

A Constellation's Dilemma
A Companion Short Story to Reign of Magic
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Pegasus, equine of the sky, bearer of the Luck Star, whose hooves had crossed skies older than most realms...was stuck.

As had been his custom since the air turned cool in certain lands, Pegasus had left his spot in the heavens to investigate a certain pumpkin patch. It pleased him to inspect the bright orange squash which reminded him of growing stars. The scent of the dirt and growing things was pleasant, and the emerald green of the vines was not a color he often saw in his realm.

But.

Today the green vines did *not* please him, for they had wrapped around his legs, and despite his legendary strength, he hadn't been able to yank free.

He lowered his muzzle and sniffed the vines that had crept around his hooves and legs. The faint metallic whiff of gold filled his nostrils. He eyed the vines, finally spotting the faint, glittering lines that spiraled through each vine like a vein.

Gold.

He snapped his head back and snorted, outrage and fury making his stars burn brighter. Already knowing the outcome, Pegasus again tried to charge free. The vines held, making him stumble. He would have pitched sideways and fallen if he hadn't maneuvered his wings to counterbalance.

The roaring fires of his powers still burned, but it was separated from him, as if someone had cut them from him.

Because they had. A mortal must have noticed his frequent trips to the pumpkin patch and had fashioned this trap for him—a very *stupid* mortal who clearly didn't understand his or her limits.

As a constellation, Pegasus had great powers, near immortality, and could make and destroy nations. His only weakness...was gold.

It had the ability to cut him off from the powers his stars gave him, and it could capture him—he couldn't break free of anything veined, lined, or forged with real gold.

It could not, however, control him.

It could not keep him from bucking a mortal off and cracking their spine. It could not keep him from plotting their death.

Who, after all, was so proud they thought they could own the stars? An idiot, that's who.

He tried to paw his front left hoof, but the gold-threaded vines held fast.

The patch grew unnaturally dark as his rage built, and he flapped his massive black wings. The heavens rumbled, but, cut off from magic as he was, he could do nothing but protest.

Pegasus was the horse of the heavens. He was not meant to be contained, and he would *not* bow to some arrogant mortal who thought he could be captured!

He sneered at the sky and tossed his neck, the situation rankling him more by the moment.

Begrudgingly, Pegasus was forced to admit that he was perhaps also angry because Ursa the bear had sent whispers through the galaxies that someone was trying to trap the constellations.

It was a warning he had ignored. With good reason—Ursa was the most dim-witted constellation Pegasus knew. A trap made for the bear would *never* be clever enough to hold him.

When Pegasus freed himself, he was going to be the laughingstock of the stars for the next century—and that was only if he was able to swiftly kill whatever individual had planted this trap for him. If the mortal was smarter than he estimated, he may be stuck in service for decades.

Pegasus flicked his flaming tail and was able to pull against the gold-veined vines just enough to kick a small, unripe pumpkin.

He snorted at the next closest pumpkin—a hulking monstrosity that was as large as he was. The enormous squash was not unusually sized, for this was a giant’s pumpkin patch—and *no*, it was not a giant who had done this. (Giants made Ursa the bear look brilliant.)

Pegasus pinned his ears at the pumpkin and considered trumpeting his anger.

The vines slowly climbed higher up his legs, curling so high they started to slither across his belly, reminding him of the embarrassing and frustrating severity of his situation.

There was the hum of magic, and Pegasus turned his head toward it.

A door of light bloomed at the edge of the pumpkin patch. It started as a rectangle of pure golden light, until blue magic swaddled it, solidifying the edges into weather-worn stone veined with precious metals and gems.

The inside of the magic door blazed for a few moments longer, crackling like flames, before the blue magic turned into flames and ate the light away, granting Pegasus a look inside, into a realm of red and gold.

A mortal fled through the magic portal—a human boy by the looks of it. The hemline of his tunic was singed, the laces of his boots were on fire, and he reeked of burnt hair.

A dragon’s roar echoed from the open portal, and the human hastily flicked his wrist, dismantling the portal just before a blast of fire escaped through it.

