

Long Distance

By Ezn



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Chapter One

“Rise and shine, everypony! You’re listening to K-FILY on a bright, sunny day in the great city of Fill-ey-delphia! The weather teams have scheduled a downpour this evening, so enjoy that sun while you can, fillies and colts!”

White Noise rubbed his still-closed eyes with his hooves as he slowly lifted himself out of bed. He’d been up late the previous night, and it felt as if he hadn’t had any sleep at all. He had half a mind to switch the alarm clock off and go back to sleep, but knew that wouldn’t be the most responsible of actions. He had an example to set.

His horn glowed brightly as he put the kettle on for some coffee. One advantage to living in such a small apartment was that everything was in the telekinetic range of your average unicorn. Another advantage was the lack of walls – White Noise had some friends who loved to try lifting things on the opposite side of walls, but he himself liked to be able to see what he was doing.

Magic wasn’t White’s main thing after all – his speech-bubble-shaped cutie mark could attest to that. When it first appeared, his parents had been frightened he’d grow up to be a comic book artist, but White had known instantly that his talent was communication. Not saying things himself, that is, but figuring out easier ways for ponies to talk to each other under more circumstances.

White poured himself some coffee as he looked over the reports from his mail service – Dragonfire Delivery. He’d been too busy to read them the previous night, but that was fine, because business seemed to be doing wonderfully. Sales of bottled dragonfire were through the roof, and his dragons were coming to more towns and cities throughout Equestria by the day.

Finished with his drink, White Noise checked out his light blue mane and white coat in the mirror, decided they were presentable enough, and trotted out of his apartment, his mind already turning back to the problem that he’d wrestled with long into the previous night.

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Sky Wave had already been up for ages when the mellifluous tones of K-FILY announcer Chats travelled through the air and into her radio. Celestia was in the middle of raising the sun, way off in Canterlot, and Sky sat on a cloud to watch as the great big fireball rose over the mountains and turned them from black to orange to green.

She had got up before the sun to practice her flying routine against a backdrop of the pitch black night. For the past hour, Sky Wave had silently glided, looped around and dove in her graceful, majestic way. Some pegasi were all about speed, but she loved the feeling of control she had when flying at slower speeds, and the way her flow carried her through the air from one move to another.

The sun was a little late this morning, which pleased Sky Wave. There had been a call to standardise the rising and setting of the sun, but Princess Celestia, in her wisdom, saw no reason not to vary the times for the good of her subjects. Cold winter days were shortened, and warm summer days lengthened. On a more specific note, the Grand Galloping Gala had happened the previous day, so Celestia gave her subjects a little time to sleep in.

Sky Wave picked up her radio in her mouth and opened her wings to fly off as the sun asserted its position in the sky. After performing her old routine at the Grand Galloping *Fillydelphia Party* Gala, she’d managed to work out a good chunk of a new routine this morning, and was pleased with her progress.

Some ponies thought Sky’s practice of only performing routines once completely crazy, but she was committed to entertaining ponies in new and exciting ways every time she performed. The only constants between performances were her light pink coat and deep crimson mane – and she’d even toyed with the idea of dying *them* between performances.

Her cutie mark was a red ribbon with three loops of varying sizes. She often imagined it floating free on the wind, contorting and changing as it moved from one updraft to another, just as she did.

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Sibwashie was jarred awake by the announcer pony’s Filly accent. He’d been meaning to find something more in tune with his tastes to listen to, but he hadn’t yet found the time. Being a Zebrican zebra in Fillydelphia, Equestria meant that he had a lot to learn.

Sibwashie switched off the radio as the announcer was in the middle of some speech about the previous night’s Grand Galloping Gala. He preferred the radio’s songs to its news – at least in song, ponies were polite enough to talk in rhymes.

“I miss my home more than I can bear,
But I’m learning more here than over there,” Sibwashie said to himself in a slow, deliberate tone.

Making up an Equestrian-language couplet every morning had been a great way to learn this strange new language. It was harder to find good rhymes than in his native tongue, but their pursuit had greatly expanded Sibwashie’s vocabulary. He’d spent many nights pouring over his prized Equestrian language rhyming dictionary.

Sibwashie reminded himself that rhyming was not an Equestrian custom. In Zebrica, only close friends and family would talk to each other in prose, so hearing it everywhere made Sibwashie feel a little strange. But he would have to get used to it, if he wanted to succeed in his lifelong dream.

Sibwashie wanted to be a Zebrican ambassador to Equestria. Throughout his life, he had borne witness to interracial misunderstandings and fear. Ponies and zebras would get off on the wrong hoof with each other because their different customs had different ways of being polite, and often neither side would admit the merit of the other side’s customs.

Looking out the window, the zebra noticed that the sunrise was almost over. Taking that as a good reason to get a start on his day, Sibwashie slid into his brightly-coloured saddlebags (adorned with intricate designs mouth-drawn in traditional Zebrican style by an artist friend of his back home) and headed out.

White Noise telekinetically flipped the “Sorry, We’re Closed” sign around so it said “Yay! We’re Open” instead. This would be the third day of operation for Dragonfire Delivery’s Fillydelphia outlet – the second one (out of two) in Equestria.

The store was small and sparsely furnished, but its simplicity and cleanliness gave it a pleasant style all the same. White Noise moved into place behind a wooden counter that extended across the shop’s width, separating its customers from the shelves behind White Noise that carried his wares.

The shelves were adorned with cylindrical jars with neat little labels with place names on them – “Canterlot”, “Manehattan”, and “Hoofington”, to name the most popular ones. What was really eye-catching about the jars, though, was that each one flickered with green light – they all contained that special type of dragonfire used for sending messages across vast distances. Unlike real fire, the green flames burnt eternally without fuel, and would actually *extinguish* once given a sample of fuel, however small. White Noise had considered marketing them for their perpetual light-giving ability on top of their primary function, but nopony liked the sickly green hue they cast upon dark surroundings.

No, Dragonfire Delivery had stayed true to its original purpose, concocted by White Noise while studying at Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. The young company had done an admirable job of bringing the convenience and speed of the school’s internal mail-by-dragonfire system to the common ponyfolk.

“Good morning, White,” said a cheery voice. “How are you feeling today?”

“Not terrible, thanks,” answered White Noise. “You sound quite happy today though, Turquoise.”

“I try to be happy every day, you know that!”

White Noise smiled. Although he hadn’t known her for very long, he found his Fillydelphia-branch assistant to be a very likeable dragon. She reminded him of Smooth Scales, his oldest dragon friend (currently managing the Canterlot branch); only she was perhaps a little less mischievous and prank-happy than that devilish creature.

“You’ll be happy to know that sales are rocketing up. Our new partnership with the Equestrian Post Office was a fantastic idea, if I do say so myself.”

“Yes Turq, you did good with that idea. I’m glad we’re reaching more ponies!” White Noise replied enthusiastically, the good news wiping some of the sleep out of his eyes. “Dragonfire Delivery is going to change Equestria, I promise you.”

“I wouldn’t be working here otherwise, sir. And speaking of the post office, here’s our liaison now.”

Turquoise’s words were punctuated by the entrance of a pink pegasus wearing an EqPO baseball cap on her head and a set of tan saddlebags over her back. She smiled awkwardly through gritted teeth, which gripped a clipboard.

“Hello Sky,” White Noise greeted. “How are you feeling today?”

“Tired, but still just a little psyched from my performance last night,” Sky replied, placing her clipboard on the floor.

“Ah yes, congrats on that. You were great up there! I was only able to hang around a short while, but I liked what I saw.”

“Thanks, I worked really hard on that performance,” Sky Wave replied, blushing almost imperceptibly.

“Anyway, I guess I’d better pick up the goods. I’ve got the post office’s order written down on my clipboard.”

White Noise levitated the clipboard up to his face and then busied himself levitating various jars off shelves (parallel levitation, now that was a skill worth knowing!). The post office would be taking almost all of his Canterlot dragonfire today, probably in anticipation of all the letters that would be sent to-and-fro regarding the previous night's Gala. White Noise hoped he would have enough left for his own, private clients.

The jars landed softly in Sky Wave's magically wide-open saddlebags, making them bulge quite significantly, and putting a visible amount of strain on the poor pegasus.

"That looks very heavy, Sky. Do you maybe want to take two trips?" Turq asked.

"Nah, I can handle it." Sky replied, smiling bravely. "A good performer must be graceful *and* strong. Also resilient. Besides, I've carried heavier weights – I'm a mailpony!"

White Noise chuckled softly at this statement. "I'm not sure where the trend of mailing other ponies large gifts like pianos came from, but I guess it must be good conditioning for you guys. I know it doesn't do my business any good."

"My back longs for the day ponies can deliver parcels by dragonfire!"

With that parting wish, Sky Wave flew off into the air, her ascent slowed by the weight of her saddlebags.

"I *am* glad we partnered with the postal service," Turquoise commented.
"She's nice."

A while later on in the day, White Noise and Turquoise were having a debate about the nutritional value of gemstones when an exotic, but pony-like shadow darkened their door. The conversation melted away as a large-framed zebra with a large and very traditional mohawk stepped into the establishment.

White Noise's eyes widened as he caught sight of their latest customer. Clearing his throat, he launched into an enthusiastic greeting:

"<A warm welcome to you, traveller from a faraway land, Speak what you desire, and I will understand!>" White Noise said in measured tones of his best Zebrican.

Sibwashie was taken aback at the unicorn's words. His rhyming was awkward and his words lacked the rhythm of a mother-tongue speaker, but he got his point across. Sibwashie hadn't heard any other ponies speak to him in his own language before.

"<Your warm accommodation finds welcome in my heart, Now, I pray, aid a traveller by using your life's art.>"

"Uuuuh....." said Turquoise.

"<Where would you like to send a letter? Limited choices are available, I'm afraid.>" White Noise asked.

"<My correspondence is with a mare in Hoofington, a fine lady of the farming trade.>" Sibwashie continued, completing White's rhyme as was the Zebrican custom.

"'Hoofington', I understand. I'll go fetch a jar of that from the back," said Turquoise, shaking the bewilderment off her face.

"Unicorn sir, your empathy and interest I will repay, by speaking in your tongue, with you, today." Sibwashie said, switching to Equestrian.

"That's kind of a relief, I was running out of words!" White Noise joked. "I'm White Noise, graduate of Princess Celestia's School For Gifted Unicorns, and owner of the Dragonfire Delivery company. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Sibwashie is the name I've borne since birth, And I am the only Sibwashie on this earth."

The zebra and pony shook hooves just as Turquoise returned with a small jar of green flame labelled "HOOFINGTON". The flame flickered and swam about behind the clear glass, entrancing Sibwashie with its unreal colour and movement.

"Say hi to Mr Sibwashie, Turquoise," White Noise gently commanded. "This is my Fillydelphia store manager, Turquoise. She's a good worker, even if she doesn't know too many languages."

"Hello Mr Sibwashie, sir," Turquoise said, handing over the Hoofington jar.

Taking the jar in his mouth, Sibwashie gave Turquoise a silent nod, grateful that he was presently unable to speak – his Equestrian rhyming still needed work, and he didn't want to get stuck on "Turquoise".

"So, if I may ask," began White Noise, as Sibwashie handed over some bits in payment. "What brings you to Equestria? Zebrica's quite a way away from here."

After placing the jar of dragonfire in his left saddlebag, Sibwashie put a hoof to his chin, thinking for a moment before opening his mouth.

"The glyph that ornaments my flank describes a very delicate mission, It compels me to prevent international relationship attrition.

"Or, to put it in a fashion more clear-spoken and plain,
Means my job is full of pony-zebra friendships to maintain.

"By travelling deep into pony country and living among you,
I hope to understand, and discover what is true."

"So, basically, you're a diplomat?" White Noise surmised.

"Ambassador is the term I would prefer,
But, right now, I am neither.

"I am a young zebra, with so much to see and to learn,
I must make myself worthy of the position I yearn."

“Well you seem like a pretty interesting guy nonetheless. You know... I've always been curious about life outside of Equestria, and it's about lunch time. Would you mind accompanying me? I'm sure I can tell you a fair bit about Equestria, from my perspective anyway. And if you're at all interested in Dragonfire Delivery...”

Sibwashie smiled and nodded. *Perhaps this would be a beneficial relationship to cultivate*, he thought. *Communication technology IS an essential component of any relationship between nations.*

“I can't believe I never thought of that before!” White Noise blurted out. “Distance doesn't matter to Dragonfire –there's absolutely no good reason why my business *shouldn't* have branches all over the world! Just think of the possibilities!”

“With such a grand, all-spanning system put in place, I would be able to keep in touch with other members of my race.”

White Noise and Sibwashie were sitting at a booth in the former's favourite Fillydelphia deli. White had eaten a daisy sandwich; Sibwashie had ordered the soup of the day. Their meals finished, they were leisurely drinking cups of coffee – White knew that Turquoise could manage the shop on her own, and Sibwashie didn't have any pressing engagements for the rest of the day.

“You've given me a lot to think about, Mr Sibwashie,” White Noise said, very truthfully, resting his coffee mug on the table.

“I can say with joy that it's the same on my end, I am glad to have met you, my new pony friend.”

Sibwashie felt that White Noise was maybe a little too absorbed in his job, but he had still managed to learn a few new things about Equestrian culture from the unicorn. More importantly, he'd gained an insight into the Equestrian viewpoint on Zebrica and zebras from someone who had studied the subject. Who would've thought they found traditional zebra ceremonial masks frightening?

Sky Wave swooped gracefully into one of the many wide entrances that lead straight from the sky into an upper floor of the Fillydelphia post office. She trotted up to her supervisor's desk, twisting and turning as she went to avoid colliding with any of the bustling mailponies scurrying around her.

"Got today's dragonfire for you, boss," Sky said cheerfully.

"Thank you," came the reply, spoken in a voice that was unfamiliar to Sky Wave. "I have something for you as well."

Sky did a double-take at the mare in front of her. She was wearing a uniform identical to Sky's supervisor's one, but a few sizes smaller, and obviously cut for a mare rather than a stallion. The light red mare who looked to be Sky's new supervisor also had a severity to her gaze, and a very neatly styled mane – a far cry from the shaggy, unshaven Stamp she had grown used to.

"What happened to Stamp?" Sky asked, trying to use as polite a tone as possible.

"He moved on. This department is currently undergoing a large-scale restructuring," retorted the strange new supervisor, pushing a brown envelope across her desk towards Sky.

Sky took the envelope in her mouth, hearing a rustle of bits as she did so. It was the beginning of the second week of that month, and Sky was fairly certain that payday was not on the agenda of "stuff to *restructure*"... but maybe it was a *special* bonus!

"Shank yew ma'am, but todaysh shnot payday."

"And that's not your wage. It's your severance package."

Sky Wave's eyes widened in horror, and the envelope of bits clattered to the floor as her mouth did the same. She was being *fired*?! Had she done something wrong? Delivered letters to the wrong addresses? Broken the contents of a package? Dropped a piano on somepony's head?

“The Equestrian Post Office and I feel you would be better suited to a career more in-line with your natural strengths,” the red mare said. “New employee policy disallows us from hiring anypony without a mail-related cutie mark, so I’m afraid we have to let you go.”

Sky Wave opened her mouth to protest, but thought better of it. This new supervisor didn’t strike her as the compassionate type.

Sibwashie and White Noise walked along one of Fillydelphia’s many concrete pavements, watching the carriages go by as they made idle conversation.

“...and that’s why Princess Luna has been missing for the last thousand years,” finished White Noise. “I heard her return was a public relations nightmare; took my civil servant friends in Canterlot weeks of sleepless nights to smooth over everypony’s confusion and anger.”

“But on a more personal note,” White Noise said, switching topics after Sibwashie’s nod of understanding, “all this talk about the Princesses has reminded me of a problem I’ve been puzzling over for a good few nights.”

White Noise closed his eyes for a moment as he composed his thoughts.

“A few weeks into my first term at Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns,” he began, “my class had a visit from the Princess herself...”

<-oOo->

A young White Noise sat in the middle row of his General Magic class, staring down at his hooves. He was wondering why he of all ponies had been accepted into such a prestigious academy, and how long it would be before the school figured out that they’d made a mistake and kicked him out.

During his short time at the school, he’d met, seen and heard about so many ponies with magical skills far beyond anything he could claim to have. Sure, his earth pony friends back home had been impressed by his

levitations, light-tricks and magical funny voices (great for pranks!), but the ponies here were ridiculously talented.

There was Ivy, the dark green filly who could make flowers grow and dance in front of her! And Steady Stand, the big red unicorn who knew a spell that made walls and carriages practically unbreakable! There were even some older unicorns working on inter-dimensional teleportation, whatever that was.

And of course there was Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia's personal student, as of the beginning of the year. White Noise hadn't met her, but he'd heard all kinds of stories about her entrance exam. He wasn't sure which ones were true, but he'd seen the giant hole in the exam room's ceiling.

What all these ponies had in common, and what made White Noise feel out of place, was that they had their cutie marks. White felt at times that he'd give his front hooves for a vine, or a wave crashing against a dyke, or even something lame like a hammer on his flank. How was he supposed to be a "gifted unicorn" if he didn't even know who he was?

White Noise was distracted from his thoughts by the sound of an old mare clearing her throat. The class was starting.

"We have a *very special* guest teacher for you today, fillies and colts," said Chalkboard, the class's dusty grey teacher. "Please stand for her Majesty, Princess Celestia."

Gasps and squeals of excitement filled the air as the hundred-and-something little ponies in the class rose to their hooves, their eyes widening as the Princess stepped into room.

The Princess, regal as always, slowly stepped across the length of the small classroom, smiling at the low-bowing teacher-pony before her. Her mane blew out in front of her face, despite the lack of wind, and the Princess seemed to radiate a magical aura all about her tall, elegant frame.

"Good morning, my faithful students," she said, giving her voice a magical boost that made it echo softly around the room. "I trust you have enjoyed your first few weeks at my school. You have learnt a lot under the guidance

of Ms Chalkboard, but you still have much, much more to discover about magic... and about yourselves.”

White Noise sat up at this.

“You are all young ponies, and many of you don’t know what your special talents are. Even those lucky ponies who have their cutie marks already may still be a little confused about their lives and what their marks *really* mean.”

Princess Celestia paused for a moment, a smile crossing her muzzle.

“Not everypony gets something straightforward like a sun cutie mark that means they should go out and raise the sun every morning.”

It was hard to tell if the Princess was making a joke, or whether or not she expected the class to laugh at it, so a few polite giggles rose up from the class before being strangled by awkwardness. White Noise smiled softly.

“Rest assured that you are all among the most magically adept unicorns in all of Equestria,” the Princess continued, slowly gazing around the room. “Each one of you has amazing potential in one or more fields of magic, and this General Magic class is where you can find out what those fields are.”

Just as Princess Celestia was pausing to let the class think about her words, a scroll materialised in front of her in a puff of smoke. Catching it with her levitation, the Princess set it down on the teacher’s desk and continued speaking.

“That was an example of an *ambient* spell, my little ponies. Can anypony tell me what an *ambient* spell is? Yes, you in the front row.”

“An *ambient spell* is a spell that does something constantly, Princess Celestia,” came the front-row pony’s matter-of-fact tone.

“Very good, my faithful student. My mail-delivery spell constantly looks for dragonfire letters addressed to me, and when it finds one, it delivers it directly to me.”

This was new information to White Noise. Like all the other ponies in his class, he'd been briefed on the school's dragonfire communication system, but he had been under the impression that dragons could only deliver letters to each other.

"Although the system sounds simple," the Princess continued, "it actually takes a lot of magic to maintain – that is the most important thing to remember about ambient magic. At the moment, I am the only pony with enough magic to use it."

<-oOo->

"...with enough magic to use it," White Noise said, his story coming to a close. "It was on that day that I discovered my fascination with communication. My cutie mark came later on – that's a whole other story – but the point of the story is that last thing the Princess said."

White Noise let out a sigh, and Sibwashie noticed the lines beneath his eye for the first time. It looked like White hadn't been getting enough sleep.

"The Princess said that nopony could cast that spell but her. And from what my research shows, she's absolutely right. The spell requires insane amounts of magic, and its ambient nature doesn't help matters. But I still feel like I have to figure out some way of using it. A spell like that would revolutionize Dragonfire Delivery – just think of all the places ponies' messages could reach!"

At this point, White Noise's eyes had glazed over with excitement, and his grin stretched so far across his face that Sibwashie feared he'd hurt himself.

"I guess it's more than that, though," White Noise continued, coming back down to earth. "If I don't have a way of casting that spell and making practical use of it, then what does that say about my understanding of dragonfire? I mean, the fire's literally the fuel that my business runs on, and sometimes I just get the feeling that I have no idea what I'm doing."

Sibwashie could think of a straightforward solution to his new friends' dilemma, one that he would enact were he in the same position.

“When seeking to understand problems like this, the only recourse, is to begin your search by finding the source.

“Dragonfire is breathed by dragons, you know? Perhaps you should see what they have to show.”

“Well, yes, but I’m just not-”

White Noise’s eyes widened as an idea dawned on him. It was probably a bit of a stretch, and hardly an appropriate thing to ask of somepony (somezebra?) he’d met maybe an hour before, but at that moment White was overcome with a sense of destiny.

“Sibwashie, you’re a diplomat-in-training, right?” he asked tentatively. “Isn’t Dragonia awfully close to Zebrica? Have you been there before? Would you go there again?”

Sibwashie blinked. This was quite a bit to take in. He’d been to the outskirts of Dragonia a few times, but it wasn’t a place he’d lavished much attention on. Dragons, for the most part, were solitary creatures who liked nothing more than to be left alone. The ones in Dragonia especially – their incredibly long lifespans meant that on the rare occasion they did make friends with others, the others in question would be other dragons. They viewed the zebra population with bemusement, watching them live out their entire lives in the time it took a dragon to take a nap.

Nonetheless, White Noise had made an interesting offer. It would merit some serious contemplation.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Sibwashie noticed that White Noise had been busy talking to a pegasus mare while he’d been lost in thought. The light pink mare’s head was drooped, and she looked rather down on her luck.

“I just got fired,” she said in response to White’s question. “The powers-that-be decided my cutie mark wasn’t ‘appropriate for a mail-carrier’.”

“That’s pretty rough,” said White. “But you’ve still got your performances, right? Don’t those bring in a fair amount of money?”

The pink mare sighed. "Sadly not. If it did, I'd not have taken that post office job. My gigs are just too irregular – my specific flight style isn't as breath-taking or daring as that of, say, the Wonderbolts, and even though I'm okay with that, and my fans are okay with that, it just means that I'm not the kind of performer most ponies want at their events."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Know of any other jobs I can get?"

For the second time in less than five minutes, White Noise's eyes widened at his own brilliance, and he felt that strange sense of destiny. Again, it was a bit of a stretch, but...

"... and that's how it'll work, if you guys are sure you want to do this," White Noise finished, taking a deep breath. "Sibwashie, you'll use your local knowledge and people-skills to get us to some dragons who can help me with my magic studies, and Sky, you'll be our eye in the sky while we're hoofin' it to Dragonia. Both of you will be paid handsomely – Dragonfire Delivery is doing very well at the moment, and a trip like this would be the perfect opportunity to expand even further."

The pony and zebra nodded in agreement. For Sibwashie this would be a chance to see more of Equestria, and visit his home again (White Noise had promised they'd make a stop in Zebrica, seeing as it was pretty close to where they were going, and they'd probably end up going through it anyway), and for Sky Wave it would be a way to actually have something to do over the post-Gala event drought. White's mention of payment had a fair bit to do with their agreement as well.

"So we'll meet up at the edge of town tomorrow?" Sky Wave asked.

"The edge that faces Hoofington, to be precise. We'll be travelling along the E7 for most of the way," White Noise replied matter-of-factly. "I'm glad you guys don't have a lot of stuff you need to do before we make this trip, because I'd hit that road right now if I could."

"I will send some letters and give my landlady notice of my leave, Then I just have to pack – that's all – hard to believe..." replied Sibwashie.

"I'm a leaf on the wind, White," said Sky Wave dramatically. "Where-ever destiny takes me, that's where I go."

"So you're sure you'll be fine to manage the shop on your own?" White Noise asked Turquoise the next day.

"Don't patronise me, boss," she replied cattily. "If I wasn't able to do something as basic as that you wouldn't have hired me. It's not like you were going to stay at the Fillydelphia branch forever in any case. No offense, but you're a Canterlot pony, through and through."

"None taken," replied White Noise, wistfully thinking of Canterlot's majestic white and purple towers topped with gold roofs, and its marble pathways and bridges. "It's too bad we're not going in that direction."

"Are you sure you know the way, White?"

White Noise levitated a map out of his right saddlebag to assuage his dragon shop-assistant's fears. A thick dotted line marked a path along the main roads from Fillydelphia all the way to Port Anchor, where a boat would take them across the sea to Zebrica.

"We'll be heading through Hoofington, Ponyville and a few other places. The Hoofington dragon I've hired will be glad to help open up a branch over there - he says the Post Office is far too noisy a working area for his liking."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out quite nicely, boss," Turquoise said, raising an eyebrow.

"They don't give just *anypony* a degree in Communications Technology, Turq. Anyway, I'd better get going. Take care."

"Good-bye Mr Bossman," Turquoise replied as White Noise levitated the shop's door open and stepped out.

The white unicorn hurried along the road to the edge of town, where he'd arranged to meet his travelling companions. He was a little nervous about going on such a long journey with a pony and zebra he didn't know terribly well, but something told him it would all work out fine. *Who knows*, he thought. *We could even become friends.*

Chapter Two

The sun hovered a short distance above the lonely dirt road, making the trees that rose up on its eastern side cast long shadows over its surface, like the many claws of a murky black dragon. A light mist rose up from the grass beneath the trees, giving the land a fuzzy, early-morning atmosphere.

Birds sang in the trees, leaves rustled in the gentle breeze, and the world was otherwise silent. Then came the soft padding of hooves – not a so much a disruption of the silence as a carefully-measured, respectful step around it.

The two ponies and zebra had not been walking for very long, but they felt that they were already quite far removed from the hustle and bustle of their city lives. Fillydelphia was no Manehattan, but the contrast between it and their current surroundings was jarring nonetheless.

A rabbit skipped across the path and disappeared into the underbrush – a rare sight even in rural Equestria, as most animals were almost completely helpless outside of domestic situations. Sibwashie smiled at the sight of the wild rodent, thinking back to the lions and cheetahs that roamed the plains around the village where he was born.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” whispered Sky Wave.

Her companions nodded in agreement, unwilling to further harm the tranquillity of their surroundings with even the softest words.

The journey continued in this fashion for a time, until White Noise finally spoke: “If you wouldn’t mind, Sky, I think now’d be a good time to fly up and see if there’s anything up ahead that we should be aware of. A fallen tree, or a broken bridge, or maybe a fork in the road: something like that.”

“On it,” Sky replied briskly, rising into the air before the words had fully left her mouth.

With a few soft flaps of her slender wings, Sky rose up above the tree to survey the path ahead. It twisted and turned in places, but as far as she could tell there were no upcoming forks, broken bridges or trees obstructing any part of it. Raising a hoof above her eyes to block out the sun’s glare, she saw Hoofington’s pretty wooden houses lying on the horizon.

Sky flapped her wings once more and rose several feet higher. The whole of Hoofington now spread out at the edge of her vision, and turning east for a moment, she could see Manehattan’s majestic skyscrapers of steel and concrete rising up to touch the sun. *It’s a shame we’re not heading in that direction*, she thought. *I’ve always wanted to see that city at night: all lit up like it is on the postcards.*

With a sigh, Sky bade farewell to Manehattan’s towers and swooped down to rejoin her earth-bound companions. She gracefully folded in her wings as her hooves touched the dirt, and brought her trotting into step with the pace of her companions.

“The way’s all-clear from here to Hoofington, guys,” she said. “And Hoofington’s not too terribly far away either – if we speed this trip up with a nice gallop, I’m sure we can get there within a few hours.”

“Guess I could use the exercise,” White Noise said nervously as he noticed Sibwashie nod eagerly at Sky’s suggestion.

“Great!” Sky exclaimed. “On your marks... getsetgo!”

At that, all three ponies broke into a gallop. Sky’s nimble legs carried her light frame swiftly along the path, and Sibwashie’s thick and powerful ones did an admirable job of speeding his large body along at a relatively similar pace. White lagged slightly behind the others, hoping that the few times he’d been jogging since he got to Fillydelphia would pay off and help him to keep up with his companions.

They didn’t.

“That was good and invigorating run
I cannot recall when last I had such fun,” smiled Sibwashie.

“You did pretty well, boss,” Sky Wave said to the panting unicorn that lay sprawled on the path just behind her. “Most unicorns I know probably couldn’t gallop *half* that distance.”

It was hard to tell through his heavy breathing, but Sky thought she saw White mouth the word “thanks”.

“We’re pretty close to Hoofington now,” Sky said. “It wouldn’t be a bad time to take a short break for lunch.”

With that, Sky reached into her saddlebag and brought out some daisy and daffodil sandwiches she had packed for the journey. They were not as artfully made as the ones at White’s favourite Fillydelphia deli, but right at that moment they may as well have been, given how appetising they appeared to his hungry eyes.

“Let’s dig in,” Sky said cheerfully, shucking her saddlebags to one side and slumping down on the grass. “I brought enough for everypony – and zebra!”

“Thank you for your thought, but I’m afraid I must decline
Your flowers disagree with me, and I find the grass quite fine,” Sibwashie apologized politely, bending his head down to the grass and taking a bite out of it.

“My father got me to eat grass on a camping trip once,” said White, having recovered his breath somewhat. “I can’t say it agreed with me.”

“It’s quite nice once you get used to it, White,” Sky replied. “In fact, I think I’ll do some grazing for dessert.”

With no further words, the ponies and zebra started eating their respective lunches. Sky Wave and White Noise each had three sandwiches (two daisy and one daffodil and pansy), and Sibwashie had enough grass to fill up his stomach. Sky joined him in grazing once she’d finished her sandwiches and White gingerly bit into a single blade of grass and turned quite green.

“I wonder if there’s any signal out here,” said Sky Wave, retrieving her portable radio from one of her saddlebags. “Oh, the battery’s dead. White Noise?”

White Noise motioned with a hoof for Sky to place the radio in front of him. Closing his eyes, he lit up his horn and focused on the radio, sending his magic between the device’s vents until it glowed even brighter than his horn.

The radio-powering spell was a slight variation of standard unicorn telekinesis, simple enough to be cast by any unicorn. The tricky part came in severing the portion of magic powering the device from one’s own magic supply. A student of Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns had no trouble doing this (severing was the second thing they were taught in General Magic), but some younger and less magically-inclined unicorns would wear themselves out powering a radio for extended periods of time.

Sky Wave’s radio came to life with a flare of static.

“Guess we’re out of range of K-FILY,” she said. “I mainly listen to them for the early morning music anyway.”

White Noise turned the dial on the radio to its second channel. The static persisted. He went to the third channel. Still only static could be heard. The fourth and fifth channels yielded similar results, and then White had to turn back to the first channel because he had run out of options.

“So Hoofington doesn’t have any radio stations,” he concluded. “It makes sense. This radio thing *is* a pretty new technology, after all. Canterlot just got its first station the other month, and I don’t know of anywhere other than Manehattan that actually uses all the channels.”

“Every village in Zebrica has a radio station
Dedicated to relaying important information

“And it’s largely thanks to the unicorns of this magical land
I’m surprised your system isn’t more grand,” Sibwashie said slowly.

“As am I, Sib,” White Noise responded. “But I guess it’s an issue of familiarity. Sure, we gave you guys the magic to really get your radio

system into widespread use, but it's your invention. You've been using radios since the days you had to squeeze magic out of Poison Joke to power them, so you're just more accustomed to the idea of listening to disembodied voices all the time."

