the ambassador with disgust.

“Your territory name, hatchling,” Razorfang said, pinching the bridge of his snout between two massive, gleaming claws.

“Oh! I’m the Dragon of Ponyville Village,” he said proudly.

“So you’re the one everydragon’s talking about,” the blue dragon said, leaning closer. “Hmm.”

*They’re talking about me?* “What?”

“There’s something magical going on,” he said, his great eyebrows knitting.

“I was hatched by magic,” Spike offered, and the dragon pursed his lips.

“That’ll be it. It’s been a while since I’ve met... oh, look at the little darling! What a pretty colour!”

“I have not greeted the new dragoness,” said the ambassador. “I intend to request audience after the duel.”

Spike followed their gazes, and, as he had dreaded, they were looking directly at Huffy. “She’s a friend,” he said.

“*Another* one like you?” the ambassador asked. The only sign of his surprise was a slight widening of his eyes. He looked back at Huffy with a speculative expression. “No new hatchlings for a hundred years, and now two of you turn up within a week.”

“Yes, she’s like me,” Spike said, wondering what that meant. Did dragons really have so few offspring? “Raised by ponies, hatched by magic, the whole shebang. She doesn’t know anything about dragon customs either.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” the magician said, waving his claw dismissively. “I had pony friends once; unicorns, of course. I remember how confused they were about my traditions, funny little mites. Of course, that was a terribly long time ago. What a precious little thing she is. They’re so cute when they’re at that age, aren’t they?”

Spike gaped, and Razorfang’s head swivelled around to stare at the magician with astonishment and mounting anger.

“You were one of these...” Razorfang spluttered.

“You... had pony friends? But you don’t live in Equestria...” Spike said. “Do you?”

“After my friends dropped in harness,” the magician said, a certain tightness around his eyes the only indication of his sorrow, “I decided to leave. That would have been about, ooh, seventeen hundred and forty years ago. It wasn’t called Equestria then, of course. They call it the *pre-classical era* now.” He snorted derisively. “Please.”

“Pre-classical,” Spike said to himself. There was something in that – some detail that was jumping up and down for his attention – but he couldn’t quite put his claw on it.

“And She Who Lives Longest sent *you*?” Razorfang snarled. “*Another* of you pathetic half-mammals?”

The magician’s eyes abruptly glowed like banked coals, and Razorfang was rendered immobile, frozen stock-still. Spike could see his muscles hauling against his invisible bonds. “She did,” the blue dragon said in a low, dangerous tone that was nothing like the chatty, urbane one he had been using.

“Whoa,” Spike breathed. He was impressed. The blue dragon must be a very powerful magician indeed to overcome an adult dragon’s magical resistance.

The horned dragon snorted smoke from his nostrils in two jets, and looked back down at the village below. “Those are the Princesses,” he said, his expression calculating. “Luna looks well, haven’t seen her for an eon. For obvious reasons. I see Celestia’s doing her mane differently these days. That’s a relief – the pompadours were starting to interfere with the ceiling.” He then pursed his lips as he regarded Huffy some more. “So who is she?”

“Um,” Spike said, watching Razorfang strain at the spell that held him. “She’s Hu... I mean, she’s the Dragoness of the Brumby Bushlands.”

“Dangerous territory,” the ambassador remarked. “No wonder she has been so well hidden.”

“I guess,” Spike said.

The blue dragon tipped back his head, and looked up at the sky. “The full moon is about to rise,” he said, and turned to Spike and Razorfang once more. “I will signal the start of the duel. Watch for my flame. I am going to release you now, Dragon of the Everfree Forest. Do try not to insult me again. The warning is embarrassing, but painless. What comes next is not.”

Razorfang relaxed out of his frozen pose, glowering. “My apologies, Magician of the Coal Crater,” he rumbled, and his eyes were hard. “I meant no offense.”

“Oh, pull one of the others, it’s got bells on,” the magician snorted.

The detail clicked into place. “Starswirl the Bearded!” Spike exclaimed. “You knew Starswirl the Bearded!”

The blue dragon jerked, and gave Spike a sharp look. Then his lips pressed together. “Yes,” he said.

Spike shook his head in amazement. “I know somepony who would *love* to meet you,” he told him.

“Enough,” Razorfang growled. “Get to your post, magician, ambassador. I have had enough of this.”

The ambassador bowed sinuously. "I will be recording this for She Who Swallows the Sky," he said when he straightened, his eyes stony. "Dragon of the Everfree Forest, Dragon of Ponyville Village, you fight according to the laws as laid down by dragons for twelve thousand years. While you stand – fight. While you breathe – fight. While you live – fight. Mortal injury will decide the victor. Prove the truth of your convictions upon the body of your opponent. No victor's request can be denied. Die a dragon, or live a worm."

"Let's get this farce over with," the magician said. "Shorty, want a lift?"

The ambassador's mouth tightened. "I can fly myself, thank you."

Spike watched in dismay as the blue wings unfurled, and the horned dragon took to the air. The ambassador's smaller wings spread and he took to the air as well, whirring as fast as a hummingbird. He bobbed in the magician's wake like a cork floating on a current.

For a short time there his fear had receded, swamped beneath his curiosity. The blue dragon had understood both the draconic and equine worlds, and Spike had begun to feel somewhat safe near him. He had been a friend of Twilight's hero.

Now, standing alone and face-to-face with Razorfang, the fear came back in a torrent. Spike gasped and sagged, before pulling himself upright again.

"Dragon of Ponyville Village, I greet you and caution you to prepare for combat," Razorfang said in a formal tone. Spike's heart leapt into his mouth, and all his muscles bunched in readiness.

"Dragon of the Everfree Forest, likewise and whatever," Spike replied, his breathing coming faster.

"You aren't going to insist on your name?" Razorfang said, his eyebrow lifting. "You usually do."

"And you always ignore it," Spike said. "Why bother anymore?"

Razorfang looked taken aback, and somehow, wounded. "I see," he said.

The magician alighted on the foothills, and turned to face them. The ambassador landed before him, and Spike could see their mouths moving. Arguing again, no doubt. Dragons didn't appear to be the most co-operative of creatures, if the magician's attitude was any indication. Of course, his other two examples were Huffy and *Razorfang* – a dragon who'd run away and a dragon who was about to flatten him.

The sun began to sink beneath the horizon. The cloudless sky was the colour of steel.

Spike could make out Huffy's pale shape amongst the crowd at the edge of his village, and the bright form of Celestia amongst the flowerlike colours of his ponies. He wished he could see Twilight, but she hadn't been named idly, and he couldn't make her out.

Slowly – even reluctantly – the full moon peered over the mountain.

The magician roared. Golden flames rushed into the air.

Razorfang opened his jaws. A cloud of red fire bloomed and rushed directly at Spike with a noise like a thousand forest fires, and Spike leapt straight into the air, beating his wings as hard as he could. The gigantic stream of fire followed him, closer than thought. He could feel the scales on the blade of his tail beginning to singe.

He banked and flew as fast as he could around Razorfang's neck, forcing the huge creature to turn his head further and further to follow him. But Razorfang was no Owlwiscious, and couldn't turn his head further than towards his own back. The old dragon was obviously a little stiff as well, and his mammoth bones popped with a sound like branches breaking. As Spike circled the huge dragon, he began to prepare his fiercest flame – the one that was too hot to see with the naked eye. Fluttershy's voice rang in his head. He stretched out his neck, fluid rushing into his flame-ducts, and opened his mouth. When he came roaring around the corner, Razorfang's head was hopelessly out of position.

He seared the green scales on Razorfang's shoulder but did not burn them through. They blackened, but Razorfang's armour was just too strong. He swooped away, cursing to himself. He'd been counting on that to wound more than it had. He ducked behind the sheer mountain peak as another giant cloud of flame billowed towards him, and desperately tried to think of something else.

Before him, the little brook he had freed bubbled happily.

*Aim with the brain...*

Inspiration struck. He grabbed a handful of river rocks and mud, before racing back around the mountainside and pumping his wings, gaining as much height as he could. Tipping slightly, he folded his wings back in and dove straight for Razorfang's face, casting his clawful of stones into his eyes.

The great dragon reared back and roared in annoyance, and Spike spread his wings, flipped mid-air just as Rainbow Dash had taught him, and buzzed over the other dragon once more. Whilst he scrubbed at his eyes in order to get the stones out, Spike took the opportunity to burn through the spines on top of his head.

This time it worked. Another roar greeted this second use of his invisible flame, and Razorfang's huge claws swiped blindly for his tiny tormentor. A steady drip-drip-drip of ichor began to trickle down his great green face.

Spike dodged the giant, flailing claw and ducked back behind the mountain peak. He was breathing heavily as he slumped back to the ground. He'd been lucky to get that chance. He didn't think Razorfang was going to let him have another.

"Hiding, hatchling?" Razorfang boomed.

"Well, sure," Spike called out, "I mean, have you heard of breath mints? Look into it. You'd hide from you too."

"You have been fortunate so far, little one, but you know you cannot win."

Spike inspected his burnt tail, and winced. His scales were blackened, and the top layer of hide was cracked and blistered. "What, so you're going to call it off, then?"

A dark chuckle was his only answer.

The mountain trembled as the heavy footsteps grew closer, and Spike prepared to leap into the sky once more. He knew he had to do something about the great spiked tail...

There was a sudden, uneasy silence. The footsteps had stopped. Spike panicked.

He launched into the air – and not a moment too soon. Razorfang came crashing down exactly where he'd collapsed, and the gigantic claws dug trenches in the earth. The blow would have severed him in two. Spike wheeled through the sky uncontrollably, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"You can't play this game all night, hatchling," Razorfang hissed, and his huge wings spread again. Spike could see the sky through the rents in the thin skin.

He flew over a fireball, and prepared to turn back to attack Razorfang's tail, but he'd underestimated the massive dragon's reach. A giant claw batted him out of the air like a cat playing with a moth, and he slammed against the mountainside with a mighty crash.

He skidded along the rocky ground, his whole body screaming in pain. Then the fire came.

A great rose blossomed and bathed him, and Spike could feel the edges of his scales crisping. He'd never felt such agony. He screamed as his hide blackened, sizzling and popping. His eyes slammed shut, and he could smell an awful cooking scent that he instinctively knew was his own skin burning. The fireball dissipated, leaving him panting and choking in its wake.

"You will learn that you are wrong," Razorfang growled. "You will pay for it."

Spike hauled himself up, and wove unsteadily on his legs. His whole hide felt like it was a size too tight, and it stung as he moved. He glanced down at his feet through blurred vision. His scales were streaked with black, but they were whole. His armour had not been penetrated.

"Wrong?" he asked through dry, cracked lips. "How'm... I wrong?"

"We cannot live with mammals!" Razorfang snarled, eyes wild, and his claw rose into the air and swiped for Spike.

Swiped where he had *been*. Spike beat his sore, stinging wings, the cool air an absolute torment on his scorched skin. He circled the mountain once more, darting and banking as fast as he could. He couldn't survive another of Razorfang's blasts. His scales couldn't take it.

The green dragon was an almost-invulnerable behemoth. Spike's only advantages lay in his speed, his agility, and his hotter, invisible flame. He couldn't afford the principles he'd been hanging on to – fighting fair was *over*.

As he rounded the horn of the mountain, he was astonished to see Razorfang's head swinging from side to side, his eyes narrowed. Spike hovered, his wings motionless, and watched as the green dragon inhaled deeply through his nose. *Smelling for me*, Spike thought, a shiver running down his spine. He glanced at his streaked and blackened wings, and then up at the full moon. He wasn't purple any more – he wasn't even shiny. The old dragon was having trouble making him out, and so he was relying on senses other than sight.

He gathered up every last scrap of courage he'd ever possessed. Fortifying himself with the memory of his friends' faces and the touch of Twilight's hoof on his head, he

rocketed above Razorfang's snapping head, strafing him with his furious invisible fire, and ducking back into the night sky.

Razorfang's gigantic wings beat once, and Spike almost lost control again as the ripples in the wind hit him. He ducked his head and flew on grimly, watching Razorfang like a hawk. It certainly took him a lot longer to get airborne than it did Spike. He was simply too big and too stiff compared to the smaller, more manoeuvrable dragon. A few seconds' grace, Spike realised. A window of opportunity.

As Razorfang majestically rose into the air, Spike fell like a stone. He dove back to the ground and bounded along the rocky soil until he reached a little thicket of saplings. Their canopies were burning, but Spike ignored that as he broke one from the ground with his teeth and stripped off the branches with his claws. Then he turned back to face the dragon now descending upon him, and hurled his makeshift harpoon with all his strength.

It flew true as an arrow for one great orange eye... and then Razorfang ducked his head. It clattered against the green scales, bouncing away harmlessly. Spike gritted his fangs as a booming laugh echoed all around the valley.

"Very ingenious," came the sibilant jeer. "Using their methods, are you?"

"I don't want to use *any* methods, but you haven't given me much choice!" Spike yelled, and launched himself into the sky just as the older dragon's claws touched the earth. Razorfang swore as the rush of wings reached his ears, and began the laborious process of trying to get himself airborne again.

He had barely beaten his great wings three times when a charred black bullet tore through the air and invisible fire slashed him across his back and neck. He howled in pain, and landed with a boom that shook the mountain.

"Yeah! How d'you like *them* apples!" Spike shouted as he span on his wingtip and hurtled directly for Razorfang once more.

A giant claw reached for him, and Spike ducked, snapping at it with his jaws. His teeth penetrated, but Razorfang shook him off as though it were no more than a bee-sting. He was flung directly upwards, and he pinwheeled madly before getting himself under control again. *Stupid*. He wasn't trying *that* again.

Shaking his head to clear it, he flew out of range and began to hover, trying to come up with something, anything. He stared down at the vast green shape below. Razorfang's

wings were once more unfolding, and his orange eyes were full of grim satisfaction as he glared up at the sky, searching for the smaller dragon.

A mad notion struck him. A mad, horrible, dangerous notion.

Well, it wasn't like he was fighting for his life, after all-

He arched himself forward and began to plummet for the ground. His wings folded flat against his body, and his neck stretched as far as it could, his nose never deviating from his target. The wind howling in his ears, he barrelled like a javelin for Razorfang's outstretched wing. Razorfang opened his mouth and roared. A jet of deadly red fire began to hiss and sizzle behind Spike, but he ignored it and stretched out his foreclaws, focusing on the vast expanse of green before him.

