

The **Queen** of
Spotland

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by

Hannah T. Petryk
Anna & Ian Burnett

illustrated by Vivian Mineker


The Queen
of
Scotland

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by

Hannah T. Petryk

Anna & Ian Burnett

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To my Ukrainian grandmother Hannah P. Petryk, who was an amazing storyteller, a talented folk singer and actress, and who shared her faith, love for kind books, wisdom, and good sense of humor with her children and grandchildren.

- Hannah T. Petryk

To our parents, friends, coaches, teachers, and everyone who has been there for us in times both good and bad, with gratitude for your love and kindness, and with prayers for peace and freedom.

- Anna & Ian Burnett

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CONTENTS

Vocabulary of Ukrainian Words	i
A Very Special Gift	1
1 Once Upon a Time	9
2 Puppyhood Days	14
3 Graduation Day	20
4 Sir Pawssible	29
5 A Tiny Disappointment	35
6 Top Secret	43
7 Doubts	51
8 The Accident	65
9 Society Hill	70
10 Neighbors	77
11 Rushed Delivery	84
12 No More Trouble	94

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UKRAINIAN WORDS AND PHRASES USED IN THE BOOK

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babúsyá – бабуся – *grandma*
podarúnok – ПОДАРУНОК – *a gift, present*
chas – час – *time*
pódorozh – ПОДОРОЖ – *trip, journey*
tak – так – *yes*
moyi harbuzyáta – мої гарбузята – *my pumpkins*
mámo – МАМО – *mom*
táto – ТАТО – *dad*
sáme tak – саме так – *exactly*
rozhézhnyky – ПОЖЕЖНИКИ – *firefighters*
chytáty – ЧИТАТИ – *to read*
tsikávo – ЦІКАВО – *interesting*
Na dobránich! – На ДОБРАНИЧ! – *Good night!*
Rizdvó – РІЗДВО – *Christmas*

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A VERY SPECIAL GIFT

It was the third month of quarantine at school, and it had been raining cats and dogs outside for the third day in a row. Sofia and Yanko had to stay inside again. They had finished their homework and had played all their board games by now. All their favorite stories had been read and reread. Sofia's plush toys looked bored and sleepy around the small table; the tea party was over. All Lego sets had been put together, and Yanko was fixing the last piece on his model of the London Eye's wheel. On top of that, they were grounded: no TV, no video games, and no phones were allowed for two more days, all because last week Sofia and Yanko were caught playing online when they were supposed to be working on a science fair project. Breaking rules and cheating always has its consequences, and now it felt like the weather was punishing them, too

“I wish it could rain cats and dogs for real,” sighed Sofia as she pressed her nose against the cold glass of the window. Yanko joined his sister. They looked at the muddy puddles in the front yard.

“Or at least for once, just for a minute, I wish it could rain dogs,

only dogs. I would pick the cutest puppy of them all!”

Yanko nodded:

“Actually, a little pup parachuting down and landing on our balcony would be really nice!”

They both giggled.

“On another side, what would we do with so many puppies?”

“That’s easy! We would keep the cutest one, then find good homes for all of them. Everyone wants a pup,” Sofia confidently declared as she turned away from the window.

Her brother decided it would be easier to not question this course of action. After all, such a situation would never happen in real life, so there was no need to argue against Sofia’s imagination. Meanwhile, Yanko noticed that an unexpected visitor had arrived at their driveway:

“Hey, look, a taxi has just brought someone! I can’t see who it is because of the huge umbrella. Wait, it looks like...”

The twins rushed downstairs to the cheerful chimes of the doorbell. A moment later, Mom opened the front door, and Grandma entered the house:

“Surprise!”

“*Babúsyá!* We thought you were flying in next week!” exclaimed the twins in joy as they ran to hug her. Mom helped Grandma to take her rain coat off and rolled in the suitcase:

“*Máámo,* why didn’t you call? I could have picked you up at the airport!”

“Well, there would be no surprise then, would there?” Grandma smiled, as the kids were already leading her, both holding her left hand at the same time, to their room:

“Let me show you my latest Lego model!”

“I want you to see my new tea set, *Babusya,* it is so lovely!”

She was holding something in her right hand behind her back, the tiny mischievous wrinkles around her eyes smiling as she spoke

with an exaggerated seriousness in her soft Ukrainian accent:

“Did I hear someone dreaming about getting a dog again?”

“How do you know, *Babusya*?” Awestruck Sofia wondered if Grandma could read her mind.

“Aren’t you my grandkids? Didn’t you ask Santa for a puppy last Christmas? Wishes like this one do not just melt away like snow in spring, do they?”

“Not in this family, *Babusya*!” Yanko concurred.

“That’s right, not in this family,” Grandma agreed in response.

She brought forward a large package that was neatly wrapped in white paper with black polka dots and handed it to the kids:

“I really wanted to give this to you two months ago, for your birthday. I fully realize that turning ten years old is a particularly important milestone and deserves a special *podarúnok*.”

“*Podarúnok*?” repeated Yanko.

“Gift,” clarified Sofia proudly, nodding in approval.