Just then, the three found their ears filled with the sound of trumpets, tubas and clarinets, belting out a stirring patriotic anthem that none of them could readily identify. The sound seemed to be getting louder.

"I don't think that's coming from my radio," Sky smirked.

And indeed it was not. In a few short moments, the source of the noise turned a bend in the road and stepped into view. It was a marching band.

The band was outfitted in cloaks, saddles and hats of dark purple and black, with a few patches of red here and there to lend the outfits some assertiveness. They marched stiffly, bearing serious expressions on their faces as they blew into their instruments. Attached to some of their saddles were large purple banners with the letters "NLR" written on them in bold black letters.

The dark ensemble was led by a proud-looking grey unicorn wearing a flowing black cape. Her striking red eyes flashed with acknowledgement as she saw White, Sky and Sibwashie, and she held out her left foreleg to signal the band to stop.

The instruments fell silent the moment the grey mare's leg left the ground, and the band stopped dead in their tracks, staring forward at the three ponies before them without changing their serious expressions for a split second.

"Warmest greetings, travellers!" exclaimed the grey mare, her face breaking into a pleasant grin. "I am Quickblink, leader of this contingent of representatives of the Movement for the New Lunar Republic, and my companions and I would like to extend our best wishes for your trip, wherever you may be headed."

"Uh..." White Noise began. "New Lunar Republic?"

Quickblink's face took on a look of shock. "You can't mean to tell me you *haven't* heard about the New Lunar Republic, the future haven of all forward-thinking equines – and might I say, Sir Zebra, on behalf of my countryponies, it is an honour to host a guest from the mighty empire of Zebrica."

Sibwashie noticed that Quickblink had very nearly said "ponies", and smiled inwardly. Outwardly, he gave the unicorn a polite nod and a far less sarcastic smile.

"Nope, I'm afraid 'Lunar Republic' really doesn't ring a bell," offered Sky with a shrug.

"Then please," began Quickblink, her horn glowing, "take a flier!"

The unicorn's cap flew up with a flourish, and a glossy black pamphlet floated out of one of the pockets and deposited itself at Sky Wave's feet.

"Now while I'd love to stay and chat, the band and I have a very busy schedule to keep to. Please take the time to read about our movement during your journey, and if you have any further questions, you should be able to find satisfactory answers at one of our offices – you'll find at least one Movement for the New Lunar Republic outpost in most towns and cities in Equestria. Good day to you all."

Quickblink lowered her foreleg and the band behind her resumed playing from the very note they'd left off on. White Noise and his friends cleared out of their way as they marched along the dirt path and off into the distance.

"Well there's something you don't see every day," snarked White, once the marching band was out of earshot. "I wonder what this whole business is about: must be quite a big deal to inspire that kind of a performance from those band ponies."

White Noise remembered his short-lived marching band days back at the Princess's school. The band was made up of very talented and creative musicians, and also it had him in it. Needless to say, the creative differences everypony had with everypony else didn't win them any accolades. *It's hard to be gifted sometimes*, he thought, smiling wryly to himself.

“I wonder who does these pamphlets,” muttered Sky Wave, admiring the pamphlet’s shininess and pleasing layout as she unfolded it and spread it out in front of her with her hooves. “I should get some like this for my performances, that’d really snazz them right up.”

“What does it say?” asked White Noise.

“There’s an interesting-looking write-up about the movement’s inspiration in the centre of this page,” Sky replied, scrunching her eyes up with a look of concentration. “Let’s see here...”

<-oOo->

More than one thousand years before, when the Royal Pony Sisters ruled Equestria from their stone castle in the Everfree Forest (long before the word “Everfree” had taken on its present-day meaning and connotations), a group of brave pony travellers set out with large wood ships to explore the seas beyond Equestria, in search of new lands to explore and colonize.

A few days into their travels, they happened upon a lush tropical island, brimming with plant and animal life. The moment the ponies stepped of their rowboats, they knew that their short-lived quest had come to an abrupt end, for the island seemed to cast a spell upon anypony who set a hoof on its sandy shores.

It is said that in those days, whenever a pony lent down and put her ear to the ground, it was filled by the low, earthy tones of the very grass growing. Ponies who planted trees and crops experienced drastically-shortened wait times before their produce was ready for consumption.

After some months of prosperous pony living, the Royal Pony Sisters heard about their citizens’ new settlement in the middle of the sea. It was decided that the younger sister would travel to the island and extend her congratulations and an offer of aid to the settler ponies, while the older sister stayed in Equestria to take care of matters there.

The younger sister took a ship to the island, and discovered its secret as soon as she disembarked. After a brief rendezvous with the island leaders,

she called an urgent meeting of all the island's citizens, scheduled for dusk that very day.

When everypony was gathered in front of the royal alicorn, she thanked them all for coming, and told them that she was about to reveal the reason for their new home's abnormal fertility.

Her horn began to glow as the gathered ponies watched her, riveted. As the glow became stronger, the ponies started to notice shimmering purple mist all around them. The mist was slowly settling on the grass, the trees, and the crops of the farmer-ponies.

With a sudden flick of her head, the younger sister motioned for the assembled ponies to look up into the sky – up to the source of the purple mist.

When the ponies saw the moon that night, it was not the usual grey moon that they had become used to. The moon appeared solid purple. As comprehension dawned on the crowd, they bowed down to the younger sister and shouted their adoration and gratitude to her.

“My dear friend the moon has long smiled upon your island, my little ponies,” she began. “Every night, it casts its spell upon the land, so that plants might grow, and the harvest of this island might be bountiful beyond imagination.”

The island's leaders had a short conference, and it was decided that the island state would henceforth be called the Lunar Republic, in honour of the younger sister, and her kind and gracious gift. A deafening cheer rose up to the heavens as ponies shouted the name “LUNA”, their hearts overflowing with joy.

“Thank you, good ponies,” said Luna, once the cheering had died down. “It pleases me to see you all so happy, but please remember one thing – remember what you saw tonight. Please remember what I have done for you and your families on this island.”

<-oOo->

“The rest of the story is actually pretty depressing,” said Sky. “The ponies grew old and died, their children forgot about the moon, and failed to give Luna any kind of respect or even thanks. And we all know what came of that.”

White Noise and Sibwashie nodded. Given how much was generally known about Nightmare Moon and, by extension, Luna, it was hardly surprising that this story had fallen through the cracks of history. It shed a further light on the circumstances that led to Luna’s fall, and put an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of White Noise’s stomach.

“What’s also interesting is that after Nightmare Moon was imprisoned on the moon, it stopped fertilising the Lunar Republic,” Sky added, reading further. “Apparently the effect has resurged slightly in the year since Nightmare’s defeat, but it’s nowhere near what it was in those ancient times.”

Sky turned over the pamphlet, and let out a startled gasp.

“Oh my... do you know what the Movement’s ultimate plan is? They want to crown Princess Luna as the ruler of the Lunar Republic, so that everypony can, and I quote, ‘escape Celestial tyranny’.”

“Well that’s not very nice,” scowled White. “I’m inclined to go give these ponies an earful at their *office* – honestly... insulting Princess Celestia like that!”

“For what it’s worth, they can’t be that harmful if this is the first we’ve heard of them,” Sky replied, cracking a bemused smile. “I’m okay with them so long as they don’t decide to replace their instruments with weapons and their marching bands with army platoons.”

Sibwashie’s eyes widened in fear at this remark, and he nearly choked on the mouthful of grass he’d been chewing lazily.

“I think she’s just joking, Sib,” White Noise said. “Ponies aren’t known for their ferocity or willingness to fight at the drop of a hat – most of us, anyway. And I hardly think Princess Luna would approve.”

"I wonder if she even knows about this," Sky pondered. "I hope she has a good laugh at it, rather than getting frightened."

One brisk canter-verging-on-a-gallop later, the travellers found themselves face-to-wood with a delightful painted sign depicting a grizzly old farmer pony shaking hooves with a young pegasus. Carved into the sign, above the picture, in large, easy-to-read-letters were the words

WELCOME TO HOOFINGTON
"The friendliest place in Equestria!"
Population: 900

"I am quite fond of the detail and colour in this work of art. It makes me feel that my home and here are really not so far apart," commented Sibwashie, staring appreciatively at the fuzzy edges that made it obvious that the sign had been painted by a mouth rather than a horn.

The sun had just shifted west from the middle of the sky when the travellers entered the town. They were greeted by a cul-de-sac of small wooden buildings with thatch roofs, arranged in a horse-shoe pattern. The houses surrounded a large patch of land that was currently being used as a farmers' market, evidenced by the neat rows of various produce stands with their hastily-assembled wooden frames and striped awning roofs.

"We should find an inn to stay the night at," White Noise said. "We'll rent two rooms – I'm happy to share a room with Sibwashie, and then Sky can have her own."

"That place looks good," replied Sky Wave, pointing a hoof at a dark wooded building with swingy saloon doors and a sign that christened it the "Noble Manticore Inn".

More interesting than the writing on the sign, however, was the painting of a manticore wearing a top hat, walking with a cane and looking positively distinguished underneath it.

"Regardless of the quality of the rooms, I'd like to go in there just to ask about the name," quipped White.

The Noble Manticore Inn's check-in room was very small, but in a cosy sort of way: an atmosphere that was aided greatly by the sounds of laughing and animated conversation coming from the dining room that it lead into, and the warmth of the torchlight illuminating the staircase leading up to the rooms.

"Two rooms please," White Noise asked the plump, middle-aged mare at the counter. "One for the lady, and one for us men."

"Alright, that'll be-" the mare began, forgetting her words as she looked up and saw Sibwashie.

Sibwashie looked away as the mare gaped at him with wide, confused eyes. He'd been afraid of this kind of treatment in Equestria's small towns and villages. Most of the ponies there had never even seen a zebra, and of that number, the majority weren't even sure what zebras *were*. Or so he'd been told.

"Oh my, you're a zebra!" the check-in desk mare finally stammered out. "I've always wanted to meet a zebra! I've heard so much about Zebrica – you know, we ponies can sure learn a thing or two from you zebras. What's your name?"

"My name is Sibwashie, kind keeper of this fine inn
I am happy to hear such kind words about my kin," Sibwashie replied, trying not to let his surprise show on his face.

"So you do talk in rhymes!" the mare exclaimed excitedly. "Oh, how beautiful!"

Sibwashie smiled awkwardly and looked away. This hadn't been what he was expecting, and in some ways, that made it more difficult to deal with. To be honest, though, it wasn't *entirely* unpleasant.

"I'm going to give you a discount on that second room, considering how far your companion must have travelled already," the excited check-in mare

told White Noise, turning her face back to him, “a two-bed room for the same cost as the one-bed room. That’ll be thirty bits, please.”

“With pleasure,” replied White, levitating the bits out of his left saddlebag and placing them on the desk. “And thank you for the discount.”

“You’re welcome, my dears. Now do go and get something to eat – or at least to drink – in the dining room. Everypony will be thrilled to meet a real, live zebra and his real, live friends.”

The check-in mare handed the group their keys, and one exchange of mutual gratitude later, they found themselves in the dining room, much to the apprehension of Sibwashie. *I’m not sure I like all this attention*, he thought. *It makes me wish I didn’t stand out quite so much. But I guess ambassadors get a lot of attention too, so maybe I’d better start getting used to this kind of thing.*

Sibwashie, White Noise and Sky Wave soon found a three-place table to sit down at, and were swiftly brought menus by the inn’s efficient catering staff. In a few short and very efficient minutes, the ponies and zebra were all drinking cold, freshly-made lemonade.

“How are you folks enjoyin’ my inn so far?” asked a gruff voice, as an older earth pony trotted up to their table.

The earth pony was pale brown, with a shock of fiery orange mane sticking out of his head as if it were about to burst off. His green eyes had a kindly expression in them, and his demeanour was so calm and slow that the travellers barely noticed him pulling up a seat to make their three-place table a four-place one.

“It’s very nice so far,” replied Sky Wave, taking another sip of her lemonade. “And this lemonade is absolutely delicious! How do you get it so sweet, Mr...?”

“That’s a family secret, I’m afraid, and I didn’t get this lemonade glass cutie mark for nothing. But what isn’t a family secret is that you can call me Mr Hos-pit-ality!” grinned the brown and orange stallion. “No seriously, that’s the name my wife - I assume you’ve met her, she’s at the front desk - and I took for ourselves when we married. My original name is Grassfire.”

“Grassfire?” asked White Noise, having not come across any similar names before.

“I was born during a dry winter, to a nomad family in the Plains,” Grassfire replied, a wistful look coming into his eyes. “It was hard times – enormous fires had chased us from our last camp, and the horror of the flames bore heavily on everypony’s minds. And then I was born.”

Grassfire took a deep breath and looked down at his hooves.

“It was always hard times on the plains, to be fair,” he continued. “Guess that’s what civilized me in the end. That, and my dear Petunia. But that’s a whole story of its own – a right exciting one, mind you, but it’s a little long in the tooth, so let me stop before I keep you here all day with my rambling. Where’re you folks from?”

“We came here from Fillydelphia, but only Sky Wave is actually *from* there,” White Noise replied, motioning to Sky as he mentioned her. “I was born in Canterlot, and Sibwashie here is all the way from Zebrica, over the sea.”

“Heh, I always thought a Canterlot pony would be above coming to my humble little inn.”

“A lot of them probably would be,” White Noise smirked.

“And a zebra all the way from Zebrica! It’s not often that we host folks from so very far away in this inn; I hope the service is to your satisfaction, Mr Sibwashie.”

The three travellers hit it off with Grassfire, and ended up talking with him until dinner was served, talking through dinner, and then having cups of tea with him after dinner. He told them the long story of how he had met his wife and the shorter story behind the inn’s name. They tried to tell him their own interesting stories as well, but they lacked the practice that comes with so many years of managing an inn and making lemonade.

Eventually, everypony decided that they were too tired to listen to any more stories, or drink anymore tea and lemonade. With some rounds of thanks

and goodnights, the ponies and zebra ascended the staircase to their rooms – numbers 210 and 212 – and finally got into bed.

“Hoofington’s a pretty different place from Fillydelphia, isn’t it?” White Noise asked Sibwashie, as the two of them lay awake in their beds on opposite sides of the room.

“The greatest mistake for which a traveller can ever take the blame is assuming that all members of one race are exactly the same

“The culture of Equestria changes from town to city to town Just as it does everywhere the sun comes up and goes down,” Sibwashie said, after a slight pause.

“Well I guess so. Goodnight Sib.”

Princess Celestia and her sister Luna sat in their private drawing room, deep in serious conversation.

“I really don’t know what the story with these New Lunar Republic ponies is,” Luna said, her voice strained with anxiety. “I promise I didn’t know anything about it before you told me, Celly. I’ve never even met any of the ponies that are running this crazy thing!”

“Relax, Luna, I believe you,” Celestia said soothingly, putting a hoof on her sister’s shoulder. “Nightmare Moon might do something like this, but not my dear sister Princess Luna.”

“Thanks Celly. That means a lot to me,” Luna replied, her voice noticeably less stressed. “I don’t know what to do about it. These ponies really love me, but they blame you, my wise older sister, for doing what you had to do all those years ago. They’re calling you a tyrant and a trickster.”

Celestia sighed deeply, and let go of it with a little smile. She’d been the ruler of Equestria for over one thousand years, and had spent the majority of that time as its *only* ruler. She’d seen her popularity wax and wane, and she’d had her share of criticism as well as praise. This was nothing new to her, but she could understand Luna’s distress.

“I have an idea,” Celestia said, after pondering the dilemma for a minute or two. “I think the time has come for you to pay another visit to the Lunar Republic, dear sister. Perhaps then you can straighten out your part (or lack thereof) in the minds of the ponies there and here, and put a stop to some of the wilder rumours going around.”

Luna nodded at her sister’s suggestion, her good mood renewed now that she had a clear course of action. She turned around and stared out of the drawing room’s largest window. She had made it a full moon that night.

Chapter Three

“Alright Melvin, we’re going to be opening the Hoofington shop a little earlier than I originally planned,” White Noise said to the young, bespectacled blue dragon in front of him. “I hope you’re prepared.”

White Noise and his dragon friend were standing just outside of the boarded-up storefront that was soon to become the Hoofington branch of Dragonfire Delivery. Up until that date, the ponies of Hoofington had only been able to receive messages by dragonfire from Melvin, who sat at the post office all day and burped. Now they would be able to send messages via dragonfire as well.

“I’ll be glad to move to a more peaceful working environment,” Melvin huffed. “The ruffians at the post office are always making such a racket.”

“Don’t expect it to be *too* peaceful,” replied White Noise. “That wouldn’t be good for business!”

“I wouldn’t count on *Hoofington* to keep the business afloat, sir. I’m not sure any of the ponies here have ever been more than a few miles out of town in their lives. Who would they even send letters too?”

White Noise sighed.

“Let’s just get this shop open, shall we?”

In keeping with its name, the town of Hoofington was built in the shape of four hooves, or perhaps more accurately, four horseshoes. This gave the town four separate “squares”, two of which were regularly used for markets and one of which was used as a park. The remaining square was occasionally used for town meetings.

It was a busy day for Hoofington’s market squares. A fair number of the town’s population were out spending their bits on all manner of fresh

produce at the farmers' market, and even more ponies had shown up to see the wares of the fleet of caravan merchants that had set up shop in Hoofington's other market square the previous night.

Among the crowds milling around the latter market area were Sky Wave and Sibwashie, who were out taking a leisurely walk after breakfast.

"You there!" came a loud cry. "Mr Zebra, sir! I think you would be *very interested* in one of the items I have here today."

Sibwashie turned in the direction of the voice to see a dark blue earth pony with a thick black moustache and the eager and slightly slimy grin of an all-too-experienced salespony.

"For what purpose do you call for my attention, pony sir? And what about my purchasing habits can you infer?" Sibwashie said slowly.

"You seem like a smart chap, Mister, very intelligent indeed," the salespony replied, his fast words betraying a working-class Manehattan accent. "Nope, you sure as anything ain't no fool. So I'm sure you're aware of *just how important* it is to be protected from curses! Only a fool would let themselves wander around all open to being cursed by anypony with the know-how!"

Before Sibwashie could give a retort, the salespony had pulled a number of bottles and jars of strange-coloured liquid out from under his table, all with hastily scrawled labels.

"I've got curse-blocking potions, curse-blocking body sprays, and even some curse ward bubble bath here," the fast-talking pony continued. "These are all 100% effective, certified by not one, not two but three highly-re-spected zebra magic scholars from Manehattan, home of the great. No right-thinking indiv-idual can *afford* to go without these must-have items!"

Sibwashie dug his hoof into the ground, and a scowl formed on his face.

"I don't know what stories you have heard about zebra-kind But I can see through the tricks you're playing on my mind," he retorted as he stomped off, leaving the vendor to curse under his breath.

Sky hurried to catch up with her companion, shooting the vendor a dirty look as she cantered off.

"I'm so sorry about that, Sibwashie," she said. "Someponies are just... like that."

Sibwashie took a deep breath, and seemed to calm down.

"Do not worry; I will not use *him* to judge all of *you*
That would be a most hypocritical thing to do."

"Ha, it sure would!" laughed Sky, smiling awkwardly.

The pegasus and zebra continued wandering through the market place, making a concerted effort to avoid any salesponies that looked even a little too eager to sell them things.

"Oh, my dear, what a lovely shade of pink your coat is! I've got a saddle here that was *made* for you."

"No thanks."

"In the market for a stronger plow, sir? This beautiful piece of farm engineering here is guaranteed to be the last plow you'll ever need to buy!"

"I do not have a farm, my friend
The tree you're barking up is a dead end."

Eventually the two came to the end of the market, and were able to say with certainty that they had seen all of the stalls and found nothing of interest in any of them. A pretty necklace had caught Sky Wave's eye, but closer inspection revealed a heart around the name "ICY WIND" carved into the back of the pendant. As nice as it would have been to own a genuine piece of Eskimo pony jewellery, Sky decided that she wouldn't have felt right wearing it.

As Sibwashie and Sky Wave were walking through the town, a little yellow filly came barrelling out of the door of one of the small houses, laughing and shouting, presumably playing a game with some of her friends. The filly

was having so much fun that she wasn't even looking where she was going and she ran right into Sibwashie.

"OOHF," she gasped as her little body slammed into Sibwashie's right foreleg and came to a standstill.

Sky Wave gasped. "Are you okay, dear?"

Slightly dazed, the filly stumbled backwards and landed on her haunches. She blinked a few times, and then smiled and nodded vigorously.

Then she noticed the large black-and-white striped pony she had run into. She looked up at the thick Mohawk that rose up from his head and her eyes widened in fear.

Before Sibwashie could say anything to calm the child, she cried out in fear and bolted back into the cottage she'd come out of.

Sky Wave frowned, and looked at Sibwashie, who merely shrugged. The pony and zebra were prepared to leave it at that when two other ponies – a mare and a stallion, some years older than themselves – came running up to them with anxious looks on their faces.

"Oh my..." Sky began, trailing off as she wondered how *these* ponies would mistreat her zebra friend.

"I've come up with my own personal *dragonfire jar filing system*, you know," Melvin said, puffing out his chest in a proud manner. "It's quite ingenious, if I do say so myself. I've got all the dragonfire set out perfectly in the back room."

"I'm glad to hear that, Melvin," White Noise replied. "I always like it when my employees take initiative – finding new and better ways of doing things is the philosophy that I started Dragonfire Delivery on, and it continues to inform every new business decision I make."

The dragon had unlocked the door of the shop and led White Noise through it and into the storeroom. Taking a quick glance around the shop's main

room as he passed through it, White noted that it had been cleaned recently – not a spot of dust could be seen, which was surprising for a place that saw so little use.

“Here we are,” Melvin said, pointing at the shelves that covered the walls of the storeroom he and White Noise had just entered with a flourish of his clawed right hand. “Primary sort: geographical distance from Hoofington, with the closest places closest to the door. Secondary sort: date of manufacture, oldest in front, newest in back, avoiding the possibility of dragonfire sitting on the shelves forever.”

“Very good, Melvin,” replied White Noise, his eyes turning away from the dragon’s precious shelves. “And what’s that about?”

White gestured with a hoof to the only space of the wall unadorned by shelves. In their place, a glossy poster hung. It depicted a blue-coated mare with a white mane and a purple cloak and wizard hat. Large letters in circus-script proclaimed her

“THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE!
BRAVE HEROINE OF TROTtingham”

The poster went on to say that she had used her astounding magical powers to banish an Ursa Major that threatened to destroy the town, and that she would be performing for the ponies of Hoofington for one night only: a truly grand spectacle that was *not* to be missed.

“I enjoyed her show,” Melvin replied indignantly. “It’s not often that one sees very much magic here in this dinky little farming town full of earth ponies. Also, I got her autograph!”

Sure enough, an overdone cursive signature had been splattered across the bottom-right corner of the poster, with the words “to Mervin” written above it.

“Sure, she may have misspelt my name, but it’s the thought that counts, isn’t it?” Melvin defended when White Noise brought up the mistake in the message. “She’s a busy lady, after all – all that travel and adventure, you know.”

White Noise decided to change the subject: "Seeing as you've already got the storeroom organized perfectly, there's not much left to do now but open for business. Help me move some of these jars to the main room, and we'll get them arranged nicely on the shelves behind the desk for everypony to see what we're selling them."

Melvin grunted his consent and grabbed two jars from right near the door. White Noise levitated a few more in front of him as he stepped out of the storeroom. He decided that opening this branch would probably be fairly easy going, as Melvin was pretty well-organized, if a little snotty about Hoofington and the ponies living there.

"We're very sorry about our daughter," the parents began, their eyes filled with concern as they faced Sibwashie.

"I promise we raised her better than that, sir," implored the mother. "It's just... she's never seen a zebra before."

Sibwashie smiled and lifted a hoof in understanding. This wasn't the hostile reaction he had been expecting from the filly's parents, and that lifted his mood considerably.

"It is quit alright; I fully understand that your child is still young Please do not reprimand her too harshly with your parental tongue."

"Oh don't worry, we won't," the filly's father said. "We'll just have a chat with her about respect for non-ponies – zebras in particular."

Sibwashie and the parent ponies parted on amicable terms, leaving a smile on the zebra's face. But just before they were out of earshot, the mare stopped in her tracks, apparently hit by a sudden idea.

"Hey, Mr Zebra sir," she called out excitedly, "would you like to have dinner with us this evening? Perhaps you could talk to our girl and show her first-hand that she shouldn't be afraid of zebras. Oh, and what's your name?"

"I call myself Sibwashie -

Student of the art of diploma-see,” Sibwashie replied proudly, having recently devised that introduction couplet and just now found an opportunity to use it.

“I’m Garden Rose, and my husband’s name is Placid Fields,” the mare replied. “Our daughter is Daffodil, and we live in this cottage that she just ran into. Please do join us for dinner at sunset – and feel free bring to your lady-friend as well.”

“Thank you kind earth ponies for your gracious invite
I shall see you here, on the cusp of Princess Luna’s night.”

Garden Rose giggled and nudged her husband before the two of them waved goodbye and disappeared around a corner.

“That was unexpected,” said Sky Wave flatly, speaking again after an extended silence. “In a good way though. Also: lady-friend?”

Sibwashie shrugged.

“Eh, whatever. I’m certainly not going to turn down the cooking of small-town earth ponies... mmm... I can taste the carrot soup already...”

White Noise levitated a “Sorry, We’re Closed/Yay! We’re Open” sign out of one of his saddlebags and placed it on the door of the newest branch of Dragonfire Delivery, with the latter side facing outward. The store interior had been cleaned, the dragonfire jars had been laid out appealingly on the shelves at the back, and all that remained was to help Dragonfire Delivery – Hoofington’s first customer.

“Okay Melvin, I’m going to help the first customer, and I want you to watch what I do very carefully,” instructed White Noise, “because you will be helping our *second* customer.”

Melvin nodded detachedly as he and White Noise took their places behind the counter and began to wait.

It wasn't long before the duo's first customer – an earth pony mare with a light orange coat – walked in. She had a pleasant smile that gave away just the slightest hint of puzzlement.

"Welcome to Dragonfire Delivery, ma'am," White Noise said enthusiastically, looking the mare in the eye. "How may we help you?"

"Uh... yes," she began, the confusion on her face growing. "I noticed this shop that wasn't here yesterday, and I was just wondering, uh, what is that you... do... exactly?"

White Noise smiled.

"Dragonfire Delivery is the future of long distance communication in Equestria, ma'am," he said proudly, levitating a jar labelled "FILLYDELPHIA" off the shelf behind him. "Using the magic of dragonfire, we can send messages across vast distances in the blink of an eye. And because you are our very first customer, we will now give you a first-hand demonstration. Melvin, take a note."

Upon producing a quill and a scroll of parchment, Melvin fixed his eyes over the paper, ready to take dictation. Dragonfire Delivery's first Hoofington customer smiled and looked intently at the jar of dragonfire sitting on the counter in front of her.

"For this demonstration, I will be sending a letter to my shopkeeper in Fillydelphia, a dragon called Turquoise," White Noise began. "Melvin, write this: 'Hello Turquoise. Please reply to this message as soon as you get it. Signed, White Noise'."

Once Melvin had written the message and rolled up the scroll, White Noise levitated it out of his grasp and held it over the dragonfire jar.

"Now I'm going to unscrew the lid, and drop the message onto the green flame."

White Noise did as he said, and the mare watched in awe as the flame wrapped around the message and burnt it up, destroying itself in the process and leaving an empty jar.

“The message has been sent, and now we must just wait for a reply.”

Soon enough, Melvin coughed and spat a message out onto the table, causing the mare to recoil a bit. Melvin was a young dragon, so he did not yet have complete mastery over his magic, but he had managed to tone message delivery down from a retch to a semi-polite cough. Turquoise in Fillydelphia was the only dragon White Noise knew who could receive a message with a breath, something she was very proud of.

“Would you do the honours of unrolling the scroll, ma’am?” asked White Noise. “I assure you, it’s quite safe to touch – that is how all dragonfire messages are sent, after all.”

The mare smiled nervously and nosed open the scroll. It was a copy of that day’s *Fillydelphia Post*, with the words “Here you go, boss. -Turq” scrawled across the top. White Noise made a mental note to congratulate his Fillydelphia assistant for devising such an ingenious method of proving the legitimacy of his system.

“Woah,” said the mare, checking and double-checking the date on the newspaper. “I’ll take two please: one for Trottingham, and one for Ponyville.”

“At a special, first-customer-only discount, of course,” White replied with a charismatic smile, levitating the relevant jars off the shelf behind him. “Tell your friends!”

As their lack of a common name indicated, Garden Rose and Placid Fields were a very modern couple, and kept a neat little homestead without too many frilly decorations - although that could have been because one of the cottage’s three occupants was a very energetic and curious little filly.

However, much to the delight of Sibwashie – and the even greater delight of Sky Wave – good cooking had clearly *not* gone out of fashion along with shared names.

The two had informed White Noise of the dinner, and ensured him that he would be welcomed in true small-town earth pony fashion should he

choose to join them, but he had instead elected to stay behind at Dragonfire Delivery and take care of all the administrative paperwork that goes with opening a new branch of one's business.

"What's it like where you come from, Sibwashie?" Garden Rose asked, after taking a polite sip of her expertly-prepared carrot soup. "Is Zebrica much different from Equestria?"

Sibwashie finished swallowing his mouthful of soup and thought for a moment before answering.

"If you look on the surface, many differences you'll see
But where it really matters, zebras and ponies are alike as can be

"In Zebrica the forests make way for great savannahs and deserts where
wild animal roam
But much like ponies, zebras enjoy good foods, good friends and the
comfort of a warm home

"Our magic is different from yours, as not one of us possesses a horn
But we don't believe in curses or other imaginings of which the foolish
forewarn."

Placid Fields clapped his front hooves together appreciatively once
Sibwashie had finished his poetic speech.

"I've always really liked the way you zebra folk talk," he said. "I remember seeing a play that a zebra acting troupe put on once, and they kept up that fantastic rhyming all the way through: in every piece of dialogue and all the narrations. They even thanked us for watching the play afterwards in poetry."

Daffodil, who had been sitting very quietly at one end of the table for the entire meal up to this point, suddenly became very animated. Her eyes lit up at her father's mention of the word "play" and she almost started hopping around in excitement.

"A play?" she asked, eyes bulging ever further out of their sockets. "Ooh, ooh, Daddy, Daddy! Can you please please *please* take me to see the zebra play? Please, oh please, oh please, oh please!"

Placid Fields smiled kindly at his daughter, feeling glad that she had seemingly got over her fear of zebras. “Of course, dear. Next time they come into town, I promise we’ll go.”

Sky Wave smiled to herself. She had noticed that the filly had yet to get her cutie mark, and something told her she already had a pretty good idea of what it would look like.

“Now, Sibwashie,” began Placid, speaking quite gravely. “As a zebra in Equestria, it must be hard for you to... blend in, right? Ponies tend to, maybe, make judgements about you based on your... heritage?”

Sibwashie nodded, not sure where Placid was going with this sudden shift in tone.

“Have you experienced any of that kind of negativity here in Hoofington?”

Sibwashie put a hoof to his chin and thought for a moment, before telling the stallion about the incident in the marketplace. He also remembered that Petunia Hospitality had been abnormally excited to meet him because of his “heritage”, but didn’t mention it. *That was hardly ‘negativity’*, he thought.

The stallion’s expression turned sour, and he opened his mouth to make a serious proclamation: “That simply shall not do. We the people of Hoofington cannot tolerate that kind of insensitive behaviour. Luckily, I have some connections in the governance of this town, so I’ll have a chat with some influential people to ensure that such an incident is not repeated within our borders – not even by any other non-Hoofingtonians.”

