

## Chapter Thirteen

As soon as the King's visitors entered his throneroom, the enormous double doors behind them clanged shut. White winced at this as he stepped forward to introduce himself.

He bowed briefly, and then began, "Greetings, your Majesty! My name is White Noise, and I come to you as a humble seeker of knowledge. I am a magic scholar, specialising in communication magic, and I have been told that your Highness's great wisdom is the best possible source for the information I seek."

Sky and Sibwashie stepped forward as White finished speaking, taking his silence as a cue to bow themselves.

"These are my friends and travelling companions," White continued, motioning towards the bowing equines to his left and right. "They do not share my interest in magic, but I would not have made it here without them."

The King nodded slightly, and turned his eyes to Sky.

"My name is Sky Wave, your Highness," she said. "Being in your Highness's court and seeing your Highness face-to-face is an honour and a privilege that I never dreamed I'd have."

Again, the King nodded, before turning to Sibwashie.

"I bring warm greetings from the people of your Highness's neighbours on a Zebrican plain. We have great respect for the dragons, and I am humbled to be allowed in their domain," greeted Sibwashie, glancing deferringly back at Venkra.

Venkra smiled warmly at the King. "Hey Uncle Kasdar. How's it going?"

White stopped himself just short of gasping in horror.

"I am very well. Thank you, Ms Venkra."

White nearly fainted. *Dragons have very strange protocol*, he thought.

The Dragon King lifted an enormous clawed hand – large enough to grab and squash a pony, Sky nervously considered – to signal that he was about to announce something of importance. A loud rumbling from his throat filled the room as he prepared to speak.

"Friends," he began, "and I do call you friends for what you have done and what you shall do for my kingdom, it is good to meet you in person at last – at last, for I feel that you have longed for this meeting for many weeks now."

White Noise's thoughts honed in on a single word. "*Friends? Really? Why? This is incredible! If the King is calling us his friends, he'll tell me about dragonfire for sure! Stay cool, White, stay polite!*"

"It is an honour to be in your court today, your Highness," replied White, bowing so low that that ground

muffled his words. "It is also perhaps too great an honour for your Highness to call us friends."

Sibwashie nodded slightly and lowered his own bowing almost to White's level.

"Pray tell us, oh King of dragons, what we have done to earn such praise  
We would not want to wonder what we have done right till the end of days."

The Dragon King's snout twitched into a faint smile, and small chuckle boomed from the corner of his mouth. He turned his great eyes to Sky, who shrank back slightly.

"As the king of the dragons, I am intimately concerned with their welfare," he said, "and not just the welfare of all dragons as general measure, but the health and happiness of every one of my subjects – indeed, every member of my species! This is why I am the king of the dragons and not the king of Dragonia – I would not worry for the sake of *rocks!*"

The King blinked and swiftly raised his head up on his tree trunk of neck, nearly smashing his skull into the cave's ceiling.

**"Ms Wave,"** he proclaimed, his voice growing louder in volume and more solemn in tone. **"thou hast forged a strong bond with our subject Venkra, daughter of Skandar in the treasury cave this day! By the power of your friendship, nevermore shall she succumb to the scaly temptations!"**

Sky raised a forehoof in front of her mouth in shock. Venkra too was surprised, but only for a moment, as her surprised features soon relaxed into a knowing expression.

"Yes, my child," the Dragon King continued softly, lowering his head to peer down at Venkra as he noticed her face. "This little pony is the first non-dragon you have given some object of value to, out of concern for *her* and not for *you*. She is your *gafcomp*, and her existence shall be a ward to your greed."

Sky's look of shock slowly turned into a look of shocked puzzlement, and then a look of pure puzzlement.

"*Gafcomp?*" she asked. "What's a *gafcomp?* ...Your Highness?"

The Dragon King smirked. "It has been a long time since I last needed to tell anydragon – or anypony – the Legend of the First Dragon."