Grandma continued:

“But the present wasn’t quite ready yet. And with this type of a *very special gift*, one cannot rush. It takes some patience to make it right. It is a unique *podarúnok* indeed, and I am so glad to admit that my grandkids have earned it!” Her face was glowing with a mix of excitement and love.

“What is it, *Babusya*?” Sofia examined the box carefully.

“Is it a new Lego set? A special edition?” Yanko tried to figure out why there was a gold seal with a symbol of a crown on the package.

“I hope it’s not a video game. I forgot to mention they are still grounded,” Mom came in with a fruit tray, set it on the table, and rushed back to the kitchen.

“Grounded?” Grandma raised her eyebrows and continued with an exaggeratedly serious tone, “Well then, it’s a good thing it has nothing to do with any phones, gadgets, or computers. Go ahead, let’s open it!”



Grandma smiled again and handed the package to Yanko. He carefully peeled the wrapping paper off.

“It’s a book!” Sofia exclaimed. “A really nice one! Is it about a dog?”

“*The Queen of Spotland...*” Yanko read quickly. “Spotland? Is

there such a kingdom? Was there one in Ukraine centuries ago? Can we look it up online?”

Grandma slowly sat down on the sofa, leaned back, and looked at the clock:

“So many questions! I seriously doubt you will find good answers to them on the Internet. There are quite a few beautiful old castles in Ukraine, but no, there was no Spotland there. I do think this story is all out of place, however, and it is not just about one or two pups. Is it three o’clock already? Perfect *chas* for a nice new story! Let’s take turns reading?”

“*Chas* means time?” inquired Sofia.

“*Chas* means time, and time means *chas*,” smiled Grandma in response. She often used Ukrainian words in her sentences. It was a game she played with the kids, encouraging them to guess the meanings of the words she wanted them to learn.

“Well, I still have more work to do. We will celebrate grandma’s arrival when Dad is home from work. Meanwhile, snacks, anyone?” Mom returned with a tray of tea and cookies, and the kids helped her set it on the small table:

“Sofia, Yanko, have fun, but do let *Babusya* rest after her long flight. I put your suitcase in the guest suite, mom. Kids, remember - no computers, TV, or video games, please! Bye! Love you all!”

“No computers, TV, or video games, yes, ma’am! We love you, too!” Sofia and Yanko hugged Mom, then ran back to the couch and cozied up next to their *Babusya*.

“We will be fine here,” waved Grandma. “Who needs those computer games when we have a new book to read!”

“It’s the perfect *chas* for a nice new story!” Yanko announced as formally as he could, as his sister smiled.

Story time with *Babusya* was always the best! Raindrops were still tapping on the windowpane, yet when Grandma opened the book, everything in the room lit up as if, for a second, sunshine magically

found its way through the dark clouds. Sofia sighed in awe. Glimpsing at her brother and Grandma, she saw that both of them were equally amazed by the mysterious glow coming from the title page. Then, holding her breath, she whispered the first sentence, as if being careful to not spook the enchanted moment away:

“Once upon a time, there lived the Queen of Spotland...”

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1

ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time, there lived the Queen of Spotland. She was a very special queen of a very special kingdom. The famous Madame Moose, the “coach dog” of the first American president, was one of the Queen’s ancestors. Her portrait still hangs in the royal hall of the Spotland Palace, reminding everyone of the importance of representing the Kingdom of Spotland with honor. And, just as when Madame Moose first headed for George Washington’s Mt. Vernon, or when later the charming Perro was about to enter the charismatic Picasso’s studio, till this day, before any pup is permitted to leave the Kingdom to join his or her new family, every potential owner is required to go through the very lengthy process of the royal approval of such adoption. (If you think that was a lengthy sentence, the adoption process in Spotland is much longer for many important reasons.) Being in charge of this process is one of the most essential duties of the Queen herself. On one side, she has to ensure that her subjects serve well as companions. On another side, she must guarantee they enjoy the privilege of being treated fairly and, ultimately, are loved and well cared for by their new families, just as they would be cared for if living in Spotland.



You see, to be a companion is also considered a privilege in the Kingdom of Spotland. Not every pup can succeed in completing the True Companionship and Service training, which is mandatory if your goal is to get on the roster. This is one of the reasons why the Queen can entrust her subjects only to those families who

prove to be nice matches and have good reputations.

As you probably have figured out by now, the Queen and the citizens of Spotland are Dalmatians. They are a unique breed of dogs, a truly fascinating one: they are extremely smart, have excellent sense of humor, are great companions, guardians, rescuers, are very athletic, and are always full of energy. And might I even mention that they are absolutely charming? The halls of the Spotland Palace are decorated with portraits of the Kingdom's most distinguished citizens who served as fire dogs, coach dogs, mascots, actors, artists, emotional support companions, ambassadors, and explorers.