Sibwashie nodded and expressed his gratitude, not really knowing what else to do. Once Placid Fields looked satisfied, the family and their guests continued to sip their carrot soup.

Sometime earlier, White Noise and Melvin received their second customer. White nudged the dragon with an elbow, reminding him that this customer was his.

The customer in question was a stout, older stallion with streaks of grey going through his black mane. A brown, slightly-fraying fedora sat atop his head, tilted at a jaunty angle. His pale yellow eyes bore a twinkle of good-naturedness.

“Good afternoon sir,” Melvin said stiffly, apparently not even trying to imitate his boss’s enthusiasm. “Welcome to Dragonfire Delivery. How may we help you?”

The stallion screwed up his eyes and made a strange expression with his mouth, as if he was thinking very hard about something.

“Errr... yis,” he said at last, through a thick accent. “Ah wuz ‘opin’ that yew culd uuze yir fency dragone fyre to send this ‘ere loaf of ‘ome’ade bread ta mah boy in Appleloosa.”

Now it was Melvin’s turn to screw up his face in a confused expression. He was about to ask the stallion to repeat himself – at a slower pace this time – when a loaf of bread was thumped down on the counter in front of Melvin and he made the connection.

Sighing deeply, Melvin shot off a response: “I am sorry sir, but the dragonfire used by Dragonfire Delivery can only be used to send scrolls of parchment, not baked goods.”

Even though this was the first customer Melvin had ever dealt with, he somehow managed to say this line through such a thick film of boredom and apathy that one could be forgiven for thinking that he had been suffering through a dead-end service industry job for his entire life – and perhaps even a little longer.

“Wut’s that son?” asked the kindly old stallion. “Wha’ever dya mean?”

“Sir, I regret to inform you that Dragonfire Delivery physically cannot send your loaf of bread to Appleloosa,” Melvin replied, rolling his eyes.

“Ah dun geddit.”

“Dragonfire is to be used *exclusively* for the transfer of *written correspondence*.”

“Speak plainly-like, boy!”

“Can’t. Send. Bread. Sir.”

“Why naut?”

“It. Won’t. Burn.”

“Ah think it’ll burn jus’ fine. Why, one time when Ah wuz jus’ a li’l colt, Ah used bread to keep mah campfire goin’. Y’see, like e’ery yung’un, Ah ran away from ‘ome once and-”

“I’m sorry sir but your bread will not burn in special green dragonfire regardless of its flammability properties with respect to regular fire good DAY!”

Melvin forced the final word of his long sentence out with such force that, had it been a loaf of bread sent by dragonfire rather than just a word, it would have shot across the store and knocked the old stallion out cold.

“Well a’right then,” the stallion said, looking at the floor. “Yah dun need ta be so rude ‘bout it. Gud day ta y’all ‘swell.”

The old stallion picked up his loaf of bread and turned to tail to leave the shop. Once he was out the door, Melvin let out a long breath of relief – only to suck it right back in again when he caught the edge of White Noise’s disapproving glare.

“Did I do...”

“No, Melvin. You didn’t do good. Not at all.”

Sibwashie awoke the next day to another idyllic Hoofington morning. The caravan merchants from the previous day had long ago packed up their wares and left town, leaving a quiet early morning atmosphere and a desolate market square.

Desolate, that is, except for a group of three athletic young stallion earth ponies kicking around a white and black ball. Sibwashie's ears perked up when he recognized the game they were playing – it was the international sport of hoofball, and they were playing in the rather unfair teams of two versus one.

The stallions were all varying shades of brown, with short manes and tails that varied from pitch black to a light green. All three of them were lean and well-muscled, although none of them were quite as solidly-built as Sibwashie.

Sibwashie galloped up to the ponies excitedly, and shouted an enthusiastic greeting and appeal to join their game.

“Good morning, sportsponies, I see you are playing hoofball, my very favourite sport
I'd very much like to join you, and then you would no longer be one player short.”

The earth ponies exchanged glances, and then the one who had hitherto been on his own nodded eagerly and beckoned Sibwashie over, while the other two nodded and motioned with a little less eagerness.

“Okay, reset the score!” called Sibwashie's new team-mate, before turning to him. “We're scoring over there, and the other team's scoring over here. You're a pretty big guy – how about you defend, and I'll attack?”

Sibwashie nodded his agreement and in moments, the game was on.

Playing hoofball again reminded Sibwashie of long afternoons during his childhood, when he and the other young boys in his village would all get together and play a game or six. Sometimes he'd win, sometimes he'd lose, and sometimes no-one remembered to keep score.

Sibwashie had the ball. Head angled down, he wound his way between the two opposing team ponies, dribbling the ball in between his forelegs. The goal was in sight, but it was still a little far away. Sibwashie spun around, preparing to buck the ball for all he was worth...

... and one of the opposing ponies whisked it out from behind his hooves, leaving him to buck air.

Not losing a moment, Sibwashie smiled and regained his footing, tearing after the pony with the ball as soon as he laid eyes on him.

The pony was going for their goals. Out of the corner of his vision, Sibwashie saw that his teammate had moved in to mark the second pony on the opposing team, who was sliding up to a position near the goals.

The stallion with the ball looked around frantically for a few moments. Sibwashie was gaining on him from the one side, and to another side his teammate was being aggressively marked. Thinking quickly, he angled himself towards his teammate, and set himself up for a pass.

Then, at the last minute, the pony whipped himself around and bucked the ball straight between the two trees that made up Sibwashie's team's goalposts.

It was a decisive shot, and the score was set to one-zero, in the opposing team's favour.

The game continued in that vein for some time. Sibwashie and his teammate scored a lucky goal, but the others managed to get a further two goals passed them. Sibwashie's teammate shot him an anxious look as the score changed from two-one to three-one.

The sun was inching ever higher in the sky, and hoofball players were sweating from exertion when another pony stepped onto the field. This newcomer was an older stallion wearing a policepony's hat, and presumably not intending to join the game.

The policepony beckoned the closest member of the opposing team over to him and whispered something in his ear. Whatever it was, it made the stallion nod profusely as his eyes widened. The policepony smiled and patted the stallion on the back with a hoof before moving out of the field of play.

"Carry on!" he bellowed.

White Noise ambled towards the entrance of his newest Dragonfire Delivery store, still blinking the sleep out of his eyes. After giving his assistant a long lecture about proper behaviour towards customers, and then leading him through an impromptu employee training session, he had to spend the rest of the previous night filling out forms and balancing his books. The moon was very low in the sky when he had finally finished and crawled back to the inn and into his bed.

And now it was nearly noon and the unicorn had only just woken up. White Noise hoped that Melvin had taken at least some of what he'd said the previous day to heart, and hadn't managed to make *too* many more ponies swear off Dragonfire Delivery.

White Noise entered the shop just as another pony was leaving. A quick glance at her face showed him that she was smiling, and had probably – to his great surprise – received satisfactory service.

"Good afternoon, boss," Melvin said cheerfully, loudly placing a number of bits into the cashbox in front of him. "You'll be glad to know that we've been very busy today. The word must have spread since you asked that lady to tell her friends about us yesterday."

"Uh, yes," White Noise replied tentatively, taken aback by Melvin's new, positive attitude. "I'm, uh, glad to see you were listening to the things I told you yesterday, Melvin."

"Why of course I was, sir," Melvin replied indignantly. "I'd say I've certainly turned over a new leaf this morning. I'm fully prepared to give my all to these customers, and start earning my salary."

And indeed the dragon had. White Noise watched in appreciation as customers would come in, one by one, and be treated with dignity and respect by the young dragon. He would be patient with the old earth ponies who didn't entirely understand how the system worked, and he would be quick and efficient with the busy young unicorns who absolutely needed to send messages to every town in Equestria.

White Noise left Melvin to handle the store on his own a little later in the afternoon, after giving him a commendation and the promise of a bonus later on in the year.

“Another excellent goal, Sibwashie!” said Twitch, smiling with his mouth. “Let’s call it day though – I’d say you two have us thoroughly beaten.”

A round of hoofbumps and proper introductions later, Sibwashie parted ways from Twitch, Trailblazer and Jump. Final score: five-three to Sibwashie and Jump.

This triumphant turnaround didn’t make Sibwashie as happy as he had thought it would. The game had been very different after the policepony’s interruption. It seemed to move at a much slower pace, and Twitch stopped catching Sibwashie out with his signature jerky movements quite as much.

Sibwashie had scored three out of his team’s five goals, and he had never even been very much of a shooter back home – he had pretty much always played goalkeeper. He was certain that the other ponies had been holding back and letting him do well at the game. *But why would they do that?* he thought. *Surely they just got tired in the second half of the game, and I just had a bit of a lucky streak.*

“Hey Sibwashie, how’s it going?” called out Sky Wave, as she and White Noise turned a corner and came into the zebra’s view. “White’s just told me that the dragon in his shop here has proven himself capable of handling the place on his own, so we figured we’d get some lunch to celebrate that! Want to come with?”

“I am pleased to hear that your business is going well And some lunch just about now sounds pretty swell,” Sibwashie replied.

“There’s a nice little eatery a few shops down from Dragonfire Delivery that’d probably be nice to try,” White Noise suggested. “It’s not as famous as the last place Sibwashie and I had lunch at, but I think it should do nicely all the same.”

The two ponies and zebra made their way to the eatery, and true to White Noise's word, it was a pleasant, quaint little place. The three sat down on hay bale-seats around an outside table and ordered soups, salads, sandwiches and their lunch-appropriate ilk.

Everything was going swimmingly until Sibwashie lifted up a leaf of lettuce and found a worm crawling across its underside. A little shocked, Sibwashie put the leaf down on a sideplate and discretely pointed it out to White and Sky. The three companions shared bemused smiles.

"Good thing it's a live worm," whispered Sky Wave. "That's how you can tell the salad's fresh."

No sooner had Sky finished her hushed sentence than the sound of thundering hooves filled the eatery's outdoor section as not one but two very flustered-looking waiters rushed over to their table and snatched up Sibwashie's salad, apologizing profusely all the while.

"Our humblest, humblest apologies, good sir," the first waiter said. "We are utterly ashamed about this terrible, terrible travesty, and the bleak misfortune that cause it to be visited on you today."

A third waiter cantered over, balancing two salads on his back.

"Please, accept these two free salads as our apology to you," said the second waiter – a unicorn – as he levitated the salads onto the table in front of Sibwashie. "And if there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to ask. Please remember, we are in your debt."

Their melodramatic play over, the waiters disappeared into the eatery kitchen, leaving a very confused zebra and his very confused pony friends to stare at the two salads in silence.

"... Are you gonna eat that?" asked Sky Wave.

Without a word, Sibwashie nosed the plate over to her.

“They probably treat all their customers like that,” White Noise hypothesised as he, Sky Wave and Sibwashie left the eatery. “These businesses have a small enough customer base that it’s very important to leave *everypony* with a good impression. Everyzebra too.”

“Haha!” laughed Sky, pointing a hoof at something in front of the group. “Look at that poor guy!”

Sibwashie and White Noise’s eyes followed Sky’s hoof and came to rest on a blue earth pony stallion who was desperately trying to balance an enormous fruit-basket on his back. He tottered in one direction and then another as we walked along the path in front of them, looking like he was going to drop the basket at any second. The pony had obviously never worked as a waiter.

“Vhis vis veavy,” came a muffled voice from above the blue pony’s head.

A sharp THUD drew his attention to his side, where Sky Wave was lying with her wings extended and her mouth over the handle of the giant fruit basket.

“Perhaps we could help you carry this basket to where-ever it is that you’re going, friend,” said White Noise. “No offense, but you’re not really managing so well on your own.”

The blue stallion only smiled nervously at White’s offer, staring at some point beyond him and Sky. Sibwashie raised an eyebrow – he was getting more than a little weirded out by this new pony’s staring.

“Zebra from a foreign land, we have brought you a selection of Hoofington’s finest produce

Please enjoy this complementary fruit basket – and remember, you can ask for more-juice,” said the pony at last, sweating profusely all the while.

Sibwashie stared blankly at the pony while White Noise cringed at the rhyme. Gears were turning in the zebra’s head, and he decided he had had quite enough of this bizarre preferential treatment.

He told the stallion to keep his over-sized fruit-basket and stormed off, with White Noise and Sky Wave cantering behind him. Sky cast a sorrowful

glance at the fruit basket before remembering that she had just had lunch and really didn't need any more food.

"That basket of fruit made to feed a village was the final straw I'm sorting this weirdness out with the an officer of the law.

"The policepony I saw at the game earlier on today Will tell me why everything's going my way," said Sibwashie determinedly, after filling White Noise and Sky Wave in on his day.

The zebra and his two pony friends soon arrived at Hoofington's small police-department – a cottage that had been painted deep blue and given a sign with a gold badge drawn on it. Upon entering the building, Sibwashie immediately set eyes on the stout policepony he thought responsible for his preferential treatment.

"Uh, hello zebra visitor from a faraway land-"

Sibwashie cleared his throat and started to speak before the policepony had finished; likely saving the latter party from perpetrating a crime against language with an awfully contrived rhyme.

"Mister policepony, I saw you earlier today at my game of hoofball You helped me turn it around and win when I had my back to the wall.

"Sadly, you were not playing, so the help was not fair Why did you do as you did: why did you care?"

The policepony swallowed. His eyes turned from the accusing stare of Sibwashie to the merely puzzled stares of Sky and White, and he breathed out, as if releasing a load from his chest.

"It's the mayor's orders, sir," said the policepony meekly. "She got us policeponies together this morning because she wanted to make you feel welcome in Hoofington, and make sure nopony was short with you. We can't have discrimination or hate in the friendliest town in Equestria, now can we?"

“Where can we find this mayor?” asked White Noise.

“She should be in her office at the town hall, signing papers and doing mayor-stuff.”

Sibwashie and co. burst into the mayor’s office to find a surprised-looking tan earth pony mare with a curly brown mane. Getting as far as the office had proven no trouble for Sibwashie, given his new status in the town – the trickiest part had been convincing the staff not to have him carried up to the office on a recliner.

“Before you start rhyming and asking how you can make his day better,” began White Noise, making fierce eye-contact with the mare. “My zebra friend has some questions for you.”

Nodding to White Noise, Sibwashie began:
“Ms Mayor, please tell me why you have thought it fitting
To single me out for favours and gifts unremitting.

“I am little more than a humble traveller, moving through your town
There is no need to accommodate me by turning it upside-down.”

The mayor pushed her glasses up on her nose and stared blankly at Sibwashie, the gears slowly turning in her head as she tried to figure out how to reply.

“I’m sorry, Mr Sibwashie,” she said at last. “I was approached this morning by my good friend Placid Fields, who told me that we had a zebra staying in our town, and it was of utmost importance that he be treated right, in accordance with our creed of friendship.”

“Friendship is one thing, ma’am,” interrupted Sky Wave. “But you had the whole town going mad trying to keep a smile on Sibwashie’s muzzle. Isn’t that a little excessive.”

The mayor put a hoof to her chin and nodded slowly. “I suppose it is, when you put it that way. But we have a good reason for our behaviour.”

“This reason I would very much like you to tell
And I’m sure my friends are interested as well.”

“It’s largely to do with someone we knew as foals,” began Placid Fields, speaking clearly and slowly into the eager ears of Sibwashie and his friends.

The mayor had summoned Placid, his wife Garden Rose, and the chief of police (the stout policepony Sibwashie had met earlier), and the group sat in a circle, listening to Placid Fields tell them the story - a story which the Hoofingtonians in the group knew all too well.

“Nearly thirty years ago, a zebra lady named Maseni lived in Hoofington,” Placid continued. “She was a kind old lady who would always gather us children around and tell us fantastic stories about her homeland, and about her many travels throughout the world. She had had a lot of adventures in her long life, and had seen so many wonderful things. The adults were all scared of her, but we kids knew better. Maseni was like a second mother to us.”

“I remember one time, I had a cold,” interjected Garden Rose. “It was quite dreadful and it absolutely wouldn’t go away. I would sneeze and sneeze, and I’m sure I kept all of Hoofington awake at night with the racket my nose made. Anyway, it was on the second day of my illness that I woke up to find a steaming bowl of soup on my window pane, with a note attached. I couldn’t read the note, but I recognized Maseni’s beautiful Zebrican signature at the bottom. The point is, the soup was delicious, and made me better within a day.”

Sibwashie smiled, remembering his mother’s soups and how they would chase out any ailment he was feeling with warmth and flavour.

“As I was saying,” continued Placid Fields. “The adults were all afraid of Maseni, and they’d always tell us to stop visiting her, and tell us horror stories about curses and tasty pony stews. Not that we listened. Eventually though, they found a reason to kick her out of the town: some contrived thing about a health hazard posed by her exotic garden - I was too young at the time to really understand what was going on.”

“Our elders were really horrible about the whole business,” added the mayor. “They jeered at Maseni as she left town with the few belongings she could carry in an old set of saddlebags, and then had a huge party to celebrate her departure.”

“Thankfully the old coots have been calmed down by the wisdom that comes with age,” the police chief said. “And now that our generation holds most of the power here in Hoofington, we’ve dedicated ourselves to making this town a place of friendship and acceptance.”

For a time afterwards, Sibwashie was silent. He had become quite angry with the town’s treatment of him: as if he was a poor, lost foreigner who needed all the kindness the ponies could possibly give him to wipe away the blemish of one insult by one pony. As if the town of Hoofington were afraid he would judge them unfairly because of some slight unpleasantness experienced within their borders.

Now the zebra saw that their pandering was an honest mistake; the result of an over-correction of a past injustice that the ponies still felt some lingering sense of guilt about. Sibwashie had seen his share of bigotry and misunderstanding and moreover, he understood what it was to want to redeem the actions of one’s forebears.

“I thank you good citizens for the work of your best intentions
And I understand their cause, as you and I are similar in some dimensions.”

Melvin watched White Noise and his companions head out of Hoofington through one of the shop windows. He’d heard they’d caused some stir at the mayor’s office the previous day, but he also heard, later on, that everything had worked out alright, so he hadn’t bothered to investigate further.

Once the travellers had disappeared around a bend in the E7, Melvin turned his attention back to the shop’s entrance. A unicorn mare entered and asked him for an Appleloosa jar of dragonfire, which he swiftly retrieved from the shelves behind him.

“That’ll be thirty bits please,” he said.

“Here you go,” replied the customer, levitating the necessary currency into Melvin’s waiting claws.

Melvin smiled to himself once the customer had left the store. He remembered how White Noise had always told him and the other dragon that “distance doesn’t matter to dragonfire”. According to the learned unicorn, that was the crux of his whole business.

White Noise is an academic, not a businesspony, thought Melvin. The customers don’t know how dragonfire works, and therefore they have no idea whether or not distance is a factor. Any shrewd businessperson would figure out how to take advantage of that.

Officially, jars of dragonfire were to be sold for twenty bits each, regardless of destination. Melvin had happened upon the idea of charging extra bits for deliveries to further away places while sorting the shop’s jars of dragonfire according to geographical proximity. He figured he’d be able to spin a story about magic intensity or flame size if he ever needed to back himself up and seeing as he was dragon, ponies would have to believe him.

Melvin’s boss would never approve of such a business practice, for a variety of reasons the dragon hadn’t paid attention to during his employee orientation, and that was why Melvin smiled extra wide as he slipped ten of the bits he’d just received into a bag under the counter.

Chapter Four

“Celestia! Celestia, good news!”

Princess Luna’s voice echoed off the walls and high ceiling of the royal throne room as she rushed in to join her sister. Luna was levitating an opened scroll, which she eagerly handed to Celestia just as she reached the room’s two thrones.

“What is it, dear sister?” Celestia asked calmly, levitating the scroll up to her face as Luna released it.

“Read the scroll!” Luna replied. “The governor of the Lunar Republic says he’d be honoured to host me, and that he’s having everyone on his staff prepare for my arrival. He’s ever so grateful for the return of the moon’s blessing to his country, and wants to make a *personal* apology for the rudeness of his ancestors.”

“That’s wonderful news, Luna! When do you wish to depart for the Lunar Republic?”

“As soon as possible – uh, the day after tomorrow, I think. That will give me time to inform the gracious governor of my plans, and sort out some stuff over here before I go.”

“When you are ready with a reply, have Wind Tamer send the governor a message hawk. Sadly, I don’t think there are any dragons in the Lunar Republic, so our second-fastest communication method will have to do.”

Luna sighed at her sister’s mention of dragons. Before her thousand year banishment, message hawks had been the fastest method of communication, bar none, and dragons had been dangerous monsters that clever ponies stayed well away from.

“I do hope they get with the times soon,” Celestia sighed. “Perhaps you could have a talk with the governor about that, if you can make time for it.”

White Noise, Sibwashie and Sky Wave had ambled into Ponyville as the sun was setting over the mountains behind the Everfree Forest. They'd walked there directly from Hoofington, something that had taken them the entire day, with very few breaks along the way. Needless to say, White Noise was dead on his hooves and desperately needed to lie down.

"What a nice little town this is," Sky Wave said. "The buildings are so colourful and cottagey. It's such a shame that it's right on the edge of that creepy forest."

The travellers were still a fair distance away from the centre of town when they came across the first ponies they would see in Ponyville.

"Oh, look at that," Sky Wave whispered to her companions, pointing at the two ponies. "Some hard-working folk still working in their garden at this hour – I wonder what they're plant- oh my!"

"No Ditzzy," came an exasperated voice from the first pony, an orange mare. "You can't grow carrots faster by burying food with their seeds. Seeds cannot eat."

"But aren't they just like eggs?" asked the orange pony's companion, a grey pegasus, as she dropped another muffin into the hole she and her friend were planting in. "Plant eggs, I mean. Like, don't plants come out of seeds in the same way chickens come out of eggs? And what if they're hungry when they get out? Plants don't have mommies to feed them, you know."

"Plants do not- oh, hello," said the irritated orange pony, noticing her and Ditzzy's three new spectators and changing her tone considerably. "I don't think I've seen you ponies before."

"We're travellers, passing through on our way to Port Anchor," White Noise replied, offering a hoof. "I'm White Noise, this is Sky Wave, and that's Sibwashie. Pleasure to meet you, Ms..."

"Carrot Top."

“My name’s Ditzzy Doo! Why do you have such a funny-looking coat, Mr Sibwa- Sibwa- Sibyouhaveafunnynametoo?”

Sibwashie smiled at the pegasus. Normally, he might have been offended by such a remark, but there was something in Ditzzy Doo’s cheerful tone of voice that prevented him from harbouring even the slightest resentment for her.

“I could say the same thing about your coat and name, Ms Doo
What people see as normal and strange varies, this much is true.”

“Oh! You’re a zebra like Zecora! You talk all sing-song, just like she does! And your coat looks like hers too, all striped and stuff. Oh wow this is so exciting!”

Ditzzy broke into a ridiculous grin at this point, and the three newcomers saw her pupils move in opposite directions – one looking up, and the other looking down.

“You’ll have to forgive Ditzzy,” whispered Carrot Top. “She’s differently-wired from most ponies, and she’s had a rather rough time lately as well.”

“You bet I have, CT!” Ditzzy Doo blurted out, having heard her friend’s every carefully-concealed word. “I used to work at the Ponyville post office, but the other day they kicked me out because they said my cutie mark wasn’t enough like a cutie mark a mailmare should have. I told them all about bubble wrap and how wonderful it is, but they didn’t agree. Which is actually good because I don’t think my cutie mark is about bubble wrap, I mean that would be silly. I think it comes from my bubbly personality, or at least that’s what my parents told me when I got it which bythewayisaninterestingstoryitallstartedwhen...”

Ditzzy kept on talking, her voice getting faster and softer, until she was rapidly moving her mouth without any words coming out of it.

“I used to work at the post office too, Ditzzy,” Sky said sadly.

Ditzzy looked up at Sky Wave, her misaligned eyes lighting up.

“But apparently a ribbon isn’t mail-related enough for those snobby ponies,” Sky continued, motioning to her flank with a hoof. “I guess you could tie your mail up with a ribbon, but I didn’t think of that at the time...”

“It’s not fair!” wailed Ditzzy, suddenly audible again.

White Noise cleared his throat and interjected with a word to Carrot Top, before the conversation got too depressing: “Could you perhaps point us towards an inn? It’s getting late, and we’re going to need somewhere to sleep tonight.”

“There’s a nice one just over there,” Carrot Top replied, motioning towards a white and brown wooden building with a thatch roof just down the road. “It’s cheap, and I’ve heard that the rooms are clean and the service is decent. It’s also your only choice – Ponyville doesn’t get enough ponies passing through to need more than one inn.”

“Thank you Ms Carrot Top, that should do nicely,” thanked White Noise gracefully, motioning to Sibwashie and Sky to tell them it was time to go. “We’d best be going to book our rooms. Thanks again for the help, and good luck with your gardening.”

The five new acquaintances bade farewell to each other, and as White Noise and his companions headed for the inn, they heard Carrot Top tell Ditzzy that gardening wasn’t her strong suit.

The following morning, Sky Wave awoke to the sound of pebbles knocking against the window of her second story room in Ponyville’s single inn. Clink. Clink. Clink.

Rubbing her eyes, Sky slid out of bed and looked out the window. A grey face with mismatched yellow eyes smiled sheepishly back at her, and she heard a low whistle as a bunch of stones fell from the pegasus’s hooves.

“Ditzzy?” Sky asked sleepily, pulling the window open.

Ditzy tapped the side of her head a few times, her eyes coming further into alignment with each successive tap. Once they looked normal, she donned a serious expression and opened her mouth to let out a flood of words.

"I remember yesterday when we met you said you lost your job at the post office just like I did because of the same reason and I was wondering if you could help me find something else to do I tried gardening with Carrot Top but she said I'm no good and I don't really know what else I can do and you seem to be alright and you look like a smart pony and..."

"Alright! Alright, I'll help you, Ditzy," Sky cried, bracing herself against the torrent of words that threatened to sweep her away. "I'd be happy to help out a fellow former-mailmare."

"You would?" Ditzy replied, her eyes starting to dislocate as her smile threatened to do the same to her jaw. "Oh thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

Ditzy flew through the window and tackled Sky to the ground with a very dangerous hug, fortunately not breaking any of the inn's furniture in the process.

Ohmigosh I wish she wasn't so strong, thought Sky, as her breath went out of her under the force of Ditzy's hug.

"Good morning boss! Ponyville Dragonfire Delivery operative Spaug at your service!"

The green dragon snapped a claw to her forehead in a salute, and White Noise nodded appreciatively. Spaug was a few years older than Turquoise, and even though she nearly too tall to walk through the doors in Ponyville without stooping, she made a fine employee.

"Glad to see you so eager," White Noise began. "As I said in the letter I sent you a few days ago, we're going to be opening up the Ponyville branch of Dragonfire Delivery today, so you won't have to hang around in the Post Office anymore. I trust you're prepared for your promotion to store manager?"

“Yes sir!” she replied. “I started preparing the shop as soon as I got the letter. I’ve stocked the shelves, dusted the whole place from top to bottom, organized the storeroom, and given the sign a fresh coat of paint. All the shop needs is your approval.”

“Excellent!” replied White Noise, already levitating his second “Yay! We’re Open/Sorry, We’re Closed” out of his saddlebag. “Judging by your performance in the past, I trust that that is exactly right.”

With Spaug’s capable claws at the helm, *Dragonfire Delivery – Ponyville’s* opening day went off very smoothly. The dragoness handled every customer who came in with grace and politeness, never losing her cool with even the most exasperating ones. She was the oldest dragon White Noise had in his employ, and her resume indicated her experience in a number of previous service industry jobs.

Spaug was doing such a great job that White Noise had become very bored sitting in the shop and watching her handle customers even better than he could.

In his boredom, White got to thinking about something the Ponyville innkeeper had told him when he’d asked about the town. The librarian was apparently a student of Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, just like himself, and was said to keep a very extensive library.

White Noise had perused every book on dragons, Dragonia and dragonfire he’d been able to find in the Canterlot and Fillydelphia libraries, but that wasn’t saying much. Dragons were not, as a rule, very active writers – most seemed happy to take dictation.

An avid reader and book collector living in close proximity to the Everfree forest may own some rare books on monsters, thought White Noise. And dragons are kinda like monsters... although I wouldn’t say that out loud in my present company.

“I’m going to go see if I can find something at the library, Spaug,” said White Noise. “Keep up the good work while I’m out.”

“Yes sir!” Spaug replied enthusiastically.

“Okay, so let’s start with your cutie mark,” began Sky Wave, giving Ditzzy a serious look. “Bubbles. What special talent does that give a pony?”

“My mom and dad said that the bubbles were for my bubbly personality!” replied Ditzzy enthusiastically. “They said I’m always smiling and happy and fun to be around, but I really don’t know why anypony *wouldn’t always* be all of those things! If I wasn’t happy, I might get sad!”

Sky gave Ditzzy a blank stare.

“No offense, Ditzzy,” she said, “but I don’t think that ‘having a bubbly personality’ counts as a special talent. I’m sure your talent is something a little more concrete.”

Sky put a hoof to her chin, and contemplated bubbles, soon losing herself in thought. Ditzzy tried to follow her example, but the pretty shapes of the clouds kept distracting her.

“Are you *sure*, Sky? Everypony always says I’ve got a bubbly personality – they use those exact words all the time and everything it’s a little weird.”

Sky smirked and let out a long, knowledge-laden sigh.

“Ditzzy,” she began. “My cutie mark is a ribbon. That ribbon represents me – it flows gracefully in the wind, just like I do when I dance. My friend White Noise, his cutie mark is a speech bubble, because he helps ponies talk to each other. Princess Celestia’s cutie mark is a sun because she raises the sun, not for her ‘sunny disposition’. I’m sure your special talent has something to do with actual bubbles – it can’t be some weird metaphor.”

Ditzzy looked perplexed at this, but went back to thinking. Sky followed suit.

“Ah-hah!” Sky said at last. “Got it! Have you ever tried... *cart washing*?”

“No, I haven’t ever done that!” Ditzzy said in response, smiling widely. “Maybe it’s my special talent!”

“It could be – there are a lot of bubbles in cart washing.”

Sibwashie strolled aimlessly through the town, feeling quite bored. Both of his friends had found things to do, and now he was alone, with a whole day to hang around in Ponyville and nothing to occupy it. With a deep sigh, he headed a first shop he came across, hoping that he would find something worth buying, or somepony to talk to.

“Welcome to Sugarcube Corner!” said a cheery voice, belonging to a pink earth pony with a poofy mane. “What would you- GASP!”

Sibwashie looked around frantically as the pink pony gasped and leaped into the air. Where they being attacked? Was the roof about to fall in and crush them both? Did he have something on his face?

“I’ve never seen you before!” she exclaimed, landing back behind the counter. “And you’re a zebra! This is so exciting I’m so excited! Why, I’m so excited I could just THROW A PARTY but actually I can’t do that because Mr and Mrs Cake are out of town today and they left me to watch the shop all day long and I have to prove to them that I’m responsible and I promised not to throw any parties while they were out! So instead I’ll just say ‘Hello! I’m Pinkie Pie, who are you?’”

Pinkie blinked. Sibwashie blinked. This mare was crazier than that grey pegasus he’d met the day before!

“Hello! I’m Pinkie Pie, who are you?” Pinkie said, speaking slower than before.

“I call myself Sibwashie - Student of the art of diploma-cy,” Sibwashie replied, reusing his slightly awkward greeting rhyme from Hoofington.

“Ooh... so you like talking to ponies and zebras and buffalos and other people?” said Pinkie. “That’s so super-duper – you get to talk all the time! I love talking!”