Taking a deep, slow breath, the King filled his lungs with air before carefully expelling it in a column of black flame. The column fed into a growing sphere in of black flame, suspended in the air above the visitors' heads. Once all of the flame had been absorbed by the sphere, it started to change colour.

*So that's what black dragonfire does,* thought White. *Incredible.*

Blurry blobs of different hues formed on the surface of the sphere, slowly becoming clearer and revealing themselves to be pictures. The pictures moved, and with the Dragon King's booming narration, they told a story.

In eons past, when the world was young and those who would become its dominant creatures were only just beginning to think and to reason, there was much needless fighting. In those days, dragons, griffons and all types of equines shared a single island in the middle of an endless ocean, and each faction vied for dominance.

During the first decades, the factions were caught in frustrating stalemate. The griffons had their sharp and dexterous talons, the dragons had their magical fire-breath, and the ponies, zebras and others had great numbers and devilish cunning. Each group would attack another group, and losses would be thankfully light on all sides, but nothing would be accomplished. This was not to last.

When the dragons' caves became too small to sustain them, they dug and blasted away huge swaths of rock, going deeper and deeper underground in search of more space. What they didn't expect to find along with their new space was gemstones.

These stones were dismissed as pretty trinkets at first, after the brief consideration of using them as distractions in battle against the other factions. Having nowhere else to go, they were piled into one of the then-Dragon King's extra rooms.

In those times, a full-grown dragon was the height of two ponies standing on their hindlegs. When the Dragon King shot up in size to the point where he was unable to leave his chambers, his subjects were greatly shocked. The greatest doctors and magicians under the King's rule tried everything they could think of to shrink him down again, but he kept growing, up to the point where his great size stopped others from entering his chamber.

The doctors were relieved when he stopped growing at this point, but still found no way to cure him. Weeks and months passed, and the equines and griffons must have wondered at the sudden reclusiveness of their common adversary.

Eventually, the doctors and magicians gave up and stopped visiting the King. They made his firstborn son the new king and encouraged everydragon to forget about the old one.

Some months later, the ex-Dragon King arrived unannounced to a great banquet held in honour of the square metre of land that had been annexed from griffon territory that day. He was back to his normal size and looked healthy and well-fed.

At that feast, dragons ate gemstones for the first time and learnt of the effect that owning them had on growth. The dragons clamoured for the old King to be reinstated, but he declined, patting his son on the back and saying how much he looked forward to his retirement.

It was only after he died that his son put what dragonkind had learnt that day to use.

«-oOo-»

The pictures faded out, and the ball of flame turned black once more.

"Now I remember what black flame does!" Venkra cheerfully whispered. "It's too bad barely any dragons can use it – it would make plays so much easier!"

The Dragon King took a moment to breath in and out as his visitors politely waited. He then took a final deep breath in and expelled it in another column of black flame, which collided with the sphere and brought it back to life in a flicker of colours.

"Now, where was I?" pondered the Dragon King. "Ah, yes: putting knowledge to use."

«-oOo-»

A few weeks after his father's funeral, the Dragon King instituted a ban on the consumption of precious stones, while at the same time starting an initiative to find more. His subjects did not understand why these measures had been taken, but any who doubted the King's wisdom were soon reminded of the thirty square metres of land that had been won from the other factions during his short reign.

The miners worked diligently, and many gems were unearthed. These gems, along with the stockpiles that had already been collected, were distributed equally among the population, together with strongly worded instructions not to eat them under any circumstances. The dragons were bewildered, but grateful.

When they started to grow, they understood the King's plan, and whoops of elation echoed through the winding corridors of their cavernous home.

After some months of complete silence from the dragons, the equines had seen their chance and planned a raid on their caves. Great was their surprise when hoards of massive dragons – easily the size of six ponies each – burst out of cave exits that were too narrow to accommodate them.

What fighting there was was mercifully short. Those few equines who were too brave or too foolish to surrender immediately were crushed, and the rest quickly gave up and joined the dragons to successfully conquer the griffons, which they all had very mixed feelings about.