With a sound like ripping canvas, he tore a huge hole directly through the thin skin of the wing and burst through it. The roar became a scream, and Razorfang's fire cut off abruptly.

"You...!" Razorfang managed through pain and outrage. "You have *grounded* me..."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," Spike retorted, the adrenaline coursing through him. He flew over the dragon's shoulders once more, raking them with his flame. The scales on Razorfang's back and spines were starting to look like somepony had branded them. There were long, blackened stripes passing from one side to the other.

This close, Razorfang's senses could pinpoint him far more easily. Spike ducked under a vicious claw and nimbly weaved around a fireball, stopping mid-air and tipping his head in order to change direction. *Don't let your rump slump*, Rainbow Dash's voice told him.

"I'm not, I'm not," he told her.

Another claw missed him by only a pony-stride, and his heart caught in his throat. Flipping over, he tore beneath Razorfang's extended foreleg and directly under the huge dragon's belly. He wove between his legs with dizzying agility, dodging the spiked tail that almost clobbered him from the air. He repressed a shudder as he began to fly vertically, pushing himself harder and harder. His breath wheezed and rattled in his chest. That extra-spiky tail *had* to be taken out. It was just too dangerous. He'd be skewered if it connected.

First things first, though... and if it worked last time...

He beat his blistered wings frantically as the older dragon turned on him, another great fireball blowing past his ear. The moon was now a silver eye in the sky, as unknowable and as unreachable as Luna herself. He sucked a deep breath into his starved lungs and extended his neck. Time for another of Dash's tricks.

Razorfang's eyes followed him as he tilted himself backwards. Arching as far as his stiff and stinging body allowed, Spike traced an upside-down arc over the other dragon's head, his belly upturned to the moon and his back to the ground. His wings kept beating rhythmically, the cold air tearing at his skin. Razorfang had no time to turn and barely time to blink before Spike was behind him again, plunging out of the sky with his talons extended like a bird of prey.

The other wing ripped just as easily, and Spike burst through it to the accompaniment of Razorfang's howls of pain. A wall of fire greeted him as he sped past the huge dragon's head and Spike dodged, but too late. The flames licked at his heels, before searing right through the weakened scales over his tail. He screeched, falling like a stone from the sky.

He managed to get his wings open again before he crashed, but the ground was too close. He backwinged furiously to halt his momentum, scraping along the ground. His hind claws dragged and flipped him over, and he went tumbling across the rocks to land in a pile near the craggy peak.

His groan was part-sob as he began to haul himself to his feet. When he tried to put his weight on his left hind leg, he almost passed out from the pain. It was broken.

Razorfang saw it. He began to laugh, slowly at first, and then louder.

Spike swallowed his scream of agony, panting heavily as his mind raced. Fighting from the ground was out of the question now, and his best advantage lay in the air anyway. He couldn't get airborne without a leap, and that meant using his powerful hind legs. Not an option now.

Somewhere, far below, he could hear Twilight screaming his name.

The mountain peak dropped sharply on one side, almost as though it had been sliced away by some giant knife. He could hurl himself off instead – that would get him flying.

Spike gritted his teeth and began to limp for the summit.

"The hatchling cannot walk," Razorfang sneered through his laughter. "You have done yourself proud, little mammal-dragon, but my wings shall heal. My scales shall heal. I can

still fight. *You* however,” he said, and another dark chuckle escaped him, “are now... what is the phrase... a sitting dock?”

“Duck,” Spike snapped, still limping along to the summit. His scales felt like they had been peeled. His tail throbbed. He was shaking uncontrollably. His eyes were stinging from the wind and the heat.

“I can crush you at any moment,” he said, and the huge claws reached out and knocked Spike sideways like a rag doll. He fell heavily onto his broken leg, and tears immediately rose in his eyes. He bit down on his lip hard as he pulled himself upright, and took another halting step. The sharp bite of his fangs was a pitiful distraction against the pain of his useless leg.

“Such determination, my, my,” said Razorfang, evidently enjoying himself. “Look at you go.”

The huge claws pushed him over again, and Spike growled low in his throat. Breathless with pain, he dragged himself up off the ground once more and staggered onwards, his eyes fixed to the peak of the mountain.

“Such a pretty, pretty dream,” Razorfang cooed, following after the wounded youngster. “Dragon of Ponyville Village. How truly revolting. In a way, I am doing you a favour, hatchling. You would lead a long, lonely, miserable life. That is what happens when a dragon has anything to do with those vile, deceiving, wretched creatures.”

“Spike,” said Spike through his teeth. He was almost there...

“What was that?” Razorfang asked. “Was that your name, hatchling? Do you even know what it means to call you that?”

Spike shook his head. “S’... my name,” he panted, and leaned against the rock he had once moved in order to release the Horsefall Stream. He closed his eyes, and shoved at it with his elbow in a futile gesture of resentment. If it hadn’t been for the stupid rock, none of this would have happened.

It shifted slightly.

“Every time you demand that I call you by your name,” Razorfang said, “you demand that you are part of my family, my clan.”

Spike's brow furrowed. The mountain peak was maybe five, six steps away. He could make it.

He'd be killed before he even got close.

"But my family is *dead*, hatchling," Razorfang whispered. "And so is yours."

"Spike," Spike mumbled. His mind raced. His muscles tensed.

"Thank you for your name, hatchling, but no family of mine will ever live with ponies," said Razorfang. He sounded almost sad.

The sound of air rushing into mighty lungs reached Spike's ears.

His eyes narrowed.

"SPIKE!" he roared. He whirled on his three good legs, and with a mighty shove that surprised even himself...

...sent the giant stone bouncing down the mountainside.

Razorfang's eyes widened, right before the stone flew straight into his mouth. He gasped, falling to his belly, smoke billowing everywhere.

Spike stared at the sight, breathing heavily.

Then he turned and threw himself from the mountain peak, wrenching his blackened and stinging wings open. He circled, his broken leg dangling uselessly, and glared down at Razorfang as he hovered above him.

Razorfang wheezed. No fire emerged from his mouth, and no words either. Smoke puffed from his jaws and even poured from his ears as he croaked, his great forepaws wrapped around his throat.

"My family isn't dead," Spike said coldly. "My family is huge."

Razorfang's face was gradually turning a darker shade of green. He gasped and gurgled around the giant rock, his eyes protruding.

Anger was coursing through Spike's veins. He was practically incandescent with rage. "Don't you *ever* talk about them like that again," he snarled, biting the words off.

Razorfang raked feebly at the ground, his face nearly black. He pleaded with his eyes, his forked tongue lolling out of his mouth.

“You have the right to destroy him,” came a voice, and Spike turned his head to see the Magician of Coal Crater hovering behind him. “If that is what you wish.” The magician’s tone was faintly incredulous, and there was a touch of admiration in his eyes.

Spike looked back down at the weakly struggling Razorfang. “I don’t know how they did things back in the Pre-Classical era, but in this day and age, that’s messed up.” He gritted his fangs. “Can you get that rock out of his throat?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it.”

A golden glow surrounded Razorfang’s throat, and the rock popped into existence beside him. The great green dragon rolled over and began coughing noisily, great wheezing, hacking coughs that made Spike wince to hear them.

“There’s a stream over there,” he said, jerking his head. Razorfang’s eyes flicked up at him, his expression blank, before he dragged himself over to the babbling Horsefall Stream and plunged his head in. A cloud of steam arose, and Spike beat his wings a little more to clear it.

With a giant exhalation, Razorfang sat back, wiping his mouth with the back of his claw.

“So are we done?” Spike asked. The hope that rose up in him almost knocked him out of the sky.

“We are done,” Razorfang said. His voice had become weak and thready.

“You mean I *won*?” Spike turned back to the magician with huge eyes.

The magician smiled. “Mortal injury. It doesn’t say anything about dying.”

Spike stared at him.

Razorfang hauled himself up with a groan, and began to walk towards the Forest. His tattered wings trailed behind him, and Spike winced at the sight. “Can you do something about his wings, too?” Spike asked the magician. “Are you powerful enough to heal him? I mean, he’s a fully-grown dragon.”

“What an insulting question. Of *course* I am. I’m the best magician dragonkind has seen in eight hundred years. But he *lost*. He should bear the scars of defeat,” the magician said, frowning. Spike snorted.

“That’s a really dumb reason. Please fix it?”

“You haven’t asked about any magical help for yourself,” the horned dragon said, his eyebrows rising. “Didn’t you used to be purple?”

“I know a couple of alicorns. Please?”

The magician sighed, and landed. Raising his voice, he called, “Dragon of the Everfree Forest?”

Razorfang halted. “Leave me be.”

“The little one has asked that your wings be healed. Victor’s request.”

Razorfang turned to stare up at Spike. His orange eyes were confused. He submitted to the dragon’s magic without taking his eyes from the small, black figure hovering above, silhouetted against the moon.

“Why?” he croaked, as the glow faded from the magician’s eyes.

Spike tipped his wings and landed gingerly, keeping his weight off his broken leg. “You really are a giant idiot,” he said.

Razorfang bared his teeth. Spike ignored it.

“So I’ve been insisting that you’re my... clan?” Spike tilted his head back, his breath catching as his scales prickled and stung. “Every time I asked you to call me Spike, I was demanding that you were... my family.”

Razorfang closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“That’s why you wanted to make sure I was safe after the harpoon,” Spike realised. “That’s why you’ve been watching me. You... you *want* me to be your family, but you don’t want me to live with ponies.”

“You are in danger if you stay with them,” Razorfang rasped.

“And you thought *beating* that into me would change my mind? Turn me into a dragon worthy of being your family?” Spike shifted painfully on his forepaws. “Ow. Nice job, genius.”

The orange eyes narrowed. “Do not flatter yourself,” he hissed. “I was within my rights. You flooded my cave –”

“You never considered calling it off once we’d gotten to know each other?” Spike demanded. “You never thought that maybe *I* had some rights? Like the right to live where I want?”

“I was doing what I thought best,” Razorfang said. “Ponies killed my family, hatchli... Spike.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “I’ve been scared out of my mind for a *month* because of a dragon with abandonment issues and a chip on his shoulder.”

The magician chuckled. “Touché,” he murmured.

“Do you remember the first time I met you?” Spike asked. Razorfang’s face darkened. “Yeah, yeah, ate your gems, my bad. I said we were like brothers. Remember?”

Razorfang’s eyes grew thoughtful. “You... did.”

“You can be part of my family if you want,” said Spike. “This isn’t dragons versus ponies. You keep trying to turn it into that, but it’s *not*. I can have a family made up of dragons *and* ponies. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“But that harpoon,” said Razorfang.

Spike growled. “Forget. The stupid. Harpoon.”

There was a flash, and then Twilight was there, clinging to him fiercely, her hooves agonising against his hide. “You’re hurt,” she gasped.

“I’m alive,” he said, and smiled, wrapping his foreleg around her.

“But your scales... your leg...”

“Yeah,” he said, glancing back at his hind leg. It was throbbing with pain, charred all over, and beginning to swell. He turned his head away from it quickly. “I could use some help from one of the Princesses right now.”

“You have it,” came Luna’s voice.

Spike blinked as the Princesses materialised before him, the ambassador flittering over their heads. The little wyvern was gaping at Spike unashamedly. At the edges of Ponyville far below, he could see Huffy rising into the air above the crowd, ponies clustered on her back.

“Hold still,” Celestia said, and together the two alicorns bowed their heads. Their horns glowed, and a tingling feeling spread over his body. His broken leg was wrapped in a cloud of soft blue and gold magic, and the pain abruptly disappeared. Its sudden absence made him realise just how much it had *hurt*.

The twinkling mist faded, and he carefully stretched his leg. It felt fine. It felt better than fine.

“That is so much better,” he said, leaning his weight on it and bending his knee. “Thank you!”

“Your scales, oh, your poor scales,” Twilight said with a little catch in her voice. Her hooves brushed the black dust from his foreleg, revealing healed purple hide. “Oh, thank *Celestia...*”

“You’re welcome,” said Celestia, beaming. Luna looked a little put out.

“But the other one’s still alive!” the ambassador blurted. His fabled coolness was nowhere to be seen. “That’s not the way it’s supposed to go! Mortal injury means... well, *mortal injury!*”

Spike glanced up at Razorfang, whose eyes slid away.

“Yes,” said Spike firmly. “He’s alive, and he’ll stay that way. I’m not going to kill him, and he’s not going to kill me. We have a lot to teach each other, so that’d be a stupid thing to do.”

Razorfang’s orange eyes widened, and he jerked his head back to stare at Spike. “I...” he began.

“Blah, blah, blah, dragons, ponies, names, families, *blah*.” Spike heaved a massive sigh, and slumped down onto the blackened ground. “Twilight? I’m *ex-haus-sted*. I could sleep for a hundred years.”

She laughed through her tears, and flung her hooves around him. “No way, mister. Not ‘til you’re at least two hundred.”

“Tired,” he insisted, wrapping a blackened paw around her.

She laughed, and cried, and laughed some more, soot from his scales staining her fur.

“Spike!” Huffy cried as she touched down on the mountain. She didn’t even wait for the ponies clustered on her back to slide off before she raced directly for him, clumsy in her enthusiasm. “I told you! Didn’t I tell you? I *told* you that you wouldn’t die!” She threw herself to the ground beside him, and her forelegs swept him into a hug. Five very familiar ponies spilled down her sides, shouting in alarm – except the pink one, who said “Wheee!”

Twilight yelped as she was jolted against Spike’s chest. She shook her head, spitting soot everywhere. “Careful!”

“Sorry,” Huffy said, a sheepish smile on her face. Then she froze, her forelegs solidifying around Spike like steel bands. “Um.”

Spike followed her eyes to peer around at the two dragons, the two Princesses, the gaping ambassador, and his groaning friends. “Yeah. *Um* is right.”

“Did I just make a fool of myself?” she whispered.

“No more than I just did,” he said. “Huffy, this is Razorfang, the Magician of Coal Crater, and the Wurmstadt ambassador. Everypony, this is the Dragoness of the Brumby Bushlands.”

“Charmed,” said the ambassador faintly. His impeccable draconic decorum seemed to have fled. The wyvern landed heavily, and his wings slumped to his sides. Wiping his face with one of his two legs, he muttered, “I have no idea how to report this.”