The Queen's Palace stands on top of a large hill surrounded by the magnificent Royal Park which is everyone's favorite place. In summer, the grass in the park is so green and lush, it feels like silk. There is a large running track and plenty of water fountains. The track is a popular site in the park. Dalmatians are natural born runners and love to run and jog a lot. There are tall trees for shady spots to enjoy on hot sunny days. There are open areas to play in the sun when the weather is cool. There is a waterpark, as well as a swimming pool, a soccer field, and many small shops offering all kinds of healthy and delicious treats. An exercise area to practice jumps and play catch is splendid. In winter, an outdoor ice-skating rink is set up. The park is also the place where you can meet Her Majesty daily.

The Queen of Spotland *Rebecca Dalimattas the Third* walks through the park from a quarter past two till three o'clock sharp every afternoon on weekdays (when all pups are done with their school for the day), and from noon till one-thirty on weekends. The Clock Tower in the east side of the park plays lovely music during these times. Her Majesty is followed by one of her advisors and a secretary. She talks to her guests, checks the park for cleanliness, and greets the vendors. Her secretary and advisors are there to take notes from citizens and to ensure everyone's requests

and suggestions are recorded for further review and consideration by the Royal Council of Ministers. The best part of the royal walk through the park is the tradition when a young pup, who has done especially well at school or achieved an important milestone that day, gets to meet Her Majesty and is given a flower from the royal garden as a recognition reward by the Queen herself.

But these are not the only times the citizens get to see Her Majesty. Her Round Office is located at the very top of the Royal Palace Tower and sits in the center of it, overlooking the park. When the Queen takes a break from reviewing the applications for adoption, meeting with visitors, or discussing the state of the Kingdom's affairs with her ministers, she often comes to one of the twelve windows of the tower to wave and smile to those who are enjoying their time in the park.

What an idyllic place it is! And why wouldn't it be? After all, when everyone does the right thing every day, from the youngest pup to Her Majesty the Queen, there is nothing to worry about indeed. Don't you agree?

* * *

"*Babusya*, Spotland sounds like such a delightful place! Wouldn't it be fun to go there for a vacation one day?" So far so good, but she took aside and imagined herself strolling through the Royal Park, playing soccer with dalmatians, and meeting with the Queen of Spotland.

"Oh, definitely! I would not miss an opportunity to go there with both of you, my pumpkins. Meanwhile, I am simply happy to be able to visit you here. It was such a long *pódorozh*."

"Across the ocean, yes? I love when you come to visit, *Babusya*," Yanko picked up the book to look at the next chapter. "Would you stay with us at least until Thanksgiving, please?"

"And for Christmas, my pumpkins! This time, I can enjoy a long

visit with my precious grandkids.”

“Really? For Ukrainian Christmas and Old New Year, too? Please, please, please!” Yanko hugged his *Babusya*.

Grandma smiled and nodded:

“*Tak*, all through January, *moyí harbusyáta!*”

“Best news ever!” Sofia jumped from joy.

“The rule remains though: first, you do well in school, then we have fun afterwards, every day.” Grandma pretended to sound strict again.

“You know, we always follow this rule, *Babusya!* Is it really true that George Washington had a dalmatian pup?” Sofia inquired.

“*Tak.*”

“And Picasso, too?”

“And Picasso, too.”

“Why did George Washington call his pup Madame Moose?”

“I have no clue. I think she already had this name before she got to Mt. Vernon.”

“Maybe she ran like a moose?”

“It’s my turn now!” Yanko turned the page to the next chapter and continued reading: “*Puppyhood Days. Such a wonderful kingdom it is indeed!..*”

Sample only.
2

PUPPYHOOD DAYS

Such a wonderful kingdom it is indeed! No wonder so many applications for adoption are mailed to the Queen's Palace from all over the world. Those who are looking for a fine Dalmatian know that the best ones come from Spotland. Because, you see, it really matters if pups were brought up in a happy environment: it makes it so much easier for them to share their happiness with others for the rest of their lives. Everyone in the Kingdom of Spotland lives by this rule.

This is why when Barkopher, three of his brothers, and two of his sisters were born, a beautiful melody was sung by the bells of the East Tower, and an announcement was made by the Minister of Childhood to welcome the new pups by name. Later that night, their tired but joyful mom and dad watched glowing and floating lanterns spell their pups' names in the sky above Spotland Palace: Bella, Beatrice, Barky, Scout, Chester, and Barkopher. The next day, special name tags, birth certificates, and first collars with the royal emblem were delivered to their home along with treats and exclusive greeting cards signed by the Queen. This was a standard and yet still a lovely gift. Every mom in Spotland kept her pups' first name tags, first royal collars, and the greeting cards from Her

Majesty as keepsakes.

Since Dalmatians are born spotlessly white, and it takes a few weeks for their spots to appear and gain color, all first collars come in rich royal red. Later, when pups turn eight weeks old and receive their invitations from the Minister of Education to attend their first day of training, they are given their second collars at the end of the first day of kindergarten. These collars come in black, blue, lemon, or brown, to match the color of every pup's nose and spots.