The boy heaved a sigh in relief and leaned against a giant pumpkin. “Master Clovicus is going to box my ears for that jump.” He wiped sweat and ash from his forehead, then ruefully inspected his tunic. “That’s if he doesn’t kill me for ruining my clothes.”

On closer inspection, Pegasus could see that the scorched human was not actually a child—nor was he a man. He was in that gawky, gangly stage—all legs and limbs and very little control or sense.

And yet, he could walk through realms, judging by his powers. That sort of magic was rare and potent. And luck had bequeathed it to a sneezing man-child who kept wiping his nose off on his sleeve.

Figures.

Pegasus danced in place—or attempted to—when he felt one of the vines slide its way up his chest. He tossed his head and snorted as he tried to rip free—to no avail.

His snort must have captured the runt’s attention, for the human twisted so his side leaned against his pumpkin perch, and he squinted in Pegasus’ direction.

“Are you stuck, poor boy?” The human pushed off the pumpkin and started in Pegasus’ direction.

Pegasus tucked his chin, then bugled—a deep sound that resonated in his chest like the beat of a thousand drums. The flames of his mane and tail flared as stars on his coat burned brighter.

The human stopped so fast he tripped over his own feet and fell with a gasp. “Y-y-you’re a constellation.” Still on the ground, he scrambled back in the direction from which he’d come, stopping only when he rammed into a giant pumpkin.

He stared at Pegasus with bulging eyes and gulped. “You must be...Pegasus?”

If he were free, he would have kicked a pumpkin at the simpleton’s guess.

There was only *one* equine of the night sky. Anyone who couldn’t recognize him immediately, as far as Pegasus was concerned, was unlearned.

Pegasus tested another vine as he sneered at a pumpkin—which, as an outlet for his anger, had been upgraded from something of interest into a sworn enemy.

“I...I could get you out.”

Pegasus swung his head around to stare at the perhaps-not-quite-a-simpleton.

The human rocked to his feet, his legs positioned so he could flee in an instant. “I mean...you’re stuck, aren’t you?”

Pegasus cocked his head.

“I can use my magic and cut you free of the vines. I’m an enchanter.”

Pegasus sucked air in, making his chest puff and his nostrils turn red.

“It’s true!” the mortal rushed to say. “Or almost—I’m taking my test soon!”

Pegasus considered the gangly boy and twitched his nose.

He could stay here and kill whoever had planted this trap, but it was possible that might take time if they were prepared enough—as much as it irked Pegasus to admit it.

It would mean he owed the snot-nosed brat—as a constellation he could never accept help even if it was freely offered. There was *always* a price.

But it had taken the human several moments to recognize him, which meant there was a very good chance he didn’t know much about Pegasus. Besides, he called himself an enchanter. There was only one realm that commonly used that term, and constellations had not frequented it since days of yore—which meant he was even less likely to be learned in some of Pegasus’ more...*potent* powers.

Pegasus huffed, for it wasn’t much of a choice.

He folded his wings and dampened his power so when he spoke directly into the boy’s mind, it wasn’t quite so deafening. *YOUR TERMS?*

Pegasus’ hopes of ignorance were realized when the boy scrunched up his face in perplexation. “Terms?” the mortal said. “What do you mean?”

WHAT DO YOU WANT IN RETURN?

“Oh, um... nothing?” He sheepishly scratched the back of his neck. “Master Clovicus is forever telling me that with my teleportation magic, I have a duty to help those in all the realms since I’m in a unique position. I don’t think it’s quite fair because he also endlessly lectures me that I should stay in *our* realm, but when I reminded him of that last year, he turned my hair purple for a month.”

Pegasus swished his tail in frustration. It was possible the boy was an idiot *now*, but in the future, he might realize just whom he had saved and demand something then. No, it was better to settle this now. *YOUR TERMS*, he repeated.

The boy squatted down, frowning in thought. “So, you want an exchange? Must be something like craft magic.”

Pegasus almost bulged his eyes that a human would compare him with his powers and domain to a mere *human* with magic, but the boy didn’t notice.