“Hello, sweetheart,” said the magician, pulling the most horrendously cutesy faces Spike had ever seen. “What a little love you are.”

Huffy wrinkled her nose. “Why is he talking to me as though I’m a baby?”

“Because you are,” said Razorfang, his voice still very raspy. His eyes darted between all the ponies warily. “You both are. You are still children.”

“He didn’t talk to *me* like that,” Spike said. Huffy snorted.

“I’m prettier than you,” she said haughtily.

“You have been challenged. You have no clan to protect you. You have a territory. This makes you an adult in the Lore’s eyes,” said the ambassador, mopping at his bronze brow with the edges of his wing.

“Is it just me, or is every dragon rule completely *stupid*?” Spike demanded. Huffy hugged his neck tighter.

“I knew you wouldn’t die,” she said.

“It was a pretty close thing for a moment there. Two moments. Four. Actually, it was all one hay of a close thing. Ow.”

Celestia touched his forepaw gently with her hoof. “I am so proud of you, my dragon,” she said gently.

“Yeah! And the way you threw that rock!” enthused Rainbow Dash. “That was amazing!”

“I got the backwards loop-de-loop right, did you see?” he asked her, smiling.

“Told you it was easy,” she sniffed.

“That big ole rock almost flattened you a month ago, and you just *grrred* and *arrghed* and *Spiked* it right down his great big toothy fiery dragony mouth!” Pinkie said. “Spike, you did it! You know what this means?”

“Let me guess.” He grinned.

She threw her hooves in the air and tossed her head back. Her smile was blinding. “SPIKE WON THE FIGHT PARTY!”

“Later?” he asked. Though his leg and hide were healed, he still felt like he had been rolled flat. Even cradling Twilight, light as she was, seemed too much for his muscles to bear. “Pinkie, I’m so, so tired.”

She gasped, her hooves snapping to her mouth. “Are you really magically all okay? Did it not work on you?”

“I’m all better, I promise. Just tired. Hey, it’s okay, you guys. Come here,” he said, and opened his free foreleg. She smiled, and barrelled into him, followed by the others a second later. Huffy braced his drained limbs as his dearest friends swarmed into his embrace.

“I was so terribly frightened for you, Spike. But you, you were just so brave. You rock. Woohoo!”

“Oh, and the way you ducked his tail, and did that flip, and stopped mid-air to change direction? Truly awesome-tacular!”

“Darling, your beautiful scales! Oh, did it hurt very much? Are you still in any pain? I’ll get Lotus and Aloe on it right away!”

“I’ve bitten mah hooves right down t’ the quick, y’know... sugarcube, I am so dang relieved to know that you’re okay.”

“...and then I said, ‘a bowler hat, are you crazy?’”

Spike smiled wearily at them all. He was swimming in a sea of his friends, their faces close and their voices overlapping as they clamoured and praised and commiserated. Their hooves patted him fondly, stroked him carefully, held him close.

He hadn’t quite come to terms with the fact that he was alive. He’d fought a grown dragon and lived. More, he’d *won*. He’d actually, really, truly won, through good luck, hard work, lots of help, and by the very skin of his teeth. He was still alive. He had a *future*.

He was sure that when that sank in, he’d be able to fly without wings.

“Spike,” said Luna softly. He looked up at her from within a tight knot of love.

“Congratulations, Dragon of Ponyville Village,” she said.

He smiled. “That’s me.”

“She isn’t going to believe me,” the ambassador said. “She’s going to replace me with my useless nephew, I just *know* it...”

The Magician of Coal Crater was watching them wistfully. His expression abruptly smoothed over when Spike glanced curiously at him. “Well, as nice and heart-warming as this is, I’ve got to get going,” he said. “Got a couple of spells on the boil, that sort of thing. You know how it is, always busy, busy, busy...”

“Must you go, Digsy?” said Celestia with a sly smile. The magician jerked back. “You’ve only just arrived.”

“Nodragon’s called me that in a long time,” he said, his broad forehead creasing. “I’d almost forgotten.”

“It is you, isn’t it?” Luna asked. “Indigo?”

He shifted. “Yes.”

“Twilight, you are *not* going to believe this,” Spike said, looking down at her.

“I can’t believe you’re still alive,” she said, her eyes closed. She held him as though she was never, ever going to let go. “Everything else is just wallpaper.”

He buried his face in her mane for a moment, before peering up at Razorfang. The great green dragon’s eyes were flickering between hatred and confusion.

“Razorfang?” he said. “You didn’t get much of an introduction last time. Want to meet the rest of the family?”

## HE ROCKS!

Ponyville's Dragon defeats Behemoth of the Everfree Forest

By Scoop Headlines (Photography by Snap Happy)

Spike, Ponyville's famous dragon, has beaten the Dragon of the Everfree Forest in a traditional draconic duel. The fight took place last night upon Horsefall Mountain. It was witnessed by the Wyrmsstadt Ambassador, and adjudicated by the Magician of Coal Crater. Princesses Celestia and Luna, well known to be friends of Spike, were present. All of Ponyville was in attendance.

After a long and fierce struggle, and despite sustaining major injuries, Spike was able to surprise his much larger opponent by flinging a massive boulder into his throat. Neither dragon succumbed to his wounds.

The outcome of this clash has been widely speculated over ever since it was first made public. It was first discovered when a letter from Princess Celestia to Spike was published in another source. Overall, it has not been a favourable forecast for Spike. The Dragon of the Everfree Forest is approximately five times larger than Ponyville's young scaled defender, vastly stronger, and presumably far more experienced. Scholars of draconic physiology have been consistently predicting Spike's demise, as have many of his detractors. The odds against Spike winning were a very pessimistic 97:3 at Canterlot CloudBets.

"Spike's a surprising guy," said Just Cause, President of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons. "He's just a kid, but he doesn't give up."

His survival will no doubt be met with mixed reactions. Spike's insistence on remaining within equine society has caused some unrest. A continuous demonstration has been held before Ponyville Town Hall for twenty-four days, and protests have been held in many of the surrounding towns. In contrast, Ponyville itself is firmly behind Spike and (*cont. Page 2*)

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Spike was still very tired when he woke, but at least he didn't feel as though he'd been hammered flat anymore.

He blinked his bleary eyes, shifting on the cobbles of the square. The smell of his scales reached him, and he wrinkled his nose. No, he'd been fried instead.

After saying goodbye to the magician and the ambassador, he'd dragged himself down the mountain. Huffy helped him every step of the way. He hadn't had the energy to haul himself to the lake before collapsing, and his scales were still streaked with black soot. He smelled *awful*.

A memory broke, and he frowned. Razorfang had watched Spike begin to stagger home with conflicted orange eyes, before melting back into the Everfree Forest. He still had to talk to the old dragon. Fight or no fight, they had to find out where they stood with each other.

Spike had meant it when he'd said that Razorfang could join his family – in time. He wasn't real pleased with the old dragon's stubbornness and intolerance right at this point, but he could see it happening eventually. Razorfang had definitely let slip that he cared about Spike, but he hadn't been able to reconcile that with his overwhelming hatred of ponies and his old-fashioned dragon ways.

Spike was still fairly torn himself. On the one claw, Razorfang had let the challenge play out, even after they'd gotten to know one another. He'd tried to kill him, just to prove a point. On the other claw, Razorfang had helped Spike learn to fly. He had helped him – well, *bullied* him – into standing up for himself. He'd even explained his instincts. Finally, he wanted Spike to be his... his clan. Though Spike already had his family, he couldn't deny that having an older, more experienced dragon in his life would be nice.

He put it out of his mind for the moment. It could wait until later.

He got himself to his feet and stretched, amazed at how well he felt. That alicorn magic was some good stuff.

"You're awake!"

He turned his head to see Twilight dashing out of the library. Behind her, Trixie peered around the door, her eyes huge. "Twi," he said, yawning. "Ugh, no, don't hug me. I'm all dirty and gross."

She ignored that and tightly wrapped herself around his foreleg. "You look *wonderful*," she said.

He grinned. "So how many points did I get this time?"

She laughed. "All of them. You're on every single front page. Every editorial is talking about you."

He nuzzled the top of her head, and then looked around. "Where's Huffy?"

"She's gone to Sweet Apple Acres," Twilight said. "She's picking up your wagon. You're probably starving."

As if in answer, Spike's stomach rumbled like a thunderstorm. He looked down at it in surprise, and then gave her a sheepish look.

"I'm not surprised," Twilight continued, stepping back from him and smiling. "You've slept almost all day."

He blinked. "I have?"

"It's four in the afternoon," said a voice from behind him, and he arched his neck to see Huffy landing gracefully, the wagon clasped between her foreclaws. She was easily big enough to fly whilst carrying it, whereas he'd have to wait a couple of years yet. "Sleepyhead," she added, her eyes alight with pride.

"I had a late night," he said with dignity. Then he fell upon his barrels and crates ravenously.

He was cramming a couple of pumpkins into his mouth when Huffy cleared her throat. He looked up, his cheeks bulging. "I wanted to say..." she said, scuffing her claw on the cobbles.

"Esh?"

"Congratulations," she blurted. Her face was blushing purple, and her eyes were shy as she peered at him from under her long black lashes.

His eyes widened. He swallowed as quickly as he could, and immediately doubled over, coughing.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Smack his back, would you Huffy? He always eats too fast."

Huffy giggled, and patted his back a little. Then she looked at her blackened forepaw. "You need a bath."

"I'll get to that," he said, straightening and running a claw over the spines on top of his head self-consciously. *Real smooth there, Spike*, he chided himself. And then wondered why he'd thought that.

Trixie took a hesitant step out of the library, and Huffy's eyes tore away from Spike to fix on her. "Hi, Huffy," Trixie said in a far too casual tone.

Huffy took a shallow breath, and tried to smile. "Hi, Trixie."

"You went to Sweet Apple Acres and picked up that food all by yourself, then? Even with all those strange ponies about?" Trixie asked, turning her head away as though she were only making small talk.

Huffy scowled. "I'm not a baby anymore!"

"Trix... *I* didn't say that," Trixie said in a rush, her head whipping back to Huffy and her eyes wide with alarm. "I didn't mean..."

"I have been all by myself for ten years," Huffy said, her cerise eyes unforgiving. "I can look after myself just *fine!*"

Spike decided to step in before Trixie ruined all her chances. "Well, you're not scared of my friends anymore, are you?" he asked Huffy. She turned away from Trixie, her expression softening, and shook her head.

"Your friends are very nice," she said. "I like them. They don't treat me like... like a dragon. I'm just Huffy."

"They've had experience with dragons," Spike said dryly, picking up another pumpkin and cramming it into his mouth. "Obviously."

"You let them ride on your back last night," Twilight remembered.

"The blue one with the bright mane flew herself," Huffy said. "I couldn't keep up."

"She's not called Rainbow and Dash for nothing," said Twilight with a sidelong glance at Trixie.

Trixie bit her lip, though her eyes remained fixed upon Huffy, a longing expression in their purple depths.

"They all fell off at the end," Huffy said. "I'm not used to carrying anypony."

"You need a harness, like me," said Spike.

“Oh, when I was at the farm, Apple Bloom said... she said she’d make me a harness,” said Huffy, and her voice was full of surprise and wonder. It made Spike sad. She was so unused to having somepony do something for her out of the goodness of their heart. “She said she’d make it with adjustable straps so it would last me a few more years. She said it was a present. But I really think I should give her something in return.”

“You could melt some metal for her,” Spike suggested. “She’s started a craftwork and woodwork stall. She’d probably like to branch out into metalwork.”

Huffy brightened. “Good idea!”

“How are you feeling?” Twilight asked Spike, her hooves running along his dirty claws.

He looked down at her. “Um, surprisingly good, actually. I’m still tired, but I’m not hurting or anything.”

“Good,” she said, smiling. “That’s good to hear.”

“Where is everypony?” he asked. Except for the four of them, the library square was deserted. Even the streets were bare, as far as he could see. He hoisted himself up onto his haunches, his wings beating once for lift. “Is something going on?”

All three of his companions suddenly looked rather shifty. “No,” said Huffy, her eyes darting from side to side. “Absolutely nothing.”

His brows lowered suspiciously. “Really?”

“Nope, nothing,” Twilight said with a very fake smile. “I’ve just remembered about a... a thing I have to do that I haven’t done.”

“Oh, me too,” said Trixie, backing back into the Library. “It has to be so done...”

“Yes!” said Twilight, nodding quickly. “We have to go and do the hay out of it...”

“And we’ve got to go do it right this minute,” finished Huffy, spreading her wings.

“But –” said Spike.

With an audible whoosh, Twilight teleported. Huffy launched into the sky. Trixie slammed the library door behind her.

Spike blinked. “Huh...?”

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Spike finished his meal in silence, and then took off for the lake. As usual, there were several reporters and photographers staking it out. He ignored the shouted questions and the pop and flash of camera bulbs as he bathed, scrubbing down his scales with handfuls of sand. It took a while. The black dust had gotten underneath a few on his tail, and he had to chew on it to get it all out. He wondered if he could pick up a great big scrubbing brush at some point. Surely the homewares store had a stiff broom or something – he could remove the handle. That’d work for at least a few years.

Finally he was clean. He plodded out of the lake and shook himself, water flying everywhere. Several of the reporters were spattered with droplets, and he repressed a grin. He hadn’t thought of that as a deterrent before, but hey, whatever worked.

“Spikey!”

He ignored the call, and began to spread his wings. Time to go back into town and find out what everypony was hiding from him. He was beginning to get a bit annoyed about that.

“Heeeey, is that any way to treat an old friend?”

The oily tone was familiar. Spike blinked and looked around, his eyes latching on the brown, smiling figure of Scoop Headlines. His mouth opened, and then closed. “Uh, hi Scoop. You’re still around, then?”

“Well, sure,” Scoop said, dropping the smarmy voice and grinning up at the dragon. “You’re the hottest news since Sapphire Shores’ fling with that poolcolt, no pun intended. Any reporter worth his salt has been staking out Ponyville for weeks. That’s the beauty of being freelance; you go where the work is. Oh, did you like my write-up this morning?”

Spike shook his head. “Sorry, haven’t seen it.”

“Shame, it was a good piece. Ever since that interview I’ve been getting a lot more work. You’ve been a real boost to my career, you know that?”

“Uh...” Spike lowered his wings a little, and scratched at his damp face. “You’re welcome?”