Flags bearing an image of a large, blood-red dragon were hung all over the island, and the Dragon King flew up to its highest peak to survey his domain. The leaders of the other factions had surrendered to him, and he wore their tiny crowns as rings on his claws. As he stood on the mountain peak, breathing in the fresh, cold air that was now his, every griffon, pony, donkey, mule and zebra on the island were being shackled and herded into their new lives as slaves.

«-oOo-»

The colours faded from the globe once more, and the Dragon King's guests looked up at him expectantly. *If that is the end of his story, then it's the most upsetting story I have ever heard*, thought Sibwashie. *Although I can see why it might appeal to dragons – the more barbaric and power-hungry among them, at least.*

"Fear not, my friends," assured the Dragon King. "This story is conventionally told in three parts – one every fifty years, when dealing with dragons. Bear in mind, also, that this is the summarised version."

The King blew another gust of black flame into the sphere, lighting it up for the final part of his tale.

«-oOo-»

*It's all mine!* thought the King. *Everything as far as the eye can see... is all mine!*

After he had stood on the summit for quite some time, the King finally flapped his wings and flew back down to the cave system where he knew his subjects would already be putting their prisoners to work in the mines. He was so busy thinking about how he would expand the dragons' gemstone-mining effort that he didn't notice the odd quiet that had fallen over the cave and was not disturbed by his status as the only dragon who wandered the rocky halls.

The King soon reached the mines, and was shocked by what he saw there. One of his subjects, a very loyal and hard-working dragon named Lyschek, was curled up in a corner, guarding a pile of gems much larger than what he had been allotted and cackling greedily to himself.

Despite the King's best efforts, Lyschek would not leave his corner, or forsake any of his treasures. When he began to grow, the King left swiftly, lest he be killed by his mad subject.

It was with a heavy heart that the Dragon King discovered that Lyschek's madness had not been an isolated incident. Formerly diligent and duty-bound dragons had lost track of their griffon and equine slaves in order to fight each other over the ownership of gemstones. Some lay guarding their spoils, and others lay impotently clawing at the ground as they shrank.

Knowing not what else he could do, the Dragon King flew back to the top of the mountain. When he looked out at the land once more, it was with great sadness, and boiling tears ran down his face.

With a flash of blinding-white light, an angel appeared before the King. She was shaped like a pony, but stood far taller, and had both a horn and a pair of wings. Her whole body glowed with light that obscured her features, and the King threw himself to the ground to avoid gazing upon her.

"Jhangren," she said, speaking the King's name, "you and your dragons have unearthed a terrible weapon and used it to balance the state of affairs on this island overwhelmingly in your favour. I could not stand by and watch such a thing happen, so I have cursed your people."

The King whimpered softly, but did not lift his eyes to face the angel.

"Henceforth, a dragon who owns too many gemstones will be driven to madness by a desire to have more," continued the angel. "Your species shall be defined by the greed you have shown in your conquest for this land. Dragons will spend their long lives in constant concern, always worrying that one more gold piece could be the difference between a niggling voice in the back of their heads and utter delirium."

The King sunk lower to the ground at this point, wishing that the earth would swallow him up.

"But," said the angel, softening her tone considerably, "I have provided a way for dragons to overcome this fatal flaw. If any dragon gives freely and kindly to a member of another species – be it a pony, camel, griffon or any among the sentient peoples – then their bond with that individual shall always be enough to overcome their temptations."

With that, the angel disappeared, and the King flew back down to the surface of the island. In the coming weeks, he stole and ate as many gemstones as he could, getting other dragons to help him as they were cured of their madness. With no further hunger for fighting and no love for the other factions, despite what

the angel had told him, he had his subjects build great boats and before many years had passed, the dragons left that island behind them.

The King only told the story of the angel on the mountain with his dying breaths, for the curse he had brought on his species ashamed him so.