“Hmm, okay, I’ve got it. Sometimes I can’t use my portals—if it’s too dangerous, it just won’t work. Then I have to travel like everyone else, which I can say is *dead slow*. How about, if it’s an emergency, I can call you for a ride?”

Pegasus gnashed his teeth. This brat expected him to carry him through the skies?! Forget it. He’d rather wait and kill whoever set the trap.

The boy, seemingly unaware of his anger, squinted at him. “I mean, I assume you can gallop really fast?”

Pegasus froze, his ears pricking forward despite himself. Gallop? Did...did he mean he wanted Pegasus to carry him over land? Like a horse?

Frankly, Pegasus wasn’t sure if that was insulting or not, but it was much better than flying the brat. He wouldn’t fly anyone ever again; he’d vowed that long ago.

YOU WISH TO BE CARRIED ACROSS LAND, OF YOUR REALM?

“Oh, yikes, I hadn’t thought of outside my realm, but you bet. I really *shouldn’t* be realm-hopping. The rules of my magic are a bit different outside my realm, so I can only randomly hop realms and hope I don’t land somewhere dangerous. So, yeah, staying in my realm sounds good!” The mortal smiled with the confidence of a human used to being liked.

It made Pegasus want to bite him out of principle.

But it wasn’t a terrible trade. A human life—even one of magic—was a flickering candle to a constellation like Pegasus. Being ridden like a horse didn’t sound appealing, but it was better than letting the rest of the constellations hear of it. Besides, no one important visited the realm of enchanters and mages—actually, it might be interesting to occasionally tour it.

And, if the boy turned out to be a real brat, he could “accidentally” kill him.

Pegasus exhaled deeply. *I ACCEPT.*

The boy hopped to his feet and approached Pegasus at a trot, pulling a dagger from his ash-streaked belt. “Great. I’ll get you out in a jiffy. Do you mind telling me where we are?”

YES.

“Oh, right, then. I’m Evariste, by the way.”

I DON’T CARE.

“Nice to meet you, too!”

Evariste did grow up to learn more about Pegasus—or rather he most likely researched him—after the first time he got a ride to a destination that should have taken almost a full day in less than an hour.

Thankfully, the snot-nosed mortal turned into a decent-enough adult, for he rarely ever summoned Pegasus, and usually only did so in emergencies. (Or what passed for an emergency to mere humans.) And his realm was interesting enough—though Pegasus no longer frequented pumpkin patches, even when they were in season.

Yes, Pegasus would never call himself *fond* of the Lord Enchanter, but he didn’t ponder killing him anymore. But Evariste managed to surprise him when Evariste summoned him just outside the elves’ Alabaster Forest.

“Pegasus!” Evariste called with a smile that was too eager. “It is so good to see you again. I’d like a ride to my home in Wistful Thicket in Torrens, please.”

Pegasus arched his neck and studied the enchanter, trying to discern what had him so happy.

Eventually he decided it wasn’t worth the effort. *FINE.*

“Wonderful, thank you.” Evariste bowed his head with proper respect. “I have another passenger I’d like you to carry—she’s my apprentice, actually. Please allow me to introduce you. Angelique!”

Pegasus blinked at the news—Evariste had never called him before while toting along a traveling companion—but the mystery of the enchanter’s good mood was solved when said traveling companion stepped out from behind a tree.

He supposed she was probably beautiful for a human, and though she smiled sunnily like her teacher, Pegasus could see there was a haunted look in her eyes, and there was something about her smile...

Evariste grinned at him. “Pegasus, this is my apprentice, Angelique.” He looked down at her, his smile softening considerably. “Angelique, make your greetings.”

“Good day to you, Pegasus.” The apprentice spoke in a husky but soothing tone that didn’t falter as she met his gaze.

Curious, Pegasus snorted and tossed his head.

She curtsied but didn’t shrink back in fear, nor did her expression change.

That’s what it was—her expression was pleasant enough, but it was clearly practiced. Not many could hold his gaze without flinching. That she had, said much about her—potentially.

He extended his neck, maneuvering his muzzle close enough to her face to get a good whiff.

