

Chapter 8: Windows

Phoenix's house had been visited before. It was a large house, separate from the rest of the town, lying on the outskirts. A cold, uninviting house, the kind that foals suspect is haunted due to the reclusive occupant and the varying states of disrepair.

There was, however, nothing truly spooky about the house. Tall, with a closed gate, and perhaps bigger than a single stallion could possibly need, yes, but there were no lingering ghosts or curses or anything. Just big, forlorn, and slightly empty, save for its occupant, who was returning from an errand.

He didn't announce his presence – the bird could hear the front door opening. Phoenix entered his study and opened the birdcage.

As for Phoenix, there are some things you might have already gathered. He was a unicorn. He had a deep voice. He had a large house and a pet blackbird. And he was not the most pleasant pony to be around. No pony really liked him, which worked out well, as he didn't really like any pony himself.

First there was Constable Brownie. Always strutting around, acting like she's better than every pony else. A bit sanctimonious, really, with the "the rules are" and the like.

Then there was Raincloud. He suspected that she must have several journals filled with angst-ridden poetry or something. Or maybe she was too lazy to write poetry and just sat under rainclouds of her own making.

And that friend she was doing errands for – Kite. Was there anything to say about her at all, aside from her name? That was really the only descriptor that existed for her. She had absolutely no interests outside of her namesake, from what he could tell. Then she had that stupid grudge with the shopkeeper.

Gold Standard. My, was she vapid. He wondered why she and Kite didn't get along better – they had completely one-track minds, with Goldie not being interested in anything that wasn't related to money (more specifically, her *getting* money). Why she tolerated that idiot assistant of hers was a mystery – perhaps she hoped to capitalize on his stupidity, somehow.

Speaking of Ritardando, what an irritating moron, always prancing about grinning, under the mistaken impression that every pony loved him, when they didn't. Worst of all, he wouldn't shut up, even when he was stating the blatantly obvious. Well, not to worry about him – one bad "concert" and he'd give up and bother someone else.

Phoenix then got tired of thinking about ponies he didn't like. "Hey, pal," he said to the blackbird, who hopped out. "Sorry I'm late. Had to go a little out of town to get these..." he set a bag down on the table. "Iris petals. Maybe I should start growing them myself."

He shook his head. "Iris, how could there not be a demand for iris? Don't ponies at least eat them?"

The blackbird chirped. "Oh, you're probably right," Phoenix said, "I got them, after all. Next time I go out I'll see if I can uproot a few and plant them in the yard. Maybe if I can just grow my ingredients I won't need to leave the house." He looked out the window at the mountains near the town. "Wouldn't that be a nice thought..." he muttered.

Then, just as Phoenix was getting tired thinking of ponies that annoyed him, the doorbell rang.

The blackbird chirped inquisitively, and Phoenix groaned. Grumbling, he walked over to the door and opened it. It was Ritardando, standing there with saddlebags and a black kite on his back.

"Well?" Phoenix asked, "what do you want?"

"Well, uh, I know you were getting medicine, and you stopped, so I thought I'd bring it up here..." he said, fiddling with the saddlebags, "hold on..."

Phoenix rolled his eyes, and used his magic to just take the box of medicine out of the bag. Ritardando let out a startled yelp as the box nearly hit him in the face.

Phoenix tossed a few coins out into the yard with the intention of getting the earth pony to leave his front door, which he immediately shut. Phoenix stood at the door, listening, and after about twenty seconds, he opened the door to see Ritardando still standing there.

"What's your bird's name?" Ritardando asked.

"*What* are you *doing* here?" Phoenix asked.

"I'm your friend," Ritardando said (Phoenix groaned), "I've been kinda worried about you, Felix-"

"Phoenix."

"Phoenix."

"I assure you," Phoenix said, his patience running out, "I'm quite fine, and so is my bird," and with that, he emphatically slammed the door.

"Huh," Ritardando said, turning and walking away, making sure to pick up the coins.