I guessed, thought Sibwashie, smiling outwardly.

Pinkie Pie launched off into a speech about... something, and Sibwashie sat quietly and listened, nodding his head every so often. Just as Pinkie was getting into her opinion of bendy straws, Sibwashie heard another voice, coming from the shop's entrance.

"<Never in my time here in Ponyville, did I expect to see another of my kind Young one, please tell me your name and your quest, if you wouldn't mind.>"

Sibwashie's smile widened as the words of his native tongue reached his ears – not the stilted, mispronounced words of an inexperienced speaker like White Noise, but the rhythmic, natural tones of one who had been speaking his language longer than even he had. He turned to Zecora and bowed his head in respect for his elder, as was the custom among zebras.

"<Good mother, I thank you, you have warmed my heart
A zebra must not, from his own herd, be so long apart.>"

"<The name my father gave me is Sibwashie, and my quest is this:
To see that relations between peoples are not of hatred, but of bliss,>"
Sibwashie replied, comfortably slipping back into his own language.

Pinkie raised a quizzical eyebrow as the zebras continued to talk in their language. She'd made up languages before – it had been a popular party game back home, as her parents thought that if they were going to have a party-pony for a daughter, she may as well play party games that stretched her brain. In any case, the language the zebras were speaking sounded nothing like anything she'd ever made up, so she decided against spouting off gibberish at the two. Also, a little thought in the back of her mind told her it might be considered rude, but that was only a secondary concern.

As Pinkie was contemplating what little she knew about Zebrican language, Zecora, now speaking Equestrian, approached her counter and asked her for a bag of sugarcubes.

"Flabbidy gabbidy gah!" Pinkie exclaimed cheerfully, grabbing a small bag with her mouth. "Shooben doogle wizzospotten."

"<I'm beginning to think that this pony is a little bit crazy,>" commented Sibwashie.

"<In Ponyville, the line between sane and insane is quite hazy,>" Zecora replied sagely.

A short while later, Ditzzy and Sky had become the two newest employees of Ponyville Cart Washers, "the cleanest place in town!" Sky had suggested a new slogan shortly after being hired, but as a very temporary employee, her opinion didn't have much weight.

Ditzzy Doo's first customer arrived soon. He was a wealthy, fit young stallion pulling a sleek black cart with well-polished chrome wheels that shone in the sunlight. Ditzzy got through the pleasantries alright, and soon the stallion had gone off to pay, leaving Ditzzy to start washing his cart.

"Cart-washing is boring!" she complained about three minutes in. "Sky, if this is my special talent, then shouldn't I be enjoying it?"

Sky thought for a moment. She lived for her dancing, and her friends White Noise and Sibwashie had been driven far from their homes in their quests to realise the potential of their talents. White Noise in particular could jaw a pony's ear off for hours about dragonfire and radio and the nuances of different languages.

"Maybe you just aren't doing it right," Sky said. "Being good at something often comes from approaching it from a completely different angle to what most ponies do, and you haven't tried washing carts in any other way than how the boss told you to."

"Maybe you're right," said Ditzzy, refocusing her eyes to show a thoughtful expression. "But I'm not sure how I can – ooh! I have an idea!"

Ditzzy zoomed off into the sky with call of "I'll be right *baaaaaaaaaaaaaack*". Sky smiled to herself. *This may just work out nicely after all.*

SPLASH!

Sky squealed as a torrent of water rained down on her.

“Sorry Sky,” Ditzzy apologized from above the cloud she’d just gone to fetch. “I should have warned you. Oh well! Pass me the soap, please!”

A dripping Sky Wave grabbed a box of soap off the ground and handed it to Ditzzy, who dumped the whole box’s contents into the cloud, which she then proceeded to jump up and down on repeatedly.

“I think it’s working!” she shouted, her eyes defocusing with joy. “I found a new way to wash carts! I’m the best cart washer ev-”

CRACK-A-THOOM! A bolt of lightning shot out of the bottom of the cloud and singed the sleek black paint off of a spot in the cart’s interior.

“My cart!” cried the wealthy stallion, having walked into view at exactly the wrong time.

“Oops...”

As he was walking towards the Ponyville library, White Noise realized how little he or anypony else knew about the dragon homeland. Dragons were not, as a rule, very sociable creatures, and although many parent dragons had been sending their children (some as mere eggs!) to live, learn and work in Equestria in recent years, their contact with ponies was still very minimal.

All these thoughts were buzzing around in White’s head as he finally reached the green door in the large oak tree that he assumed led into the library. Hoping that they would somehow have a book that he could use, he pushed the door open and walked in.

“Oh, hello sir,” said a meek, surprised voice as a purple head looked up from a thick book on a reading desk in the middle of the room. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before. How may I help you?”

White Noise’s eyes widened – the lilac mane – the purple hair and eyes – the bookish demeanour. It couldn’t be...

“Twilight Sparkle?” he asked, twisting his face quizzically.

“Uh, yes,” she replied. “That’s me.”

“You actually left the library?!”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

Twilight narrowed her eyes at the strange white stallion.

“I’m White Noise,” he said. “We were in General Magic together back in our first year at the School for Gifted Unicorns. Well, I don’t think we ever really talked, but everypony knew about *you*, Twilight!”

“Oh, well I guess they would,” she replied.

“I remember every time I went to the library, I’d see you sitting there with a book – just as you are now, I guess. We, uh, used to joke about how you probably had a sleeping bag behind the librarian’s counter.”

Twilight blushed, thinking back to all the times she’d woken up with her face in a book and a crick in her neck from falling asleep in the library. *In retrospect, it might have been a nice idea to have kept a sleeping bag behind the librarian’s counter*, she thought.

“So what are you doing here in Ponyville?” White Noise asked snidely. “The idea of you leaving the school’s grounds at all comes as quite shock.”

“Princess Celestia sent me here on an important mission for Equestria!” Twilight announced proudly. “I have been tasked with studying the magic of friendship!”

White stifled a snicker, earning another glare from Twilight.

“Hey, who’s there, Twilight?” asked a voice from the stairs. “He sounds... oh. Hey White Noise.”

A familiar baby dragon entered the library from above and smiled at White Noise.

“Spike! It’s been a while,” replied White, walking over to bump Spike’s hand with his hoof. “How’s life?”

“Same old, same old,” Spike replied casually. “I see your business is going well! It’s been cool having another dragon in town.”

White Noise and Spike descended into conversation about Canterlot, their mutual friends from the school, and White’s business, while Twilight pretended to return to her reading. She decided that she would have to ask Spike how he made so many friends... perhaps she would be able to make a study of it...

Sky frowned. Ditzzy frowned. The two pegasi lay prostrate on the grass, their manes tangled and their coats covered in tree sap.

“I wish we had had more success finding you a new job, Ditzzy,” Sky said morosely. “At least we tried.”

“It’s okay, Sky,” Ditzzy replied slowly, weariness winning over the usual cheer in her voice. “I guess I’m just not good at anything. I don’t have a special talent – just these stupid bubbles. What do you even do with bubbles? You blow them and they pop...”

“Don’t say that!” Sky exclaimed, startled by the depth of Ditzzy’s depression. “Everypony’s good at something, Ditzzy. And we’ll find out what it is that you’re good at, even if we have to get covered in tree sap again and again and again!”

The two ponies heard the clapping of tiny hooves some distance behind them. Mustering up the strength to turn her head, Sky looked in the direction of the sound and saw three little fillies wearing red capes, who shortly walked over to the pair.

The little yellow earth pony wearing a red bow was the first to speak.

“You’re tryin’ ta find what makes you special too?” she asked. “But you already have your cutie marks.”

“Ditzy Doo does have her cutie mark, yes,” Sky replied. “But she doesn’t know what it means. When she got it, she thought it was because of her ‘bubbly personality’, but she has no idea what *talent* it represents.”

“But don’t you just *know* what you’re supposed to do when you get your cutie mark?” asked another member of the group, an orange pegasus. “When Rainbow Dash got her cutie mark, she knew it was because she was supposed to be the fastest flier in Equestria! Same with all her friends and their boring stories!”

Ditzy Doo hung her head in shame. Sky put a hoof on the sad pony’s shoulder.

“Not always, girls,” she said to the three little fillies. “Cutie marks are just pictures – they don’t come with instruction manuals.”

The little fillies looked downcast at this. Sky glanced at their flanks, and noticed that none of the three had their cutie marks yet.

“Getting your cutie mark is still an amazing experience, even if you don’t understand what it means until later,” she explained. “The day this red ribbon appeared... it was the happiest day of my life...”

“So you really think that the... friendship... between ponies is a source of magic?” asked White Noise.

“There’s so much more to it than that, but if you must put it that way, then yes,” replied Twilight. “Friendship is magic.”

The two unicorns were seated on two of Twilight’s cushions, with Spike-made glasses of lemonade on the carpet next to them. White had forgotten all about any books he’d been looking for, and was having an in-depth discussion about magic with Princess Celestia’s star pupil: something he had never dreamt he’d do.

“Guess I’ve heard stranger things,” White said. “It makes a kind of sense – one of those ‘invisible bonds that link us all’ types of things.”

Twilight was enjoying this rare opportunity to talk to another gifted unicorn about magic. None of her earth pony or pegasi friends were really that interested in her greatest passion, and even Rarity didn't have an awful lot to say on the subject of magic. Twilight found herself wishing she'd made friends back at the school – having ponies to talk about her research with was very fulfilling.

“Believe me, I didn't believe it at first either,” Twilight said. “I thought magic was all about studying and learning the tricks of previous masters, and about understanding the intricate relationship between-”

Just as Twilight was about to recite the introductory paragraphs of the thesis she'd been planning, her train of thought was interrupted by the noisy entrance of three little fillies and two older ponies.

“Wow Sky Wave,” said Scootaloo. “That was actually a pretty okay story. Not as awesome as Rainbow Dash's cutie mark story, but I never knew air-dancing could be *that* extreme!”

Sky smiled modestly at the filly's compliment – the surprise on the faces of her friends indicated that to receive a compliment from Scootaloo was a rare honour, usually reserved for whoever this Rainbow Dash pony she kept talking about was.

“Hey Sky,” greeted White Noise. “Made some new friends, I see. Oh, hi again Ditzzy Doo.”

“You have a talks bubble for a cutie mark,” pointed out Apple Bloom. “Do you draw comic books?”

“No,” replied White Noise bluntly, “but a lot of ponies ask me that.”

Sweetie Belle walked over to Twilight to return a book while Apple Bloom launched into a barrage of questions about White Noise's cutie mark and special talent.

“... It's not really that exciting,” concluded White, as he finished satisfying most of Apple Bloom's questions.

“Sure isn't,” Scootaloo snorted.

While all this was going on, Ditzzy Doo was sitting very quietly in a corner, looking down at the library's carpet with a big frown on her face.

"... sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith, Sweetie..."

Ditzzy caught a snippet of Twilight's conversation with Sweetie Belle.

"... like when I was trying to escape a hydra near Froggy-Bottom Bog..."

"Did somepony say hydra?" Scootaloo asked excitedly, her ears perking up to listen to Twilight and Sweetie's conversation as well. "Those things are cool."

"Yeah, I'd like to hear about this 'hydra adventure' you had as well, Twilight," added White Noise. "I really enjoyed Monsters 101 back at school, and I've always wanted to see one with my own eyes."

Sighing a little, Twilight related the story of her adventure with the hydra, and the Pinkie Pie-themed events that led up to it.

"So the moral of the story was that sometimes you just have to believe in things, even if you can't make sense of them," Twilight concluded.

"I can imagine that would be difficult for you, Twilight," White Noise retorted.

"The other moral is don't go near Froggy-Bottom Bog," Twilight continued, eyeing the Cutie Mark Crusaders. "It used to be perfectly safe, but it's become a hydra habitat in recent times. I think it's got something to do with the-"

"Hey, where's Ditzzy?" asked Sweetie Belle, preventing Twilight from educating the others on the care and feeding of hydras.

The ponies in the library looked around to confirm that Ditzzy Doo was indeed missing. *She probably wandered off*, thought Sky Wave. *No big deal... she must have left when... oh!*

"I think she left around when you mentioned that giant... bubble..."

I'm sure your special talent has something to do with actual bubbles – it can't be some weird metaphor.

Everypony's eyes widened in realisation and they all raced out the door, Cutie Mark Crusaders included.

"You girls stay here, or go home," commanded Twilight. "I already told you, Froggy-Bottom Bog is *too* dangerous."

"Aww man..."

Dejectedly, Scootaloo crossed "Cutie Mark Crusader Hydra Slayers" off her mental checklist, while the other two did the same with sighs of relief.

White Noise, Sky Wave and Twilight raced across the town in the direction of the Everfree Forest. Froggy-Bottom Bog lay on its outskirts, and had for a long time been considered a safe place for ponies to visit, but in recent months, frightening creatures from the Everfree had been encroaching on the bog, rendering it a danger zone.

"Sibwashie, come, we need to get to Froggy-Bottom Bog! No time to explain!" Sky Wave yelled from her position in the sky, as she passed over the street Sibwashie had been nonchalantly walking across.

Without even taking the time to compose a situationally-appropriate couplet, Sibwashie leapt into action and galloped after Sky, swiftly overtaking her unicorn companions.

Sky arrived on the scene first. A grey blur shot towards her, and her heart sank. *Maybe she found out what her cutie mark means?* Sky hoped.

"Help! A hydra's chasing me!" shouted Ditzzy Doo. "The bubbles didn't listen when I told them to defend me!"

Well, maybe not.

Sky chuckled, and then swallowed nervously.

“Get out of here!” she shouted. “I’ll divert the hydra’s attention, don’t worry.”

Shouting a further command to Sibwashie (who had just arrived) to do what he could to help, Sky dove towards the bog, where she caught sight of the meanest, largest hydra she had ever seen.

And it was already halfway out of the bog, bearing scowls of rage on its many faces. Most of its eyes watched the area of the sky where Ditzzy had just been, but a few turned to face Sky, sending a shiver down her spin.

She had no idea how she was going to deal with the hydra, but thought that maybe it would go away if she stuck a hoof in its eye or something.

“FLY IN AND OUT!” shouted White Noise, his voice magically amplified.
“TRY TO TIE ITS NECKS IN A KNOT!”

Probably a better idea than just trying to poke it, Sky thought, adjusting her trajectory to accommodate her new plan.

She flew down. The hydra’s nearest head followed her.

She flew up. Another head followed her.

She flew towards the hydra’s body. Both heads followed her.

She twisted around, flew around the heads, and flew up towards a third head. She couldn’t see what was happening.

She flew down, then left, then right, then in a zig-zag pattern, and finally flew away from the beast.

Sky put on a cocky expression and glanced back at the knot she’d made of the hydra - except there was no knot. The hydra’s heads bobbed up and down on its untangled necks, and she could have sworn one of them smiled viciously at her.

“Aaah!” she gasped as one of the hydra’s heads snuck up behind her.

Sky flinched just in time for the head to pass her by with a loud WHOOSH of wind, riling up her mane but otherwise leaving her unharmed. Before the hydra was able to snap at her again with another of its many mouths, Sky soared out of the hydra's reach and made her way towards White Noise.

"It's too smart for me to tie up!" she cried, hovering just above the hill White was standing on. "I've only managed to tire myself out; if I landed now, I don't think I'd be able to get up again."

White Noise nodded in acknowledgement as he wracked his brains. He had been told by a grizzled old adventurer once that a nimble pegasus could trick a hydra into tying its necks together with the correct sequence of movements, but the effectiveness of that trick relied on the hydra being young and unaccustomed to the number of heads it had – neither of which applied to this vicious and crafty beast.

"Tying the hydra in knots, that's got to be the solution!" White Noise shouted. "Maybe if we could cut off some of its heads to-"

"Stop right there," Sky Wave interrupted, resisting the urge to give him a hoof to the face. "Have you *seen* how many heads that thing has *already*?"

White Noise glanced over at the hydra. Three of its heads scanned the muddy ground, frantically looking for whatever creature had been poking and pinching at its sensitive underside. For a big guy, Sibwashie could be artfully stealthy when necessary. And he was also quite skilled at swamp-diving.

That buys some us some time, White Noise thought. Maybe enough time for it to forget about Ditzzy Doo and get back into the swamp.

One of the hydra's heads swivelled around at just the right moment to catch Sibwashie surfacing above the mud. A roar and a lunge later, Sibwashie was out of the fight and the hydra had hopped out of the swamp entirely, and was slowly ambling towards Ponyville.

Or not.

"Okay, if you can't make it tie itself up," White said to Sky, the panic showing in his voice, "then we need magic to tie it up ourselves – and while

I'm not bad at tying bows on birthday presents, those necks are as thick as ponies! I don't have that kind of power!"

"I do."

Twilight Sparkle stood right behind the two ponies, her body lowered and tense. Her horn slowly lit up.

"Normally I'd tell you visitors off for provoking a hydra, but this one is far too large and dangerous to be so close to town, and it looks a little too interested in chasing Ditzzy Doo."

Her horn glowed ever brighter as the tendrils of her magic reached out to touch, and then surround the hydra. Twilight closed her eyes tightly in intense concentration as beads of sweat broke upon her brow.

"Aah! Help!" cried the voice of Ditzzy Doo, coming from behind Twilight.

Ditzzy zoomed past Sky Wave and White Noise, her goofy eyes wide with terror.

"I tried to go back to Ponyville but there's an evil dog-thing and he's chasing *meeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*!"

Sky and White watched in horror as a giant, three-headed dog – a cerberus – bounded out from behind a clump of trees and lunged at them. Frothy saliva hung from its mouths, and it had a look of blind rage in all six of its eyes. The creature was easily as tall as three ponies stacked on top of each other. White Noise had read about such creatures, but he hadn't been aware that they were able to grow to such enormous sizes.

The beast's multiple aggressive roars were deafening, growing ever more so as he closed in on the three ponies. But suddenly, they came to stop with three low whimpers.

"Gotcha," said Twilight, her voice straining just slightly as she held the hydra and the cerberus in her magic.

White and Sky opened their eyes to find that they had been holding onto each other for dear life. They quickly disentangled and stared in awe as

Twilight levitated the giant dog – now closer in countenance to a scared puppy – towards the hydra’s many heads.

Sweat poured down Twilight’s face as she slowly tied the cerberus up in the hydra’s necks. One neck, two necks, three necks...

“They’re... resistant... to magic,” she grimaced. “Not... sure... why. Can... get through the barriers... but... takes... a lot... of magic. Running... out...”

Twilight’s horn glowed brighter than White Noise had ever seen a unicorn’s horn glow before as she tied more and more of the hydra’s necks together, but he could see she was close to breaking point.

“Just... need... a little more... power.”

A crazy thought came into White Noise’s head.

“I can help,” he said.

White took a deep breath, and his horn started to glow. He looked at the hydra, and then back at Twilight. Magic tendrils extended from his horn and wrapped around the other unicorn, before shrinking to only cover her horn.

White was about to try something that’d he never heard of anypony doing before. He let out his breath, and severed his magic. All of it. His face contorted into a pained expression as his magic rushed out of his horn and into Twilight’s.

The magic transferal held. With the extra surge of power pushing her just over the edge, Twilight’s eyes glowed pure white as she quickly tied up the rest of the hydra’s necks, making a neat cerberus bundle (nicely wrapped up in hydra gift paper). Twilight then flicked her neck dramatically, and levitated the bundle up into the air.

She released her magic, and the hydra-cerberus package flew high into the air, reaching its maximum height halfway to the horizon, and dipping down into the depths of the Everfree Forest.

Twilight collapsed from over-exertion, and tears leaked from White Noise’s eyes. His horn appeared a shade darker than usual.

Sibwashie had emerged from the swamp by this time, and stood next to Sky and a still-shaken-up Ditzzy Doo, mouth agape in awe of the spectacular feat of magic that he had just witnessed.

“WOOHOO!” came a piercing cry, as Pinkie Pie appeared on the scene, seemingly out of nowhere. “This calls for a celebration!”

An hour or so later, Pinkie’s party was in full swing.

Everypony in town bombarded Twilight with gratitude for saving Ponyville from the terrible wrath of the enormous hydra and its friend the gigantic Cerberus, which made her feel quite uncomfortable.

“These travellers helped too!” she insisted, desperately motioning towards Sibwashie, Sky Wave and White Noise.

The three travellers smiled politely at the townsfolk, who soon returned to swamping Twilight, leaving them to talk in peace.

“Are you sure your horn’s okay?” Sky asked White. “It looks odd.”

“That’s because I gave Twilight my entire magic reserve back at the bog,” replied White. “My magic will replenish itself in a day or two, but until then I just won’t be able to do magic. It’s an annoyance, but it’s only temporary. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go get some punch... without levitating anything.”

As White Noise ambled over to the punch bowl, his mind returned to something Twilight had told him on the way back to Ponyville.

“Beasts of that size have no reason to be so close to Ponyville,” she had said. “When I talked about hydras in Froggy-Bottom Bog, I meant young ones: hydras that just get lost in the Everfree, or runts that get chased out of the bigger swamps. That one was certainly way out of the age range of ‘young’. What’s more, I know of the cerberusi – or is it cereberi? – who hide in dark caves in the forest’s depths, but they seldom come out, and definitely don’t journey as far as the bog when they do.”

"Maybe they just got lost?" he had replied. "I'm sure it happens to older hydras and cereberi as well."

"I was thinking that as well, but then I started using my magic on the hydra. As soon as I tried to move its first neck, I felt that... sense of disconnection you get when something has been enchanted to resist magic. It wasn't a very sophisticated enchantment, but it was there."

White Noise shuddered as he thought back to the magical resistance breaking course he had barely scraped through in school. Even the "not very sophisticated" enchantments would leave him with a massive headache.

So Twilight thinks that somepony was behind the attack, at least indirectly, White thought as he looked to both sides, checking to see if other ponies were watching before dipping his muzzle into the punch bowl and taking a long drink. Not sure what anypony would have to gain from enchanting huge monsters and sending them to Froggy-Bottom Bog though.

In another, lonelier corner of the party, Ditzzy Doo felt a hoof on her shoulder.

"Hey Ditzzy," said Sky Wave kindly. "How's it going?"

Ditzzy looked at the ground, too ashamed to make eye contact.

"I'm so sorry!" she bawled. "I nearly got everypony killed!"

"Don't say that!" Sky reprimanded. "It wasn't your fault that there was a hydra hiding in the bog! And besides, if I hadn't been so insistent about the meaning of your cutie mark..."

"Wait..." began Ditzzy, as she brought her eyes into focus. "So, you're saying that you were wrong? That my cutie mark does mean what my parents told me it means?"

“Yeah... I guess,” Sky admitted. “Okay fine. Yes. I’m sorry, I was wrong. Forgive me?”

“Well...”

Ditzy thought about it for a moment, before nodding her head and wrapping her forelegs around Sky. Sky smiled and returned Ditzy’s hug.

“Ahem.”

A gruff voice interrupted the two ponies, and they turned around to see a middle-aged brown pegasus stallion. He had a few days’ worth of stubble on his muzzle, and was wearing an expression that showed him to be feeling very sorry for himself.

“Mr Brown!” Ditzy exclaimed. “Uh... are you okay? ... Sir?”

“Ditzy Doo, this is really embarrassing for me, but, uh,” the brown stallion mumbled. “D’ya wanna have your old job back?”

Ditzy’s eyes widened in shock, and her pupils lost their focus as her irises drifted in opposite directions.

“But I thought my cutie mark-”

“Yes, yes, that’s still how it is,” interrupted Ditzy’s old boss. “But the thing of it is this: the Equestrian Postal Service cannot spare any more mailponies from anyplace else. The mailmare who was supposed to transfer here from Trottingham has been reassigned, and Ponyville doesn’t have a mailpony right now. Folks are gettin’ agitated.”

“She’ll take her job back,” Sky offered coyly. “At double the salary!”

Mr Brown raised an eyebrow, and Sky immediately regretted her demand.

“Not my call to make. Ditzy, the offer to get your old job with your old pay back still stands. We’ll make a plan to deal with the bureaucrats at headquarters.”

Ditzy barely had to think before nodding her head vigorously and wrapping her “new” boss in a bone-crushing hug.

“Thankyouthankyouthankyou!” exclaimed Ditzy. “I can’t wait to get back on the job! Back to my old route, with my old mail bags and my old breakfast muffin and my old...”

Sky smiled to herself as she trotted off to find her travelling companions. Ponyville had been full of excitement, and she’d made a number of great new friends, but she found herself hoping that the next stop she and the others made would be a little less eventful. If she ended up having to fight any more hydras, she would have to ask White Noise for a raise.

Chapter Five

The town of Port Anchor was a quaint little place, populated mostly by seafaring ponyfolk, who jittered about uncomfortably in their little wooden houses and longed for the sea when they weren't out sailing. As such, the town's large docks were its busiest area.

Which wasn't to say that they were particularly busy. Equestria, by and large, was a very self-sufficient nation, largely because of its great size and the diversity of its climate. Large tracts of arable land provided more than enough food for the ponies living there, and beneath the fine soil, the ground was rich with precious metals and gems. Equestria had a cordial relationship with nearby countries, and exported much of its excess produce, but the majority of that activity took place in the shipping district of Manehattan.

As such, the docks of Port Anchor were, at their busiest, not overly busy, and the vast majority of the ships there were Equestrian in origin. True to its name, the town was a place to anchor for a short time, should necessity demand it.

A shiny new ship, small enough to almost be called a boat but still very sea-worthy, sat on the side of one of the wooden harbours, anchor down. Large white letters across the ship's near side christened it *Moonchaser*. Its owner stood nearby, admiring her fine, week-old craft.

Ocean Glider, an indigo earth pony mare with a dark purple mane and a crashing wave for a cutiemark, believed very strongly that this ship was the best purchase she'd ever made. Having a ship of her own would finally allow her to start her transportation business, and ferry ponies to and from the increasingly-visited Lunar Republic.

Ocean wasn't a native Lunar Republican. Her parents, being the crazy old seadog ponies they were, had ensured that her birth coincided with a trip they had been taking, and she had been born in international waters, making her a "citizen of the world". As she'd spent most of her life on ships and boats, she felt that that status was quite appropriate, and had never

before considered acquiring Equestrian citizenship, or that of any other country.

Which made it very strange that she was, at that moment, considering the benefits of becoming a citizen of the Lunar Republic – or rather, the New Lunar Republic, once Princess Luna overcame the shackles of her oppressive sister and took her rightful place as ruler of the island kissed every night by her moon.

“‘Moonchaser’, eh?” said a gruff voice to Ocean Glider’s side. “You one o’ them Lun-*arr* Rep-*ub*-li-*cans*?”

“Well, no,” she replied semi-truthfully, feeling flustered about the loss of her train of thought.

“Then why is ya boat called *Moon-chase-ah*?”

Ocean Glider turned to the speaker, and found herself staring right at the slimy, yellow-toothed smile of an old and crusty grey sailorpony. His orange eyes narrowed, and a number of other sailorponies stepped into view just behind him.

“We don’ take kindly ta desert-tahs,” said the grey stallion, as his followers stepped closer to Ocean Glider. “Isn’t Equestria good enough for ya? Is Princess Celestya ta *old* fer ya?”

“N-no,” Ocean Glider stammered, as her aggressors stepped ever closer. “W-what do you want?”

The group’s leader let out a low, raspy chuckle that made Ocean Glider dislike him further, something that was fast becoming nearly impossible to do. A dry tongue flicked over his yellow teeth, and he nodded towards *Moonchaser*.

“Torch it, boys,” he commanded. “We ain’t ‘avin’ no in-sub-ordy-nants in mah town. Not while Ah’m still breathin’.”

Ocean watched in horror as the ponies under the unseemly stallion’s command brandished wooden torches in their mouths, and the group’s single unicorn lit up his horn with an orange glow.

There was a WHOOSH as the first of the mob's torches lit up, followed by many more as the unicorn's orange magic field stretched out further and further. Ocean's heart sank as the ponies in the mob turned towards her beautiful ship and readied their torches for throwing. A single word from their leader would light up her ship in a brilliant orange blaze.

"Stop!" she cried desperately. "You'll burn the harbour! You'll burn the rest of the boats too!"

"We're *pro-fesh-ionals*, lady," jeered the leader, raising his right foreleg theatrically. "Now lads, when mah hoof hits the wood, ya throw ya torches. Git ready."

The leader's foreleg reached the top of its arc. He stood frozen for a moment, before shooting Ocean a particularly nasty glare and slamming his hoof down.

SPLASH!

The sound of the leader's hoof hitting the wood was drowned out by a sudden massive downpour. Ocean squealed in surprise as she was thoroughly drenched, but noticed with glee that the same had happened to her aggressors – and to their torches.

The source of the downpour was a decently large cloud that had snuck above the group while nopony was watching – or, perhaps more accurately, had *been* snuck above the group while nopony was watching.

Something moved above the cloud and the pegasus responsible for it swooped down onto the harbour triumphantly, and was joined by a white unicorn and large-framed zebra.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I think you ponies really need to find a safer way to celebrate maiden voyages," the pegasus said casually. "I'd suggest something that allows the ship to actually *make* the voyage afterwards."

The leader of the mob shot the newcomers a dirty look, his mood dampened almost to the same extent as his coat and mane. The less

dedicated members of his mob had already wandered off, and he didn't have the energy or the will to start a fight with some crazy tourists.

"Sorry about getting you all wet like that," the unicorn of the group said to Ocean Glider, once the soaked mob had fully dispersed. "It was the best plan we could come up with on such short notice."

Ocean stood flabbergasted, her jaw hanging open. She hadn't moved from the spot she'd been rooted to when her three saviours made their perfectly-timed entrance.

"Are you okay?"

A round of introductions and a torrent of gushing thanks later, Ocean Glider and her new friends sat down to eat on the deck of an old passenger ship that had been repurposed as a nautical-themed café. Ocean insisted on paying.

"Thanks again you guys," she said, hugging her towel closer to her body. "If you hadn't shown up just then-"

"-you just don't know what you would have done?" Sky Wave interrupted, finishing the sentence Ocean had already repeated at least one hundred times that night. "Don't worry about it. We just did what any decent pony would've done."

Ocean smiled and nodded, still feeling amazed at her good fortune.

"If you want to repay us, though," began White Noise, suddenly cottoning onto a great idea. "Then you could tell us what you're planning to do with that nice new boat. Perhaps you can help us out?"

Ocean nodded eagerly and launched into her business plan:

"*Moonchaser's* gonna take ponies between here and the Lunar Republic! At the moment, there isn't a dedicated passenger liner that does that, and that's because, for centuries, only supply ships have been out that way. But that's all changing now, with Princess Luna's return, and the renewed lunar

magic she's brought with her. Ponies want to visit – or even immigrate to – the Lunar Republic, and my little ship's going to help them do just that."

White Noise thought back to the geography he had learnt at school. The Lunar Republic was a small island in the Radiant Sea, situated roughly halfway between Equestria and Laung, the continent Zebrica and Dragonia formed the west-most outcropping of.

"Have you started operating?" he asked Ocean.

"Not yet, no," she replied. "*Moonchaser* hasn't even been on her maiden voyage. In fact, she only left the dry dock the other day."

White Noise's eyes flashed with realised opportunity.

"I think I may have a proposition for you, Ocean Glider. If you're willing to go a little further than the Lunar Republic for your inaugural trip, then my friends and I would be happy to be your first customers."

"How much further?"

"Laung."

"That's double the distance!"

"Sure is."

"I guess I *do* owe you guys."

After a little coercion, and the promise of handsome payment (which she negotiated down slightly because of her unending gratitude to White Noise's group), Ocean agreed to take the ponies and zebra to Laung, provided they were happy to stop off in the Lunar Republic on the way.