There. She didn’t smell false, even though she had a flavor of power to her. But that meant she’d been forced to endure a lot to learn how to keep up such cheerful stoicism.

Pegasus glanced at Evariste—who had an idiotic look of affection on his face.

Ah.

Pegasus had lived long enough to recognize the stirrings of love. It wasn’t anywhere near to flowering right now, but given it was Evariste-the-simpleton and a female mage of power that was perhaps greater than Evariste’s, and it was only a matter of time.

Which meant Evariste had probably summoned Pegasus for the girl’s sake.

When Evariste looked at him and renewed their eye contact with a tangible undercurrent of joy, Pegasus’ suspicions were confirmed.

Very well. An extra person didn’t matter to Pegasus. But Evariste looked like he was ready to settle in for a chat, which *did* matter. So, Pegasus turned his rear to the enchanter without speaking and moved across the clearing.

“How perfect,” Evariste said in his annoyingly-bright voice. “Pegasus approves!”

“*That* is what his approval looks like?” the apprentice said, clearly stunned.

“Oh, yes,” Evariste nodded. “If he hadn’t liked you, he probably would have broken one of your limbs.”

Pegasus supposed Evariste might be a stupid twit for the possibility of love, but at least he had grown more intelligent as he aged—which was more than could be said for the majority of mortals.

But if the Lord Enchanter thought Pegasus was going to prance sedately across the lands like a good pony, he was sadly mistaken.

Besides, it would be good to see just how much courage the student had. Yes, Torrens was no small distance from the elves’ forest, but Pegasus would make it a *short* trip.

Pegasus flexed his wings in the soothing silence of the sky realm. It was mostly dark, except for the soft glow of neighboring stars and the glittering dust of galaxies.

He settled his legs—or rather, the stars that made up *him* moved into proper alignment, for in his home, he didn't need to confine himself to the body most realms required—and flicked his tail, sending an asteroid off on a careening path.

Then, he heard it.

“Pegasus! It is I—”

Ah, Evariste. He would—

“Enchantress-in-Training Angelique, student of Lord Enchanter Evariste of the Fire Gates.”

Pegasus paused in surprised. *Angelique?* That was Evariste's apprentice, wasn't it? Why was she calling?

“I summon you from the skies to carry me across the lands. Come!”

Pegasus considered not answering. He owed the apprentice nothing. But the apprentice—in their limited meetings—had never struck him as a fool, and it seemed unlikely she would call on a whim.

Very well. He'd answer. It didn't mean he would help, but he wished to see what she wanted.

He pawed a hoof, igniting his powers and making his stars blaze. Once he had gathered all of his constellation close, he stretched out his wings and leaped into Evariste's realm, settling into a corporal form during the shift.

He emerged in a blue sky and spotted the apprentice on the ground, surrounded by a crowd of people. He shed the feathers of his wings as he dropped, but he did not go so far as to soften the crash that shook the ground when his hooves touched the dusty road.

His power crackled, eating up the dirt so he made a small crater when he fully landed, his stars burning the ground.

A glance at the apprentice confirmed she looked pale but grimly determined. So, for the showmanship of it, Pegasus reared up and trumpeted loudly. (It greatly satisfied him the way the mortals rapidly backed up and gaped at him in awe and fear.)

The apprentice spoke with another mortal and awkwardly held a saddlebag before she fully turned her attention to him.

Smugly, Pegasus pawed at the ground, creating a thunder-crack.

The apprentice visibly swallowed but cautiously approached him. “I know I'm not Lord Enchanter Evariste.” Her voice was grim and resigned—what happened to the cheerful act she usually put on? “But I'm desperate enough that I'll try to make you yield as you do for him. Now will you test me, or shall we fly?”

It took Pegasus a moment to realize she had essentially challenged him. Foolish, stupid mortal.

He lunged at her, his powers making his stars flare.

The student thrust her arm out and shouted a spell.

Pegasus froze when he heard the rolling words of magic.

Similarly, the student clamped her mouth shut, cutting off the spell before speaking the final syllable that would set it into motion.