“Got a moment for a few quotes about the fight?” Scoop’s ever-present fedora lifted with a glimmer of magic, and his notepad and pencil zoomed out from underneath. “Won’t take a mo, I know you’re probably tired...”

“A bit,” Spike said.

“So how come you spared the other dragon’s life?” Scoop asked, his tone turning businesslike. “All my sources say that these duels traditionally end in the death of one of the combatants...”

“The rules don’t say that,” Spike said, sitting down with a sigh of resignation. He probably owed Scoop a quote or two. He’d been a real pain in the tail during that first interview, but he’d always reported fairly. “They actually say ‘mortal injury’. I stopped Razorfang from breathing – that’s mortal enough. I got the dragon magician to save him. I didn’t want anypony to die.” He screwed up his face. “Including me.”

“Were you scared?”

“What d’you think?” Spike snapped, and then regretted it. “Yeah, I was terrified. But I was protecting my village, you know? I had to do it.”

“Do you expect any conflicts with the Dragon of the Everfree Forest in the future?”

“Depends on how stubborn he is,” Spike snorted. Then he realised how that would sound, and hurriedly added, “Well, not really. We’re not friends yet, but I think last night taught us both a thing or two about putting aside our differences. He’s very traditional... and I’m... not. But despite that, we’re still both dragons.”

“How about that blue one? The magician? Think he’ll be popping back around?”

“Don’t think so,” Spike sighed. He’d been far too tired to really talk to the Magician of Coal Crater after the fight – and he’d so wanted to watch Twilight’s face when she discovered that he had known Starswirl the Bearded. “He’s welcome to visit, though.”

“How about the little mauve one?”

“Little?” Spike spluttered. “She’s bigger than me!”

Scoop pushed back his fedora and grinned. “*Relatively* little one. She hanging around for long?”

“I sure hope so,” Spike said, his eyes growing soft and a foolish smile tugging at his lips.

“Ooooh,” Scoop said, leaning forward, “does Spike have a lady-friend?”

“No!” he scoffed, and then picked awkwardly at his claws. “She’s... a friend,” he eventually said. “She’s like me. Dragon raised by ponies, all that.”

“She was an examination egg?”

“Yeah. You know about her, she was in that first opinion piece you did. Her name’s Huffy. We found her. Talk to Just Cause at the RSPCD about her.” Spike began to stand. “Look, I’ve gotta get going. It’s almost six. Everypony’s disappeared, and I’m off to find out why.”

Scoop tucked his notepad under his fedora and smiled smugly at his jealous fellow reporters. “Well,” he said. “Thanks for that. And congratulations, kid!”

“No problem. Thanks to you too,” Spike said, and spread his wings.

“If I were you,” Scoop said nonchalantly, rocking back on his hooves, “I’d try that farm out on the western edge, the one where you had all those lessons.”

Spike gave him a sharp look, and then grinned. Scoop blanched a bit at the sight of his fangs, but grinned back anyway. “Gotcha,” Spike said with satisfaction. “See you, Scoop.”

“Talk to you later, Spikey!” Scoop tipped his fedora in salute.

With a beat of his wings that sprinkled water over the assembled press and blew back their manes, Spike climbed into the sky. He did a lazy flip, enjoying the sensation of simply flying for the sake of it for a moment. Then he turned his face towards Sweet Apple Acres.

Sure enough there was a huge crowd assembled there, mostly clustered around the barn. He squinted, trying to make out the details, but he couldn’t really see much more than the barn, the farmhouse, the shifting colours of his ponies and the pale shape of Huffy. Pursing his lips, he began to soar through the gentle air towards them.

An orange and purple blur zipped past his eyes, and he jerked back, backwinging in surprise. Scootaloo was hovering before him. She tentatively waved a hoof.

“Scoot!” he said, irritated. “Whatcha do that for?”

“Sorry,” she said, shrugging, before performing a complicated and athletic turn to end up inches from his snout. “Didn’t mean to startle you, big shot.”

“Stop that,” he growled, and she laughed.

“Only teasing.”

“Why is everypony at Sweet Apple Acres?” he asked, deciding to get to the point.

“You’ll see,” she said mysteriously. Then she huffed. “We didn’t think you’d find us this quickly. We thought you’d sleep all day.”

“It was pretty tempting,” he said, coasting over a current and tipping his head. “Scoot, just answer the question. Please?”

She gave him a mischievous little grin. “Come on down and see.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why all the sneaking around?”

“Come *down* and *see*,” she repeated, rolling her eyes. Then she zipped away. With a flip of his wing, Spike followed her, his body extending easily.

As he neared the crowd, everypony began to cheer and whoop. His eyes widened.

He couldn’t believe it.

There was a sign over the barn that read, “SPIKE: PONYVILLE CHAMPION!” There was a veritable *mountain* of food. There was a blanket that had obviously been enlarged by some unicorn. There was a whole barrel full of gems – and what gems! Sapphires and rubies and topaz and emeralds, some of them as big as his *eye*. There were balloons floating through the air. There was a massive tub of punch. There were rides set up all around the barn – a ferris wheel, a carousel, a big carnival slide. The cheering was deafening. Flags and hats waved as he neared, and hooves punched the air in victory.

“No way. *Really?*” he breathed.

He landed with a thump, suddenly weak at the knees. He stared around with his mouth open in shock.

“Close your mouth, Spike,” Huffy murmured. “You might scare the little ones. Nice fangs, though.”

“Besides, yer catchin’ flies,” Applejack said, grinning hugely as she trotted towards him with the others in tow.

His jaw closed with a snap. “Guys...!” he squeaked.

“Toldja I was planning the biggest, bestest party ever!” Pinkie crowed, bouncing excitedly up to him and grinning like a sunrise. “Come on, everypony! He’s here!”

“Three cheers for Spike, king of the mountain!” hollered Pipsqueak, and the crowd erupted once more.

“You... guys!” he managed again, his forepaws pressing over his mouth.

“Are you... *blushing?*” asked Twilight, her eyebrows rising as high as they could go.

“He is,” said Scootaloo, giggling. “Look, you can practically see the steam comin’ from his ears.”

“Blushin’ like a filly on her first date,” chuckled Apple Bloom.

“Now, don’t be bashful, Spikey-wikey,” Rarity said, her eyes fond. Fancy Pants stood beside her, looking somewhat out of place amongst the rough-and-tumble Ponyville folk. “You deserve it, darling.”

“Guys...!” he choked, and rubbed his eyes.

It was all still there, all the same – except everypony was now regarding him with amusement.

“So, what *is* it with you an’ showing rocks who’s boss?” Rainbow Dash said, elbowing him.

“We’re all so very proud of you, Spike,” said Fluttershy.

“That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen,” declared the Mayor.

“Oh, stop blushing,” Pinkie said with a giggle. “Look at him, he’s going to explode. Twice.”

“You look better after a bath,” Huffa said, her gaze flicking over him.

His blush redoubled.

“Smooooove!” cried Sweet-Pea, and the foals of Ponyville converged on him, clustering around his ankles and beginning to clamber up his tail.

“There’s a slide right there, and they’d rather climb all over the dragon,” said Cheerilee, shaking her head.

“Okay with me,” he said, a bubble of utter happiness forming in his chest. He stroked Sweet-Pea’s curly, pale-green mane. “Heya Sweet-Pea.”

“My dagom,” she declared in her indistinct, piping little voice, and pressed her head against his claw. His breath hitched.

“Yeah, your dragon,” he said softly.

He raised his head and beamed at them all. “Guys... I...”

“Y’keep tryin’ ta say things when there ain’t no need fer ‘em to be said,” said Macintosh. The farmpony was watching Spike in a quiet, approving manner. “We *know*, Spike. We’re proud o’ yer.”

“Come on, everypony!” Pinkie called exuberantly. “It’s time to par-TAY!”

Music began. Spike stroked Sweet-Pea’s little head once more, and met Huffy’s eyes. She smiled.

There was dancing, and laughing, and tug-o-war. Pin-the-tail-on-the-dragon had been set up against the barn’s side. Spike was *still* dreadful at it, and laughed at his ridiculous attempt along with everypony else. The gems were *delicious*, and he absolutely had to stop eating every now and then to exclaim over them. Big Macintosh easily won the strength competition – Spike was sure that the bell ended up in orbit – and, surprisingly, Fancy Pants won the horseshoe toss. He gave a few air-rides after Twilight teleported his harness over, and the Mayor was once again the very first in line.

Applejack gave a demonstration of rope-twirling, and the Wonderbolts wrote his name in the sky, making him duck his head in pleased embarrassment. Zecora told the tale of the fight to the little ones, her amorphous shape-changing powders illustrating it for their eager little eyes. It sounded a lot cooler in rhyme.

And then Sweetie Belle sang. Her clear, pure voice soared over the crowd, joining them together. Fluttershy’s birds piped along.

Spike sighed in absolute contentment.

“So, did you want to dance?” It was Twilight. Her eyes were twinkling in the light of the torches.

“Twilight, we went over this,” he said, his mouth quirked. “I’d look ridiculous. Besides, there’s not enough room.”

“Spike, you used to love dancing,” she said, her brows knitting. “You should still be able to do the things you want to.”

“I think that’s one I have to say goodbye to,” he said with a shrug. “Besides, this isn’t exactly dancing music.”

“Disco boy,” she snorted.

“Showtunes,” he coughed. She coloured, and cleared her throat.

“I... I’ll dance if you do...” Huffy said, her eyes downcast. She’d hovered near the barn most of the evening, and though she hadn’t been standoffish, she certainly hadn’t been comfortable. To offer to dance in front of all these ponies was a huge step. Spike glanced back at Twilight, who shooed him on.

“Well...” he hedged. Huffy took a long, slow breath, obviously steeling herself. Then she set her jaw and firmly grabbed his claw in hers.

“Come on,” she said. Her claw completely swamped his as she yanked him from his seat on the enlarged blanket. He stumbled awkwardly and almost fell over as she drew herself up onto her haunches, towering above him. He did the same, trying futilely to make himself taller.

As Sweetie Belle sang about home, and friends, and love, and hope, Huffy’s long forepaws tentatively crept over his shoulders, almost meeting at his shoulder-blades. His own claws hovered over her long, thin waist. He’d hugged her many times, but this was different. He’d never actually danced with *anypony* before, especially not somepony like Huffy. He was almost too nervous to touch her. Finally she rolled her eyes, took his paws in hers and pressed them to her sides.

Spike had never, never blushed so hard.

Sweetie's glorious voice soared into the upper registers, birds accompanying her in a trilling descant. Huffy's neck hooked around Spike's, and she began to sway. He swallowed hard, his heart beating so fast he thought it might tear a hole in his chest. He tried to mimic her actions, snaking his neck over her shoulder and pressing his snout against the feathery white fins on her head. They moved together, their feet still and their bodies bending as Sweetie Belle filled the air with her song.

A peculiar peace settled over him, and he closed his eyes. He could feel the fires in Huffy's chest and throat pressing close to his own – fire next to fire. He took a slow breath that inhaled her wild, strange scent, sighed noiselessly, and relaxed against her. Her forepaws tightened on his shoulders.

A shout rang out, shattering the mood. Spike was thrown from his reverie as the crowd was parted by a small, frantic figure, her mane dishevelled. Huffy blinked as she shook herself from their moment, and she met his eyes for a second. He quickly tore his paws from her waist, dropping his gaze. Her soft laugh rang in his ears as he turned to the crowd.

A greenish-blue unicorn was stumbling through it, pushing past ponies roughly. Her eyes were wild and her face horrified. "Spike!" she called, panic in her voice. "Spike!"

"I'm here," he said, stepping away from Huffy. "Grape Vine? Something's wrong?"

"You were right," she gasped, her hoof pressing against her aproned chest. "It's a riot! They've all converged on Ponyville – they're all down in the village right now! It was all those dragons last night... all at the same time... they just boiled over. I couldn't stop them! They'd rather trash the village than have you here to attract even more dragons, they say! They didn't listen when I told them that you were the only Ponyville Dragon..."

Spike's heart stopped entirely. He looked over the rise of Sweet Apple Acres down to his village, and sure enough, there was smoke hanging in the air, rising in grey curling drifts. He could just make out movement through the streets. Torches bobbed along like fireflies.

Fury began to build in his belly.

"Thank you for warning me, Grape Vine," he said. His voice was fire whispering through stone.

"They're burning ze town!" cried Aloe, her hooves flying to her cheeks.

“That’s my garden!” Lyra said as she clutched Bon-Bon, her eyes wide and glassy.  
“They’re burning my garden!”

“The library!” Twilight gasped. “The books!”

“My home!” sobbed the Mayor. “My home!”

Spike’s lip began to tremble with rage. He wanted to leap out of the sky and *destroy* those bigots. He wanted to see them *pay* for making one of his ponies cry.

He couldn’t. He had to see them safe first.

His mind was still a bonfire as he began to snap orders. “Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo, get to the Ponyville Retirement Village, would you? Take any pegasus who’ll go with you, and get all of those old folks out of there.

“Rarity, Fancy Pants, Sweetie, can you gather together as many unicorns as you can and protect the hospital? Talk to Nurse Redheart; let her know what’s going on.

“Fluttershy, Macintosh, you’d better go check on your animals. Make sure they’re okay, huh? Bloom, can you help them?

“Pinkie, Applejack, can you organise things here? We’ll need a place for the old folks to be comfortable, a place to keep Fluttershy’s animals, a place for everypony else...”

“What about me?” Twilight asked, her back stiffening. Her mouth was grim, but her eyes regarded him with a touch of awe.

“Twilight, Trixie, Huffy, I need you with me,” he said, eyeing the fires below and baring his fangs.

“I’m not hurting anypony,” she said, her hooves planting themselves. He snorted.

“Who said anything about that? Huffy and I will scare them off, and I need you and Trixie to put out those fires.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Pinkie, saluting crisply.

He blinked at her respectful tone, before spreading his wings. Raising his eyebrows at Twilight, he said, “You coming?”

She closed her open mouth, and scrambled onto his back, her hooves wrapping around one of his spines. He'd taken his harness off and it was sitting by the barn, but neither of them wanted to take the time necessary to buckle it back on. "Are you sure this is safe?" Twilight hissed in his ear.

"You once bounced off a *bubble*," he retorted.

"I've been trying to forget that. I could teleport, you know."

"I've got you," he said. "Trust me."