Barkopher received a chocolate collar. He was the only one among his siblings who had brown spots, which are also often called liver spots. Liver-spotted Dalmatians are not very rare, but it just happened that Barkopher was the only pup in Spotland for the last five years who had brown and not black spots. There were also no lemon or blue-spotted dals born in the kingdom for two decades now. Because of this, Barkopher sometimes felt a little bit different among his peers and really liked it when mom called him "my sweetie pie." It made him feel not only unique but also loved. His friends nicknamed him Choco, and he didn't mind it, as no one in Spotland even knew that things like teasing, or mean name calling, or bullying could exist. Besides, Choco was a nickname that fit Barkopher perfectly, it was also conveniently short (and probably sweet, but chocolate was not allowed in the kingdom because it can cause serious illness in dogs.) His family loved him very much, and Barkopher knew it.

"Choco, let's go play at the new soccer field!" his friends called him one afternoon. That was the day when Barkopher learned to play his favorite sport! You see, Dalmatians are not only natural born runners, but are also great at soccer. The legend, commonly told to the pups of Spotland by their elders, claims that the soccer ball was given its black and white colors for a reason. A long time ago, when the dog gods saw Dalmatian pups playing ball for the



first time, they really enjoyed watching it and decided to create the game of soccer. At first, the ball was bright red, so that everyone could easily spot it in the grass. The pups were so good at the game; they had a lot of fun playing soccer! In fact, they ended up being a bit too loud when cheering for each other. One day, their

cheerful barks interrupted the sleep of one old goddess, and she got really upset. She decided to challenge the pups to stop them from playing loud games forever. The deal was that the Dalmatians would play against the team of gods and, if the pups lost the game, they would never be allowed to play soccer again. It goes without saying, most gods did not intend to play hard, but instead were planning to use their superpowers and trickery to win. The good news was that not all gods found this deal fair. One goddess loved a good laugh and wanted to continue watching the Dalmatians play soccer, so she decided to help. On the day of the match, the kind goddess painted the soccer ball white with black spots. Now it looked like a ball with Dalmatian spots, and it was hard to tell a pup and the ball apart when everyone was running fast. The proud gods had trouble tracking the ball on the field and lost the game.

Moms and dads of Spotland love watching their pups practicing. Once a week, cheering crowds gather for the Kingdom's Youth Soccer Championship. The Queen attends the event, too. The winners are celebrated for an entire week until the next championship, so you get to wear the medal on your collar for whole seven days! The truth is, since the championships are held so often, every team gets a chance to practice more and win. You can say that in Spotland there are definitely no losers in soccer.

When Barkopher got to wear his first shiny gold medal, he felt he was glowing, too. That week, his sister Beatrice wore a silver medal, and Barky, Scout, and Bella wore bronze. Everyone knew that all it took to succeed was practice, dedication, patience, some time, and a sprinkle of luck. They all knew that next week would bring new chances to do their best.

Another popular sport in Spotland is less physically active but not less rewarding. Chester, the youngest one in their litter, was a master of the game and really loved chess. For a long time, Barkopher was convinced that Chester's name was misspelled on

his name tag, and that it was supposed to be written as *Chesster*. Even their dad agreed with the suggestion. After all, his great grandpa earned the title of the chess champion of Spotland for ten times in a row and was knighted by the Queen for this remarkable achievement. Now, everyone in the family was following Chester's chess successes and comparing him to his celebrated ancestor.

Dalmatians, in general, are an immensely proud (but not arrogant) breed. Every family in Spotland takes pride in the good education and good manners their pups are taught daily, both at home and at school. Mrs. Growly, the school principal, spends her days observing the classes to ensure that all her students' academic needs are met. Every day, when school is over, she visits one or two families to discuss her thoughts on each student's progress with their parents. Because she is also a good listener, all parents in Spotland are happy to welcome her inside for a cup of milk. They know that Mrs. Growly is a wise and caring principal. The graduation cards she signs include her comments on each pup's talents and strengths, as well as advice about their possible career paths. She rarely misses anything in her observations and usually offers thoughtful and much appreciated advice.

Once you are a school graduate, your puppyhood is over, and the time comes to decide which apprenticeship to choose if your goal is to contribute to the prosperity of the Kingdom. There is also another path: if you want to continue your education and go through the True Companionship and Service Course for Future Ambassadors, you can choose one of the more adventurous careers as a companion, a fire dog, or an actor representing the Kingdom of Spotland abroad. Every Spotlandian understands how big of an honor it is to be an ambassador for the Kingdom. Only ten percent of the trainees graduate from this intensive two-week course. Then their adoption process begins.

“*Babusya*, if I were a pup from Spotland, I don’t think I would ever want to leave my family and the Kingdom,” said Sofia.

“I would want to travel and see the world, as long as I knew I could come back home any time I missed my family,” suggested Yanko.

“There is no right or wrong answer here, your heart will tell you when the time comes. Everyone chooses their own path, and sometimes the path chooses you,” replied Grandma.

“Is this why you went back to your hometown?” Sofia hugged her *Babusya*.

“I think so. And now my heart is divided between the two countries,” smiled Grandma, “One half is left in the small town where I grew up, and another one is here, with you, *moyi harbuszyata*. Well, it’s time for a walk now, isn’t it?”