"You aren't actually my *first* customers, you know," she snarked. "I meant it when I said there were ponies who really wanted to get over to the Lunar Republic."

The group laughed and talked until their food came, and then talked and laughed some more while they ate.

“Yeah, we’ve had some pretty interesting experiences since we left from Fillydelphia,” said White Noise. “You’ve gotta hear about what happened in Bridleburg, the last town we stopped in.”

“Eccentric ponies put us and themselves in terrible danger compared to any other town, Bridleburg will always prove stranger,” added Sibwashie cryptically.

The travellers told Ocean all about their journey thus far, and she interjected with her own little stories about her life at sea, and all the places she had been to and the amazing things she had seen. Eventually, the question that had been gnawing at her mind since White Noise first started telling her about the group’s adventures couldn’t stay beneath the surface any longer.

“Sorry if I’m being nosy,” she began. “But, uh, why are you going to Laung, anyway? I know you’ve been setting up outlets of your shops, but you haven’t come here to set one up, and you haven’t been to Manehattan or Trottingham either. Are you taking your business international?”

White Noise exchanged glances with Sibwashie and Sky.

“That’s a distinct possibility, but it’s not the main focus of this journey,” he began. “Sibwashie would like to visit his home again, and I’m glad to accompany him there, but that’s not the main focus either. The main point of our journey is this: I am going to find out how dragonfire actually works.”

White Noise took a deep breath, and let it out slowly before continuing.

“To do that, I’m going back to the source, to ask the masters themselves. This journey’s final destination is Dragonia, where I hope to use my academic credentials to gain an audience with the leading dragon experts in dragonfire and its associated magic.”

Ocean Glider’s eyes widened, and she marvelled at the group’s bravery. Although Equestria-Dragonian relations had improved greatly in the past few centuries, and more and more dragons were sending their young to live, study and work in Equestria, the idea of actually going into Dragonia was a frightening one. Not all dragons were educated, or benevolent creatures,

and beyond that, the country's dry climate and rocky, mountainous terrain made not at all ideal for ponies to travel through.

White Noise went on to explain the dilemma he felt was inherent in setting up a business based around a kind of magic he didn't fully understand, and how dangerous it was to trust his livelihood to it. However, his impassioned speech about the quest for knowledge was soon interrupted.

"I heard ya say ya was headin' fir Dragonia," said a grave, old voice. "I would be a leetle more careful about ideeas like that if I was yew."

The voice belonged to an old brown earth pony sailor with a well-worn blue ship-captain's hat on his head and an anchor on his flank. A low, hurried whisper from Ocean Glider named him Salty Seadog, a mostly-retired sailor who loved telling folks stories about his glory days. The stories weren't always true, but Ocean assured her new friends that they were always entertaining, and promptly offered the old stallion an empty seat at their table.

"Thank ya kindly, ma'am," he said politely, his smile revealing an incomplete set of yellow teeth, but making Ocean feel completely different from last time she had seen such a smile. "Now let me tell you folks about dragons..."

"I know you kids are used to yir home-grown helpful baby dragons that write all yir letters and clean yir house, but them's completely different beasts from the dragons livin' in Dragonia. I tell ya, there's a reason why them dragons aren't allowed in Equestria, and I seen that wit' mah own two eyes..."

<-oOo->

The fine ship HMPC (Her Majesty Princess Celestia's) *Duskbreaker* was looking very much the worse for wear as it rounded Dragonia's cliffy coastline. It had just been through a terrible storm, and although nopony had been lost to the raging winds or turbulent waves, the sails were in tatters and there were great holes in the mast and deck.

As the ship's sails were all but gone, its only form of propulsion was its secondary rowing system, with the help of some limited unicorn magic. To

row the enormous ship, however, took the horsepower of nearly the entire crew, and travelling too far by such an energy-intensive method was bound to tire out the ship's crew to the point where they would be unable to go on long before reaching Equestria.

The ship's captain, a prudent fellow named Calmwaters, decided that the ship would have to anchor somewhere soon, if it hoped to avoid being caught in another storm (the fury of which it would surely not escape in one piece). The crew, their hearts eager for Equestria, agreed with their captain's decision, and assured him that, once the ship landed, they would be able to fix it in no time at all.

Alas, the high and foreboding cliffs of Dragonia prevented the ship from anchoring anywhere for another day, and then the day after that, and the day after that. The crew were beginning to get despondent – when would they be able to land?

Finally, on the fourth day, the *Duskbreaker* sailed into a small bay, and the sailorponies alighted on the bay's tiny beach.

Beyond the beach was a thin clump of trees, and beyond that, the cliffs rose just as high as any in Dragonia. The crew did not have much space, but they would have enough wood to keep a fire burning at night, and to mount basic repairs on their vessel.

A younger, more impulsive Salty Seadog was among the sailorponies. This being one of his earliest voyages, he was but a lowly cabin boy, whose main task was cooking remotely-edible food out of whatever plantlife he could find. The crew didn't rush for seconds of his grass-and-leaf stew, but they ate it quietly and made no complaints.

With the crew rested and fed, the ship's repairs progressed rapidly. A great big tree has chopped down and hewn into a new mast, and the holes in the ship's deck and hull were patched up with the wood that remained. New sails were woven from a combination of the remains of the old sails, some leaves and bits of bark cleverly molded and woven by unicorn magic, and one or two extra hammocks.

Salty had even managed to make himself useful by supplanting the ship's dwindling food supplies with stores of the edible leaves he managed to find.

By nightfall on the third day, work on the ship was complete, and Captain Calmwaters announced that the *Duskbreaker* was seaworthy once more. It was decided that the crew would go to sleep early that night, awaken the following morning with renewed strength, and sail out of the bay, Equestria-bound.

Around midnight, the ponies were awakened by a terrible screeching, unlike any noise they had ever heard before. All at once, they opened their eyes to a terrifying sight.

For above the bay, just lower than the tops of the foreboding cliffs, there flew a great blue dragon, twisting and writhing in fury. The bone-chilling screech tore through the air once more, and the sailorponies realised that it was the dragon that made been making the awful sound.

Salty remembered Captain Calmwaters assuring everypony that they were too low down to be bothered by any dragons – apparently dragons felt uncomfortable close to sea-level, or above smooth, level ground.

All of a sudden, the dragon turned around in the air and plummeted towards the sailorponies, making even the most hardened veterans of the waves among them scream like little fillies and run around madly.

Caught up in the moment's frightening atmosphere, young Salty picked a direction and ran, closing his eyes for fear of seeing the dragon hurt him or one of his shipmates. It was on this day that Salty would learn never to run away from something with your eyes closed, as a protruding tree branch shortly caught one of his forelegs and sent him tumbling down in a heap.

Lying on his back and feeling quite dazed, Salty could only watch as the great blue dragon swept over him, ruffling his coat and mane with the gust of wind that came with. For a split second, Salty saw the dragon's eyes. They were pure white, and appeared to be dripping with some foul liquid. Certainly not tears.

Salty felt a sense of warmth against his back as the dragon breathed out a column of fire, setting the trees behind him alight. This proved to be the

exact motivation the little cabinpony needed to get back on his hooves and gallop out of the small forest, trying to ignore the screams of ponies less successful than he.

A loud shout ripped through the air, and Salty recognized the dignified voice of Captain Calmwaters, not even quivering with fear in the face of this immense danger.

“Dragon!” he bellowed. “Why do you attack us? What have we done to bring your anger down upon us?”

Calmwaters was barely able to jump out of the way in time to miss the blast of fire that shot his way the instant he finished talking. Salty could see that the hairs on his one side had become singed, and his magnificent blue hat had been blackened on one side.

Seeing the wisdom in beating a hasty retreat, Calmwaters turned tail and rushed towards the ship, ordering the remains of his crew to do the same.

Salty and the others galloped faster than they had ever galloped before, and once on the ship, the anchor was drawn up at a rate that suggested it was made out of balloons rather than heavy iron.

Losing interest in the pony-kebabs he had made, the great dragon turned his attention to the escaping ship (its crew rowed with a vigour that might’ve carried them to Equestria faster than the strongest of gales, had they kept it up). With another mighty screech, the dragon blasted the ship with his fire.

And that might have been the end of Captain Calmwaters (though he would pass not long afterwards, following the events of another, unrelated story), Salty Seadog and the rest of the crew, had it not been for the ingenuity of Flighty the unicorn, who turned her magic on the dragon’s powerful breath of fire and turned into a regular powerful breath, of air.

The *Duskbreaker* shot out of the bay, skipping across the water like a stone – or so it felt. The rowing crew emerged from below and cheered, while the dragon could be heard screeching impotently into the night before fading from sight, utterly uninterested in flowing the ponies any further.

Flighty was given a commendation for her bravery and resourcefulness, followed by a stern lecture for shirking her duties – she had been on deck watching the dragon, instead of down below, helping the other unicorns telekinetically row the unoccupied oars.

There were a lot of unoccupied oars in the bowels of the *Duskbreaker*, for Calmwaters had lost a third of his crew to the dragon's fire that night.

<-oOo->

“So don't yew tell me that dragons ah ha'mless,” Salty concluded, staring wistfully out to sea as his tale concluded. “We did nothing to tha' devil, but 'e still burnt a third o' us to a crisp. Even afta Cap'n Calmwaters tried reasonin' with him!”

Salty's audience nodded their heads gravely, none of them knowing how to respond to the story they'd just been told. White Noise thought about all of his dragon friends, and a knot formed in his stomach. Even Melvin, sour little git that he was, couldn't possibly be capable of such atrocities.

A waiterpony brought the group their after-dinner teas and coffees, and Salty Seadog yawned and bade them all a good night.

“Heed mah words!” he warned. “Don' go pokin' around in the bus'ness o' dragons!”

“We'll remember what you've told us, don't worry,” White Noise said, mustering a semi-earnest tone out of his extremely boggled mind.

As Salty hobbled off, the group turned to their drinks, dipping their muzzles into the cups and lapping up the warm liquid.

“Hey,” said Ocean Glider, suddenly noticing something. “White Noise, why are you drinking like that? Don't unicorns usually...”

“Yes, they do,” he replied flatly. “Usually.”

It was then that Ocean noticed something odd about the white unicorn's horn. Most unicorn horns were colours that matched their coats exactly, but

White's horn was a strange, greyish off-white that looked out of place against his pale coat.

"Ponyville," he told her. "Can't believe we never even got to that part of the story. Anyway, the short version is this: I do usually have magic, and use my magic like a regular unicorn, but after I had to sever my supply – you wouldn't understand what that means, but don't worry – to help fight a hydra, I haven't been able to do magic."

Ocean Glider gasped. "Is it... permanent?"

"No, no, it's nothing that serious. My magic supply just has to build up again, and that takes a while. A while longer than I thought it would, but seeing as nopony's ever severed their entire magic supply in one go, I guess I'm in uncharted waters here."

"It's rather irritating," interjected Sky. "White's magic would've *really* come in handy back in Bridleburg."

White Noise put a hoof to his chin and thought for a moment, before adding: "It's okay, I can feel my magic slowly returning, but I just haven't felt able to use it yet."

"Well that's a relief," Ocean sighed, her mind turning to other thoughts now that her worries were put at rest. "You guys fought a hydra?"

"Well," began Sky, looking down at her teacup modestly. "Twilight was the one who actually defeated it..."

Two days after White, Sky and Sibwashie's heroic rescue of the *Moonchaser* and her owner, the fine ship was prepped for the voyage ahead and ready to depart. The three travellers lined up on the dock with four of Ocean's other customers, all of them eager to mount the ship and set sail for foreign lands.

"I can't believe we're finally about to leave Equestria," said White Noise to his companions. "I've read a lot about the world out there in books, but I've never actually been to any of the places I studied in school."

“Same here,” agreed Sky Wave. “I’d barely ever been out of Fillydelphia before you guys got me to come on this crazy trip, and I’m a pegasus pony! I can fly anywhere I want to, and have travelled so little, while Sibwashie has no wings and has been further across the world than the two of us combined!”

Sibwashie chuckled softly to himself.

“I love discovering other cultures and seeing new places
But there’s comfort to be found in familiar faces.

“My talent and my calling has brought me here, and will send me all over the world
But sometimes I wish to lie beside the fires of home, sleeping with my tail curled.”

The two ponies looked at the zebra with wide eyes, nodding slowly and smiling as they noticed a small tear in the corner of one of his eyes. It could have just been a trick of the light, or a speck of dust, but White and Sky were certain that Sibwashie was overjoyed to be on his way home.

“All aboard!” came a shout from the deck of the ship, jarring the three friends out of their shared moment of contemplation.

The passengers ascended the boarding plank in single file and alighted on the ship’s recently-swabbed deck, so clean that it shone in the sunlight. The single sail hung proudly from its mast, bearing a lovingly-painted image of the moon (a very up-to-date image, as it lacked the traditional mare’s head shadow).

The *Moonchaser’s* captain, a proud and haughty-looking Ocean Glider wearing a smart blue hat, stood in front of her newly hired crew, and welcomed her passengers aboard graciously, shaking each one’s hoof and looking them all directly in the eyes, confidence exuding from her every pore.

“We now set sail for the Lunar Republic,” she announced. “As you may have already heard, her majesty Princess Luna departed for the island herself not three days ago. She has stated that her visit shall be a casual,

very temporary affair, but I hope you will join me in hoping that the Princess sees the beauty and potential of the Lunar Republic, and extends her services to... renew it."

Ocean Glider's speech concluded, and the ship's passengers stomped their hooves politely against the deck, some more vigorously than others. White Noise felt a queasiness rising in his stomach.

Chapter Six

White Noise woke up with a start, banging his head against the bed above him.

“Ow...”

The throbbing pain from the new bump on his head was further compounded by a sudden blinding headache. White let out a small whimper and curled into a ball under his sheets. *Why did I have to take the bottom bunk?* he thought.

Rubbing his sore head with a hoof and trying to focus his mind through the haze of pain in his temples, White Noise tried to remember what had caused him to wake up so suddenly. It had been a dream – he’d had a very strange dream, and it had become very frightening at the end.

White Noise tried to remember his dream, but only small snatches of it came to mind. *Standing on a mountain, with the world stretched out beneath me. Shouting into the wind... it changed colour as my voice got louder and softer. Darkness... a voice... a scream!*

Sweat broke on White’s forehead as he decided against trying to recall the end of his dream. He found himself envying Daisy Dreams, an earth pony who had mastered lucid dreaming and been the subject of an in-depth study conducted by some of his old classmates and friends. Her dreams were always controlled and she had the psychological resilience of a rock.

“Good morning White Noise, I trust you slept well
I dozed like a log, and dreamt sweetly for a spell,” Sibwashie announced from above, as he peered down at White.

Sibwashie smiled sympathetically as he saw White Noise rubbing his head and sighing.

A little later on, White Noise and Sky Wave hobbled onto deck, with a steadier-hoofed Sibwashie following just behind them.

“Uurgh...” moaned Sky. “Why does the ground... keep... moving? It’s making me-”

Her words were cut off as Sky dived to the edge of the deck and stuck her head over the side. White Noise felt something rising up in his own stomach, but fought to keep it down.

Once she had finished emptying her guts, Sky suddenly got an idea that she felt she could kick herself for not coming up with earlier. She smiled as she extended her wings and lifted off the deck, feeling better as soon as her hooves left the swaying floor.

White glared at her enviously. “Remember to flap, now.”

Being a clever pegasus, Sky was already flapping, and doing a very nice job of keeping up with the *Moonchaser*. She gained a little bit of speed and flew up and around, doing a loop-de-loop in the air.

“Pegasus show-offs,” muttered a member of the crew, who was busy mopping the deck.

Watching Sky twist and turn in the air, White was reminded of his nausea, and quickly turned to Sibwashie in an effort to take his mind off it again.

“So, Sibwashie, excited to get home soon?” he said, envying the zebra’s nonchalant attitude to the swaying deck beneath them. “Where exactly is your village? In relation to this ‘Molaro’ we’re going to be landing at, anyway?”

The zebra smiled, and replied after a period of thought:

“As soon as I could walk, I learnt how to swim and how to sail
The coastal town of Molaro, conveniently, is from whence I hail.

“I remember the seaweed dinners and the long boating trips
My parents’ warm, wooden hut, and my brother’s dinnertime quips.

“They won’t be expecting me, not for a while – I’ll catch them by surprise and unaware
But they’ll be overjoyed to see me, and homesickness is a burden I’ll no longer bear.”

“Wow, that sounds great!” White Noise replied enthusiastically. “I can’t wait to meet them! In fact, I’d better practice my greeting. Hold on, let me think about this for a bit...”

White furrowed his brow in a look of intense concentration, while Sibwashie waited patiently to hear his friend’s latest attempt at Zebrican.

White Noise cleared his throat and began to speak, slowly and deliberately:
“<Hail and well met, family of my friend
I hope you don’t resent the time that he will spend>

“<Helping me out with the dragons and their fire
I’d rather not earn any of your ire.>”

Sibwashie nodded his head enthusiastically while cringing on the inside. Sibwashie had to give the unicorn points for effort, even if his rhythm was quite off.

“Hey, look at that!” Sky shouted from above the pony and zebra’s heads. “The island’s coming into view!”

White and Sibwashie rushed over to the side of the ship and peered out at the small chunk of land that was just coming into view. The island was relatively flat, and looked very green and full of life, even from a distance.

“Welcome to the Lunar Republic!” Ocean Glider announced proudly, as the ship pulled up to a shiny new harbour some time later. “We’ll be disembarking in the recently-founded town of Port Welcome, where I hope you will all feel... ‘welcome’!”

Sky Wave rolled her eyes and landed back on deck as the *Moonchaser* came to a halt and let down its anchor. She was loathe to admit it, but her

wings were actually quite tired after keeping her up in the air for so long. *At least I've managed to keep my lunch down*, she thought.

"Ohthankgoodness," White Noise cried, galloping off the ship with a wobble in his step as soon as the board was lowered.

Once the ship's other passengers had departed, White, Sky and Sibwashie were able to have a chat with Ocean on her own.

"Thanks for the wonderful trip," said White, trying not to think about his lingering sea sickness. "When will we be departing for Zebrica?"

"I'll just need two days to stock up on supplies and take care of some business over here," Ocean replied. "Maybe find some other passengers for the trip too. If you guys can hang in there until then, that'd be great."

"I'm sure that we will find something to occupy our time in this place. Go ahead and do what you need to; don't make it a race," said Sibwashie.

"Great! I don't have to get started with all that just yet though, so I'll show you guys around town. Port Welcome's gonna be a pretty important place someday..."

As Ocean Glider had said, Port Welcome was a very new town, having only been founded a few months earlier. It had been established to handle the sudden influx of traders, tourists and new citizens who had come to find adventure and riches in the newly-prosperous Lunar Republic.

"Ever since the return of Her Majesty Princess Luna," Ocean began, slipping into a pattern of speech that suggested a history as a tour guide, "total agricultural production in the Lunar Republic has increased by approximately twenty-one percent, and is set to get even bigger. Plants just get bigger and grow faster here, and it's all thanks to the fertilizing magic of the Princess's moon - which this island just happens to be in the perfect spot to receive."

White Noise lifted a hoof to his chin. He knew that there was definitely something about this island that made the plants grow better than they did

in Equestria, and he was starting to believe the moon-magic story, despite its inherent absurdity. He remembered that astronomy and studies of the moon were never Princess Celestia's favourite subjects, and that their tiny departments received very little interest or funding. He regretted not showing interest in either of the fields; some grounding in astronomy would have helped him understand a little bit more about the nature of the magic at work in the Lunar Republic.

The four ponies trotted out of the harbour area and into Port Welcome proper. They trod on newly-placed paving stone, past wooden houses so new that they were practically still wet with paint, and into what would eventually become the town square.

"As you can see," said Ocean, using a foreleg to gesture towards the buildings around them, "this town square isn't finished yet. Directly ahead of you, where those short walls of stone now stand, is where a clock tower will eventually watch over Port Welcome. Also note the empty storefronts: they're on sale by the town planning committee for low, low prices. Any forward-thinking entrepreneur should scoop one up now, before they're all gone."

White Noise got the hint, and made a mental note to visit the town planning committee later on that day.

"Uh, Ocean?" asked Sky Wave. "Sorry if I'm interrupting or anything, but is there anywhere a pony can get something to eat around here? I'm pretty hungry."

"In keeping with its theme of hospitality to newcomers, Port Welcome hosts a number of fine eateries, each catering to a different taste," replied Ocean, not missing a beat. "My personal favourite is 'The Giant Salad': a brand new local startup with a *distinctly Lunar* flavour and very generous portions."

Sky Wave's eyes lit up at the prospect of "very generous portions", and she insisted that the group make their way to the eatery for a big lunch post-haste.

“Sounds fine to me,” White Noise said, realising how hungry he had become after eating very little on the voyage, due to fear of throwing it all up again.

“The sun is in the middle of the sky, signalling the time for a meal. It would be good to pay it heed and fill up our stomachs, I feel,” agreed Sibwashie.

The Giant Salad was a very new business, and that showed in the inexperience of its waitering staff. The group had had to wait rather a long time for their food, but all the irritation that went with that was forgotten upon the meal’s eventual arrival.

“Woah,” said Sky, her eyes growing wide as she desperately tried not to drool. “They don’t call it The *Giant* Salad for nothing. This is going to be sooo goood...”

The other three politely thanked their waitering staff and made light conversation while picking at their food politely. They ignored Sky’s ravenous chewing, and tried not to grimace as she stuck her head right into her salad, splattering her pink face with lettuce and tomatoes.

“You seem to know quite a lot about the Lunar Republic,” remarked White Noise, once Ocean Glider finished detailing the pros and cons of the island’s various beachfronts. “How did you learn it all?”

“To be honest with you,” Ocean Glider replied. “It was all required reading for my side-job as a canvasser for the New Lunar Republic.”

White nearly choked on an olive, but managed to squeeze out a polite smile (or rather, a polite grimace).

“Now, I know folks are a little antsy about our movement, and I don’t expect you or anyone else to support us just because, but there’s been a lot of misinformation going around. I’d really like to clear some of that up.”

“I’m listening,” White replied, having successfully swallowed the olive.

Sibwashie's ears perked up, indicating that he too was interested in what Ocean had to say for her "movement".

"A lot of the misconception that ponies have about the NLR stems from their basic misunderstanding about what a republic is, and how our government works," Ocean began, slipping back into tour-guide-slash-lecturer mode. "The Lunar Republic doesn't have an immortal and benevolent princess to watch over it, so we have to make do with regular ponies. And I don't know about you, but I'm disinclined to put as much trust in a mortal pony with selfish desires as in a wise and ancient princess. So that's why we have a little thing called 'democracy'."

Sibwashie grew more interested. In his studies of different cultures and governmental systems, he'd heard of this "democracy" (adapted from the Goatish words "demoroc", meaning "people" and "racsee", meaning "rule of law"), but he had never studied any country that practiced it in very much depth.

"What that means is that we get the ponies living here to vote for who should lead them. To prevent any one governor – that's what we call an 'elected prince or princess' – from becoming too powerful or too complacent, we hold new voting sessions every three years, and each governor is only allowed to be governor for a total of six years at most."

White Noise nodded in understanding. "So it's a lot like how we decide on mayors, but on a larger scale."

"Exactly. Now, because of that scale, it's very difficult for one pony to get him or herself elected into governorship on their own, as the first few candidates soon found out when the Lunar Republic started out. A successful election campaign that captures the votes of ponies requires the kind of careful planning and thorough advertising that can only be achieved by a group of ponies working towards a common goal. And that's where the 'party' system comes from."

A loud burp distracted Ocean from her speech for a moment, and she turned to look at a blushing Sky Wave.

"That was some good salad," she said meekly, gazing at her empty bowl with half-lidded eyes.

Ocean Glider smiled dismissively and returned to her speech. “A party is a group of ponies that bands behind a single candidate for governor whose views they support and tries to get that governor elected. The New Lunar Republic is one such party – it is a peaceful political organization, and not a rebel movement, as some might think.”

“Then what about that ‘Celestial tyranny’ business?” asked White, narrowing his eyes accusingly. “I take offense at that kind of slander being aimed at my Princess.”

Ocean rubbed her mane with a hoof and smiled awkwardly. “Some of our PR officers – especially those working in the Equestrian Outreach program – are perhaps a little overzealous. Although their claims are not completely unfounded: Princess Celestia could probably have handled the Nightmare Moon situation a little better.”

White Noise considered starting an argument with Ocean about the princess’s conduct a thousand years before, but decided the better of it. Over the previous year, the subject had become a hideously divisive issue among enough ponies for White to want to steer clear of it.

Sibwashie’s face crinkled up in concern, and he opened his mouth to speak:

“Your explanation has been well-worded; a soothing balm to my fears
But there’s something I do not understand; a problem gumming up the gears.

“As a student of nations and peoples, I’ve studied this political system
But all other cases suggest that a party’s country binds them.

“If this is true, then why does your New Lunar Republic escape its confines?

Why search Equestria for votes, when none from there can even queue in your lines?”

“A good question,” replied Ocean, taking a moment to decode Sibwashie’s poetry. “The New Lunar Republic is a new party that believes in and aims to create, well, a ‘new Lunar Republic’. This small country has seen a huge influx of ponies over the past year or so, and many of them came here after

being told about the island's agricultural wonders. At the moment, citizenship is easy to come by, and with citizenship, comes voting rights."

"That's pretty smart," noted Sky Wave, joining in the conversation now that she was finished eating.

After their lunch, the travellers bade farewell to Ocean Glider, who had to go attend to various matters in town. Their tour over, the two ponies and zebra decided to head over to the town planning office with White Noise, to have a look at the price of shops in the square.

"I really think it's time to expand Dragonfire Delivery outside of Equestria," said White Noise as the three walked down the road. "The whole point of dragonfire is its ability to send information over vast distances! Restraining it to operating within a single country would be an awful waste."

"But who are you going to get to run the store?" asked Sky Wave. "As far as I know, the only dragons outside of Dragonia are the young ones in Equestria, and they're mostly there for the School for Gifted Unicorns."

"I've thought about that a lot, and I think I'm going to do a little redistribution back home," White replied. "Melvin's sudden and refreshing change of attitude has earned him a job somewhere more important than Hoofington. I was going to just give him my newest employee - one of Spike's friends, whom I hired via correspondence in Bridleburg - as a shop assistant, but that's kind of a stupid idea now that I think about it, and not really fair to my other employees."

"Hmm," pondered Sky. "So Melvin will work in the new store here, and your new employee will be able to cut his teeth in the slow-moving Hoofington."

"Exactly. It's a rather brilliant solution, if I do say so myself."

Activity on the other side of the street caught Sibwashie's attention, and he turned his head to see two stallions arguing over something.

"I ain't hirin' nopony what supports them pushy NLR politicians," said the first stallion, a stout middle-aged yellow earth pony with a thinning mane of

brown hair. "Them's gonna ruin mah country wit' their highfalutin ideas about Princess Luna and buildin' cities. Mah great-grandfather left Equestria because 'e wanted-"

"Yes, well, I'm allowed to support whatever political party I want to," interrupted the other stallion, a young brown pegasus with a full-bodied blonde mane. "And it's not like you have any choice but to hire me! In case you haven't noticed, there aren't a lot of pegasi in this town, and your crops are going to get *awfully* dry unless somepony gives them a little rain every now and then."

"It's a matter o' principle!" the older stallion roared.

"It's a matter of you have no choice and should pipe down and give me a job!"

Sibwashie had always been a rather large zebra, and not because of gluttony or sloth. In school he had always been the largest in his class, and he had excelled at the traditional Zebrican sport of Quagball because of it. When he discovered his special talent, however, he began to use his great physical stature for a rather different purpose.

The arguing stallions fell silent as a large shadow loomed over them and a disapproving striped face gave them each a long stare.

"From what I understand of your fight, the two of you could work together for mutual benefit
But the younger has a radical political affiliation, and the elder, he will not hear of it.

"Consider for a moment, if you will, the practicalities of your situation as things stand
The younger needs money, and the elder needs a pegasus to water and nourish his land.

"Although you disagree on matters of state, it may be necessary to put such things aside
For until other pegasi move into town, each other's presence you must simply abide," Sibwashie said.

The younger stallion pumped a hoof in the air and sneered at the older one. A glare from Sibwashie quickly wiped the expression off his face, as the diplomat prepared for another speech.

“Young one, your disrespect towards an elder marks you as a stallion of poor breeding
Cease this foolishness, lest your conduct reflect on the NLR in a manner most misleading.

“This old farmer has lived many more years than you, and is wiser for having seen more
He respects the ideals of his ancestors, and the land from which both he and you draw.

“I would recommend that he hires you to keep his farm alive, yes
But for your insolence, whatever pay you asked for, he should offer you less.”

The two stallion stood dumbfounded for a moment, before nodding their heads slowly and turning to each other. Their right forelegs lifted off the ground and went into a shake, and their quarrel was resolved.

Sibwashie smiled and bowed to the two stallions before returning to White and Sky, who had long since stopped their conversation to watch the scene unfold.

“Very nice,” said a voice from behind Sibwashie. “An excellent show of diplomacy - and the rhyming just tops it all off with a delightful layer of *finesse!*”

Sibwashie spun around to face the speaker: a charcoal-coated earth pony mare a few years older than him. Her yellow-and-orange-streaked mane was done up in a tight bun on top of her head, and she glanced at the zebra with keen, clever eyes from behind a pair of round-framed glasses.

“My name is Vibrant Pattern,” she said to him, her tone brisk and business-like. “After seeing that skilled display of mediation performed by a stranger in an unfamiliar environment, and to ponies he doesn’t even know, I feel I have gauged enough of your character to know that you can be of great

use to me. I have a task for you, sir, and should you choose to accept it, I would be eternally grateful. A large monetary reward would be in order.”

“I will listen to what you have to say
Perhaps we can enrich one another this day,” replied Sibwashie.

“Sky and I are going to go on ahead to the town planning office,” called White Noise, anticipating that Sibwashie’s conversation with the long-winded mare could take some time. “We’ll meet back here later.”

Sibwashie nodded to White, and then turned his attention back to Vibrant Pattern.

“Excellent!” she said. “Now, my husband and I are new to the Lunar Republic, and have been living on a farm. Coming from a background where we knew little of agriculture, we have nonetheless planted our first crops quite successfully. And that would be the end of it, if not for the terrible problem that plagues us.”

The mare took a breath, steeled her resolve, and continued.

“You see, sir, for the past week, a terrible great beast of a dragon has been burning our crops! He comes every night to destroy a part of our fields, and leaves again once the morning comes. My husband and I have tried to chase him away, but to no avail - we have even come close to being burnt ourselves many a time!”

Sibwashie raised an eyebrow at the mare’s story. The behaviour of this dragon really wasn’t consistent with the profiles of any dragons he had ever met - but it did fit in eerily well with Salty Seadog’s cautionary tale.

“Nopony is willing to help us: they are all too afraid of the dragon to chase him away, be it by coercion or by force. Now, my husband and I are both modern ponies, and have no desire to hunt the dragon like a common animal - we have both dealt with a good few kind and generous dragons, and know that they are just as much people as we ponies and zebras are. This is where you come in.”

Sibwashie’s eyes widened as he realized what he was being asked to do.

“We’d very much like it if you could talk our dragon into going away and not burning our fields anymore.”

The sun was low in the western half of the sky as Sky and White exited the Port Welcome town planning office with smiles on their faces and a neatly rolled-up deed in White’s saddlebags. It had taken a fair amount of paperwork and discussion, but overall, White Noise found that buying a stand in Port Welcome had been a good deal easier than in Fillydelphia, or even Ponyville.