Phoenix watched from the window of the study. Ritardando turned his head, shouting "Bye!"

Phoenix shook his head, opening the box. “Here you are, Singsing.”

Ritardando made straight for Kite’s house, where he promptly rang the doorbell. He enjoyed the doorbell’s chime, so he tried to whistle it. He wasn’t sure he got it right the first time, so he rang it again.

“I’m right here,” Kite said, behind him. Ritardando jumped.

“Sorry,” Ritardando said, “I like your doorbell. And I brought the kite.”

“I noticed,” Kite said, though not in the sarcastic tone that Raincloud would have, “ready to fly it?”

“Uh-huh.”

They walked out of the town, up a grassy hill.

“I like being outside the town. Seeing the countryside and all that,” Ritardando said, “so quiet you can’t hear anything but the wind.”

“That’s my favorite sound. You ready?”

“I think so...”

Kite took the kite off of Ritardando’s back and placed it on the ground, unrolling the string. “Okay, you hold this end of the string in your mouth, okay?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Okay, now just face that way... no, *that* way, Ritardando.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, backing up, ready to throw the kite, “now RUN!”

Ritardando took off, teeth clenched, and Kite threw the kite into the air. It sailed up, carried by the wind. “Okay now – slow down a little!” she called after him.

Ritardando slowed his run to a brisk trot. “Better!”

The wind became stronger, and the kite tugged on the string so hard it nearly came out of Ritardando’s teeth. Kite ran up to him, grabbing the string along with him and helping him to hold onto it. The burst of wind died down quickly enough, and they settled on top of a hill, the wind letting the kite lazily glide through the air.

“It’s a nice kite,” Ritardando said, the string wrapped around his hooves.

“Thanks,” said Kite, “I’m not sure black’s a good color for it...”

Ritardando looked at her, surprised.

“I didn’t mean anything by that,” she said hastily, “I mean, for a kite.”

“I like it.”

“Well, I guess that’s all that matters,” she said, “but I’m more used to colors like blue or red or purple.”

“That would make more sense...”

“But, I dunno,” she said, “I just think it fits you. I mean, for obvious reasons. It’s got your color and your cutie mark.”

“Yeah,” Ritardando said, nodding, “that works. Thanks for making it.”

He watched the kite fondly for a while before speaking again. “Have you ever wished you could fly?”

“What?” Kite asked, “Oh, uh, no. Not really. Not anymore. Used to, kinda.”

“Kinda?”

“Well,” Kite said, sighing, “my parents were pegasi, and...”

“Wait, what?” Ritardando asked, “That doesn’t make any sen-”

“I was adopted.”

“Oh,” Ritardando said. He felt very, very foolish. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said, “they were very good to me. They even moved out of their home in the clouds. I... honestly didn’t expect that. They didn’t have to, they could’ve just, well... not adopted me, but they did.”

“Sounds like they cared,” Ritardando said.

“They did,” she said, “I need to go visit them sometime. But that’s enough about me, what about your family? Where are you from?”

Ritardando shrugged. "I dunno," he said simply.

"What do you mean?" Kite asked.

"Uhh..." Ritardando said, "I... don't know."

"You mean you don't remember?"

"I guess not," Ritardando said, "I guess it just, well, never came up."

"But," Kite said, trying to figure it out, "how can you not know? Do you have amnesia?"

"What's that?" Ritardando asked.

"That's when you can't remember things," Kite said.

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense..." Ritardando said, mulling it over, "I dunno, maybe? I've just never really thought about it. Doesn't matter much. I mean, it's just not a thing that *happens* to me."

"Well, what *does* happen to you?" she asked.

Ritardando shrugged, "I go places, meet ponies, sing songs, and, well, I dunno. Though there was this one time..."

"Yeah?"

"Well, once, I was in this caravan, and they were all these merchant types," he began, "one of them is selling these sponges, and these are magic sponges that take in a lot more water than they normally would."