“But it’s raining cats and dogs outside, let’s continue reading instead,” Yanko gave the open book to *Babusya*.

“I don’t see any cats and certainly no dogs there anymore. The rain is over, although it is still cloudy outside. All we need is our umbrellas, boots, and raincoats, just in case. Isn’t it good to get some fresh air finally? We will read more tomorrow. Besides, do you think the Queen of Spotland would cancel her daily walk in the park because of a few rain drops?” Grandma left the room, and Sofia and Yanko raced downstairs to look for their umbrellas and boots.

By the time they returned home after the walk, it was already getting dark outside, and Mom and Dad had the dinner ready. Grandma told about her trip and the news from Ukraine. The kids knew that five years ago due to the invasion, Grandma had to move from the city of Donetsk, where she used to live, back to the small town where she grew up. Then, everyone thought it would be a temporary move, and that peace would come to

Donetsk soon. But years have passed, and more Ukrainian towns got occupied. There was no good news from Ukraine, but Sofia and Yanko got sent upstairs to get ready to go to bed before they could hear it. The kids were glad that Grandma was here with them in America now, that she was safe, and they knew that adults would keep talking about the war late into the night.

The twins imagined the occupation to be a scary monster that slowly destroyed everything in its path, and that people were fleeing from the places this monster was taking over, while brave Ukrainian soldiers were fighting to stop it from advancing. It was good to know that this monster could never invade the Kingdom of Spotland, and that the Queen and her Dalmatians were safe in a faraway land, free of wars and cruelty.

The next morning, Sofia and Yanko woke up earlier than everyone else in the house. It was a nice Saturday morning, two weeks before Thanksgiving. They had a big project planned: last year, *Babusya* taught the twins how easy it was to make Christmas ornaments from salt and flour and decorate them with traditional Ukrainian patterns. This year, Sofia and Yanko already had an extensive list of classmates and neighbors who had pre-ordered the ornaments. The money from these sales would be donated to help refugees from the occupied territories to resettle in Ukraine. The kids had a lot of ornaments to make.

By the time Dad walked into the kitchen, the island, the dining table, and every counter was covered in beautiful sparkling stars and shimmering snowflakes, cute bunnies and birds, Christmas trees, gingerbread men, stockings, candy canes, you name it – every Christmas ornament shape possible was there. Flour and salt were also covering the twins' faces and occasionally the floor. Dad looked completely lost for a minute in this kitchen turned winter wonderland.

“Good morning, *Táto!*” Sofia interrupted the silence and smiled mischievously.

“The ornaments will be completely dry and ready in two hours, Dad. We will need another hour to clean up after that,” reported Yanko.

“Got it... Good morning! I guess I will go get us something for breakfast then, since cooking is out of question for now. Don’t wake up Mom and Grandmáya!”

“Good idea, Dad! You are the best!”

An hour later, everyone was awake. *Babusya* and Mom peeked in the kitchen to admire the drying ornaments while Dad was setting out the breakfast in the den. By noon, everyone was busy bagging and labeling the ornament orders for delivery. All donations had to be gathered that day, so that on Sunday morning the family could take them to the Ukrainian church that supported the resettlement program.

“I am so tired but so glad we did it!” Sofia smiled in her bed that night.

“Me too,” Yanko agreed with his sister. “*Babusya*, how many people will this help?”

“What you did will help many, even if the funds you have raised will be enough to help only a few people for now.”

“I don’t understand how it would help many if our help will be enough only for a few people?” Yanko sat up in his bed.

“Even if only a few people will get help from what you have raised today, many more people will become inspired by your actions. They will think that if these two young children cared to find a way to help, then I can do it, too, and maybe even more,” explained Grandma.

“I see. Is that how it really works, *Babusya?*”

“*Sáme tak, moyi harbuzyata.*”

“We still have a few ornaments left. We should gift them to the

kids at church tomorrow,” suggested Yanko.

“That’s a great idea,” agreed Grandma.

Sofia picked up the book from her nightstand and handed it to Grandma:

“Could we, please, read the next chapter now?”

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3

GRADUATION DAY

“Wake up, boys!” Beatrice ran into her brothers’ room.

“You don’t want to be late for graduation day!” her sister Bella pulled the blankets away from Choco and Chester.

“Just five more minutes... I am moving my knight to B5 and... check...” Chester mumbled and turned on his left side.

“Mate!” Beatrice hopped on top of him and took away Chester’s pillow.

“Wake up, sleepyheads! Breakfast is ready,” Bella was now pulling the blanket off Scout and Barky. Scout was still running in his sleep, all his four paws moving fast, as if he were playing soccer.

“Woof-woof... goal!” Scout rolled around on his back and stretched all his fours in the air, bumping into Barky.

“I smell some sunny side up eggs!” Choco opened his eyes.

“And chicken cutlets!” Barky yawned and stretched, too.

“Good! Mom is waiting for everyone in the kitchen,” announced Bella.