“Now I just need to send Melvin a message about his promotion,” White Noise told Sky Wave. “I’ll include a cheque for travel costs – he’ll have to hire a pony to get him to the docks, because those stubby little legs aren’t going to cut it.”

“When do dragons’ wings come in?” Sky asked.

“I think it takes about a century – that’s what Smooth Scales told me, anyway. The only dragons that can fly are a good deal older than you or I. A little unfair, perhaps, but then they go on to live with wings for thousands of years, so I guess that makes it better.”

The ponies walked in silence until they came to the shop White Noise had been looking for – Birdtamer’s Hawk Messenger Service, a modest little store with a majestic hawk painted on its sign.

White entered the store and produced a pre-prepared letter from his saddlebag, using his mouth rather awkwardly, and sorely missing his telekinesis (not for the first time).

“To Melvin the dragon of Hoofington, Equestria, please,” he asked politely, depositing the letter on the counter.

The clerk locked eyes with White for a moment, and then took the letter and his bits. Moments later, a hawk was released into the air with White’s message tied around its ankle.

White Noise left the shop to rejoin Sky Wave, sighing inwardly as he did so. Little did the clerk know that the letter he had just sent would likely put him out of work within a few months, or a year at most. White felt sorry for the clerk, and for whoever owned the store, but he knew he couldn't stand in the way of progress; especially not progress he had personally worked so hard for.

"She wants you to do WHAT?!" Sky exclaimed.

The day had given way to night, and she and White had met up with Sibwashie in the town square, before going off to book rooms at the first inn they came across. The hay and oats dinner the inn had provided had been quite delicious, and the ponies and zebra were lounging in their chairs around the dinner table, feeling stuffed after their second (or in Sky's case, third) courses.

"It seems like a good idea to me," White Noise added. "In case you've forgotten Sky, I originally hired Sibwashie for basically the same reason. We're going to be negotiating with dragons in Dragonia to discover the secrets of dragonfire magic, remember?"

"Yes, but there's a difference between academic dragons who discuss magic with academic unicorns, and crazy dragons who burn up ponies' farms for no good reason! This sounds like a really stupid idea to me."

"Every pony, zebra, dragon and any other creature you could care to name has reasons behind their actions, although they may not all think the same," Sibwashie told Sky, at which she rolled her eyes.

"Do this if you must, but I really don't think it's going to end well," she replied.

"Oh don't be such a wet blanket, Sky!" chided White Noise. "We're going to go with Sibwashie tomorrow and offer him moral support, and that 'we' includes you, whether you like it or not."

Sky pouted, but stiffly nodded her head.

Using his mouth, White Noise angled the toothpaste tube towards his toothbrush and gave it a gentle squeeze. Toothpaste exited the tube and landed neatly on the brush's bristles. White put the tube down and smiled to himself - a perfect spread on the second try: he was slowly getting better at doing things without magic.

The toothbrush was held by an earth pony bathroom fixture which White had dubbed the "brush vice", even though it probably had another, more delicate name. As he angled his head down and moved his teeth over brush's toothpaste-filled bristles, he tried to remember how he'd managed to do this sort of thing during the first few years of his life, before his magic had manifested.

Like a lot of gifted unicorns, White had been able to use magic earlier than most, which made him the talk of the magic kindergarten back in East Canterlot. He'd only been able to do a little very weak telekinesis and some funny voice-changing spells (which he now found little use for outside of parties), but the earth ponies and other unicorns in his class would watch in awe when his horn so much as lit up.

That just means I'm really at a disadvantage without my magic, he thought. I hope it comes back soon.

White's horn sparked, and a tiny glowing particle descended from his horn and into the basin in front of him.

Woah.

Closing his eyes in concentration, White focused on his horn. Was his magic back? He could feel something there. The bottoms of his hooves tingled as if he was standing in a very shallow puddle. White tried to lift his toothbrush.

A flashing pain cut through White's skull, and his thoughts became foregrounded with a violent shade of red. His horn sparked again, made a faint clicking sound, and then fell dormant. White could feel that his magic was finally building itself back up to noticeable levels, but decided against trying it again for a few more days.

He returned to brushing his teeth.

Vibrant Pattern and her husband owned a small farm just a few miles outside of Port Welcome. She met with Sibwashie and his friends in the afternoon of the following day, and the four of them took a horse-drawn carriage to the farm, with the ladies riding in the back while the men pulled.

"This... is probably... good for me..." wheezed White Noise as the farm finally came into view. "I'm sure... I'll be a lot fitter... once this trip... is over..."

The ponies pulled up to the farmhouse in the late afternoon, and were greeted by Vibrant's husband, a nervous and retiring warm-coloured stallion who introduced himself as Yellow Orange.

"Hello dear," Vibrant said, running up to her husband and giving him an affectionate nuzzle. "In order of appearance, these are: White Noise, Sibwashie and Sky Wave. Sibwashie is the zebra I told you about; the one who's going to solve all of our problems! His friends are here for moral support."

And because we're bored, Sky Wave added mentally.

"I'm glad to hear that," Yellow replied, before turning to address Sibwashie. "My wife and I *really* need this farm to work. If you can talk the dragon away, we will be forever in your debt."

"I can only promise to try, as I know little of this dragon's nature or his circumstance

But I shall do my best to get through to him, now that I have been given this chance," Sibwashie replied gravely.

The night was not due for another few hours, and the ponies and zebra wiled away the afternoon with chatter, all of them trying to ignore the tension and gravity of the situation. The travellers told Vibrant and Yellow of their travels, and Vibrant and Yellow told the travellers of their lives on the farm, and where they had come from.

“Yellow and I are very much city ponies, funnily enough,” Vibrant told them. “Yellow is one of the Manehattan Oranges, and I was born to the Manehattan Patterns. Our families have lived in that city for generations, and most of our relatives still do.”

“But the times have been tough on us,” Yellow Orange continued. “I ran a specialist orange and orange-related products store in Bronklyn, until a combination of bad luck, dishonest employees and the fickle Manehattan market put it out of business. Seeing as my special talent is basically ‘oranges’ – like many members of my family – I was at a loss about what to do after the disastrous failure of my business.”

“We considered starting another shop in Fillydelphia, or even an orange farm somewhere out in the country, but we didn’t have enough money! We were forced to live - or should I say *leech* - off the kindness of our respective families until we found out about the Lunar Republic.”

“I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was walking home after another unsuccessful day of job searching when a kind pony noticed my unhappiness and asked me what was wrong. I broke down and poured out all of my sorrows on that kind pony, who listened quietly until I was done. When I could speak no more, he offered me flier.”

“Yellow stormed into the apartment with that flier in his mouth: he was so excited! I read it over and over, not believing what I was seeing. We knew then that we would be able to start a farm in the Lunar Republic for less than we could ever have imagined, and reap the benefits of the island’s magic! It was the happiest day of our lives...”

The city-turned-farmer-ponies talked at length about the wonders of their new country and their beautiful farm, and about all the plans they had for it. At that time, they had only planted cornstalks and orange trees, but they planned to expand into other forms of produce – and then there was the thought of starting a family.

All the excited talk served only to make Sibwashie nervous. He was confident in his skills as a diplomat, but he had to admit that he had never used them on a dragon. *I’ve never even used them on a baby dragon, let alone a full-grown, crazy one!* he thought.

Thankfully, the talk of the farm eventually let up, largely thanks to White Noise's intervention.

"Did we tell you that Sky Wave's an aerial dancer?" he asked them.

"Oh, how delightful!" Vibrant replied, bringing her hooves up to her face in glee. "Please do give us a demonstration, dear - I do so enjoy a good dance!"

"Well, I haven't really-"

A discreet jab in the ribs from White cut Sky's excuses short, and she gave in showed the ponies a part of her newest routine, swearing them all (but Vibrant Pattern especially) to secrecy after the fact.

Eventually, the sunset cast its red rays over the land, and Sibwashie was led to the orange orchard, with instructions to gallop over to the cornfield, should the dragon decide to burn that instead. His friends offered to accompany him, but he politely declined. Any interference from factors he didn't have complete control of could jeopardise the whole operation.

The evening breeze broke against Sibwashie's stiff mohawk as he waited for the dragon to make an appearance. He watched the small leaves of the young orange trees in the "orchard" sway in the wind, and stared out into the evening sky. The stars had not yet come out, and there was no hint of a dragon. If one lay in wait nearby, he was doing a good job of keeping himself concealed.

Many of the trees had been newly-planted, he noted, and there were scorch marks on the ground not far from where he stood.

Sibwashie waited for what felt like an eternity, his mind empty of thoughts as he focused only on watching the sky. He knew what he would say; he had practiced his lines over and over in his head, and had analysed every little detail of his words to ensure its effectiveness. All he could do was continue waiting, and try not to be driven mad by it.

Eventually, his sensitive ears caught the soft sound of leathery wings flapping above him. Sibwashie looked up at the dragon, and the dragon looked down at Sibwashie.

The dragon's tar-black scales made his shape difficult to discern over the backdrop of the night sky. All that Sibwashie could make out clearly was his dark purple belly, and his eyes. The eyes of the black dragon glowed red with menace, making it impossible for Sibwashie to read any real emotion in them.

However, the eyes were not white, and neither were they stained with fluid. This brought Sibwashie some small relief; relief that was immediately cancelled out by rows of the dragon's long, sharp teeth, so white that they glistened in the moonlight.

Sibwashie cleared his throat, and in a loud, clear voice, began to speak:
"Oh dragon lord, thou who hast lived my lifetime a hundred times over and more
For your kind ear and wise understanding, I stand beneath you and implore.

"I speak for the humble and diligent ponies making a living of the fruits of this land
For there is much about thine conduct that neither I nor they understand.

"Why, pray tell, dost thou roast more of their farm each night?
Couldst thou bring the cause of thy actions to light?

"For if thy reasoning is flawless, and thy intentions noble and good
I shall make them vacate this land, and even agree that they should."

The dragon continued to stare down at Sibwashie, his expression unchanged.

Chapter Seven

The dragon blinked its glowing red eyes. Sibwashie wondered to himself if the old-fashioned Equestrian had been too much. *And I spent all that time researching it!*

FWOOM.

A great column of flame from the dragon's mouth snapped Sibwashie out of his thoughts in an instant. He jumped out of the way of the dragon's fire just in time to avoid being roasted alive, and fell onto his side. Sibwashie's eyes widened in fear, and he stared at the dragon in awe.

The fire made short work of the pitiful orange orchard, and it wasn't long before the great black beast set all the little trees ablaze and was able to turn his attention to the frightened zebra beneath him. Sibwashie scrambled to his hooves and broke into a gallop, tearing the ground with his hooves as he tried to escape the dragon's fire.

There was a flash of light, and suddenly orange flames licked the grass in front of Sibwashie, causing him to rear up and almost lose his balance as he desperately twisted and tried to run in another direction.

FWOOM. The dragon breathed out another torrent of fire, this time to Sibwashie's side. The fire didn't burn him, but came close enough to make him uncomfortably hot. Sibwashie darted away from the fire and glanced all around him, looking for a clear path.

There was fire to his left, to his right, in front of him, and behind him. To his horror, Sibwashie realised that the dragon was trapping him in a ring of fire. It was not a complete ring, but the gaps were closing fast.

In a sudden moment of intense clarity, Sibwashie felt the ground under his hooves. It was soft and supple. Moving faster than he ever had before, he used his front hooves to dig up a mound of dirt, which he then kneaded into a compact ball.

Okay, he thought, I only have one shot at this.

The traditional Zebrican sport of Quagball is played by two teams of seven players each. Each team must attempt to launch a ball through a hoop angled at forty-five degrees, and mounted on a pole two metres above the ground. It is a contact sport. Players should be quick-thinking, quick-moving, and possess powerful, accurate hindlegs.

Sibwashie turned around, lowered his stature, and scooped the dirt-ball up with his hind legs before bucking it straight into the dragon's mouth.

Yes!

Coughing and spluttering filled the air as the dragon choked on the dirt. The great black beast flailed around in the air and made gurgling noises with his throat before departing, his wings unstable and his upward course haphazard. The dragon was done bothering farms for the night.

There was still – as Sibwashie realized after a brief moment of elation – the problem of the fire. He thought back to the stories Grassfire had told him and his companions back in Hoofington. The traditional plainspony way of dealing with rampant fires was to ensure that the fire ran out of fuel by carefully burning everything around it.

Sibwashie raced out of the incomplete ring of fire and rushed towards one of the few unburnt trees in the area. Using his jaw, he snapped off a dead branch, which he lit up at one of the numerous fires that burned around the orchard.

Sibwashie burnt a patch of grass, and then stomped the fire out with a hoof. He winced at the pain, and hoped that his friends would see the blaze and come to his aid.

The other ponies were sitting around an outdoor table behind the farmhouse, twiddling their hooves and ineffectually trying not to appear nervous to each other. White Noise whistled in a jaunty and tuneless fashion, Sky Wave focused intently on her hooves, and Vibrant Pattern and

Yellow Orange just sat and stared into space, absently holding onto each other.

“I wonder if your friend has made any progress,” said Vibrant Pattern. “I do hope that his mediation abilities are good enough show that dragon the error of his ways.”

“I’m sure he’s doing gre-”

White Noise’s words stuck in his throat as he noticed a column of black smoke rising up beyond the farmhouse.

“We’ve gotta go help,” he blurted out, already on his hooves. “There’s smoke.”

The others sniffed the air and looked up to see the spiralling smoke. They gasped in shock, and within seconds the four ponies were galloping for the burning orange orchard.

On the way there, White Noise spied a small lake, which he directed his telekinesis at. Spluttering sparks from his horn and a sharp pain in his head reminded him that his magic was still recovering. *How much longer?! he thought. I really need my magic now!*

Sky Wave took to the air and soared towards the source of smoke, coughing and wincing as it got in her mouth and eyes. Despite this, she managed to get to what was left of the orchard long before the any of the grounded ponies. She saw Sibwashie brandishing a fiery branch in his mouth, and stepping gingerly on his hooves.

“Sibwashie!” she cried. “I’m here, and the others are on their way! What should we do?”

“I’m glad to see you have arrived so swiftly to help me extinguish this fire The others can help me starve it, but from you a raincloud I require!” Sibwashie shouted up to her.

Sky marvelled at her zebra friend’s ability to rhyme his words even in the most stressful of circumstances, and zoomed off to find a raincloud as he had instructed.

She remembered noticing what a clear day it had been. It was a clear night as well, and there was nary a cloud in sight. Except... Sky had to squint to see it, but she noticed a very faint, wispy cloud off in the distance. It would hardly put out any big fires, but it would have to do.

White Noise and the farming couple finally reached the burning orchard just as Sky raced off to fetch the wispy cloud. Sibwashie caught sight of the three and beckoned them to him, where he instructed them to grab branches off trees and follow his lead.

Like Sky before him, White marvelled at Sibwashie's rhyming skills before heading off to follow his instructions. Given a few more years, the zebra would likely become a better speaker of Equestrian than he was.

Sibwashie assessed the situation around him. Sky was nowhere in sight – likely still looking for a cloud. White was wincing in pain as he stuck his hoof onto a small patch of grass he had just lit on fire. Yellow and Vibrant had their sticks in their mouths and were heading towards a patch of fire to light them.

Although his hooves were throbbing in pain, Sibwashie ran to help White Noise put out his patch of fire. Between the two of them, they made short work of the grass around the burning orange tree, and soon the fire starved and went out.

They were about to move onto the next patch of fire when they heard a horrified scream. Sibwashie spun around to see Vibrant Pattern lying on her side, almost entirely encircled by fire. Without thinking he twice, he dashed to her rescue.

"My... hooves... they hurt," she whispered as Sibwashie appeared at her side. "Dropped my... branch..."

The great zebra knelt down and maneuvered himself under Vibrant Pattern's body. He was able to lift the mare up quite easily, due to her light frame. But the added weight drove his hooves further into the ground than before, and he teared-up with pain as tried to leave the ring of fire.

There was still an opening in the ring, and Sibwashie managed to get himself halfway through it before collapsing. He shucked Vibrant over his head and out of harm's way as he fell, but he himself landed directly in between two walls of flame, which crept ever closer.

Sibwashie tried to scramble up, but his hooves hurt too much. The fire was getting closer, and he didn't know if he had the energy to escape. If he wasn't able to, Vibrant would likely be killed by the encroaching flames.

Sibwashie heard wings flapping over him. He strained his neck upwards to see Sky. She was carrying a wispy cloud between her forehooves, which she now squeezed and strained for all she was worth.

A few drops of water left the cloud, but it was not enough to quench the raging fires. Sky squeezed the cloud until there was nothing left, and then looked around frantically for another. Clouds were the only way she could help Sibwashie, as he was far too big for her to be able to carry out of harm's way.

Sky spied a cloud in the corner of her vision and dashed off to fetch it just as White Noise came running up to where Sibwashie lay. He was bigger than Sky, but still not big enough to carry the enormous zebra. He supposed he would be able to do it with Yellow's help, but he could see that Yellow was already busy carrying his wife off.

White closed his eyes and let his thoughts extend to his horn. The magic that had built up within it was not large in quantity, but it was something. It certainly felt like there was more than there had been when he had tried to levitate the water in the lake. *Perhaps there's just enough to perform that spell*, he thought. *The one I've barely ever used and shouldn't even know.*

White Noise focused his magic, and surely enough, his horn began to glow for the first time in nearly a week. The air above his head crackled, and a body of white foam appeared. It was arranged in neat letters that read "Help has arrived".

The foam-sign bobbed in the air for a moment before White shot it at the fire to Sibwashie's left. The foam mowed down the fire as it came into contact with it, reducing the ring by half. There was still, however, the wall of fire to Sibwashie's right to contend with.

As White was contemplating whether he'd be able to push Sibwashie out of the way or not, Sky suddenly appeared with a great big black storm cloud. She made short work of the rest of Sibwashie's ring of fire and managed to put out the few other remaining fires as well.

"My mother always told me that weather pegasi tend to leave extra storm cloud lying around for emergencies," she explained. "Turns out she was right."

White smiled at her before losing his footing and passing out, as an overdue feeling of pain tore through his temples.

The Lunar Republic's governor, a middle-aged stallion named Grain Harvest, paced across the boardroom impatiently as he and his advisors, associates and assistants awaited Princess Luna's arrival. The princess had arrived in the capital the previous evening, and would be holding her first meeting with the ruling elite of the Lunar Republic in over one thousand years this morning.

She was already ten minutes late. But she was also an alicorn princess capable of raising and lowering the moon, which made up for it.

At long last, the boardroom doors burst opened and the room filled with black smoke. The governor and his many cronies coughed and spluttered as Princess Luna entered the room.

"We have ARRIVED!" boomed the Princess's powerful voice. "We doth EXTEND our warmest GREETINGS to GOVERNOR Grain Harvest and her FINE associates, and we WOULDST like to EXPRESS our sincerest HOPE that this visit shall PROVE beneficial to both OUR country and thine."

"Somepony needs to teach her Equestrian," whispered one of the governor's assistants to another.

"W-welcome y-your highness!" squeaked Grain Harvest as he shakily edged over to Luna to kiss her outstretched hoof. "I hope you have enjoyed your stay in on our humble little island so far."

“YES!” replied Luna, still not adjusting to an indoor voice. “We have been MOST pleased at the fine treatment WE have received at the HOOVES of your diligent staff! We have also enjoyed the FRUITS of this fine land’s many FARMS and GARDENS. We do not REGRET our gift to you ALL those centuries AGO.”

The governor and his associates smiled wearily. Although Princess Luna was at least a thousand years older than any of them and many times more powerful and accomplished, they couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for her. For all her royal posturing, she seemed to be little more than an immensely powerful lost child.

“And we thank you for that, Princess,” said Grain Harvest. “It is the magic of your moon that is taking this country from poor island state to a major contender in the global scene.”

Luna looked around the room. There were too many ponies there – too many judging eyes and ears. She had something important to talk about, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to mention it to so many, many ponies.

“COME Governor, we wish to HAVE words with THOU. Lead us to a place WHERE we can conduct a PRIVATE conversation, between us and thou ALONE.”

Vibrant Pattern and Yellow Orange prepared the guest room for the three travellers. Although Sibwashie had not succeeded in negotiating with the dragon, they were still immensely grateful for his selfless rescue of Vibrant, and for the help his friends gave them with the fire.

It turned out that both Yellow and Vibrant had completed some first aid training back in Manehattan, and the two swiftly tended to the travellers’ wounds and their own. Most of the twenty hooves that entered the farmhouse that night were treated for burns and bandaged.

Once this was done, the still-unconscious White Noise was gently deposited on one of the guest room’s sleeper couches, and his friends

followed suit. Sky and Sibwashie were asleep before their heads hit the pillows, and they slept soundly until the next morning.

“Good morning,” said Sibwashie, rising and stretching as rays of sunlight peered into the room through the curtains.

“Good mor- wait, what?” replied White, finally rising from his comatose state. “Uh... slick awning?”

Sibwashie raised an eyebrow and smiled kindly.

“Why aren’t you rhyming anymore?” asked Sky, who had just opened her eyes. “I know it’s not because you can’t find any more good rhymes.”

“You two saved my life last night,” Sibwashie replied gravely. “In Zebrica, it is customary to rhyme when speaking to casual acquaintances, superiors and colleagues. We forgo the formality when dealing with close friends and family.”

The room was awash with silence as Sky and White contemplated the meaning behind their friend’s gesture. The three travellers had been through a lot together, and they still had a long way to go before their journey came to an end.

“That’s... quite an honour,” said White Noise at last.

“You deserve it,” Sibwashie replied. “Especially you, White Noise. I cannot imagine how much pain you must have had to go through to perform that spell while your magic is still recovering.”

“What was up with that spell, by the way?” interrupted Sky. “I saw you casting it just as I reached Sibwashie with my cloud. Where did a communication technology unicorn learn to summon magical fire-eating foam?”

White Noise chuckled and gave his friends a sly look.

“Besides telekinesis, unicorns generally only have a few spells, *all related to their special talent*,” White said. “What most don’t know is that there’s a

pretty simple way of learning other spells. All you've gotta do is recontextualize the spell as something relevant to your talent."

Sky and Sibwashie gave White blank looks.

"Okay, a more concrete explanation then. If you had looked closely at the foam I summoned, you would have seen that it spelt a message – 'Help has arrived', to be precise. It did this because my special talent is communication – creating means of communication. By making the foam I summoned an overt means of communication, I was able to 'hack magic', as we say, and move beyond my basic repertoire."

"I think I understand," said Sky. Sibwashie nodded in agreement with her.

"Don't think it didn't take its toll on me, though. All that recontextualization takes a lot of magic to get right, and I think that little spell managed to deplete what little magic had built up again."

Yellow Orange entered the guest room as White finished his explanation. Despite the rest he had had the previous night, he still looked tired. His right forehoof was tightly bandaged; it had been the only one he'd had to use when starving the fires.

"My wife and I would like to thank you travellers for your help last night," he said. "That blaze was bigger than any before it, and if not for your help, the entire farm may have burnt to the ground. We have tended to your wounds, and would like you to have some oranges as a parting gift."

Yellow reached into his saddlebag and gave each of the travellers three oranges.

"These are no ordinary oranges," he said gravely. "They come from my family's private orange orchard, and have been enchanted at great cost. They will not go bad. Eat them when you require strength or healing."

The travellers thanked Yellow for his kindness and put away their precious gifts.

"Yellow Orange, I am truly sorry that I was unable to stop the dragon from burning your farm

But perhaps my friends and I can help you in a more obtuse way, saving you from future harm.”

Yellow’s ears perked up, and he poked his head out of the door to call his wife.

“We’re interested,” he said.

Once the governor and Princess Luna were sitting in the governor’s office, behind a locked door and away from prying eyes and ears, the Princess lowered her voice to honour the governor’s high status.

“We hath heard tell of many strange goings-on about this island and with its ponies,” began Luna. “Tell us, Governor, what be the meaning of thy campaign to maketh me thy queen?”

The governor shifted nervously in his seat.

“Oh, you’ve got it all wrong, your Highness!” he said. “The, uh, ‘Princess Luna’s New Lunar Republic’ campaign is not *my* doing. It’s all the work of my opposition, the ‘New Lunar Republic’, as they call themselves. The whole thing is a ploy to gain ponies’ votes!”

“Opposition? Votes?” Princess Luna asked. “Is there a war here? Thou speakest in riddles, governor!”

Grain Harvest sighed inwardly as he realised that the ancient Princess had no idea how the Lunar Republic’s political system worked, or even what democracy was. He supposed she couldn’t be blamed.

“Well you see Princess...” he began, going on to explain his country, the party system, and its various ramifications.

“We... think we understand,” replied Luna tentatively, after Grain Harvest had finished explaining, repeated a few key points, and fielded a lot of the Princess’s questions. “So... thou represents the ‘Farmer-Trader Alliance’, and thy ‘opposition’ is the ‘New Lunar Republic’? And the two groups compete for the hearts and minds of the citizens, so that the prince-

governors of the winning group can ascend to the throne and rule the land? But... only for three years at a time? And thou is the latest in this string of 'elected' governors?"

"Yes, your Highness, that's it exactly."

"And it is the New Lunar Republic - not thy party - that desireth our queenship?"

"That is also correct."

"Oh."

Grain Harvest got the sense that he had misspoken at some point. He glanced up from his desk at Luna, who stared blankly at the wall behind him.

"Please don't see it as disrespect, Princess Luna!" he implored, making eye-contact with the Princess. "It's not that we don't think you'd make a good leader for our nation – I daresay you'd be a better one than me. It's just... well... you and Princess Celestia were meant to rule Equestria together, right?"

"This is true."

This is true, Luna thought. The words echoed in her brain after she said them, and she backed them up with more words and phrases, like "we were meant to rule together, dear sister" and "half the day is night". But the seed of doubt was already planted.

White Noise quietly drank the juice out of his first orange as Sibwashie began speaking. He could feel the pain in his hooves receding as the tangy liquid washed down his throat.

"Although I tried to reason with the dragon and my words fell short I found another way of dealing with him – a method of a more violent sort.

"In my homeland, where the elephants roam and the lions prowl for prey

We have learnt to use the ground to build our houses and keep danger at bay.

“I will teach you the dirt-shaping techniques we use in the place of my birth And show you how to accurately buck, as in Quagball, a solid sphere of earth.”

Vibrant and Yellow were bewildered by Sibwashie’s words at first, but he ensured them that what he intended would be made clear upon demonstration. White Noise recommended that he eat one of his oranges to quell the pain in his hooves before trying to pack dirt or buck balls with them, and he did so.

When Sibwashie was ready to demonstrate his unique method of dispatching dragons, he found that his audience consisted of more than just the farming couple. Vibrant and Yellow had called for and gathered a small group of young, fit stallions and mares – some barely out of foalhood – all eager to learn what Sibwashie had to teach them.

As it turned out, Yellow Orange and his wife were not the only farmer ponies who had had their farms decimated by the dragon. Many of the stallions and mares came from the farms of their parents (or in rare cases, their own farms), where the same thing had happened. From what they said they had heard, it seemed to be happening all around the island, and on a regular basis.

“And what really gets me,” White Noise said, as he and Sky were sitting on the grass, watching Sibwashie’s training. “What really gets me is that everypony seems to have been attacked by the same dragon. They’ve all described a black-scaled dragon with a dark purple underside and evil red glowing eyes.”

“He’s gotta be a pretty busy dragon then,” Sky replied.

“Yeah, *busy* burning ponies’ farms for no personal benefit. It makes no sense!”

“Maybe it does. To the dragon, though – not to us.”

“And it would matter to the dragon because... because I don’t even know why it would matter to the dragon. I don’t know dragons. Not the big ones, anyway.”

At that moment, what had been White Noise’s quest for knowledge of a dragon-specific branch of magic gained a second purpose: the search for understanding. He, Sibwashie and Sky were going to go to Dragonia not just to plunder secrets and ideas from the dragons’ minds, but to understand them – to understand why a dragon would attack sailorponies on a beach, or orange trees on a farm.

The president of the New Lunar Republic (or the Movement for the New Lunar Republic, as it was officially known but seldom called) stared out of the window of her office, which was located at the top of a two-storey building in Tranquillity, the island’s capital (and only) city.

Her name was Joyous Dawn and she was a unicorn of around the same age as the island’s present governor, although she looked a good deal younger. The effect of her neatly tied-back black mane on her dark red coat gave her a severe look – one that she was proud of. Dawn was emphatically not a pushover, and wanted ponies to know it.

She was known to her followers as a dynamic and charismatic leader, and a worthy successor for Mecury, the mysterious mare who had started the movement and then disappeared a month after its establishment. Her cutie mark was an hourglass, overlaid by an ornate telescope. It symbolised her vision and her ability to see things from a long-term perspective.

To her opposition, she was seen as a dangerous opponent, but not an unworthy one. Although there had been murmurs of malcontent with regards to her latest, Luna-centric campaign, most ponies still saw her as a hard-working and terribly intelligent politician, likely to make a very positive difference in the country should she be elected.

Dawn lifted the teacup on the desk behind her with telekinesis, and brought it to her muzzle for a long, refreshing sip. Elections were barely a fortnight away, and she still had a lot of work to do to ensure her continued success in the polls. However, most of the puzzle pieces had already fallen into

place, and it was looking as if the completed puzzle would display a picture of Joyous Dawn being sworn into office by solemn government official ponies.

Despite the return of Princess Luna's moon fertilization magic, there had been a drastic drop in agriculture output in recent weeks. Agriculture was, in Dawn's estimation, the only thing the current government cared about. If they couldn't even protect that which was most important to them, then there was little chance of Grain Harvest seeing another term.

Princess Luna's recent arrival was also an interesting and potentially useful development. According to Dawn's sources, she would be staying in the country for an extended period of time – until a few weeks after the elections, to more precise. Sources also claimed that she was incredibly curious about the ponies who wanted to crown her Queen of the Lunar Republic.

Dawn smiled as she put down her teacup down on the windowsill in front of her. The princess would find out about them soon enough. When she did, she'd come to investigate at head office. And Dawn would be waiting for her.

A knock at the door distracted Dawn from her thoughts. Her ears perked up and her horn glowed a faint red.

"Come in, Barley," she said, face still to the window.

The door opened and a very light yellow pegasus mare entered the room. Joyous Dawn turned around to greet her, and smiles immediately broke upon both of the ponies' faces.

"I still think it's really weird when you do that sensing thing, Joy," Barley said. "It makes visiting you like going to the fortune teller, except you manage to call ponies by their names instead of just saying 'I've been expecting you'."

"Ha, perhaps so," Joy replied jovially. "But there's no point in letting my special talent go to waste, now is there? That spell was the first thing I learnt after getting my cutie mark – it's pretty important to me."

“Fine, fair enough. Anyway, I came to ask you about something: there’ve been complaints about a dragon attacking farmers’ crops recently. At first it was just one farm, somewhere near Port Welcome, but it’s been getting worse. Why, just this morning we received letters from at least ten different farms all around the country asking us what we’ll do about the dragon if and when we get into power.”

Dawn put a hoof to her chin and stood in silence for a moment. Then she smiled.

“We’ve got barely a fortnight until voting day, and this couldn’t have come at a more perfect time. Let the concerned farmers know that a vote for the New Lunar Republic is a vote for a *new* Lunar Republic, and that new Lunar Republic doesn’t include crop-razing dragons.”

Barley was already seated on the floor, furiously writing the president’s words down on a pad of paper with her mouth.

After thinking for a moment, Dawn added: “Reword it to make it say ‘New Lunar Republic’ fewer times. I’m all for brand recognition, but this may get a little confusing.”

The sun had just set as the *Moonchaser* left Port Welcome. White Noise stood on deck, watching the dock recede as the gentle breeze filled the ship’s sails and sent it further and further away.