She laughed tightly. "You and your drama."

Huffy looked down at Trixie for a long moment, before crouching and offering her knee. "Come on then," she said, impatience ringing in every syllable.

Trixie hesitated, before she galloped over to her estranged friend and clambered over the proffered limb onto her back. She carefully stepped over Huffy's back to settle between two of her ice-white spines, and held on. "Thank you, Huffster," she whispered.

"Don't thank me yet," Huffy said, and with two gusts of wind, the dragons thrust into the air.

From high above, Spike could see the fires spreading over his village. His mind was clamouring with violence. How *dare* they attack his village. How *dare they!*

He shook off his anger as best he could, burying it in the darkest corners of his mind. This couldn't be about territory. If he stayed in that frame of mind, he'd explode. He'd hurt somepony. Tonight, he couldn't be a dragon – tonight, he had to be an Equestrian.

As he flew he could feel the smaller, faster airtrails of pegasi hurtling past him. The familiar sonic scream of Rainbow Dash's passing rang in his ears, followed by the ripping sounds of her fellow Wonderbolts. He mentally crossed off the Retirement Village from his checklist. Dash had that one covered, and she'd never let anypony down.

Great, now he had *mental checklists*. Twilight was obviously contagious.

The unicorn in question pointed to where the main body of the mob came charging up the street. "There!" she yelled over the howling of the wind.

"I see them," he said. "Hold on!"

“What do you *think* I’m doing?” she snapped, clutching him in an iron grip.

“Can you two get those fires from up here?” he yelled back.

“Number twenty-two, remember?” she called back. Her horn glowed, and several of the fires began to shrink and dissipate.

“Vanishing magic! Nice one, Doctor Sparkle!” he said, and she chuckled. “Trixie, you getting them?”

Trixie’s horn was aglow as well, and her face was screwed up in concentration. “Don’t bother Trixie when she’s performing feats beyond imagination!” she snapped.

“They’re shrinking,” said Twilight. “She’s got it, look!”

“Let’s do another pass to get them all!” called Huffy, and Spike nodded. The two dragons banked and swerved, gliding back over the town. Twilight’s horn relit, and beneath them the fires diminished. It was like watching eyes close all over the ground.

“We’d better get down there!” Spike shouted.

“Let’s try scaring them away first,” Huffy said. “We could fly low...?”

“Oh, let’s not...” Trixie said, holding on to Huffy desperately, her horn illuminating her somewhat queasy expression.

“We’ll try it!” Spike yelled back. “Going down!”

He tilted his wings, his weight tipping forward. They angled into a shallow dive, zooming over the heads of the rioters. Many screamed and bolted, but others waved their torches and hollered vicious insults at him.

“I don’t think they’ll be that easily scared off!” shouted Huffy, following in his wake. Spike gritted his fangs and banked, turning in a wide circle to face her.

“We’re going to have to get down there,” he said, his mind still shrieking vengeance. He squashed his instincts ruthlessly. “They won’t be scared off because they’re more angry than scared – and what they’re angry and scared about is *us*. We have to go and show them that we mean no harm.”

“You just buzzed over their heads,” Twilight pointed out.

“Anypony could buzz over somepony’s head,” he said loftily. “It’s a free sky. Buzzing for all. Hey look, there’s a clear space by Sofas and Quills. D’you think that’s big enough for both of us?”

Trixie peered over Huffy’s outstretched wings. “It’ll be a tight fit,” she said with a dubious expression.

“We’ll get in there somehow,” Huffy said.

He could see pegasi flocking out of the Retirement Village, and sent a mental thank you to Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo, Soarin’ and Spitfire. On the outermost edge of town, earth ponies were galloping at full tilt towards the animal shelter, and Spike could recognise Macintosh at the head of the herd. The hospital was covered with a faint glimmering sheen of magic. What had to be protected was being protected. He glanced down again, taking in the chaos spilling through his streets, and then back at Twilight.

“Go on, hero,” she said.

He gave her a quizzical look. “You said the what which now?”

“Come on, Spike!” Huffy yelled, and began to descend in a long, winding spiral towards the empty space before Sofas and Quills. Trixie was holding on to Huffy’s spines, a low moan issuing from her lips.

“I... feel... sick,” she said, her eyes closing as she circled and circled and circled.

Spike decided against that method. He wasn’t real keen on the idea of Twilight throwing up on him. He banked once more, and turned on a wingtip, his wings tilting into a V and their edges trailing. Then he pointed his nose to the ground and arched into a dive. The extra wind resistance from his wing edges would stop him from plummeting. With a quick backwing, he landed and looked around the street.

Several shop windows had been smashed, and the anger he had quashed briefly threatened to surge past his control once more. There were goods and shards of glass scattered all over the street, and a little bench was burning. He’d rested there every time he’d done the shopping when the bags became too heavy for his little arms. Wet writing dripped from other shop-windows, and he stubbornly refrained from reading it. A gasp from over his shoulder told him that Twilight had noticed it.

“Spike...” she said.

“Nope, not paying attention to it,” he said through clenched teeth. “D’you think they’ve noticed us yet?”

Huffy landed behind him. It *was* a tight fit in the narrow street. The larger dragon could barely fit between him and the shopfronts, and her chest was pressed against his haunches. “Oh, they’ve noticed,” she said dryly. “We saw all the torches heading back this way. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Oh, goody,” Twilight said, her hoof rubbing her face. “Why couldn’t I go and protect the hospital again?”

Spike arched his neck to give her a long, serious look. “Because I need you,” he said quietly.

She held his eyes for a moment, and then nodded. Her horn flared and the flames upon the bench shrank and died.

“Trixie doesn’t feel so good,” said Trixie weakly. Spike gave a short bark of laughter.

“Maybe you should hold off on the spirals next time you’ve got a rookie on your back,” he said to Huffy.

“Just who do you think you are calling a rookie?” Trixie sat bolt upright, her face indignant. Then she slumped back over. “Ooooooh.”

Spike could now see the torches advancing up the street. “Why torches?” he wondered. “Don’t they know that dragons are fireproof?”

“It’s the traditional rioting accessory,” said Twilight.

“I really think I hate that word,” he grumbled.

“They don’t have pitchforks. We should count our blessings.”

Huffy crouched in readiness as the leading edge of the rioters came within earshot. “Here we go,” she said, her eyes hard.

“Huffy?” Spike said, touching her foreleg. “You know that these ponies aren’t all ponies...”

“Not *now*,” she snapped.

*Impatient, right, I almost forgot.* “Right, right,” he said, and turned back to the oncoming flood of rioters. They shouted and hollered as they came, made bold by their numbers.

“Monster!”

“You evil beasts!”

“Get out of our lands, you abominations!”

“Monstrous, foal-killing demons!”

“Hideous fiends!”

“Get back to your own country, and leave us in peace!”

Spike frowned. “Hideous?” he said, a bit hurt.

“Ignore that, Spike,” Twilight said in a stern voice. “You’re a very handsome dragon.”

He preened. Then he caught Huffy’s amused eye, and stopped.

“Aren’t you taking this seriously?” Trixie demanded, sliding to the street along Huffy’s outstretched wing.

His eyes turned deadly. “If I did,” he said in a voice of ice, “they’d be dead.”

“His territory is being attacked,” Huffy explained to Trixie. “He’s trying to protect it without letting his instincts have full control of him.”

“Oh,” she said, blinking.

Twilight teleported to the street, crammed between the two dragons. “Keep a grip, Spike,” she said, worry in her eyes.

“I’m okay,” he said, controlling himself with a great effort. “Promise. Let’s just get these idiots out of here.”

A pegasus lunged at Spike, face set and determined, and Twilight’s horn flared. A purple shield manifested before his eyes, and the pegasus was hurtled off it like a pony bouncing on a trampoline.

“Why can’t we just magic them away?” Trixie said as the rioters clustered together, shouting and hollering. Another pegasus flew like a bullet for Huffy, her hooves extended. Blue and purple magic clashed before the dragoness, and the pegasus was flung into the sky, wheeling uncontrollably. Twilight smiled apologetically as Trixie scowled.

“If we got rid of them with magic, then they’d be back,” Spike said. “And they’d never stop coming.”

“What about the policeponies?” said Huffy, warily eyeing the gathering crowd.

“No doubt they’re busy,” Twilight said. “I’ll bet the Ponyville Police Department isn’t big enough to contain this crowd. They’ll have sent to Canterlot for reinforcements.”

“That won’t do it,” Spike said grimly. “We have to convince them I’m not a threat.”

“You, not a threat!” brayed a pony in the front of the crowd. “You are a *dragon!*”

“Thanks for that newsflash,” he replied with heavy sarcasm. “And here I was thinking I was some sort of oversized mouse.”

“You’re a beast who preys upon innocent foals! You enslave ponies into doing your bidding! You fatten them for your evil feasts!” screamed another.

Spike blinked, and then looked down at Twilight and Trixie. “What, have you two put on weight?”

Twilight scowled, and Trixie turned up her nose at him.

“None of us are safe with you in our midst!” cried yet another pony. “We’ll all be eaten in our beds!”

That seemed to ignite whatever fears the rioters had about him, and a flock of pegasi took to the air as the earth ponies cheered them on. The unicorns bent their heads, their horns flaring. Twilight planted herself firmly before him, her horn flaring in answer, but Spike tapped her shoulder and shook his head.

“No need,” he said quietly. “None of ‘em are anywhere near as magical as you. I don’t think that all of them together could give me so much as a goatee.”

“You’re not *that* big yet, Spike,” she hissed. “There could be somepony in that crowd strong enough...”

“I’m big enough for this,” he said. “And I’m not fighting them.”

He lifted his head and nodded to Huffy. Her eyes were huge and angry, and he knew she too would be restraining the urge to defend herself against her attackers. She nodded back, and together the two dragons lifted their heads, closed their eyes and gritted their fangs.

Magic settled over Spike. It felt cool and somehow slimy. He let it beat uselessly against his hide for a long moment, before opening his eyes and taking in the chagrined faces of the unicorns before him. The multicoloured mist that had coalesced over him dissipated with no discernible effect whatsoever.

Perhaps if they’d worked in concert instead of individually – or if they’d done their research – they’d have overcome the draconic resistance to magic. As it was, the determination on their faces was quickly overtaken by fear.

At that moment, the flock of pegasi struck.

Spike lifted his wings in a sudden movement that made the nearest rioters flinch and gasp, and wrapped them firmly around Twilight and Trixie. He spotted Huffy tucking her head under her own wings, and he did the same. He could hear Twilight’s harsh breathing in the darkness beneath his wings. Torches and stones and hooves rattled against his scales, and he grunted as somepony got in a lucky shot on his ribs.

“It’s no good!” he heard one pony say. “We can’t get through these scales!”

“We need something sharper!”

“Make it open its wings! They’re softer on the underside, that’s what I heard!”

“*Make* me open my wings? Is that what you want?” he growled, doing exactly that. The mob, which had surged forward to batter at him, scurried back as his wings flung open. He glared at them.

“Control it, Spike,” Twilight whispered.

He swallowed, and pulled his anger back with difficulty. “I’ve got it. Sorry.”

“You can take our lives, monster,” quavered a pegasus, “but you will never be able to stop all of us! We will *never* stop fighting your kind! Our children will avenge us, you mark my words!”

“Melodramatic, much,” Huffy said in an undertone. Spike’s lips twitched.

“Spike doesn’t eat ponies,” snapped Trixie. “Neither does Huffy!”

“It made you say that!” said a mare stubbornly. “It’s controlling you!”

“You’re dreaming if you think she’s ever done anything I wanted her to,” Huffy said. Trixie looked crestfallen.

“It’s only a matter of time before you rip us all to shreds!” hollered the mare.

“For the *last time*,” Spike said, turning back to the crowd. “I don’t do any of that! I’m just me – I’m just Spike!” The words jogged at his memory, and the first time he’d faced a group of anti-dragon ponies came flooding back to him. The library square, the markets, and Grape Vine’s angry face floated in his mind. The *déjà vu* was overwhelming.

The group opposed to him back then had been small, unformed, and easily convinced. Even so, he’d needed the help of the former Cutie Mark Crusaders. He’d been so upset by the knee-jerk prejudice that he’d acted without thinking and frightened everypony.

Well, he knew better now. He’d fought a grown dragon and lived. He’d faced down worse than this. He was older and stronger and wiser than he’d ever been, and he would not budge.

“I’m not leaving,” he said in a steady, even voice. “There is nothing, absolutely *nothing*, you can do to make me leave my home. I am here for good.”

He let his anger surface in his hard green eyes. “Get used to the idea.”

“You don’t belong here!”

“I belong here a heck of a lot more than you do,” he retorted.

“Don’t listen!” gabbled a pegasus. “It can hypnotise you with its voice!”

“I wish,” Spike said sourly.

“If there is one of you, more will follow!” cried a stallion hysterically, tearing at his mane. “You are just the front of an invasion!”

“Invasion!” Spike’s laughter burst out of him, and a plume of smoke rose above his head. “Invasion, don’t make me laugh! Oh, wait, you just did.”

“You deny it, of course!” the stallion frothed. “You are all the same, you dragons! Liars, with your forked tongues and your slimy reptile ways...”

“That sounds familiar,” Twilight said, glancing back at Spike.

“Sure does,” he said. “A certain dragon of my acquaintance said something like that. ‘*All ponies are the same!*’ he said. And believe me he has a real reason to hate you.”

“You hate us! You hate us! He admits it!” another pony shrieked. “The beast will turn on us and call upon its horrid breed to join it in its unholy slaughter!”

“That’s me, horrid breed speaking,” Huffy said with a roll of her eyes.

“I don’t hate ponies,” Spike said, holding onto his fury with an iron grip. “Although you lot in particular aren’t exactly my favourites, lady. I’m not some leading force for an invasion – can you *hear* how stupid that sounds? – and I don’t kill! How many times and in how many ways must I say it? I don’t! Eat! Ponies!”

“Why don’t you go back to where you came from!” snarled the stallion, his green and grey mane waving wildly. A chorus of angry agreement followed this statement.

“You mean Canterlot?” Twilight said, stepping forward.

There was a moment of confusion. Then a mare said, “Pardon?”

“I’m from Canterlot,” Spike said.

“Honestly, don’t you ponies *read?*” Twilight said angrily. “It’s been all over the papers for weeks! *I* hatched him, in Canterlot, during my entrance examination for the School for Gifted Unicorns. Everypony knows that!”