“Good morning, everyone!” added Beatrice, who was now leaving the room with her sister, their tails wagging.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and the smell of

delicious cutlets reached every corner of the house. Dad was already done with his breakfast and was reading his morning news, while Mom and all six pups were chatting at the table:

“I bet Mr. Ruffos will recommend me for the kingdom’s soccer team today,” Scout confidently proclaimed, chewing his second cutlet.

“He hinted he would do that when I saw him last week. He is really impressed with how fast you are,” said Mom.

“You didn’t give up when your team scored third in the first championship. You are a good sport, Scout!” Dad nodded.

“I hope to become a teacher,” Bella put her two front paws together. “I love helping younger pups with their homework.”

“Everyone knows you will be a teacher, Bella! No one doubts it a bit,” Beatrice cheered, nudging her sister’s nose.

“Which apprenticeship do you have in mind, Beatrice?” Chester asked, fixing his glasses.

“I haven’t decided yet... A firedog career sounds pretty fun, but so does an acting school. I think I will apply for the True Companionship and Service Course for Future Ambassadors. And if that doesn’t work out, then I will probably choose to become a chef.”

Mom dropped the empty bowl she was carrying to the sink. Dad rushed to pick it up. Both parents returned to the table with a surprised look on their faces.

“I thought you wanted to be an artist...” Dad addressed Beatrice and looked at Mom at the same time.

“You have so many talents, Beatrice. You can be anything you want, really. I just... was not ready to hear this today. A firedog? Isn’t that a bit dangerous?” Mom hugged Beatrice.

“Well, I thought I wanted to be an artist, too, but last week we had a special guest speaking about her career as an ambassador, and I really liked her story. Her life is so full of adventures! She travels a lot. She began as a firefighter dog, then she was an actor, and now she is a companion for a chef’s family. Can you imagine

how fun it is? And I promise to visit you often, too. You won't have a chance to miss me too much. I promise!"

"That sounds very cool, but I plan to become a gardener and take care of our parks and the Queen's garden," chimed in Barky.

"What have you decided, Choco? Will you continue with soccer?" Mom asked.

Choco stood up and walked next to Beatrice. Mom and Dad looked at each other again, then at Beatrice, then at Choco.

"I support Beatrice's choice. I don't care about acting, but becoming a Kingdom's ambassador sounds like a good career for me, too. I know I won't fail the training."

"Well, these are all good choices, kids. We are so proud of all of you," summed up Dad as he hugged Mom.

There was a brief moment of silence, then Bella wagged her tail, walked to Chester, and asked him softly with a sly smile on her face:

"And what would you like to be, Chester?"

Everyone laughed at Bella's joke. There was no doubt in anyone's, including Chester's, mind about his choice.

"Alright, sure, who else would become a chess master here?" Chester fixed his glasses again and picked up his backpack. The parents and all pups encircled Chester in a big hug.

It was time to go to the graduation ceremony. The happy family left the house and rushed to the school. There, at the courtyard, they met other families looking forward to the ceremony. Mr. Ruffos, the Assistant Principal, and Mrs. Growly were walking between the rows greeting the students and parents. Everyone was expecting the Queen's visit. The clock chimed nine times, and the trumpets announced the Queen's arrival. Mr. Ruffos gallantly opened the door of the Queen's carriage and stepped aside, welcoming Her Majesty to the graduation ceremony. Everyone bowed when the Queen of Scotland walked the isle to the center



of the courtyard. Mr. Ruffos, Mrs. Growly, and ministers followed behind her.

“Good morning, our dear graduates and families! I am so happy to see you all today,” the Queen addressed the audience. “I would like to congratulate everyone on such an important day for

Spotland. These young Spotlandians are about to graduate from our wonderful school and choose their future occupations. Thank you for supporting their dreams and aspirations to always be and always do their best. As your Queen, I am very proud and honored to be here today. I also have an important announcement to make. This year, more graduates will be invited to join our prestigious True Companionship and Service Course for Future Ambassadors. This is an excellent opportunity to serve our Kingdom. I am delighted we were able to make this happen, so that more of our ambassadors could join the program.”

Everyone clapped and cheered. Mrs. Growly invited Choco to come to the center of the courtyard:

“The first honor of choosing his path goes to the best student of this year’s class, Barkopher (Choco) Muddypaws! Please, announce your choice, Choco.”

Choco bowed to the Queen and to Mrs. Growly, glanced at his mom and dad, then faced the audience:

“I announce my choice to enter the True Companionship and Service Course. I would like to become an ambassador.”

The audience applauded as the Queen tied a purple ribbon around Choco’s neck and Mr. Ruffos presented his certificate of graduation.

“The next honor of choosing her path goes to Spotty Coals!”