«-oOo-»

"When a dragon forges a bond with a member of another species, that individual is known as the dragon's *gafcomp*, which is the word for 'guardian angel' in the old language," said the King as his sphere of black flame faded out for the final time and collapsed in on itself. "You, Ms Sky Wave, are Ms Venkra's *gafcomp*, for she 'gave' you that golden chain – which is actually mine, and will remain mine, but the workings of such magic can be liberal with their interpretations of 'ownership'."

"Oh!" Sky exclaimed, "then you should have this back!"

She reached into her saddlebag and pulled the long golden chain out with her mouth, dropping it in a snaking heap in front of her. "It's suprising how light it is," she remarked.

"Yes, I have most of my treasure enchanted in some way or another," explained the King. "On second thought, why not keep the chain? I won't miss it."

"Thank you, your Highness!" Sky and Venkra said in unison. They looked at each other and grinned awkwardly.

"Thanks for saving me from my *greedy dragon nature*," Venkra whispered.

"Uh, you're welcome?" Sky whispered back.

While Venkra and Sky were whispering to each other, the Dragon King's eyes twitched from side to side and he put a clawed right hand to his chin, stroking it thoughtfully. He looked down at White's expectant gaze.

"Ah!" he cried, snapping his claws and lifting his head up to the ceiling once more. "Of course, *that's* what I needed to do..."

The King coughed and put on a serious expression. "**Mister White Noise, thou hast travelled far to learn the ancient secrets of dragon communication and *green* dragonfire. We have agreed to disclose these secrets to thee, for we trust that thou wilt not misuse them. Listen closely!**"

With this, the King's neck shot down and he brought his head to a hovering stop just in front of White Noise, who could feel his hot breath on his fur and couldn't decide whether he was more elated than frightened or more frightened than elated.

"You ponies are familiar with the statement 'friendship is magic', aren't you?" asked the Dragon King.

Remembering his discussion with Twilight Sparkle in Ponyville and feeling just a little bit sheepish for having laughed at her about the focus of her studies, White nodded vigorously.

"Ah, good. Princess Celestia has taught you well, then," the King continued. "You know, back when she was just 'Celestia the Alicorn', it was / who taught her that saying. She was a very independent young pony... as was her mother."

White's eyes widened. "You knew Princess Celestia's mother?"

The King chuckled heartily. "Since *she* was but a filly. I have walked this earth for twenty thousand years, and I shall walk it much longer yet. Now, watch!"

The Dragon King took a deep breath and expelled another spurt of black flame. Instead of forming into a ball, this flame formed a wobbly plain and lit up with colours that dimmed as it slowly dissipated. It lasted long enough for White to see himself on it.

White saw him, Sky and Sibwashie walking through the gate and into Dragonia. Another burst of black flame showed him the scene in Venkra's cave. A final blast reminded him of the ordeal in the treasury that had happened only an hour before.

"Black dragonfire allows me to see things," continued the Dragon King, once the last of the flames had faded, "things that should be far too far away for me to see, and things that happened in the distant past. I have watched you and your companions since you entered my country, and I paid close attention to your actions and words in the treasury room. You are already aware of the boost that your magic experiences when your friends need your help, and so you already know of the magic of friendship in that context.

"With dragons, there is a little more. Allow me to show you."

The Dragon King slowly slid his eyelids over his eyes and began to hum softly. White felt his horn light up involuntarily, and his pupils shrunk to pinpricks as he a powerful and unfamiliar presence enter his mind.