“They do?” Spike whispered.

“They do now,” Huffy said.

“You lie!” the stallion growled. “That creature has *forced* you to say that...”

“Me? That’d be a first,” Spike said, shaking his head. “She won’t even eat when I tell her that dinner’s ready.”

“So *she* is responsible for the infection,” the stallion said, his eyes turning on Twilight.

“No,” Spike growled, stepping protectively over Twilight, framing her with his forelegs. “Leave her alone!”

“For Luna’s sake!” Trixie burst out. A corona of pale blue magic surrounded her horn, and spread over the crowd. “Listen up, you bunch of foalish neighsayers!” she blared, her voice magically amplified to echo and boom over the assembled rioters. Spike winced. “We are the ones who should be ashamed! We are the ones who stole dragon eggs and turned them into a test for silly young unicorns! Spike had no choice but to come to Equestria – he never had a choice! Don’t you think, if he’d had the opportunity, he would have preferred growing up with a mother and father? But no, we had to treat a living, sentient, intelligent creature as no more than an assessment. A thing! We brought him here, but now that he’s bigger we want him gone. Where will he go? He doesn’t fit in anywhere, because we took that away from him! We made her want to be like us, knowing full well it was impossible. But let me tell you something! She may be a dragon, but she’s as much a pony as you or me! Don’t you think she’d have wanted to be cared about like any other pony? Don’t you think she has *feelings*? The Nice and Generous Trixie is *ashamed* – nay, *appalled*! – at us! How dare we think we are better than her? How dare we treat her this way?”

Trixie broke off, her chest heaving and her eyes full of tears.

Huffy was staring at Trixie. Her eyes were also wet, and her lips were trembling. “Trixie...” she said in a tiny voice. There was a child’s cry in that word, a child who wanted to be acknowledged and listened to and loved.

Trixie glared at the crowd, who had drawn back in utterly shocked silence, leaning away from her tirade. “Why did we do it?” she demanded, her tears beginning to trickle down her face. “Why? Because she’s different? Because an egg can’t cry? Because she’s too big, too strange, too unlike a pony? She learned about us, didn’t she? She spent every day with our traditions and our instincts and our ways. Why couldn’t we do the same? Couldn’t we respect her enough for that?”

“She’s a dragon!” the stallion shouted. “Why respect a beast?”

“Why respect a pony?” Trixie shot back immediately. “Why did anypony ever respect *me*? Was it because I was kind, and clever, and generous and honest? No. I was flashy! I was a *liar*! It was Huffy who was honest, and kind, and so, so giving... and I treated her like less than dirt. Because I could. Because I was a pony, and she was a dragon. Because I was a fraud! And so are you if you think you are better than her just because you have hooves and she doesn’t! You disgust me...” Trixie heaved in a huge breath, lifting her wet face to their judgement, and whispered, “...and so do I.”

“Holy horseapples,” said Spike in a numb voice.

“Don’t you *dare* tell me she isn’t good enough for Equestria,” Trixie said, staring over the crowd. All her showpony tricks were absent, and it was just a unicorn – stripped to the bone and speaking from her heart – who held them, spellbound and stricken, in the middle of her hoof. “Equestria failed her. It wasn’t good enough for *her*.”

“Trixie...!” sobbed Huffy, reaching for the powder-blue unicorn. Trixie gave the crowd one last, baleful glare, before flying into Huffy’s embrace. “I forgive you,” Huffy cried, her tears splashing onto the cobbles, steam rising from them.

“I love you, Huffs,” Trixie said, kissing the dragon’s face repeatedly, her words distorted by her tears. “I’m so, so sorry... I love you, I always have... I’m *sorry*...”

“I forgive you... I *missed* you...”

Spike released a long breath, and watched the pair finally, finally reconcile. Twilight leaned against his leg, and smiled tiredly up at him. “At least some good came of tonight,” she said.

“And I got to dance,” he reminded her.

She chuckled.

“You... didn’t have a choice, then...” said a mare in the crowd. “You dragons, you didn’t ever *come* here. You were raised by...”

“Me,” said Twilight, still leaning against Spike. “I’m still raising him, technically.”

“I take a lot of raising,” he said, which caused a slightly-stunned chuckle to race around the crowd.

“Why was your... your egg brought to Equestria...?” asked somepony else.

Spike sighed. “You have to understand, dragons and ponies used to hunt each other,” he said with reluctance. “I know, can you believe it? Dragons used to try and protect their territories from ponies, and ponies would try and secure their settlements and towns from dragons. Bit of a conflict of interest, right? Anyway, a dragon hunter killed my mother and stole my egg for a trophy. When he passed away, it was given to the school. It was kept in magical stasis all that while, which is why I didn’t die.”

“More’s the pity,” snarled the unicorn stallion.

“Shut up, Blarney,” snapped one of his fellow rioters. “I want to hear this.”

“It lies!” said the stallion, turning on the pony who had spoken. “It lies, that’s what dragons *do*, lie and lie and lie again!”

“Huffy has never told a lie in her life,” Trixie said staunchly.

“I’m afraid I can’t say that about Spike,” Twilight said, and he picked at his claws, his head hanging. “But it was a long time ago and he was only a baby. He was sorry and he learned his lesson.”

“What about all those dragons last night?” the grey stallion with the streaked green mane challenged. “Can you deny that you are luring the monsters here?”

“For a start,” Spike said, beginning to get irritated again, “I didn’t lure them here. You’re a complete hay-brain if you think I *wanted* to have to fight for my life. The Dragon of the Everfree Forest has always lived there – that’s why he’s called the Dragon of the Everfree Forest, strangely enough! The Magician of Coal Crater doesn’t even live in Equestria, and he was only here for a night. Besides, he likes ponies! He actually knew Starswirl the Bearded – can you imagine all the things he’s seen? All the cool magic and history?”

Twilight was covering a grin, and he realised that his internal library-assistant had spoken up again. He smiled a little sheepishly, and a slight intake of breath rippled through his audience.

“Fangs,” Twilight hissed. Spike dropped his smile quickly.

“No,” Trixie said, still holding Huffy. “Let him smile. He should be able to smile.”

Spike blinked. “Thanks, Trixie.”

“The Nice and Generous now,” she said with a watery grin. He smiled back tentatively, before turning again to the crowd.

“Anyway, no dragon can hurt a pony unless their life depends on it, because of the treaty. And vice-versa. You don’t hurt us, and we don’t hurt you.”

“Why can’t you go live in a cave like a proper dragon, then?” said a pony from amongst the rioters. There seemed to be a commotion at the back. Somepony was pushing through the crowd, causing ponies to stumble and swear.

“Because I want to stay with my family,” he said, barely hanging onto his patience. “If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a hundred times. And boy, am I sick of the words ‘proper dragon’.”

With a final shove, Grape Vine pushed her way through the crowd and almost fell at Spike’s feet. “The policeponies are coming!” she said, gasping. “They’re rounding everypony up, and converging here. There’s guards from Canterlot with them. They’re closing the net!”

Spike lifted his chin. “Knew they’d be out there,” he said. “Ponyville’s Finest – ponies sworn to protect this town. You know, the town you just trashed, set on fire, and looted. There are consequences for that sort of thing. Believe me, I *know*, I’ve done it myself. But if you believe in the rights of ponies, you have to believe in the responsibilities too.”

She wrung her hooves. “I never wanted this!”

“I know,” he said, closing his eyes. “But that’s the thing about lighting fires. Sometimes they get out of control.”

“Quit being wise, you’re making me feel old,” Twilight muttered.

“Why should we bow to the justice of this dragon-loving freak village?” the stallion roared, levitating his torch. “Why should we be punished for doing what our forefathers knew to be *right*?”

“Forefathers...?” said Twilight, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m an Equestrian citizen,” Spike said. “And the laws of this village are the same as the ones all over Equestria. Twilight, hit it.”

“Laid down by Princess Celestia and Princess Luna at the founding of Equestria, witnessed by the leaders of the three pony tribes and now kept in a glass case in the Canterlot Museum of Dry and Dusty Historical Artefacts,” Twilight rattled off.

“You’re not an Equestrian,” the stallion said, his pupils surrounded by a sea of white. “You can’t be, you’re just a beast! Why should I believe a word from your lying mouth?”

“You can go check it yourself,” Twilight said frostily. “I took Spike to see it when he was a baby.”

“It was boring,” Spike muttered.

“I got you an ice-cream,” she muttered back.

He wanted to retort that she’d gotten him vanilla when he’d *clearly* said chocolate, but the angry stallion was speaking again. His fellow rioters were beginning to draw away from him. Their fervour had seemingly been crushed under Trixie’s epic scolding and Spike’s factual answers, and each face seemed to say, ‘well, I was just going with the flow, you know? But I’m not like *him*.’

“You should all be dead,” the stallion said, tossing his green and grey mane, and snorting in anger. “You should all die!”

“Did a dragon kill somepony in your family or something?” Spike asked with a glance at Grape Vine, who blanched.

The stallion laughed maniacally. “*My* family!”

“This guy’s got donuts for brains,” Spike muttered.

“There should be hunting parties again,” the stallion said, his eyes lighting up with an almost religious fervour. “We should hunt you all down, yes! Eradicate you from the world altogether!”

“You’d break a treaty between the Princesses and the Wyrmsstadt?” gasped Huffy. “Set ponies against dragons all over again?”

“Hunting has been banned for a hundred years,” Spike said coldly.

“They had the right idea back then!” the stallion shrieked, apparently lost to reason. “We should kill you all!”

“I think you’ll find that the Princesses come down pretty heavy on that whole genocide thing.”

“Die, you monster!” the stallion roared, and before Spike could react the heavy torch was hurtling straight for his eyes – his startled, non-fireproof eyes.

“No!” Twilight shouted, her horn blazing in a corona of light. She rose slightly off the cobbles, her eyes burning white-hot with power. The torch froze mid-air only inches from Spike’s eyeball, and then clattered to the stone cobbles.

The stallion was rooted to the spot, tugging vainly at his immobile hooves as Twilight floated towards him encased in brilliant white light.

“*Your name,*” she said in a voice that trembled with magic.

“I’ll never tell you,” he snarled, still pulling at his hooves.

A tendril of power snaked out and turned the stallion’s head roughly towards her. He glared for a moment, and then her glowing eyes captured him and he began to gaze vacantly into them.

“*Your name,*” she repeated, still speaking in that overwhelmingly powerful voice.

“Blarney...” he said dully.

“*Blarney what?*”

“Blarney Stone,” he said.

Spike’s heart leapt into his mouth, which was suddenly dry as dust.

“*Why did you throw the torch, Blarney Stone?*”

“To regain my family’s honour,” he replied, his eyes blank.

“*You are a descendant of Living Stone?*”

“Yes.”

“*Is that why you hate dragons?*”

“He was a hero,” he said, his voice an awful monotone. “My mother showed me. We had many riches, many things. He is not a hero now. Everypony sees a murderer instead. His riches and treasures are gone, taken for burial and to make restitution. I should have spent my life amongst his riches. Instead I am old and poor and alone, because he is not a hero anymore. But he was right, and dragons should die, and I should be rich and proud of my family heritage.”

*“You threw the harpoon at Spike?”*

“Yes.”

*“Where did you get it?”*

“It was Living Stone’s. It was the only thing we had left after the RSPCD took all his things away. I was a child then, just a foal, and I hid it.”

“He killed my mother,” Spike growled.

“I know,” said Blarney Stone in his empty voice. “I thought it was right to kill you with the same weapon that killed your mother. Fitting. I missed by only inches, and now the harpoon is gone.”

*“You have been hiding in Ponyville? You sent the letters?”*

“I didn’t need to hide. I just wore a camera around my neck. There are so many reporters and photographers here that one more wasn’t likely to cause any comment. It allowed me to study the beast’s movements without causing any suspicion. I sent the letters. I was pleased to make you afraid – the monster and the traitor to ponykind...”

*“Blarney Stone?”*

“Yes?”

*“Sleep.”*

The unicorn stallion dropped to the cobbles, snoring. Spike released a slow, shaky breath, his eyes wide.

Twilight gradually settled to the ground, her blazing eyes fading. Her hooves touched the cobbles, and then she drifted into a swoon. Spike caught her before she hit the stones.

“What in Celestia’s name is going on here?” came a gruff voice, and the crowd parted to reveal Detective Inspector Nosey Parker. “I get to the middle expectin’ a full-fledged riot, an’ it’s a bleedin’ tea party! Spike, lad, mind telling me what’s going on?”

Spike cradled Twilight gently, and straightened, holding her to his chest. “Uh, well, there was a *bit* of a riot before,” he said. “A sort of riot-lite.”

Twilight groaned and shifted against him, and he carefully set her down on her hooves once more, keeping her steady with one forepaw. “You okay? That was a lot of magic you just did.”

“I’m okay,” she said, frowning. “Slight overload, but I’m fine.”

“That’s a new one. What number’s that?”

“One hundred and six,” she said, and smiled, leaning against his forepaw heavily.

“You really love her,” said the mare at the front of the crowd in an awed voice.

“Yes,” said Spike, still watching Twilight worriedly. “I really do.”

“Anypony mind filling me in?” asked Parker with exasperation. “If it’s not *too* much trouble?”

“Well, Huffy and Trixie and Twilight and I decided to get down here from Sweet Apple Acres,” said Spike. “Twilight and Trixie put out the fires... and I hope you’ve got some big cells, because there’s a whole lot of ponies to go in them.”

“This one wants special attention,” Trixie said, kicking the snoring Blarney Stone. “This is the one who threw the harpoon at Spike, Detective Inspector.”

“Just call me Parker, missy, everypony else does.” The grizzled old policepony stooped and peered at the serenely snoring Blarney. “That’s the one? How d’you know?”

“He made a confession,” said Spike, glancing at Twilight.

“Really? How’d you manage that?”

“I was very... persuasive,” Twilight said with a grim little smile.

“Can’t be havin’ that, missy, not if it’s coercion,” said Parker regretfully. “I’m not sayin’ I don’t believe you, only that we’ll have to do our own investigation on him.”

“Are you going to arrest him, at least?” asked Spike, his heart sinking.

“Well, we got him on riot charges, don’t we? I’m sure our investigation will pan out, son. Don’t you fret none, we’ll have him tied up nice and legal.”

“Good,” said Spike, his jaw tight.