Mr. Ruffos and Mrs. Growly continued to call the names of the students based on their class rankings. Beatrice came up fifth. She also announced her choice to join the ambassador program. Choco was happy his sister would be in the same training with him. The Muddypaws family was cheering for everyone. Chester came up seventh and was recognized by the Queen with special honors. Bella was called tenth, and Mrs. Growly commented that she was proud to have her as a new colleague. Barky and Scout were called to the stage together as they shared the rank of being seventeenth in their class. The new soon-to-be gardener and

soccer player were greeted by Her Majesty, too. When all graduates received their diplomas, the Queen of Spotland asked for more attention:

“As I have mentioned earlier, our Ambassador Program has grown amazingly fast, and we have enrolled twenty-five new students in it today. Thank you all for your brave choices! This is one of the most prestigious paths in our Kingdom and I would like to introduce the individual who made this expansion possible. Please, let us welcome our new minister of External Affairs – Mister Henry Van Pawssible!”

The crowd applauded again. Mr. Pawssible stepped forward and grinned proudly. His monocle glistened in the sun. His brand-new tie and well-trimmed whiskers looked as confident, poised, and smug as their owner. This honor to be introduced by the Queen meant a lot to him, and, in his own opinion, was definitely well deserved, perhaps, even a bit overdue...

* * *

“I am not sure about this Mr. Pawssible,” Sofia yawned when Grandma finished reading the chapter. “Is he going to be trouble, *Babusya*? Everything has been so nice about Spotland so far...”

“What makes you think he is going to be trouble?”

“I don’t know... Put something feels a bit bit about him, for sure.”

“One hundred percent,” Yanko agreed. “I think he is a bit *too much* into himself, *too* proud, maybe?”

“Perhaps, you are right... I really don’t know. After all, life would be really boring without any trouble in it, wouldn’t it? Let’s see if we find out more about Mr. Pawssible tomorrow. Good night!”

Grandma kissed the kids on their foreheads and left the room.

“Of course, he will be big trouble!” Yanko turned off the night light.

* * *

Sample only.

4

SIR PAWSSIBLE

Henry Van Pawssible began his career two years ago as a marketing manager for a large warehouse. Within this short period of time, he rose to the rank of Minister of External Affairs. His fast career growth was undoubtedly supported by his creativity and keen interest in computer technologies and coding. Mr. Pawssible took pride in being the expert in online sales and marketing. He knew how to advertise and successfully sell many different products and understood the potential of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, too. One day, however, he suggested that his skills would be better suited in the Department of External Affairs, specifically for advertising the Kingdom's adoption process online. This idea inspired him to apply for a position within the adoptions department.

Word had spread very quickly about his talents, and he was promoted weekly. The Queen was pleased that, due to Mr. Pawssible's efforts, more prospective families were interested in visiting Spotland and applying for the adoption of royal ambassadors. Now, Henry Van Pawssible had another great idea in his mind - his goal was to reform the Department of External Affairs completely to make it more efficient, cut costs, and at least

triple the number of adoptions. He intended to achieve this by convincing the Queen that the current process is outdated and that the adoptions should be handled directly via the Internet through social media. This way there would be no need for applicants to travel to the Kingdom, rather they could be momentarily vetted online. Mr. Pawssible believed that more applicants would be interested in adopting a pup from Spotland if they could do it virtually instead of wasting their time and money on visiting the Kingdom.

Henry was now in the royal chamber, and his confidence was shattered by the Queen's opposition to the idea of streamlining and modernizing the adoption process by turning it into an online business. He did not expect that Her Majesty would be so opposed to his brilliant progressive thoughts and plans!

"Mr. Pawssible, I am not confident this new idea of yours is feasible. Our pups are not toys," the Queen said abruptly as she walked towards the window facing the park. "You are very young now but soon you will understand. I have no further comments." This meant the Queen of Spotland did not approve the innovation initiatives Henry was hoping to implement. It was time for him to leave the Tower and accept the petty looks of his employees.

But Henry Van Pawssible did not want to look like a failure. He had a different plan brewing in his head. Instead of obeying the Queen's decision, he decided to approach the Minister of Health immediately after leaving the Queen's Tower:

"The Queen has been working too hard lately. I just saw Her Majesty in her office. I am concerned she hasn't had enough rest. It would be wise to suggest a nice vacation for her, Sir."

Dr. Pill, the Minister of Health, could not agree more. He admired the Queen's devotion to her duties but knew very well that she had not taken a vacation for several years now. Dr. Pill



also respected Mr. Pawssible and trusted his judgement.

“You are absolutely right, Henry. I will talk to Her Majesty in an hour. I will insist she takes a nice vacation. The Kingdom’s affairs are all in great order. She should be able to afford a few weeks away.”

Mr. Pawssible was confident that the Queen of Spotland would listen to Dr. Pill's opinion and almost certainly agree with his recommendations. The rest of the plan would be easy to execute. Henry took a lunch break and called the Minister of Health exactly an hour and a half later. He liked what he heard from Dr. Pill:

“Oh, this is wonderful! The Queen is going on vacation? Splendid!”

Mr. Pawssible rushed back to his department and announced to all his employees that the meeting with the Queen went quite well and that she approved his modernization plan. A few of Mr. Pawssible's clerks looked puzzled but did not doubt the authenticity of the news from their boss. They realized, however, that a lot of changes to the adoption process were soon to be made and that the outcome could be unpredictable. There was a lot of work to do, and much more time was needed to ensure that the new procedures would not lead to disaster. Yet, no one questioned Henry Van Pawssible's integrity, and he felt certain that when Her Majesty returns from her vacation and sees the successes of his changes, as well as how much money they would add to the Kingdom's budget, she will definitely praise him and, possibly, even knight him!