Before leaving the farm, he had made a promise to Yellow Orange and Vibrant Pattern that he would do what he could to find out the cause of the dragon’s strange behaviour when he got to Dragonia. Dragons were mysterious creatures, and the only way he was going to understand them was by talking with some.

“Maybe you can also ask them how we should apologize for all the dirt-bucking we’re going to do,” Vibrant Pattern had said. “I hate to antagonize the dragon like this, but we really have no choice. If he’s going to act like a barbarian, then we really don’t have any choice than to give that right back to him.”

Sibwashie stood on the other side of the deck, looking at the sea that spread out in front of him. He wasn't looking towards Zebrica - the *Moonchaser* would have to go around the coast of the Lunar Republic before he'd be able to do that - but he pretended he was. He hadn't been home in over a year, and he was eager to see his family and friends again, if a little anxious about discovering how much had changed in his absence.

Below deck, Sky Wave lay on her bed, feeling her seasickness returning. She considered eating one of her oranges for a moment, but immediately dismissed the idea as a waste.

Instead, she fished one of the oranges out of the saddlebag that lay strewn across the cabin floor and just looked at it. It was bigger than any orange she had ever seen before and, unless it was just a trick of her eyes, seemed to glow faintly in the dark room.

Upon entering the Hoofington branch of Dragonfire Delivery to get his morning papers, Grassfire Hospitality was surprised to see a lanky red dragon standing behind the counter in place of the usual short, stout blue one.

"Good morning sir, and welcome to Dragonfire Delivery!" said the dragon, smiling toothily. "How may I help you today?"

"Well, um," began Grassfire. "I don't think I've seen you around here before. Where's Melvin?"

"Melvin has been reallocated, sir," replied the dragon. "His expertise was required elsewhere! I'm Groze, his replacement!"

"Well, okay then," replied Grassfire. "Awfully sudden. But anyway, I'm here for my usual newspapers - although I guess you wouldn't know what those are. Today's Fillydelphia Times and Ponyville Daily, please."

"Certainly sir," said Groze, already writing requests for the newspapers on blank rolls of parchment.

Dragonfire Delivery's local newspaper service had been Melvin's idea. He'd implemented it in Hoofington as soon as White Noise had left, and had then confirmed it as a good idea with White via correspondence somewhat later on. White's response had been enthusiastic, if a little rushed.

"That'll be seventy bits please, sir," said Groze, upon spitting out the two newspapers.

As newspaper delivery cost two jars of dragonfire and the cost of the paper itself, Grassfire tried to avoid purchasing his papers more than once a week. He loved to know what was going on in Equestria, and read new and exciting stories from around the country, but he wasn't made of bits.

Thanking Groze, Grassfire tucked the papers into a saddlebag and trotted out of the store. He waited until he was seated in his private study in the Noble Manticore to read his newspapers.

Equestria was a busy place, and there was a lot of interesting stuff going on in both Fillydelphia and Ponyville, but what caught Grassfire's eye the most was the Ponyville reports of monster sightings and attacks.

Being on the edge of the Everfree Forest as it was, Ponyville was one of the more dangerous hamlets in Equestria. Even so, the monsters that roamed the forest seemed to have little interest in the little town, and generally stayed away from it, unless provoked.

Grassfire knew all this, and – much like the Ponyville Daily reporters – was perplexed at the strange behaviour of the Everfree monsters in recent days. Large and dangerous hydras had been spotted as close to Ponyville as Froggy-Bottom Bog, and a cockatrice had caused quite a stir in the town the previous afternoon. In addition, nearby farmers had reported hearing strange noises at night and seeing large, shadowy figures skulking around their fields.

Ponyville's foremost magic-expert and librarian, the famous Twilight Sparkle, was investigating the matter, but had not yet turned up any answers. She was, as the paper said, reluctant to divulge her early, underdeveloped suspicions and theories. "It's got something to do with magic" was all the reporters were able to force out of her.

Grassfire put down the newspaper and reclined in his study chair. The morning sunlight shone in through the window to his right, warming him in its gentle glow. *It's got something to do with magic.*

Chapter Eight

Melvin lugged his heavy suitcase full of glass jars off the ship and onto the dock, looking around disdainfully as he did so. He'd heard a lot of excited chatter about the Lunar Republic, some of it from ponies he halfway respected. While he'd been careful to keep his expectations characteristically low, he was nevertheless disappointed at the state of Port Welcome.

"And I thought Hoofington was a dump," Melvin whispered to himself.

As he carried his suitcase out of the docks and down the town's main road, he made a few keen observations. The town was clean, if only because it had barely been around long enough for anyone to have the time to dirty it up. There didn't seem to be many places one could go for entertainment - unless one had a fondness for the elegance of scaffolding and the diligence of hard-working builder ponies, and Melvin didn't.

Builder ponies. Builder ponies, shopkeeper ponies, farmer ponies and sailor ponies. Melvin noted with that the town had an overabundance of earth ponies. This made sense to him, as no pampered unicorn would choose to live in such an underdeveloped hole and very few airheaded pegasi would care to live so close to sea-level.

"This place isn't even *finished*," Melvin remarked to himself. "Although that could be a good thing – fewer buildings mean fewer *awful* buildings."

Eventually, Melvin came to shop 16A - the place that was, under Melvin's care and guidance, to become the first international branch of Dragonfire Delivery. He had to give White Noise credit for getting a shop right in the middle of town - or rather, he would've had to give White Noise credit for that, if Port Welcome had been a town worth being in the middle of.

Melvin sighed. *Perhaps you're looking at this the wrong way round*, he told himself. *Instead of looking at this town for what it is, perhaps it would be wise to see it for what it has the potential to become – under your*

guidance. It has the potential to become dreadful (well, even more so) under anyone else's.

"Are you Melvin the dragon, sir?" asked a dapper earth pony with a neat moustache.

"Yes, that's me," replied Melvin, regarding the new arrival with some interest. "Are you from the town planning committee?"

"Yes sir," said the pony. "I have come to present you with the key to your boss's new shop."

"You've got excellent timing," Melvin complimented. "I only just arrived in town."

Melvin presented the earth pony with his identification document, at which the pony nodded and motioned towards a key hanging around his neck. Melvin detached the key and opened the door with it.

"Thank you," he said to the pony. "I like your style. Your name?"

"Correspondence, sir."

"I think I'll call you Corr, for short. Have a good day, Corr."

"I will, thank you sir. I wish you the same."

Yes, Melvin thought. *I can work with this.*

The *Moonchaser* set down anchor at the docks of Sibwashie's hometown of Molaro in midmorning.

"Thank you again for agreeing to take us here," White Noise said to Ocean Glider. "I mean, I know it's quite out of your way, and I'm sure a trip back to Port Anchor could've been far more profitable."

"Nothing would have ever been 'profitable' about my little business if you guys hadn't saved me that night," Ocean replied. "Thanks again - especially

to Sky. Besides, you guys weren't my only passengers on this trip - and hey, maybe I can even find some zebras who want to go to the Lunar Republic!"

A round of hoofshakes and promises to stay in touch later, the travellers and Ocean went their separate ways. Ocean would need to restock the *Moonchaser* before setting sail again, but it was unlikely that the four would see each other again for a long while.

"Come, I will show you around," Sibwashie told his friends, smiling widely. "A few things seem to have changed since I was last home, but it looks like it's still very much the same Molaro I grew up in."

The two ponies followed their friend out of the docks and into his town, looking around and sniffing the air as they did so. Sky Wave noticed a dryness in the air, and was also struck by the town's lack of trees. Staring up at the sky, she couldn't see any clouds.

The town's buildings had been designed in a fashion that blended traditional Zebrican solidness with Equestrian flair. The squat, round buildings were made of tightly packed dirt, topped with clean, carefully-woven thatch, and beautified with Ponyville-style painted wooden window frames and hanging signs. A few of the more recent-looking structures had even experimented with tiled roofs.

Sky asked about this, making sure to end her question off with "it's very nice, of course".

"Because this is a port town, we are more in touch with Equestria and the rest of the world than inland Zebrica," Sibwashie explained. "The builders and architects who grew up in this town developed a fascination with the exotic designs of your ships and your pastel-coloured wood."

"It's certainly a nice gesture," said White Noise. "All this town needs now is a marble tower or two, and I'll feel right at home."

Sibwashie balked at the thought. Like most zebras, growing up in a town of single-storey buildings had not prepared him for towers and skyscrapers, and he had been happy to leave them behind in Equestria.

“<Sibwashie!>” cried a familiar voice, shaking him from his thoughts. “<That you, bro?>”

The travellers turned to see an excited young zebra colt gallop up to them. He was wearing a pair of slick-looking sunglasses and a huge, goofy grin. The two features contrasted greatly.

“<Yes, Walene, it’s me,>” Sibwashie replied, running over to meet his younger brother. “<It is good to see you again.>”

“<Mom and Dad are going to> FLIP OUT <when they see you! Who are these ponies you’re with?>”

“<Friends from Equestria. I will introduce them to you.>”

Sky gave White a nudge with her elbow.

“He says he’s going to introduce us,” White whispered to her.

“Oh.”

White Noise and Sky Wave smiled awkwardly at the newcomer, who looked them both up and down a few times. Sibwashie nudged his brother, and whispered something into his ear.

“Welcome to our humble town, travellers from afar
My name is Walene, and I’d like to ask who you are,” he said to the ponies, giving a small bow.

“White Noise,” said White, extending his hoof. “Business-owner.”

“Sky Wave,” said Sky, also extending a hoof. “Part-time aerial performer.”

Walene met both Sky and White’s hooves with his own two forehooves, and shook them both in a comical manner, causing Sibwashie to let out a chuckle under his breath.

“<Let’s go now,>” Walene said, turning to his brother. “<You’ve kept Mom and Dad and the rest of us waiting for over a year already.>”

One hastily-whispered translation in Sky's ear later, the two ponies and two zebras were walking down the dusty town pathway through the town and towards Sibwashie and Walene's parents' house. The two brothers chatted amiably in their own language, but many of the words they used were unfamiliar to White, so he didn't try to translate them for Sky.

Once they arrived at the house, Sibwashie rapped a hoof across its newly-sanded wooden door. He was greeted by an older zebra mare, who blinked at him a few times, and then embraced him with a cry of joy.

"<Sibwashie! My son, you're home!>" she cried.

"<I missed you, mother. Also, I have brought friends from Equestria. Would you mind hosting them?>"

Sibwashie's mother's smile grew even broader as she released her son from her hug and caught sight of Sky and White.

"It would be an honour and a pleasure, for it is indeed my duty, dear son To ensure travellers are well-treated, and think fondly of us when their visit is done," she said, smiling widely.

Sibwashie couldn't wait to tell his family about all the new Equestrian words he had learnt since his last visit.

Sibwashie's family house was an L-shaped structure, made up of three distinct hut-shapes joined together by hallways. His parents and younger brother lived in one, his older brother lived in another with his wife and child, and the third was used as a lounge and dining room for the whole family, but only on cold nights.

That evening was not cold at all, and it was under the stars, in the family's yard that Sky Wave and White Noise experienced a traditional Zebrican dinner for the first time. *And hopefully not the last!* Sky thought afterwards.

The meal was made up of various different types of grasses, flowers and leaves, which, at first glance, weren't very exciting. They were arranged very artfully, and White Noise didn't scoff at them as he had scoffed at

grazing before, but what really made them enjoyable were the spices and herbs that Sibwashie's mother had added.

Sky had wolfed down three bowls of the stuff, all of which the zebras were happy to give her, in keeping with their custom of hospitality. She thought the food was so nice that she asked Sibwashie's mother – whose name was Baleni – what her secret was.

"My recipe is a cherished family heirloom, and a sworn secret between parent and child. Giving it away freely, even to a good and noble pony, would be an act most reviled," she replied.

Sky felt a little bashful after that.

Young Walene cleared away everyone's plates, and the family and their guests enjoyed after-dinner cups of tea.

Sibwashie's older brother was named Inkirenlo, and his wife was Juweni. They had a very young daughter named Ponli, who had been creeping closer and closer to Sky as the dinner went on.

While White Noise and Sibwashie's father, Makena, were in the midst of an in-depth business discussion, Sky felt a tiny hoof on her left wing.

She looked down, and the hoof immediately retracted, jerking back to cover Ponli's face. Sky smiled at this, and extended her left wing slowly.

Ponli flinched again as Sky's wing started to move, and took a few steps back, before covering her face with her other forehoof as well. *Oh no!* Sky thought. *I hope I haven't scared her.*

"It's okay," Sky reassured Ponli, using her softest voice. "It's just a wing. It won't hurt you."

Ponli slowly removed her hoof from her face, and stared dumbly at Sky. She was too young to know any Equestrian, so she had no idea what the older mare was saying, but she could feel no menace in her words, and could detect only kindness on her face.

“I can move it, see,” said Sky.

Sky moved her wing in and out, only twitching it at first, but slowly building up to the point where she was gracefully extending and contracting it. Ponli had removed her hooves from her face, and stood mesmerized by the movement.

“I won’t mind if you want to touch it. Go on.”

Sky slowly extended her wing towards Ponli’s tentative forehoof. The child looked at her for a moment, and then reached out towards the wing and gently laid her hoof against it. Ponli smiled at the softness of the wing’s feathers, and Sky couldn’t help but smile with her.

“She has never seen a pegasus pony before
We do not get that many on this shore,” said a soft voice to Sky’s left.

Sky smiled at Juweni, and said: “Well, I guess we don’t get too many zebras in Equestria either. But, if you don’t have any pegasi, then who controls the weather?”

“Zebrica is a dry, warm country, without many clouds or very much rainfall
Griffons take care of farms and our magic changes the seasons, but that’s all.”

Sky remembered overhearing Sibwashie and White’s numerous discussions about magic, and the nuances of and subtle differences between internal unicorn magic and zebra alchemy, but she had never understood very many of the words they used, or been particularly interested in the subject as a whole.

Winter Wrap-Up in Fillydelphia was her favourite event of the year. Sure, they used magic to wrap up winter in Canterlot and Manehattan, and there had been a drive to start doing the same there, but Sky was glad that nothing had yet come of it. *Why let the unicorns have all the fun?* she had always thought.

A little to the right of where Sky was daydreaming, White Noise was still deep in conversation with Makena. Their conversation had started with Makena asking White what had brought him to Zebrica, but had soon

evolved into a discussion about business practices and the potential Dragonfire Delivery had to completely change the world.

“It’s a shame you have to use dragons to make your message fires
The only ones I’ve ever met have been uncouth vagabonds and liars,”
Makena said gravely.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” White quickly retorted, slightly taken aback.
“All the dragons in my employ are diligent workers, and fine, upstanding
members of society. Many of them previously served as personal
assistants to students of Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.”

Makena hrumphed thoughtfully, and nodded ever so slightly.

“I will admit that I have only ever met one dragon, who lived in a cave
Living in cities and towns may teach them the right way to behave.”

A niggling voice at the back of White’s mind reminded him of an article in
the *Canterlotian* he read a few months prior. It had been about a large
dragon who had illegally entered Equestria and decided to take a nap on
the top of a mountain. If not for the brave actions of a group of ponies from
Ponyville, his slumber may have covered Equestria in smoke for a century.

That sort of uncaring, thoughtless self-centeredness didn’t fit well with the
picture of what a dragon was like that he had in his mind, and he didn’t like
to think about it. This, of course, wasn’t helped by his group’s recent
encounter with a malevolent dragon, or Salty Seadog’s story.

*And I’m going to be waltzing right into dragon territory – scratch that,
dragon ancestral homeland – with two friends and a bunch of questions, he
thought nervously. It probably won’t even take more than a week to get
there...*

Meanwhile, Sibwashie and his mother and younger brother were talking
about the formers experiences in Equestria – especially the ones he’d had
in the past two weeks or so.

“<The mayor of Bridleburg said WHAT?!>” asked Walene in disbelief,
leaning in to hear the story better.

Sibwashie chuckled at his brother's exclamation, and repeated the mayor's words. Walene's eyes grew ever wider as Sibwashie's story progressed.

"<Oh my!>" said Baleni worriedly. "<I'm not sure I want to hear any more of this – you've certainly managed to get yourself into some nerve-wracking situations, Sibwashie. Please be careful about that sort of thing.>"

"<It's alright, mother,>" Sibwashie assured. "<If I hadn't come out of this adventure unscathed, then I wouldn't be here right now, telling you this story. My job as a diplomat is going to necessitate me going into dangerous territory, you know.>"

Baleni sighed and gave Sibwashie another look of concern, before making him promise that he wouldn't do anything unnecessarily dangerous, which he did.

Little Ponli tugged at Sky's wing.

"I think she wants to see you spread your wings and fly," said Juweni.

Sky noticed that something was off about Juweni's speech. *Where's the second part of the... oh.*

She suddenly remembered being briefed about this sort of thing by both Sibwashie and White. "When a zebra wants you to respond to them, they will usually begin a rhyming couplet, and it is your duty to finish it," she had been told.

Her mouth went dry. *Gotta think of something, gotta think of something! What rhymes with sky? Die... no, that's horrible! Pie... no, zebras don't eat pie... or do they? Spy... no... try... lie... fly... uh... sky... Yes! Sky, that's it! It's even in your name, idiot!*

"Sounds like a good idea," began Sky, her polite smile growing a little too wide, "I really like... the sky!"

Juweni smiled and nodded ever so slightly, and Sky breathed an inward sigh of relief. Juweni then announced Sky's offer to the rest of the table, and they all started looking at her expectantly. White motioned for everyone

to steady their cups and mugs with their hooves, lest they be blown away by Sky's take-off.

"Lights, please!" White asked, motioning for Walene to turn off the outside light, which he did.

The group was now illuminated by the light of the full moon alone, and would be able to see Sky's performance. There was silence as they let their eyes adjust to the darkness.

Sky breathed in and out, trying to relax. Being careful not to disturb anything on the table, or any of the zebras around her, she got to her hooves, spread her wings, and lifted off, shooting up into the star-filled sky.

The whole town of Molaro spread beneath her as she ascended. She could see the little mud-and-wood houses, the few zebras who still roamed the streets after dark, and the cheery lampposts and porchlights that gave the town a warm glow.

Remembering her audience, she stopped herself before rising too high, and swooped back down into their view, performing a slow corkscrew as she did so. Sky smiled nonchalantly as her mane flapped about her face while she turned.

On the last corkscrew, Sky tilted her head up and went into a series of loop-de-loops - an old classic. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her spectators. Ponli was especially transfixed by her flying, her pupils tracking Sky's every movement.

Sky slowed and straightened up. Flapping her wings to stay in a hovering position, she twirled around and around. One of her hindlegs moved to the side, the other stayed rigidly beneath her, and Sky spun around in the air, as if balancing on the vertical leg.

The dry air made her eyes itch, and she closed them for a moment. There were no tall trees anywhere near house, so she wasn't at all worried about colliding with anything.

Once Sky had finished her impromptu performance, she landed gracefully next to the table, and was immediately engaged by an energetic Ponli, shouting her head off excitedly in baby-Zebrican.

“She says that that was wonderful, and she wants to see more
But it’s already long past the time I should put her in bed to snore,” Juweni translated.

Sky smiled at her newest little fan, and she smiled back, reaching out to touch Sky’s wing again.

“Wow, Sky Wave, that was a really excellent display
Where-ever did you go to learn to fly that way?

“None of the griffons I’ve seen here do those kinds of twisty-turny moves,
Their flight’s complete purpose-driven, like zebras are on our hooves,”
Walene said excitedly, displaying a greater command of Equestrian than expected.

Sky blushed and told him and little Ponli (even though she couldn’t understand) about her dancing lessons during her summer vacations in Cloudsdale. They listened attentively, and even their respective parents appeared interested.

“It sounds like this dancing has taught you patience and discipline
Perhaps a grounded version would be good to enroll our daughter in,” said Inkirenlo.

“I’d recommend it!” Sky replied.

After realising that it was long past Ponli’s bedtime, the ponies and the other members of her family soon found themselves yawning, and discovered that it was possibly just a little bit of time past their own bedtimes as well.

Makena and Baleni offered Sky and White sleeper couches in the common room of their family hut, which the ponies gratefully accepted. They were perhaps not the most comfortable beds in all of Molaro, but they were free of charge, and given out of a spirit of hospitality the ponies did not wish to offend.

“White,” whispered Sky. “Psst- White? You asleep yet?”

“No,” came a flat voice from the other side of the room.

“Uuh... me neither,” Sky replied, shifting under her duvet. “Everything’s so strange here - I swear there’s a different *smell* to the air and everything.”

A very soft sniffing sound came from White’s couch. “Hmm. You’re right.”

“If things are already so strange and different here in Zebrica, imagine what it’s going to be like when we finally get to Dragonia?” Sky mused. “Do they even have towns and cities there? I don’t know that they do.”

“My research shows that most dragons in Dragonia live in caves in the rocky mountains. They have no need for artificial buildings, apparently. Their caves suit them just fine, and if one isn’t too their liking, then they just find another one. It’s a very... different sort of society.”

“Sure sounds like it.”

Neither pony wanted to voice their real concern: whether or not it was actually a good idea to continue their journey to Dragonia, given all they had recently learnt. They’d been through a lot together already, too much for them to just turn back without completing their quest - the quest that had started as White’s quest alone, but was gradually becoming shared by all three. But Dragonia was largely uncharted, and their safety would be entirely in the hands of dragons - dragons they may not be wise to trust.

The two continued their smalltalk for a few more minutes, before it died down and they finally went to sleep.

White Noise had another strange dream that night.

He was standing in an empty room. The walls, floor and ceiling were plain white, and there were no windows or doors. The room was perfectly square, and White stood directly in the middle of it.

He blinked his eyes a few times, and the walls began to wobble. Ripples cracked along their surfaces, and White heard a sound – almost like flowing water, but with a slight, grating edge.

The floor beneath him turned green, and then blue, followed by red. The ceiling mirrored these colour changes. Before White knew it, the colours had spread to the walls, and the wobbling to the ceiling. The floor's wobbling knocked him off balance.

He crashed down onto the floor, and with an echoing *TSSH*, like the breaking of glass, a web of cracks appeared beneath him. The web grew.

Soon the whole room was riddled with cracks, and parts of it began to fall away. As more and more of the room shattered and fell in around him, the strange, water-like sound grew louder. It grated at White's ears, becoming almost deafening.

As the din reached its peak, it grew louder and louder, White thought he heard a voice, screaming through the room and penetrating his mind. The voice didn't say anything – it just screamed.

White awoke with a start.

Sweating profusely, he tried to recall what his dream had been about, but found he could not. This dream was even more difficult to remember than the last one.

His body still wracked with nervous shivers, White lay his head back down on his pillow, and tried to get some sleep.

Just as White fell asleep again, Sky mumbled something indistinct and shifted on her couch uncomfortably. She was having a dream about flying through a waterfall.

A Zebrican breakfast, as it turned out, was just as good as a Zebrican dinner. It was also made of mostly the same ingredients, with a few eggs and some toast in addition.

"I am afraid that we zebra do not have as varied a diet as they say you do. But I have bought some eggs: traditional Equestrian breakfast foods for you two," explained Baleni.

"That's quite alright," replied White Noise. "Sky and I are in your country now – we may as well sample some of the local culture, and get an understanding for how you do things here."

"As long as we don't have to rhyme all our words," Sky added.

Sibwashie chuckled under his breath.

"The most important thing that rhyming helps us learn is not to speak thoughtlessly, or out of turn," said Inkirenlo, speaking for the fifth time since he had met Sky and White.

"Oh, uuh," Sky began, suddenly feeling very foolish. "I... uh..."

Sky smiled awkwardly and continued eating her breakfast. Inkirenlo's silence and stoicism intimidated her, but she figured he must not have been too bad if he was Sibwashie's brother, and if he raised the delightful little Ponli. Still, he was intimidating.

Once breakfast was done with, White Noise and Sky Wave decided to have a look around town, in search of some supplies, and perhaps some advice about travelling through Zebrica. They asked Sibwashie to join them, to which he replied that he would catch up with them in a little while.

Once they were gone, Sibwashie turned to his family. "<It has been a great joy to see you all again, dear family. But I was not planning to stay here for very long. The success of White Noise's mission relies on my mediation skill, and so I must depart with him when he is ready to go. I will see you again later on today, and then once more, upon our return from Dragonia.>"

Baleni immediately ran up to hug her son. “<We’ll miss you, dear. Please take care of yourself>”

“<I will, mother.>”

Releasing her son, Baleni thought for a moment before adding: “<And tell that pegasus girl she’s a good pony.>”

“<I will, mother.>”

“<Just don’t go getting any ideas about marriage or something like that! She’s not *that* good.>”

“<I won’t, mother>”

Princess Luna stood alone on a deserted beach. She stared out to sea, gazing in the direction of Equestria, thinking of Canterlot. Dusk was coming to a close, and the time had come for her to raise the moon.

While her sister encouraged large audiences to gather around when she would raise the sun, Luna preferred a more discrete approach to her celestial duty. She stood alone to raise the moon, just as she had done many years before, in the dark courtyard of the old castle.

Luna closed her eyes and slowly rose into the air. The task of raising the moon employed a kind of magic more closely related to the innate, mysterious magic of the pegasi and the earth ponies than the carefully-studied spell-casting of unicorns. Luna would ascend with a few powerful beats of her wings, and the moon would ascend with her.

The moon peered over the ocean, and the princess returned her hooves to the sand and admired it. Given an initial boost, it would continue along its ancient path until it was time to put it to rest and let Celestia bring out the sun.

To any other set of eyes, the moon’s silvery light alone would have been visible on the water, but Luna saw another light, made visible by her glowing horn. The moon basked the island in a soft, purple mist that wafted

lazily along the ground. Cocking her ears, Luna fancied she could hear the plants growing around her.

She suddenly felt very tired. The princess was reminded that she had not yet regained all of her power. Raising the moon was getting easier, but it still took a lot out of her – a far cry from the ease with which she had locked it in the sky at her full power a thousand years before.

Her lack of power was also evident in the state of the purple mist. It was thinner than she remembered it being. Before, it had obscured the ground in an almost opaque fog, but on this night it was little more than a thin film, giving the sand a slight purple tint.

But it was something, and the people of the Lunar Republic were grateful for it. Everywhere she had been, she'd seen smiling faces and heard cheerful whoops, all in celebration of her appearance. No pony was afraid of her, and every pony wanted to hear her speak, and to compliment her on her beautiful night.

"My daddy says you make all the plants on our farm grow really really big!" a young filly had told her. "He says you do it with the moon!"

"THIS IS CORRECT, YOUNG ONE," Luna had responded proudly. "It is indeed with the MAGIC OF MY MOON that your LAND'S HARVEST is the most BOUNTIFUL IN ALL THE WORLD!"

The filly had been so excited by Luna's reply that she had run off to tell all her friends about her short audience with the princess. She'd been too excited to even say goodbye to Luna, but the Princess understood.

Later on that day, she'd received an overflowing basket of apples, pears, oranges and other assorted fruits from a stout shopkeeper with a luxurious moustache.

"Zis is a gift, your Highness, a gift for you!" he had said, his eyes twinkling. "But it is actually a gift *from* you. A gift from you to yourself! For without your powerful magic, fruits of zese sizes would not grow! I thank you, your Majesty, I thank you on behalf of all Lunar Republicans. For ze New Lunar Republic!"

Luna had heard a few grumbles of dissent among her government-hired bodyguards at the pony's parting words. Party politics was very new to her, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Although the governor had conspicuously avoided mentioning the upcoming elections, Princess Luna had managed to discover that they were scheduled for less than two weeks after her arrival. Since she planned to tour the island for a month, she would be there for the election.

And I'll be here after the election as well, she thought to herself. I wonder who's going to get elected? Will Grain Harvest stay on as governor, or will there be somepony else? What if another party gets elected? I should ask somepony...

Princess Luna decided that she would need to pay the New Lunar Republic's head office a visit.

"We'll be spending most of our time on the open road," said White Noise, poring over his newly-purchased map of Zebrica. "I'd have liked to have visited Shangora, or one of the other big cities, but none of them are on the way. In fact, there don't seem to be an awful lot of zebra settlements along the road to Skandar's Pass at all."

The map's crisp brown surface had been marred with a dashed red line leading from Molaro to a gap in Dragonia's formidable cliffs, known as Skandar's pass. Sibwashie had mentioned earlier that Skandar's Pass was among the only safe routes into Dragonia available to non-fliers.

"The stories tell us that the dragons chose their mountainous, isolated homeland out of a desire to be left alone," he had explained. "In the old days, dragons would swoop down from their nests to catch unsuspecting zebras. That's why there aren't many towns nearby – dragons may not eat zebras and ponies anymore, but the subconscious fear persists."

After stocking up on some necessary provisions at the local shops and bidding a long farewell to Sibwashie's family, the travellers set their sights upon the dusty road that would lead them to their destination. They set out

in the middle of the afternoon, having timed their departure so that they would make it to a roadside inn a little while after sundown.

The three trotted along the road at a leisurely pace, staring across the flat plains that extended past the horizon. The long grass that grew on either side of the road swayed in the gentle breeze. To the north, they could just see the cliffs of Dragonia. The sun set behind them as they inched further north-east.

Chapter Nine

It was mid-afternoon the day after their departure from Molaro when the travellers arrived in the first town on their route. The hot Zebrican sun had dipped below its noontime zenith, and it was in a pleasant, hazy heat that the three entered that small village of Kweweri.

Sibwashie smiled at the sight of the town's plain huts, unadorned by Equestrian flourishes. The scene reminded him of visits with extended family in similar villages.

"Have you been here before, Sibwashie?" White Noise asked him. "Anything you can tell us about the village of Kweweri?"

"This is my first time here," he replied. "We shall all discover it together."

"Nah, I've been here before," Sky added. "Bought the t-shirt and everything."

The other two glanced at her. She grinned. White Noise rolled his eyes, and then turned them to the buildings around him, searching for a sign that indicated the presence of an inn or cafe. His stomach grumbled loudly.

"Sibwashie!" he said. "My zebra-script is a little rusty, so perhaps you wouldn't mind finding someplace to eat and leading us there?"

"I can do better than that," was Sibwashie's reply.

Mystified, the two ponies followed Sibwashie as he walked off the town's dirt road and approached one of the huts. This particular hut didn't have a sign, and looked far more like a home than any kind of business. Sibwashie strode up to the front door, and the two ponies lingered behind.

Frowning, he motioned for them to join him in front of the house's front door instead of awkwardly standing around a few steps back from it. Once they were standing next to him, one on either side, he made sure they had smiles on their faces and rapped a hoof against the hut's knobby wooden

door.

A call was heard from inside the house, and a few moments passed before the door opened to reveal a zebra couple who looked around a decade older than the travellers. Sibwashie and the two ponies smiled at the couple.

“Zebras of Kweweri, I bring you greetings from Molaro, and good wishes from across the sea
My friends and I have just arrived in your village, and would like to request your hospitality.

“We have walked all day, and it has caused us to hunger and to tire
If you can provide us with food, I will tell you our tale – I am no liar.

“We have come far and seen much; this is obviously true
And even now, a good way in, there is still so much to do,” Sibwashie said, speaking slowly at first, and speeding up as the recognition in the eyes of the zebra couple showed that they could understand Equestrian.

The couple looked at each other before both of them broke into smiles and ushered their visitors inside.

“If you can tell a story that excites and enthralls,
We will be glad to have you within our walls,” said the male zebra.

Sibwashie grinned at his companions and leaned down to whisper to them.

“Old zebra hospitality custom,” he told them. “It’s very useful if you have got a good story to tell.”