“We saw him attempt to assault Spike,” said Grape Vine suddenly. “We all saw it. He threw a torch at him, and it was only that unicorn’s fast magic that saved his sight.”

“Well, now.” Parker raised his eyebrows. “You willin’ to make a statement along those lines?”

“Yes,” she said firmly.

Spike jerked, and then stared down at Grape Vine in surprise. She glanced up at him, and gave him a short little nod. “Right is right,” she said.

“Can we go back to Sweet Apple Acres?” said Huffy, her eyes darting around the subdued former rioters. Trixie hugged her foreleg comfortingly.

“Good idea,” Spike said, and heaved a great sigh.

“I think Pinkie still had fireworks planned,” said Twilight, looking up at the starlit sky.

“That was enough fireworks for me,” said Spike wryly.

“Do you think that’s the end of it?” asked Trixie.

“Nothing ever ends,” Spike said, watching the policeponies rounding up the subdued rioters. “Not really. Every ending is just the beginning of something else.”

Twilight looked up at him with that odd touch of awe in her eyes. Then she gave him a crooked little smile. “Wise,” she said.

• • •

“Hi.”

“Hatch... I mean. Spike.”

“How are you doing?”

“I am well, little one. You are healed also?”

“Yeah, all better. Of course, I slept all day yesterday...”

Razorfang chuckled. “As did I. I have not participated in a duel for many centuries. Especially not one against so agile an opponent.”

“Huffy’s leaving soon,” Spike said, sitting down at the edge of the forest and looking up into the old dragon’s face. “She’s going back to her territory. Trixie’s going with her for a few days. That should be interesting.”

“The small purple female,” mused Razorfang. “And that is the name of the... pony that raised her.”

“Yeah. Look, I’m sorry about the names thing. I didn’t know that I was demanding...”

“Spike,” Razorfang interrupted. “I am not sorry for it, not at all.”

Spike blinked. “Really?”

Razorfang raised his head and gazed out over Ponyville, his eyes distant. “I have been alone for so long,” he said in a faraway voice. “I have nursed my hurts and chewed my anger for so long it has become like a limb I must carry around with me. I have been eaten up with bitterness and loneliness. And then you enter my life,” he said and paused, before chuckling quietly. “You enter my life like a stream washing out a cave.”

Spike winced.

“You insist with every second breath that you are my family,” Razorfang continued. “But I could not accept that a dragon could live with and love ponies. I am old, and tradition is what I cling to. And so I clung to the rite of the duel, even as proof upon proof was heaped upon me that a dragon could indeed live with ponies – and that ponies could indeed love a dragon.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m okay,” Spike said, squirming a little. Razorfang laughed again at his expression, before sobering quickly. His great head bowed, and touched Spike’s in a peculiarly paternal way.

“I am sorry I forced you into that situation, hatchling,” he said.

“Spike,” said Spike automatically.

They met each other’s eyes, and began to laugh.

“Stick to Froggy Bottom Bog, or I’ll really give you something to cry about!”

Spike glared at the Hydra, who hissed and spat at him even as it slunk away. One of its heads was indeed crying, howling over its broken tooth. The Hydra had been overstepping its range again, sneaking up onto the rocky cliffs around Ghastly Gorge and coming perilously close to Ponyville. Spike wasn’t nearly the size of the great beast yet, but he was already more than its match.

The morning sun beat down on him as he spread his wings, climbed into the sky and began to soar back towards his village. It was market day, and as he coasted, many ponies looked up and waved. He waved back, smiling. His house loomed over the town, a great rocky mountain with a cheery little green chimney. Flowers and moss were beginning to grow over its sides.

Five eventful years had passed since the challenge. Spike’s second great growth spurt had begun with a vengeance, and he had roughly doubled in height. Twilight only reached his ankle now, and his claws were about the length of a pony’s leg. Growing had again presented its difficulties. He had a great deal of trouble when it came to moving around the town, and more than once his tail had slammed into a building and caused it to shake. Thankfully he hadn’t caused any damage, and he’d redoubled his efforts to get reacquainted with his old friend, control. He’d had to work very, very hard on maintaining his precision with his larger claws. Even the lake was starting to get a little small.

When his growth spurt had begun, he’d been a bit worried. As he grew bigger – and bigger, and *bigger* – and even more ferocious-looking, worry became fear. What if his appearance turned ponies against him again?

As it turned out, he’d worried for nothing.

After the Riot of Ponyville, attitudes had changed. The backlash against the Anti-Dragon sympathizers had been enormous. The whole of Equestria unilaterally condemned the actions of the rioters and protestors. The petition had been summarily dropped. New laws had been put into place, confirming the Equestrian rights of those dragons that had been pony-raised. And right after that had come the trial.

Blarney Stone had been tried and found guilty on overwhelming evidence, and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for attempted murder. The green and grey unicorn had ranted and raved throughout the entire proceedings, to the point where his own counsel

became disgusted with him. Grape Vine had testified against him, bluntly admitting her own prejudices and giving the facts honestly and straight-forwardly. Since the trial, she had disbanded the 'Parents for a Peaceful Equestria', and founded a new group, working closely with the RSPCD and the Griffon Consulate. It was called 'Equality for Equestria.'

The trial was feverishly reported on by what felt like every journalist in Equestria. Spike had thought that he'd become inured to the flash of cameras, but he'd never experienced anything like the Canterlot Courtroom steps that day. It had been like being caught in a personal lightning storm. It was even more embarrassing because he couldn't get through the courthouse door, and his hindquarters were left sticking outside for the whole of Canterlot to photograph.

Scoop Headlines had won his third Ponitzer Prize that year – with an article featuring a picture of Spike's scaly rump.

After the trial had finished, the details had been made public. For the first time, the majority of ponies were made aware of how a dragon's egg had made it to the examination room. The outrage was unbelievable. Everypony wanted him to know that they supported him. Everypony wanted him to stay. Ponies came to Ponyville simply to have their pictures taken outside his house. He'd never been so accepted, not even as a small and unthreatening infant. Then, his differences had only served to set him apart. Now, his differences made him special – even celebrated.

In that way, he supposed, the Mayor had been right. He was now Ponyville's Famous Dragon. He was pretty glad that he attracted a very different type of tourist these days.

Dragons, too, had been interested in him. He'd woken up with a burp one night, only to end up receiving a bundle of letters in a burst of green fire. The Dragon of the Wyrmland had sent him everything She could about his mother – and his father. It turned out that the Dragon of the Singing Ranges was his Sire, and he was still alive. Spike wasn't interested in meeting a dragon who had rejected him even before he hatched, and so he hadn't made contact. It honestly didn't matter to him anyway – he'd never been so happy. She Who Swallows the Sky often sent him messages asking about 'modern life' and 'young ponies these days'. He got the feeling that he entertained Her.

Apparently the prickly wyvern Ambassador had washed his claws of the whole situation, and was now living on a volcanic island somewhere, working on his tan. His nephew was a rather happy-go-lucky fellow, and almost impossible to dislike. Dragon-Pony relations were likely to become very interesting during his tenure as Ambassador. She Who Lives Longest seemed to think it the best joke since the birth of the world.

Spike had gone to the caverns of the Wyrmland once. He wasn't ever likely to forget Her. She made an Ursa Major look like a kitten. He couldn't even *think* of Her without capitalising the H.

Indigo had become a good friend. The magician wrote almost every month, sending spellbooks and interesting artefacts and little curios from his travels. Included in all his witty chatter were many anecdotes from his time amongst the unicorns in the Pre-Classical era. Spike always showed these to Twilight, with mixed results. She had been immensely happy to hear that her hero had been honest, brave and true, but less than pleased to hear that he had a frightful lisp, and that he was convinced that invisible horseflies were stealing his clothes – thus the bells. Spike had laughed himself hoarse at her expression.

A downdraft sucked at him, and he coasted through it easily with a beat of his wings. The sky was an achingly clear blue, full of the promise of Spring. He flipped over with a great gust of wind that blew back the tops of the trees and backstroked once or twice, enjoying the cool breeze on his hide and in his fins. Flying was now a great joy. He couldn't believe how scared he'd once been.

“Spike!”

The cross shout came from far below, and he craned about, looking for the shouter. Pinkie was shaking her hoof from the window of Sugarcube Corner. “You made my soufflé collapse with that gust of wind, you big lug!” she hollered. “I'm gonna sic Gummy on you! I'm gonna make you deliver my cupcakes for a month! I'm gonna make up a really silly song about you, oooh, see if I don't!”

“Sorry!” he yelled back, his voice booming through the pleasant valley. It was deepening as he grew, and he was having to learn how to temper his volume. His snores were becoming a problem. Magical baffling was being applied to the walls of his house to make sure he didn't keep everypony awake all night. “I forgot!”

“Tricky flying happens at over three hundred feet, or I'll do more than assault you with soufflé, mister!” she yelled, her eyes sparkling. “By the way, I have a Gemstone Crumble cooling on the windowsill for Huffy when she turns up, okie dokie lokie?”

Spike grinned. He knew Pinkie couldn't be that upset about a silly soufflé. She was now the Head Baker at Sugarcube Corner since the retirement of Mr Cake, and her cookies, cupcakes and muffins were eagerly sought by all the fancy cafe-going sets in Manehattan – mainly through Rarity's influence. “I'll let her know! Thanks, Pinks!”

“Silly billy Spikeface!” she yelled back, grinning and waving.

Spike waved back, and righted himself carefully, trying to keep the gusts of wind to a minimum. He elongated his neck and pointed his nose upwards, soaring higher over the town. From this high, he could see over the whole valley. He could recognise the orange blur that was Applejack walking through the raked fields in Sweet Apple Acres, watering all their hard work.

He tilted himself towards his great grey house, his eyes taking in the rise of the Everfree Forest. That reminded him of the lessons he was getting from Razorfang, and he blew out a frustrated, smoke-laden breath. There were so many aspects to draconic culture he hadn't ever suspected. His head occasionally felt like it was going to burst. Out of the hundreds and hundreds of chants, the only ones he could really recall perfectly were the Flight and the Long Sleep chants. Razorfang hadn't become any more patient in the intervening years, and fully expected Spike to have memorised each chant, aspect of lore or song before the next lesson. Spike hadn't ever been the most studious of dragons despite his library training, and though he tried his tail off, he simply couldn't retain it all the way that Twilight or Huffy could.

Nowadays Razorfang was more likely to be disappointed rather than angry when Spike fumbled – and that was almost worse. Spike hated disappointing Razorfang. He wanted the old dragon to be proud of him. Twilight was adamant that Razorfang was in fact *ridiculously* proud of him, and that he was being oversensitive. He could make out the small range under the trees which hid the old green dragon's renovated cave. Pony magic had cleared it out for him, and he and Spike had collected all his gems together once more. Razorfang had given Spike an old crown from his collection, which even now sat on Spike's shelf.

Tomorrow, he and Huffy would visit, and Razorfang would give them another chant to learn. The chants had brought up bittersweet memories of his long-dead mate, who had loved them so. It seemed to help the old dragon to teach them to a new kind of dragon, and thus give the old songs and chants new meaning and memories. Spike had a test next week on the Stone chant... and he was sure he was getting it wrong...

At that moment, a chromatic blur zipped past him and he locked his wings, sighing. “Rainbow,” he said testily. “You know that doesn't work anymore.”

Rainbow Dash returned to hover in front of his eyes, smiling sheepishly. “Can't blame a pegasus for tryin'! You used to jerk back and make the *funniest* faces... it was totally hilarious!”

“When did you get back?”

“Just now,” she said, smoothing down her Wonderbolts uniform. The Captain’s badge sat upon her breast. “Saw you above, thought I’d try and give you a scare for old times’ sake.”

“Applejack’s in the fields,” Spike said pointedly. “I just saw her. Don’t you think you should go see her first?”

Rainbow’s fuschia eyes softened. “Yeah, off t’ do that now. See you later, huh?”

“See you!”

Rainbow Dash zipped away with a practised flip of her wing directly for Sweet Apple Acres. Spike watched as the blue and rainbow blur converged upon the orange one, and giggled to himself as he saw Applejack drop her watering can. The two mares had come to an understanding a couple of years ago. They had unexpectedly hooked up at one of Pinkie’s parties, and even more unexpectedly happily *stayed* together. They had been a surprise to everypony – even themselves. They hadn’t stopped challenging or sniping at each other over the intervening time, but the gleam in their eyes was now warm and fond rather than irritated. Though Rainbow had to leave periodically to undertake her Captaincy duties, she always returned to Sweet Apple Acres.

Applejack was unchanged and unchangeable, just as cheerful and honest and good-natured as ever – and you couldn’t pry her out of her beloved farm with a crowbar. Macintosh had given over the full running of the place to her upon his marriage, though he had trotted over every day from the cottage he shared with Fluttershy – at least until the arrival of Appleseed.

He landed with a carefully controlled gust of wind, and shook out his stinging neck. Stupid Hydra, thinking it could bite through his scales. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to put the stubborn creature back in its place. The first time had been enlightening for both of them. Spike had tried to reason with it, thinking that perhaps the Hydra had an intelligence nearing that of a dragon or a pony. He was quickly disabused of that notion. The Hydra had immediately attacked, and Spike had been forced to give it a quick and humiliating lesson in what it meant to face a dragon. It still had burn scars along the side of its second head. Since that day, it had mostly stayed to Froggy Bottom Bog, treating the inhabitants of Ponyville with wary respect. It was only within the last week or two that it had started ranging outside its grounds once more. Spike made a mental note to talk to Fluttershy, if she had the time. Suppose the fish in the Bog had been too

depopulated, and the Hydra was hungry? That would explain why it was starting to look further afield for a snack.

He nudged open his great metal door. It was still vastly too big for him, but it swung easily thanks to a combination of Apple Bloom's ingenuity and Twilight's magic. Inside, his tiny little gramophone was piping a merry tune, and he lit the branch in the torching with an absent-minded breath. Then he looked around, frowning. He'd cleaned yesterday, but he wanted to do one last check.