You see, Mr. Pawssible's dream was to become Sir Pawssible, and he thought the shortest path to knighthood would be by impressing the Queen. Henry rushed towards his next success. Can we blame him for being a bit ambitious, a bit immature, and, perhaps, a bit vain? Most of us have dreams we would love to achieve. Henry was just a bit more in a hurry to accomplish his goals than most of us. After all, he had only one month to get his new plan going: the Queen was leaving Spotland for a thirty-day vacation the following morning.

* * *

“Yanko, Yanko! Wake up! I saw the strangest dream about Spotland!” Sofia rushed to wake her brother.

“I saw a dream about the Queen and Mr. Pawssible,” Yanko said as he opened his eyes.

“And Mr. Pawssible was in the Queen’s office?” Sofia asked hastily.

“Yes, and she did not approve his plan!” Yanko raised his eyebrows.

“But Henry Van Pawssible went to the Minister of Health?!”

“And he lied to his employees that the Queen liked his plan!”

“How could we see the same dream, Yanko?”

At this moment, Mom entered the room.

“Rise and shine! Breakfast is ready. We are waiting for you downstairs... What happened?” She noticed that the kids looked perplexed.

“Something really strange happened last night, Mom...” Yanko said slowly.

“Yanko and I saw the same dream. Exactly the same! It was about Mr. Pawssible!” Sofia added quickly.

“Well, that is strange indeed, because your *Bibiyu* was just telling me about her dream about the same guy.”

On the way to the church, the twins and Grandma couldn’t stop discussing all details of their last night’s dreams.

“I knew he would be trouble!” Sofia whispered exiting the car when they finally arrived.

“Because of his vanity?” smiled Grandma.

“*Sáme tak*,” the girl beamed back.

“One hundred percent,” approved Yanko.

The discussion continued on the way home.

“But why did the Queen not explain the reasons Henry’s plan was not acceptable? Don’t you think he would listen to her then?” insisted Yanko.

“Well, he decided to cheat and lie already,” Sofia reminded. “So, he would not accept her explanations, and she, most likely, did not have much time in her schedule.”

“I would find the time to explain my decision though. Perhaps, he would understand her reasoning,” continued countering Yanko.

“I see you can’t wait to hear what happens next. Let’s read the fifth chapter after a walk in the park,” Grandma proposed. “By the way, what took you two so long after the service today?”

“Well, speaking of times, *Babusya*, will you be available next Saturday for a... let’s say, a small group crafts class?” asked Sofia, clasping her hands as if she was begging for a huge favor.

“We gave away the last ornaments at church today, but then, guess what happened!” Yanko lit up with excitement.

“Everyone loved them, *Babusya*! And every kid at church wants to learn how to make them now!” Sofia added glowing from joy.

“And they want to use them to raise more money for refugees in Ukraine!”

Grandma smiled. “I see. I thought this would happen. Yet why should I be the one instructing your friends? You made these ornaments by yourselves yesterday. And to tell you the truth, they are perfect.”

“But you are the one who taught us how to make them, *Babusya*,” continued Sofia.

“And we will be making them at church, so your presence as a responsible adult is a requirement,” Yanko threw in as one final unbeatable argument.

“Understood. So, you have already volunteered me for this event. And how many children will be there?” Grandma surrendered.

“Twelve!” the twins answered in unison.

“Well, in that case I can only agree to this if I can find two volunteers to assist me with the class,” Grandma said in her pretending-to-be-serious tone.

“I’m in!” Sofia hugged her in response.

“Me, too,” joined Yanko.

“Father Volodymyr will bring everything we will need, too: salt, flour, ribbons... He wrote down the whole list today,” Yanko mentioned proudly.

“And everyone will bring their favorite cookie cutters, too,” added Sofia. “And we have been practicing “Carol of the Bells” in Ukrainian for a month now with the church choir!”

“You mean *Shchedryk*?” clarified Grandma.

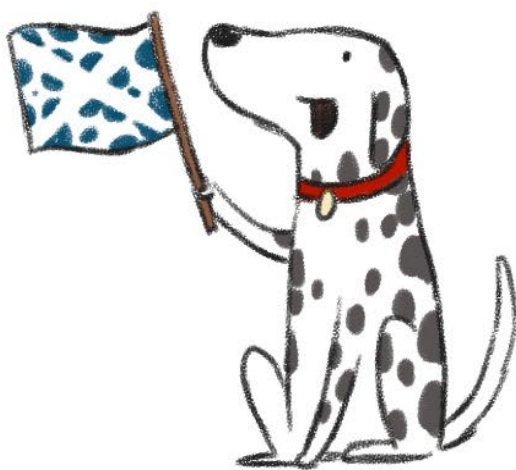
“*Same tak!*” confirmed Yanko.

* * *



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