Melvin rubbed the rightmost jar of dragonfire on the bottom display shelf in his new shop. Stepping back to take a look at it, he noticed that the label read “ridleburg”. Melvin carefully straightened the jar, lining it label up with that of the jar on the shelf just above it.

He then stepped out from behind the counter and admired his handywork.
Dragonfire Delivery – Port Welcome was looking clean and ready for

business. He'd put up some posters detailing the business's various services and prices, as well as a "flavour poster" he'd commissioned from a starving artist in Hoofington.

The so-called "flavour poster" was adorned with two long-bodied dragons that twisted along its sides – one red and one blue. At the top of the poster, green fire came out of their mouths and formed the words "Dragonfire Delivery". Below these words was the feature of the poster that Melvin felt most proud of – he had written it himself.

Since time immemorial, the proud and mysterious dragon race has used the magical properties of its fire to send letters far and wide in the blink of an eye.

The dragons kept their magic a fiercely-guarded secret until one century ago, when the wise Princess Celestia was able to gain the trust and respect of the great Dragon King, and the "Equestria-Dragonia Treaty" was drawn up. The Princess learnt the secrets of this powerful communication method, and brought numerous young dragons into Equestria under her employ, and created a robust internal mailing system in her School for Gifted Unicorns

Now, for the first time in history, the speed and convenience of dragonfire is available to you, the common pony! Gone are the days of waiting weeks for your mail – with dragonfire, you can receive correspondence from friends on the other side of the country in the time it takes to have a cup of tea!

Dragonfire Delivery – condensing long distances into short timeframes.

Once he was done admiring his deft prose and enviable marketing skills, Melvin took a few steps toward the front of the shop, flipped the sign on the door to "Yay! We're open" and hooked the door open.

And now to wait, he thought.

Melvin was not destined to wait very long, and had just readjusted an errant "Seaddle" jar when his first customer arrived on the doorstep.

“Wot’s all this then?” asked the customer.

Melvin didn’t even have to look at the pony to ascertain that he was a young stallion from Trottingham (or possibly Buckshire) who had recently arrived in the Lunar Republic to seek his fortune. He looked at the pony anyway, confirming most of his assumptions. He also noted that the stallion was a white-and-brown-spotted paint pony.

“Hello, good sir,” he greeted, putting on a fake smile and faker cherry demeanour. “Welcome to Dragonfire Delivery! How may I be of service?”

“You can be ‘of service’ by tellin’ me wha’ this is all abou’,” the stallion replied. “It’s no’ everyday a new shop opens up in Por’ Welcome – although it does come close to that a’times. This is a fast-growin’ town, after all! Full of opportunity! Brimming with potential! And adventure!”

Melvin smiled at the customer, his mouth beginning to hurt. “Um, yes... quite. Now, you said you wanted to know what it is that Dragonfire Delivery does?”

“Tha’ I did. I see yew’ve go’ a fancy sign, prob’bly wi’ writin’ on i’... prob’bly writin’ that answers my question. But I don’ like readin’ so much, so if ya could tell me, I’d be much obliged.”

“Well,” Melvin began, gathering his thoughts. “Basically we’re like an extra-speedy version of the postal service. With the amazing magic of dragonfire, I can send a letter from here to anywhere in Equestria in the time it would take you – or rather, me – to sneeze.”

“That so?”

“It is indeed. For a price between forty and sixty bits – depending on the destination – I can sell you one of these jars of dragonfire on the shelf behind me. Simply write a letter, and then put it in the jar. The letter will burn up and be transported to one of our dragon operatives in the city or town on the jar’s label. As an added bonus, jarred dragonfire still gives off light – perfect writing-light, in fact!”

“Hmm...” the stallion pondered, stroking the ratty goatee on his chin.

“A Trottingham jar would normally cost fifty bits,” Melvin said, eyes lighting up. “But seeing as you’re my very first customer, I’d like to give you fifty percent off! Twenty-five bits, and that jar is yours!”

The stallion’s eyes widened, and Melvin smiled inwardly. He would still be making a personal profit of five bits.

“I’ll take it!” he said. “Mum ‘n dad will be so ‘appy to ge’ a letter from me!”

“We offer some other services too. Newspaper delivery is one of our most recent innovations. I’m sure I can offer you a copy of the Trottingham Sun, for a today-only discounted price of fifty-three bits – two jars of dragonfire and the cost of the paper.”

“‘Today-only’, you say? Well, I’m not one f’r readin’, but I go’ a few friends ‘ho migh’ like a paper fr’m the mainland. I’ll spread the word.”

“Oh, that would excellent! Thank you, sir.”

Melvin sold his first customer a “Trottingham” jar of dragonfire and rubbed his claws together as the pony left the store to tell his friends.

Dinner was concluding as Sibwashie entered the final stanza of his poem.

*“And so on that lunar ship, we sailed to the Zebrican shore
We put down anchor near Molaro, my home of yore
Before travelling further, we had a quick respite
And Sky Wave danced in the sky at night.”*

The zebra couple clopped their hooves together politely, at which Sibwashie beamed and bowed his head.

“We cannot imagine how much of that story was true
But we know that all of it was entertaining – thank you,” said the husband, whose name was Padle.

With Sibwashie’s story finally over, the group’s attention turned to Sky and White, who had both been sitting very quietly up until this point.

"Mr Noise, as an international businesspony, I must ask your advice. Do you think apples are a good investment, or should I go with rice?" asked Padle.

"Uh, well, I guess you should..." White Noise began, trailing off as he desperately tried to remember the few things Turquoise had told him about the stock market.

"Perhaps I can invest in wood?"

Padle's wife, whose name was Kalena, turned to Sky, who smiled politely at her.

"I am the manager of our Post Office, so I too have delivered mail. Your dismissal was highly irregular; in Zebrica, it would not sail," Kalena said.

"Tell me about it," Sky replied. "I don't know how our Post Office thinks it's going to function with only ponies specifically born for the job."

"It is unfair that they believe anyone without a mail-related cutie mark to be a slob."

"Yeah, but if they hadn't fired me, I wouldn't be here right now. That would be quite sad."

"Good things can come of bad; I envy your opportunity to travel – it is one I wish I had."

"I never thought I'd leave Fillydelphia, and here I am on another continent! I've seen so much... but it's more than just that – I've made friends as well."

"By the time you return home, you will have amazing stories to tell."

"And, of course, there are these oranges!"

"..."

Kalena's mouth shut tight, and Sky gave her an inquisitive look. Her eyes

widened and then narrowed disapprovingly. Sky didn't get it.

"Excuse me, Sky – we need to talk. Perhaps we can quickly make use of the next room's *doorhinges*," said Sibwashie, cutting into the conversation.

Kalena breathed a sigh of relief as Sibwashie led a very confused Sky into the house's living room.

"What was that about?" she asked. "Why did she stop talking like that?"

Sibwashie put a hoof on his forehead for a moment before replying.

"Oranges, Sky," he said gravely. "The word 'oranges' does not have any perfect rhymes."

"So? It's not like we were... oh wait..." Sky covered her mouth with a forehoof as she realised what she had done. "But your parents..."

"My parents are more accustomed to speaking with non-zebras than these villagers. When you did not respond to Kalena with your own couplet, she assumed that you meant her to complete your rhyme."

"Oh. I guess I've still got a lot to learn." Sky's hooves moved to her forehead. "I don't think you ever told me *why* this rhyming stuff is so important to you guys."

"I never did, no," replied Sibwashie. "My mistake. It would have been the sensible thing to do."

"..."

"I take it you would like to know why rhyming is so important to us zebras."

"Yes, please."

"Very well. It all began over a thousand years ago, long before ponies and zebras ever made contact..."

<-oOo->

The land of Zebrica was not always united under one government. In ancient times, herds of zebra living in close proximity to one another built self-governing villages, with their own customs, hierarchies and chiefs – becoming individual tribes.

In those days, life was peaceful, and tribes largely kept to themselves, occasionally trading or intermarrying when one came across another. There were occasional disagreements, and these were settled by battles, but not large-scale ones. In these early battles, champions from both tribes would face off in a physical fight, and tribe of the first one to get tired and collapse would be declared the loser, and would have to concede to the other.

For many years, this was the way of things, and zebras all over the land were happy. This was until Shano's appointment as chief of the Zolaro tribe. Zebras in that time said Shano was "kissed by the stars", and his close associates described him as having a passionate fire in his eyes.

Not satisfied with his tribe's pitiful size, Shano spent long, sleepless nights trying to figure out ways to bring the Shano to greater prominence. He tried a barbaric breeding regime, forcing every mare of child-bearing age to foal as many little zebras as she could, and using the magic of the tribe's shamans to increase the probability of them giving birth to strong twin colts.

But with pregnancies taking as long as four hundred days, Shano became impatient with this method, and soon hit upon another: the integration of other tribes.

It was through Shano that zebrakind was introduced to large-scale violence. In his ambition, he forewent traditional champion battles and built up an army of champions, using them first to intimidate, and later to force other tribes into joining his own.

Over the years, the Zolaro tribe grew in numbers, power and influence, eventually coming to cover half of the today's Zebrica. Shano was ruthless, but not stupid. He kept his tribe under his mighty hoof, and designed battle formations, weapons and training styles to keep his edge over the few remaining independent tribes.

These independents, not wishing to fall under Zolaro rule, reluctantly joined forces under their oldest and wisest chief: Xenta of the Mumbaro tribe.

Xenta was a kind, reasonable leader, but she was not impractical. She took no joy in raising armies against the forces of Shano, but did so out of necessity. Many great battles were fought between the two factions, and much zebra blood was spilt in the dust.

Eventually, Shano died – he was stabbed in the back by Dishaka, his power-hungry younger brother. Sadly for the Zolaro tribe, Dishaka was not half the leader Shano had been, and the tribe descended into bloody infighting.

Zebras had been introduced to the effectiveness of war and bloodshed, and many of the weaker-willed would fly into murderous rages over the slightest disagreements.

Some years after Shano's death, the Mumbaro tribe were having a feast with Dishaka's splinter of the Zolaro tribe. Spirits were high, and the talk of peace was in the air – until a heated argument broke out between the generals of the two tribes' armies.

As the Mumbaro general was reaching for the assegai in his saddlebag, the wise Chief Xenta intervened. She looked into the eyes of the two generals, and held up a hoof to both of their mouths, saying that she was not interested in what they were arguing about.

The people of both tribes were silent when Xenta finally spoke.

“Generals, why would you provoke ill-will between our two herds? Reiterate your arguments, this time with a rhyme in your words,” she said.

The generals were taken aback at this, but did as they were instructed. After a few minutes of thinking, each stated their viewpoints.

“I was just saying that the bull-and-horns formation is one of great power. It catches the enemy army off-guard and makes them... cower...” said the Zolaro general.

“And I merely stated that no formation so well-used can be surprise

I concede that it was deadly in Shano's day, but now we've grown wise," said the Mumbaro general.

Xenta smiled as the generals considered each other's points and came to an agreement, nodding and laughing instead of reaching for their weapons. From that day forward, zebras conducted all important matters of trade and debate in rhyme, preventing anyzebra from losing his temper and saying harsh words in haste.

<-oOo->

"Collaborative couplet-completion came later on. It is usually used when zebras are asking questions and exchanging more causal ideas with one another, as opposed to when they debate, make statements or teach others." Sibwashie bowed his head as he finished his story.

"I think I understand now," said Sky. "Let's go back to the dining room – I'll apologise to Padle and Kalena."

"And you'll avoid ending your sentences with words that don't have rhymes when talking to them?"

Sky opened her mouth to complain about how difficult that would be, but then thought better of saying that to somezebra who had managed to adlib a poem about their adventures earlier that evening.

"I was told that you sell Equestrian newspapers in this establishment," said Melvin's second customer.

"Your source was correct," Melvin replied. "What can I get you?"

"I'd like a copy of the *Manehattanite*, the *Fillydelphia Post* and the *Canterlot Herald*."

"Certainly sir," Melvin replied, before ducking down to the abacus he kept under the table.

Melvin's nimble claws flicked the abacus's beads this way and that, and

after a succession of soft tapping noises, he came up with a total.

“That’ll be one-hundred and fifty-nine bits, please ma’am.”

The mare’s eyes widened in horror. “Daylight robbery!”

Melvin smiled awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other. He refrained from mentioning that the exorbitant price of his wares was an opening day special.

“I like the news, certainly, but not *that* much!”

“Could I perhaps interest you in a single newspaper? The *Canterlotian*, perhaps?”

Melvin did a quick mental evaluation of the customer: middle-aged, unicorn, mare, hat-wearer...

“I have it on good authority that there’s an exclusive interview with Hoity Toity in today’s issue,” Melvin mentioned. “There’s even a piece on the headwear designs of the up-and-coming young designer Miss Rarity.”

“Who’s that?”

Melvin raised an eyebrow and smiled inwardly.

“Why, she’s the hottest new name in the Canterlot fashion scene!” he said. “Her dresses and hats have been the centrepieces of everypony’s wardrobes for months! Surely you must have heard of her?”

“Oh, *that* Miss Rarity! Of course I’ve heard of her – I placed an order for three of her dresses just last week.” The mare chuckled uneasily. “Um, one *Canterlotian*, please.”

Two minutes and a message to Smooth Scales later, fifty-three bits clattered onto Melvin’s counter and his second customer left the store, her snout entrenched in the day’s *Canterlotian*.

Melvin deposited half of the bits he’d just received below the counter, with the rest of his ever-growing private stash. Strangely, it looked slightly

smaller to him than it had the previous day, even though a quick mental tally showed that the bits still came to the same total figure.

After patted himself on the back for his triumph, Melvin became serious. He knew that he wouldn't be able to guilt everypony into buying his newspapers so easily, and he also knew that selling Equestrian newspapers to homesick Lunar Republicans could and should be a huge source of income. If only he could make it less resource-intensive...

An idea began to form in Melvin's mind.

After a restful night and a large breakfast with the Padle and Kalena, the travellers thanked their hosts profusely and went on their way. At one point, White Noise had motioned towards his bit bag, but Sibwashie had put out a hoof to stop him – by Zebrican custom, their story had been payment enough.

The hot Zebrican sun beat down on the trio as they made their way to the edge of the town. There was not a cloud in the sky, and not a body of water to be seen for miles around. The Equestrians felt very thirsty, and White Noise groaned inwardly at the thought of the long way they would be walking that day.

At the edge of the town, the travellers spotted a metal-and-wooden something that made White's pre-emptively tired heart soar – train tracks. His eyes followed them to a squat wooden building to the group's right.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed. "There's a train station here! Maybe we can take a train to the Dragonian border!"

"My country's trains do not serve its far-flung borders," Sibwashie replied. "Our railway system is very much centralised – a station in place like Kweweri is likely the end of the line."

"That... actually makes a lot of sense," Sky interjected, musing on Equestria's own raillines.

"Well," White Noise began, scrambling for reasons to ride a train instead of

walking, “maybe there’s one or two more stops along the line? I’m sure we could make our journey that little bit faster with the help of this train.”

White’s companions nodded in agreement and mumbled about there being no harm in trying, and the three of them headed towards the train station hopefully.

“Look at that,” Sky said as they neared the station. “It looks like there’s some kind of party going on here!”

Just in front of the station, a patch of clear ground was occupied by a group of around ten large male zebras. The zebras were dancing and singing, their hooves rising and falling in time to the slow rhythm of their drawn-out words.

“Is this a traditional dance?” Sky asked Sibwashie eagerly. “Like, a dance intended to stop the train from having an accident? Or to improve the morale of the zebras pulling the train?”

Sibwashie let out a long breath, and motioned towards the signs that had been propped up around the dancers. Their zebra-script was indecipherable to Sky, but the words were large and roughly inked.

“This is a strike,” he said. “The train-pullers do not feel that they are receiving adequate compensation for their work.”

White, who had hitherto been staring intently at the scattered signs, nudged Sibwashie with his elbow and pointed at one of the signs.

“I’ve always wanted to see rough, mouth-written zebra-script! However, I fear that my knowledge of it is a little rusty, or perhaps too rigidly set on the printed version. What does that sign say?”

“You don’t want to know, my friend,” Sibwashie warned, chuckling inwardly.

“How are we going to use the train if the pullers are on strike?” Sky asked suddenly. “I don’t think it can run on its engine alone.”

“Well, actually...” White Noise began, before trailing off. “No, sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

“Maybe we should go inside and talk to whoever’s in charge here,” said Sky. “We may even be able to help settle this!”

White cocked an eyebrow at her. “And just how are we going to get through *this*? Last time I checked, strikers don’t just let ponies walk into the places they’re striking in front of.”

“Maybe it’s different in Zebrica?” Sky pondered, glancing hopefully at Sibwashie.

Sibwashie shook his head. “It’s not. People are much the same, wherever you go.”

As if in answer to their dilemma, the station’s door opened just then, and hard-faced griffon wearing a conductor’s hat walked out.

A grin stretched across Sky’s muzzle as she looked into the griffon’s hard eyes. Here was a griffon with a cushy office job, oppressing the hard-working zebra train-pullers who were actually native to the land. Here was her opportunity to stand up for the downtrodden!

Sky flapped her wings and rose into the air, puffing her body up to look intimidating.

“You there!” she cried, pointing a forehoof at the griffon. “I want to have a word with you.”

The griffon looked a little perplexed, but decided to fly up and humour to confrontational pink pegasus. Her anger made her look rather adorable – just like his teenage daughter back home.

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked politely.

Sky was fuming with righteous anger. “How dare you come into these zebras’ country, steal a cushy job in their transport industry, and then use it to oppress them! You should be ashamed!”

“Uh...” the griffon began, inwardly amused at Sky’s antics.

Down below, Sibwashie raised a hoof in front of his face.

“Well?” Sky asked haughtily.

The conductor breathed in and out, before speaking slowly: “Ma’am, this here payment problem is a tragedy, but not one that I am responsible for. My train-pullers haven’t got their annual raise because the company’s losin’ money. There’s a drought here in Zebrica, and that means that we have less produce to transport, which in turn means that we make fewer stops, get less payment for our transport services, and have less money to go around.”

“Oh,” Sky said flatly.

“In fact, I was just coming out of my office to try negotiate a deal with my workers – get them a small raise at the cost of some of my own paycheck from this ‘cushy job’ of mine.”

Sky hung her head and descended, landing next to her companions. They had heard everything.

“I’m, uh... I’m sorry, sir,” Sky said to the griffon who had just landed in front of her. “I thought...”

“Don’t worry about it, ma’am, you had good intentions; jus’ try not to jump to conclusions like that in future.”

The four stood in silence for a moment.

“So, uh, I guess the train isn’t running at the moment,” White said.

“I’m afraid not,” replied the griffon conductor, a deadpan expression on his beak. “The train will not be running until I and head office can sort out this strike.”

White Noise thanked the conductor half-heartedly, and the three travellers turned their back on the station and walked away. White’s hooves felt especially heavy.

Melvin smiled to himself as he admired his handiwork: a pile of claw-written sheaves of paper, summarising the most important events that had happened throughout Equestria the previous day. It had taken him the whole of the previous night, and his writing claw was suffering from awful cramps, but he was proud of his work.

He had placed a new sign in the window of the shop, advertising the “Dragonfire Equestrian Digest”, at its “affordable price of 30b!”, and with its “news from all corners of the pony homeland, from Prance to Stalliongrad”.

Sure enough, his first customer arrived shortly after opening time. Melvin smiled as he recognized the dapper pony entering his store.

“Good morning, Corr,” he said cheerfully. “How may I help you?”

“I would very much like to see this ‘Digest’ of yours, sir,” replied Correspondence, his eyes already locked on the pile of papers resting beside Melvin’s clasped claws. “I have been dying to hear about Equestria again for months.”

In response, Melvin grabbed the top sheaf from the pile and held it up in front of Correspondence’s face, letting his exemplary summarising skills speak for themselves.

Much to Melvin’s dismay, Corr frowned. “I thought this was supposed to be ‘digest’.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Melvin snapped.

“Well, it’s about as easy to digest as a bucket of gravel,” Corr added. “This article about diamond mining, in particular, has a very needless digression about gem aging and ‘subtle taste differences resulting from shape and impurities’.”

Melvin bit his lower lip. He’d been working so hard on his digests that he’d forgotten to eat the previous evening. *If everypony has the same opinion as Corr does, this is going to be a disaster!* he thought.

Corr plucked the digest from Melvin’s claws and put it down on the counter,

shaking his head as he skimmed over more of the articles. He muttered things about “verbose language” and “misplaced witticism” as he paged through the rest of the digest, causing Melvin to bite his lip even harder.

But before Melvin could draw blood, an idea struck him.

“Hey Corr,” Melvin began, taking a quick glance at Correspondence’s right flank. “What’s your special talent?”

“Summary,” Correspondence responded sharply.

His cutie mark is a quill, thought Melvin. I guess it is kind of a short quill... maybe...

“Tired of working for city hall?”

“They pay me well.”

“How much do you get?”

Corr told him.

Melvin glanced down at his private stash of bits. “I can double that.”

Corr nodded politely, and raised a hoof to Melvin’s already outstretched claw. Melvin winced slightly as he clasped Corr’s hoof – his claw cramp hadn’t gone away – and the deal was done.

“Welcome to Dragonfire Deliveries, Mr Correspondence!”

“Thank you, sir.”

With his eyes closed and his face turned away, Melvin swept his papers off the counter and into a waiting rubbish bin, before handing a stack of newspaper and a quill to his new employee.

“Get summarising,” he said with a smile.

Princess Luna stood outside of the door of the New Lunar Republic's head office – a modest, two-storey brick building close to the centre of town. The glass door was propped open, but Luna hesitated slightly before going inside.

Her royal guards had wanted to come to the office with her – for protection, they had said. Luna had flatly refused their help, and sent them off into the town to bide their time until she was ready for them to take her to another part of the island on her royal chariot. She was more than capable of handling herself.

Many centuries before, when she and Celestia had only recently wrested control of the land from Discord, there had been no need for guards, or political meetings, or any of this modern stuff that made Luna's head spin. The princesses had lived with a few trusted friends and servants in their castle in the forest. With Discord turned to stone, there was nothing they needed to be guarded from.

Luna entered the office's foyer, striding purposefully. She saw a desk at the far end of the office. Behind the desk stood a light yellow pegasus, and a crimson unicorn stood to its side. The two were engaged in quiet conversation.

Luna shrugged and cleared her throat softly. *No need to make a big deal of my entrance*, she thought.

“GREETINGS, ponies of the NEW LUNAR REPUBLIC,” she announced, filling the room with her powerful Royal Canterlot voice. “YOUR INSPIRATION hath arrived UPON your DOORSTEP! Pray tell, where DOTH we find the one named ‘JOYOUS DAWN’.”

The crimson unicorn turned around and bowed politely. “That would be me, your Highness. It is an honour and a privilege to finally meet you, Princess of the Night.”

Princess Luna held out a hoof, which Dawn dutifully kissed, still maintaining her humble bowed position.

“WE have many QUESTIONS for THEE!” Luna barked.

"I can imagine you must," replied Dawn. "Please, follow me upstairs to my office, and I will do my best to tell you whatever you want to know."

Luna nodded gravely before following Dawn up the stairs to the left of the reception desk.

"I don't use my office very often, so I'm afraid it isn't very well-decorated," Dawn mentioned. "I'm a hooves-on kind of leader – I'd rather be out there, getting things done than sitting in a stuffy office."

Luna nodded approvingly.

As she soon discovered, Joyous Dawn's office was exactly as advertised – its main decorations were the reams and reams of paperwork, magazines and newspapers that lay strewn across every available surface – especially the floor.

"My secretary suggested having shelves installed, but I'm in my element in this kind of organized chaos," Dawn explained. "Shelves are where you put books and papers when you want them to sit around getting dusty – I'd rather use the whole floor as a shelf, and keep everything readily accessible. It's important to keep one's hoof on the pulse of events in this politics business, as I'm sure you're well aware."

"YES," Luna replied, holding her head up proudly. "WE ARE INTIMATELY ACQUAINTED with the MANY NUANCES AND FACETS OF POLITICAL DEALINGS!"

"And that's why I'm sure we'll get along spectacularly, your Highness," Dawn replied, her voice firmly mired in a sincerity backed up by her serious gaze. "You are a wise and powerful ruler, and your voice resonates with the confidence that defines you. How do you do it?"

Luna blushed slightly at the compliment, fighting to keep her haughty and regal demeanour.

"I've always been inspired by you, Princess Luna," Dawn continued. "It was your reappearance on the throne in Canterlot that brought me into politics, you know. My party – not to mention my country – owes you an immense

amount of gratitude.”

“Um, yes,” replied Luna. “Yes, that is, uh... that is why we sought thy audience.”

“I hope you don’t find me presumptuous!” Dawn gasped. “I assure you, your Majesty, I had only the noblest and most respectful of intentions when I used your name to inspire the members of my party, and our prospective voters. You must understand, Princess, that you have done a great deal for our island. Without you, we would not be the ‘Lunar Republic’, after all.”

“This is true...”

“Please, Princess Luna, have a seat. Take my chair – it’s the fanciest piece of furniture I own.”

The Princess did as she was requested, and rested on the wide, soft chair behind the office’s paper-covered desk. Dawn swiftly deposited the desk’s papers on the floor and took a seat in front of the desk, in the chair her guests would usually use.

Dawn wasted no time in continuing her speech. “Princess Luna, since you returned to Equestria, the long-forgotten circumstances of your original banishment have come into popular knowledge once more. I know that you felt underappreciated all those years ago, and I cannot say how sorry I am for the acts of my ancestors, whom you gave the gift of your moon’s magic. They were ungrateful and insensitive.”

Luna leaned forward in her seat. Dawn was speaking very earnestly, and looked as if she might cry.

“I promote you in my party because I cannot let that happen again, Princess Luna. You are a good and kind princess, and you deserve the love and adoration of those you serve so selflessly. So, Princess Luna, will thou allowest me to – in my own minute capacity – bring thee the fame and respect that thou deservest?”

Luna didn’t answer right away, to which Dawn gracefully conceded. The two mares spent the rest of the afternoon discussing politics and the

welfare of their two nations. Dawn did most of the talking, but Luna chimed in where she could, her voice growing softer and gentler all the while.

Eventually, though, Princess Luna's softened voice found a hard edge.

"So, what thou art saying is..." she began, screwing up her eyes. "What thou art saying is that we should *abandon* our sister and come to thy Republic?"

Dawn's eyes flared with shock momentarily. "Well, your Highness, I wouldn't put it like *that*, but-"

"I see," Luna replied sternly. "We are interested in discovering why thou holdest that opinion."

Dawn took a deep breath, and readjusted the spectacles on her nose. "I'm going to be frank with you, your Majesty. The ponies here like you. I'm sure you've seen their smiling faces and the way they mob around you whenever you come into town. Lunar Republicans treat the Princess of the Night with the respect she deserves."

"Miss Dawn," Luna replied, a stern expression on her face. "To go where we are most 'liked' would be an act of selfishness unbecoming of a princess. We are the night, and our sister is the day. How can night be without day?"

Dawn bit her lip.

Luna continued, "Yes, we are aware that day was without night for one thousand years. We are aware that for the entire lives of thy generation and the ones preceding it, the name 'Luna' was forgotten. But that was not how things were supposed to be, and to force our sister to reign alone once more... It is unthinkable."

"But you *misunderstand* me," replied Dawn, speaking ever-so-softly. "I do not want your sister to be alone; I merely wish for a more active *partnership* between Equestria and the Lunar Republic. You have blessed our land, Princess Luna, and for that, you deserve a part in its governance. You deserve to reap the benefits of what you have sown."

The room was silent for a moment as Princess Luna carefully considered Dawn's words.

"Thou HAST give us a LOT to think about," she proclaimed, rising from her seat. "We shall SLEEP on it."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Dawn replied silkily. "I am certain that whatever decision you come to will be wise and well thought-out."

The trio were on the road once more, having picked up a few necessities that now weighed down their saddlebags before leaving town. White Noise had done his best to push any thoughts of trains out of his mind, and was trudging along, focusing on the dull aching in his hooves.

Sky was still feeling a little embarrassed about her outburst, but her thoughts of the strike itself had largely been overshadowed by something the conductor had told her – something she didn't understand.

"Hey Sibwashie," she said, glancing at the silent zebra walking next to her. "What's a 'drought'?"

If he was at all taken aback by Sky's comment, Sibwashie did not show it, merely stating: "A drought is what happens when it doesn't rain somewhere for a long time. Things dry out, and crops die."

"But why wouldn't it rain where there are crops?" Sky asked. "I mean, my mom always told me that farms were the very first places to get fresh supplies of clouds."

"Yes, I am sure that is the case," Sibwashie replied, "in Equestria. Sadly, Zebrica does not have floating cities full of cloud factories, or the winged ponies to staff them. Here, we get our clouds from what the wind is kind enough to blow over our land, and what griffon weather-importers are able to requisition and transport from Equestria."

"So, then, if you can't get enough..."

"Drought. The winds have not been kind to us this year."

“But, but won’t zebras... *starve*?”

Sibwashie smiled reassuringly. “Thankfully our government has made plans for things like droughts. Zebrica has just had to increase its imports – I’m sure it’s caused a strain on finances, but zebras shouldn’t starve.”

“It’s awful that you have to live at the whims of natural forces here, Sibwashie,” White Noise added. “It’s unnatural.”

“I, too, regret that nature has not provided us zebra with floating cloud factories,” Sibwashie replied.

“Good thing we ponies can do something to help you guys,” White continued, completely blasé. “Why, I remember experimenting with food delivery via dragonfire back in my student days... not that that ended well...”

At the urging of his companions, White reluctantly divulged the stories of some of his less-than-successful magical communication experiments. The journey’s mood lifted significantly as the three travellers laughed with each other.

“... and that’s why you should NEVER practice voice projection on an empty stomach...”

Correspondence’s improved Dragonfire Digests did not sell well. The first one was finished toward noon, and couldn’t be sold because it needed to be used to make further copies. Even with Melvin’s help, the two did not build up a respectable pile of digests until it was time to close the shop for the evening.

The following day, however, Correspondence found himself frantically scribbling new copies – no easy feat for an earth pony – as Melvin sold every single one they had in a matter of hours.

“Well, Corr, it looks like we’ve really hit a nerve with this,” Melvin said as they closed up the shop for the night once more, this time with considerably higher spirits. “Let’s split the profits sixty-five thirty-five – I am a generous

employer, and you did a great job summarising all that news.”

“Yes, thank you sir,” replied Corr, scooping the bits Melvin presented him with into his saddlebag.

Correspondence said goodnight to his new boss, and Melvin found himself alone, staring at his (and White Noise’s) share of the day’s earnings. He poked at the bits with a claw, trying to decide how much to apportion to White and how much to keep for himself.

I did come up with the digest idea all on my own, Melvin thought, and it’s based on the newspaper idea that I had before... all on my own. I also spent a lot of time physically making the digests today. Why should I give White Noise any of this money? I earned it – it should be mine!

Melvin gazed loving at the bits on the counter for a moment, and then quickly gathered them up and added them to his private stash – a collection of shiny bits that was growing at a very pleasing rate. *I’m going to run out of space under the counter if this keeps up!* he thought gleefully.

Yawning widely, Melvin decided it was time to go to sleep. He started making his way to the back room, where his bed sat, surrounded by extra jars of dragonfire and his beloved Trixie poster, but something stopped him.

Melvin looked at his stash of bits and suddenly got a very strange idea. With a flourish, he knocked the bits out from under the counter. They clattered to the floor, spreading out across its length. Melvin’s eyelids drooped, and he sank to his knees.

A clawed hand reached up to place a pair of round glasses on the counter, and then Melvin was out. He slept soundly on his bed of shiny bits, dreaming of all the bits that were to join them.