Did...did she just nearly cast a spell that would summon *squirrels*?

Confused, Pegasus danced backwards.

She was Evariste's apprentice. She was capable of far more than attacking squirrels. But why, then, did she challenge him?

Pegasus didn't like being puzzled, so he flicked his flaming tail in irritation and stretched his neck out, trying to work through the student's thoughts.

The student fumbled with the pack, flicking it open as she held it out. "It's for Roland." She showed the motionless black-and-white cat tucked inside.

It took Pegasus a few moments to place the feline. He'd met him when he dropped off Evariste and the apprentice on occasion. Roland was a mouthy cat capable of magic and another sign of Evariste's infatuation with the girl.

But whenever Pegasus saw the apprentice with the big-mouthed cat, the light in her eyes turned brighter. The animal was important to her, that much he knew.

He huffed and looked away from Evariste's hopeful apprentice.

It was official: he was growing soft in his old age...or perhaps turning senile. Grumbling in his chest, Pegasus lowered his front-half down, making it easier for the apprentice to slip on his back.

If he had known he was going to end up serving as a courier for not just Evariste, but his student as well, Pegasus would have said no out of spite the day the mortal offered to save him.

Because this was intolerable. Obviously. Completely.

She was crying again.

Seasons had passed—*years* had passed since Pegasus helped Angelique cross into Mullberg so she could cast healing spells on Roland. She had eventually explained to him about Evariste missing and the manner in which he had been taken.

Initially Pegasus carted her across the continent more to scope out the state of the place than for any real reason—though in the privacy of the sky, he would perhaps admit he was marginally concerned for Evariste.

But somewhere along the journey, Angelique's manners had transformed from frightened reverence to something warmer and more familiar.

She kissed his muzzle, patted his neck, and leaned against him in moments of weakness.

Really, it wasn't a way a constellation should ever be treated...but Pegasus *liked* it.

And the person that made him enjoy it was crying, again.

Pegasus considered rousing her. She was sleeping, tucked against his side, her cheek pressed against his shoulder, making it so her tears trickled down into his coat. But waking her wouldn't take her sadness away.

All he could do was stay there for her. And he did. He spent most of his time in this realm now—and it seemed like the rare occasions he *did* leave, Angelique would get herself in more trouble, which made him *more* inclined to stay.

The stars in Pegasus' coat stirred.

If that war mage hadn't used Evariste's magic to escape...he would have ended him in the most painful way possible. How *dare* he attack Angelique, and—

Angelique shifted in her sleep, mashing her face in his coat.

Pegasus had to twist his head and neck awkwardly to gently press his muzzle against her hunched shoulder.

He hadn't spoken much to her. He didn't really *want to* either. Not because she wasn't worthy, but because his voice couldn't disguise his power or near limitless existence.

If Angelique knew exactly what he was capable of, he suspected the nights of her sleeping splayed across his back, snoring loud enough to rouse nearby wildlife, would be over.

Pegasus swiveled his ears, finding the thought distasteful.

No, he'd hold back. Maybe, after enough days of treating him like a pet, Angelique wouldn't retreat from him even if she did learn of his powers. Surely a decade or two would be enough...right?

The thought made Pegasus pin his ears, ill at ease.

He wasn't certain he had two decades before she found out. Things were growing more dangerous. And while Pegasus wasn't going to extend himself on behalf of others—he couldn't really, for if he used too much power, he could collapse the continent—he would certainly use it to protect Angelique. And find Evariste, too.

But he had a suspicion that, in the future, much of the battle against the enemy that held Evariste would rest on Angelique.

He didn't like it, but he didn't know what he could do to defy it when his powers were, frankly, too *much* for this particular realm. Not to mention it still was a little taboo for constellations and other beings of great magic to frequent this realm with all their power.

So he would stay.

He would let Angelique cry on his shoulder, and he would carry her wherever she wished. And whenever she stretched out her hand for him, he would be there.

And when they finally retrieved Evariste, Pegasus was going to give him a good kick for making Angelique cry so much, rescuer or not!

The End