He stretched up to his haunches and ran a claw over one of his shelves. Still spotless. His packed-earth floor was smartly brushed, and the scrolls and enlarged books on his shelves neatly arranged – by subject and in alphabetical order – his library assistant days were never far behind him, even now. Many of them had been presents from the Princesses and Indigo, though the jewels of his collection were from Twilight. His pictures were hanging straight. His scarf was on its peg. He glanced over at his larder, which was stocked to the rafters – quite a feat, considering the height of his rafters. There were bales of hay for extra-large hay fries, a bay tree hanging upside down from the ceiling, a huge drum of last autumn's apples, a basket filled with the amethysts and diamonds Rarity had discarded from her last designs, and all sorts of other things. His great cooking pan, made from the ruins of the old water-tower, hung on its hook, shining. His fireplace had been swept out. Everything was in order. Everything was ready. Good.

Finally he flopped down onto his big straw mattress, and heaved a sigh. Only thing to do now was wait.

“Knock knock? Spike?”

He raised his head. “I'm in!”

“I saw you come back,” said Twilight as she opened the smaller, pony-sized door set into his. “How did it go?”

“He bit me again,” Spike said.

“Did it hurt?”

“Well, it sure looked like it. He broke a tooth.”

Twilight laughed and trotted over, clambering over the straw to inspect his neck. “One or two scales are dented.”

He sat up. “Really?” His claws flew to his neck and he rubbed it, feeling the little depressions. “Aw, ponyfeathers! Not now!”

“It’s fine,” Twilight said, smiling. “Maybe she’ll think it’s dashing.”

“You think?” he said hopefully. He peered over at the great mirror that had been a birthday present from Trixie, fastened to one of his walls. “I guess it could look pretty cool...”

“Just think how impressed she’ll be,” Twilight said.

“He-lloooo, Huffy. What’s that?” he asked his reflection. “Aw, it’s nothing... just a Hydra bite. Yeah, a *Hydra* bite. Pretty darn manly, huh?”

Twilight broke into giggles and nudged his forepaw. “You don’t change.”

He slowly reached out with his free forepaw and nudged her in return. Each glittering talon was the length of her leg. She could stand upon his palm with room to spare. “Good to hear,” he said.

Then he turned once more to his reflection. An adolescent dragon, a child no longer, smiled ruefully back at him. Two more major growth spurts after this one. It’d be twenty years before he was fully grown.

Judging by his rate of growth, he wasn’t going to be a lightweight, either.

He frowned at the dints in his long, strong neck. Perhaps she’d like them? Be impressed? Stupid Hydra. He should have knotted its heads together.

Twilight sat down in the straw and leaned on his other forepaw with her elbows, chewing her lip. “Has Razorfang given you that test yet?”

“Nope,” Spike said, turning his head away from the – possibly manly – dints in his scales. “He says I’m not ready. I have to practice for another week.”

“Let me know, would you? I want to be there.”

“Sure thing.” He wrinkled his snout. “There’s so much to remember. I’m pretty positive I’m getting that third stanza wrong.”

“I’ve got it written down in the library,” Twilight said.

“Knowing you, you already know it better than I do,” he said. “I kinda wish you hadn’t decided to do your next thesis on draconic culture sometimes. It makes me feel like a real dummy.”

She tilted her head, frowning. “Well, you’re not. I just study a lot.”

“And the sky is blue. In other breaking news, the grass is green,” Spike said dryly. “Oh, that reminds me, can you magic me up some more quills? I’d better write to the Princesses. It’s been a week since I last wrote...”

She smiled. “Are you having some sort of letter-related crisis?”

“That’s your thing, not mine. I just like to write to them. Celestia’s letters are always good to read, and Luna’s can be really funny. They like to know what’s going on. I can tell them about Huffy’s visit, and the Hydra, and about learning the Fire and the Stone chants.”

“You still haven’t written out the Winter chant for me,” she said, her eyebrows rising.

He huffed. Smoke rose from his nostrils, floating in curling drifts to the magical chimney in his roof. “I’ve been a bit busy!”

“Winter Wrap Up was *three weeks ago*,” she said. “That’s plenty of time to write it down for me. Do you *want* me to be tardy? Honestly, sometimes you’re as lazy as Rainbow Dash.”

“Am not,” he retorted. “Anyway, after Winter Wrap Up there was the planting at Sweet Apple Acres, and then it was Hearth’s Warming Eve and all that fire-duty, and then there was Sweetie’s debut at Coltent Garden...”

“I still can’t believe they managed to get you on stage.”

“Theatre loading docks. Anyway, I’m a great announcer!”

“Everypony was almost more interested in you than in the music,” Twilight said, smiling.

“They thought Sweetie was amazing,” said Spike defensively. “That tenor colt she likes was looking at her with eyes like *this*.” He batted his eyes dewily. “Talk about mushy!”

“You could have written out the Winter chant after the concert, you know.”

“No way, because then Trottingham asked me if I could deal with their Diamond Dogs, and then there were all my lessons with Razorfang, and then there was Sweet-Pea’s cute-ceañera, and then Indigo came to visit, and then there was repairing the dam, and then there was the Hydra! Again!” Spike finished with a flourish of his claws. “See? Busy!”

“Okay, okay, obviously a dragon in demand!” she said, laughing at his vehemence. “Do you think you’ll be able to find a second to write down that chant for me? This could be a very important study. Just think what it could do for dragon-equine relations!”

“I know, I get it,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “The more we find out about each other, yadda, yadda, yadda. Jeesh, Twi, you’ve told me enough times.”

“Spike...”

“Can I rest for a bit? Huffy’ll be here this afternoon, and I just got bitten by a Hydra.”

“It obviously hurt him more than it hurt you,” she pointed out.

He grinned. His teeth were now the size of a rolling pin, each one wickedly curved and sharp as a knife. He’d been so ashamed of them once. Now he was absurdly proud of them, and kept them as white as possible. “Yeah, you should see the other guy.”

She shook her head fondly. “Oh, Spike.” It was the same old, affectionate way she’d always said it. It never failed to make his heart leap in happiness.

He lowered his head, touching his snout to her mane lightly. “How are you doing with the Great and Powerful Motivational Speaker away again?”

“Um, okay,” she said, her face turning a dark magenta. “She’s in Fillydelphia at the moment. I hope she’s not too lonely.”

“That wasn’t the question,” he said, nudging her. Twilight cleared her throat.

“*I’m* not lonely,” she said, tipping her head back to peer up at him. “I’ve got you, and all my friends.”

“They’re a bit busy too,” he said.

“I know,” Twilight said with a roll of her eyes. “Fluttershy is so busy with little Applesed that she can’t find a moment long enough to see anypony, and Rarity’s spending half her time in Canterlot these days.”

He'd met the brand new daughter of Fluttershy and Macintosh only a few days before. The tiny foal was the colour of an apricot, with a silky wispy pink mane and tail. Her father's green eyes were giant in her sweet little face as she stared up at her huge draconic 'uncle' with no sign of fear, only unfocused, infant fascination. Both her parents had smiled, looking tired but proud. "Well, a newborn foal is a hoofful, they say," Spike said, scratching at his dented scales.

"Nowhere near as bad as a new-hatched dragon," Twilight said, poking his immense free paw. He pulled a face at her.

"Funny. Real funny. I think Rarity's home today. I saw her carriage this morning, anyway."

"Is she still seeing that pegasus, what was his name... Big Shot?"

Spike grinned slyly. "Nope."

"Spike," she said in a warning tone. "What have you done?"

"Me? Why would you say that?" he said, widening his eyes as far as they could go. She snorted.

"I know you. Spill."

"Weeeeell, Rarity told me that she broke it off with him, and I got a letter from Just yesterday, and I wrote back about this charity auction that I knew Rarity was going to be at, and I know he likes her, and he's nice and smart and handsome and cares about things," he said in a perfectly reasonable voice.

It made sense to him. Just often asked about Rarity, even though the activist went rather quiet in her presence. As Rarity was spending so much time in Canterlot at the moment promoting her celebrated new high-fashion line, 'Dragon Scales and Diamantes,' it had been foal's play to set up a situation in which they could meet. At the very least, Rarity would be glad of a friendly, honest face. She had complained to Spike about the Canterlot ponies being rather shallow and obsequious to her face, though her amicable breakup with Fancy Pants had been the favourite topic of covert gossip for months.

Twilight shook her head again, though a smile tried to creep over her stern face. "You have to stop meddling in your friends' love lives."

"Can't I want my friends to be happy?"

“Does Just know he’s being set up?” Twilight settled down in the straw, and craned her head back to look at him.

He snaked his head down towards her, and whispered, “Nah. That’s the beauty of it.”

She looked up at his ceiling with an expression of forbearance. “Celestia give me patience. Spike the matchmaker.”

“I’m just looking out for two of my friends.”

“Oh, I remember your ‘looking out’ for me,” she said dryly. “I remember you hovering over Trixie and looking as menacing as possible. I remember you scaring the living daylight out of her with your warnings. I remember you flying above us at night, covered in river mud to disguise your scales. I remember you whispering in her ear after we’d made the announcement to our friends, and her running into the bedroom and not coming out for half an hour. I remember...”

“Water under the bridge,” he said quickly.

She smirked.

“Anyway, I haven’t done it for ages,” he added.

“Last week is ages?” she said. He pursed his lips – an exercise that was becoming increasingly more difficult as his snout elongated further and further into its mature beak-like shape.

“It was only a *little* threat,” he said. “A teeny-tiny baby threat. Not even that. A warning. A warning-ling.”

“*Spike.*”

He harrumphed, and his voice was sulky as he said, “All right, I’ll apologise.”

“Thank you.” She leaned over in the neat, clean straw, her hooves hooking over one of his toes. “Good grief, it’s been three years, you should be used to the idea by now. It’s been a long time since the Ursa Minor. Anyway, I thought you liked her these days?”

“I do! She’s great! She’s absolutely the Nice and Generous Trixie now,” he said. “But... Twilight, it’s *you.*”

Her head thudded against his foot. “Spike, how many times... please try and refrain from the overprotective territorial big brother tactics. You’re intimidating enough without *trying*.”

He brightened. “You think I’m intimidating? *Intimidating*. Yeah, I can work with that... He-llooo Huffy, say, check out how awesomely intimidating I am today...”

She gave him a look that needed no translation, before pushing back up to her elbows. “So how big do you think Huffy is now?”

He growled. “I’ve *got* to catch up with her sometime,” he said. “Every time I think I’m getting there, she’s taller than me again!”

She covered a giggle with her hoof. “Now, Spike...”

“I *am* getting closer,” he said with an air of determination. “She was only a head taller than me when I last went to visit.” Then he slumped. “With my lousy luck, she’ll be a whole neck taller again.”

“Spike, she doesn’t care how tall you are,” Twilight said.

“But I wanna impress her, Twilight!”

“Oh, for goodness’ *sake*.” Twilight rubbed her closed eyes. “You’ve got a Hydra bite on your neck. You’ve fought off eighty Diamond Dogs. You cleared out all the Quarray Eels. You fought *Razorfang* when you were only half this size. She won’t hear a word against you, she flies over every month, and she snaps at Rarity almost constantly. I think it’s safe to say that she’s impressed.”

Spike shifted a little, and thought about that for a moment. Huffy had come a long way in the last five years. She’d rejoined Equestrian society fairly slowly, allowing herself enough time to adjust to being around so many ponies. She’d started off so shy and wary. Now, she actually invited ponies back to the Brumby Bushlands to see the beauty and strangeness of her home. Botanists, scientists, and adventure-seekers leapt at the chance. Huffy became their guide and protection through the wild and tangled forest. It was becoming the Done Thing in adventure-loving circles to spend a week in the Brumby with a dragoness. Scootaloo had gone twice. Trixie had her own personal little nook in Huffy’s sparkling cave. Spike had an oversized mug – made by Apple Bloom, out of an old barrel – on Huffy’s shelf reserved only for him.

They aged in the same huge fits and starts, of course. She was still long and willowy, while he was becoming far bulkier with a strong, deep chest. The swanlike curve of her neck increasingly made him feel as though more than fire lived in his throat.

Huffy didn't impress easily. She'd lived amongst dangerous creatures for fifteen years now, and would fight them like a tigress if she were threatened. She was a survivor. If Twilight said she was impressed, then perhaps she was... but still...

He looked back at his mirror, and fingered the dents in his scales thoughtfully. "Maybe if I had a moustache...?"

She let out a strangled scream.

He began laughing as she thumped his claws with her hoof. "You are such a terrible tease," she grumbled.

"Hey, I'm a nice guy, ask anypony," he said, still laughing. "Help, help! She's hitting me!"

"Oh, hush," she said, thumping his claws again; they both knew he couldn't feel it, even if she'd actually had the strength to hurt him. Finally she relaxed with a little sigh, her body slumping over his foot. "I miss Trixie."

Unlike the startlingly sudden hook-up of Rainbow Dash and Applejack, Twilight and Trixie had spent almost two years circling each other. Theirs had been a slow, cautious and tentative courtship. Trixie had had several mountains worth of issues to sort through, after all, and with all their similarities Twilight had been the best one to help her through them. They were both somewhat insecure, both magical beyond the norm and both guardian to a dragon, after all. Eventually Twilight realised that there was a rather scared and lonely pony underneath Trixie's showy exterior, and Trixie had learned to value the patience, gentleness and compassion that Twilight showed her.

Eventually Trixie had decided to use all that she had learned from her painful journey to help others, and had begun a series of talks around Equestria for ponies with emotional insecurity. Twilight was immensely proud of her, even though it kept them apart for weeks on end. They were a quiet, gentle and loving couple. Spike was happy for them – though he still hadn't worked out how to squash his knee-jerk 'protect Twilight *above all else*' instincts.

"Aw, Twilight," he said, leaning down and nuzzling her head once more. "It's okay. She'll be here soon." He straightened, and looked down at her more seriously. She looked a

little tired, and a lot lonely. It reminded him of the first days after he had moved out of the library, somehow.

He made a decision. "Come on, let's go see somepony," he said.

She looked up. "Who?"

"Well, Rainbow Dash is back at Sweet Apple Acres this weekend," he said. "I ran into her earlier. We could go see her and Applejack. She doesn't leave on tour for a few days yet."

"I thought you wanted to rest? Bitten by a Hydra and all?"

"Nah, let's go see them," he said, standing slowly to give her time to move away from his bulk. "It's only a Hydra bite. Besides, we might run into Pinkie. I owe her for collapsing her soufflé."

"Are she and Caramel...?"

Spike winked down at her. "I'm doing my best."

"Spike the matchmaker," she sighed again, and he laughed some more as they made their way to his door.

"I promised to look after you all, didn't I?"