"What happened?"

"Well, the guy's really friendly, gives me one of them..."

"Did it work?"

"Yup. Drained an entire bathtub, but you couldn't tell by looking at it. Well, thing is, I forget and I leave it on a seat, and this other pony walks in and sits down on it..."

Kite burst into laughter. "Was he mad?"

"Uh-huh," Ritardando said, "everypony else found it very funny."

Kite looked back up at the sky. "Yeah, I don't really want to fly," she said, returning to

the earlier topic, "I just like to watch."

"I know what you mean."

"I mean, I'd be afraid of falling. With kites, you don't have to worry about that," she said, "they're like windows, kinda."

"Windows?"

"Yeah," Kite said, "just little patches of color that you watch. You don't really do all that much with them, you just watch them. It's simple."

"You make them look complicated," Ritardando said, "I mean, with all your different... kinds of them."

"Well, music seems complicated to me," Kite said.

"Really?" Ritardando said, surprised.

"Yeah," she said, "the way you talk about it sometimes, I can't keep up with it."

"Huh," Ritardando said, "I guess maybe. Depends on the kind of music. Some of it's complicated, some of it isn't."

"Can you think of one that isn't complicated?"

"Hmm..." Ritardando thought. "I know, howabout this..." he cleared his throat.

*Yes, the candidate's a dodger, yes, a well-known dodger,
Yes, the candidate's a dodger, yes, and I'm a dodger too.
He'll meet you and treat you and ask you for your vote,
But look out, boys, he's a-dodgin' for your vote.*

*Yes we're all a-dodgin',
A-Dodgin', dodgin', dodgin',
Yes, we're all a-dodgin' out the way through the world.*

*Yes, the lover is a dodger, yes, a well-known dodger,
Yes, the lover is a dodger, yes, and I'm a dodger, too.
He'll hug you and kiss you and call you his bride,
But look out, girls, he's a-telling you a lie.*

*Yes we're all a-dodgin',
A-Dodgin', dodgin', dodgin',
Yes, we're all a-dodgin' out the way through the world."*

“Seems kinda... cynical,” Kite said.

“Huh?”

“I mean, they’re all dishonest ponies and they’re just trying to scam you out of something.”

“Oh.” Ritardando said. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“But it was a nice song,” Kite said, encouraging him, “you have a pretty voice.”

“Thanks,” Ritardando said, smiling, “I’ve been hoping to put on a concert. But it’s not going well. There’s all this... paperwork.”

“Paperwork?” Kite asked, “what for?”

“Well, I need permission, but every time I fill it out, there’s something wrong – like, I filled out something wrong, or I took it to the wrong desk, and then when it’s in order, they’re closed, and... and...” his voice cracked.

“That’s a shame,” Kite said, “you know, I don’t really know why you need to do that. Seems a-”

“You’re right...” Ritardando said, “what time is it?”

Kite looked at the sky, “well, from where the sun is, I’d say it’s around two-thirty.”

“I’ve gotta get back to the shop,” Ritardando said, rolling the string back in. “Thanks for this,” he said, “it was really nice.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“Bye,” Ritardando said, walking off. Then he stopped and turned around, “why don’t you ever come into the shop?” he asked, “you always have Raincloud buy stuff for you.”

“Well, I...”

“You don’t like her, do you?” Ritardando asked, “why?”

“Well... Kite laughed, a little embarrassed, “I tried to open a shop once. A kite shop.”

“You did?” Ritardando asked, “how’d that go?”

“It didn’t,” she said, “Gold Standard saw and decided she wanted to compete. And I

couldn't."

"That stinks."

"It did," Kite said, "but... maybe it's better that way. Keeping a shop sounds busy. I might not have had enough time to make the kites, or to even fly them. Still, it'd be nice if she sold a better variety of kites."

Ritardando thought about that. "You're good at ideas," he said, walking off. Kite watched him, wondering what exactly he meant.