***You are in luck, young unicorn! Your mind is already open to the magic of friendship that we dragons know so well!***

*You can do this too?!*

***Of course I can! And not because I am a king or a special individual, but because all dragons are capable of telepathy, and most dragons use it on a day-to-day basis. Why do you think it is that we have an old language to cherry-pick words like "gafcomp" from, but no new language to hide our thoughts from foreigners with?***

*Wait, but... that doesn't make sense! If all dragons can do this, then why couldn't I access Venkra's mind back in the treasury? Was it because she was insane?*

***Logical assumption, but no. Why? Because as experienced users of telepathy, we dragons naturally protect ourselves from the kind of interference that new telepaths perpetrate on those with unsuspecting minds unfamiliar with foreign thoughts.***

*So... Venkra was naturally blocking my, uh, "signal"?*

***Yes, but don't think that your plan would have succeeded had that not been the case. I suspect, from previous experience, that you have been able to manipulate others by planting thoughts in their heads. This is only an effective tactic because those people cannot fathom the existence of thoughts in their heads that are not their own, but we dragons are very familiar with such things.***

*I think I get that, but I have a question.*

**Yes?**

*I see that this is definitely a form of "communication magic", but what does it have to do with how green dragonfire sends messages?*

***Why, everything! Green dragonfire disintegrates objects, shoots them along the intangible bond everydragon has with everydragon else and recreates those objects at the other end of the line. That's why it requires two dragons, and why it is functionally instant – one cannot hope to measure friendship or love in miles or kilometres, now can one?***

*What about Princess Celestia? How does she receive messages?*

***After she unlocked her telepathy, I inducted her into the dragon network and taught her the spell she would need to recreate the messages on her end. She can't send messages on her own, of course – nopony can breath green flame!***

*Could you teach me that spell too?*

***I have already decided to. I shall teach you the spell I taught your Princess, and at the same time, I shall teach you to control your telepathy. Your mind is weary with the stress that comes with having such great power. I shall ease your burden, White Noise.***

White's eyes shot open. A soft buzzing filled his ears, and he took a moment to realise that the Dragon King's head had left him. When the buzzing subsided, he heard the King conferring with his friends.

"– and we will be busy with that for quite some time. You three will wait outside the throne room until we are done and you are called for."

"Yes, your Highness," replied Sky.

She and the others bowed to the king once more and waved at White before leaving the now-open doors of the throne room, which closed swiftly behind them.

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The atmosphere just outside the throneroom was tense. The two guards stood at attention outside the great doors, and Sky, Sibwashie and Venkra milled about awkwardly in front of them.

Sky was the first to speak. "So I guess I'm your *gafcomp* now?"

"Yeah, I guess," Venkra retorted.



"Uh, did I do something wrong?" asked Sky. "Is there something about me that isn't *gafcomp*-ey enough?"

Venkra's snout sunk into her claws, and an awkward silence filled the cavern for at least a minute before she replied.

"No, Sky," she said softly. "You're a nice pony, and I'm grateful that you... well... I guess I'm grateful that you almost got yourself killed in order to snap me out of my little spell. Yeah, that's what I'm grateful for. Sounds a little messed up, doesn't it?"

Sky dug at the ground with a forehoof. To Venkra, her silence said everything.

Venkra sighed. "I'm ashamed of myself for *needing* a *gafcomp*, Sky. Really, I'm glad it's you, and I'm glad that us being acquaintances – should I say friends? – will stop me from doing something like that again, but I *shouldn't* need it."

Venkra and Sky sat down face-to-face, and Sibwashie ambled over to them with a puzzled look on his face. He had been listening to their conversation.

"From what I can surmise,  
A *gafcomp* is a great prize.

"Surely all dragons should have one to curb and soften their base desires?  
Why do you live with this curse, when a friend is all its breaking requires?" he recited.

"Maybe if the world was perfect... maybe then everydragon would be big pals with their own pony or zebra or narwhal," Venkra snapped. "But that's not how it is! As things are, dragons keep to themselves. I am the nineteenth dragon to ever have a *gafcomp*, and it's a badge of weakness!"

Sky's ears drooped.

"Let me tell you about what's important in dragon society," continued Venkra. "It's size. The size of a dragon denotes how much they matter. Why? Because the more you hoard, the more you grow, and the more you grow, the more you want to hoard. Everydragon has a breaking point – a point where they amass enough treasure to have a completely overpowering desire to get more – a desire that clouds their rationality and makes them little more than beasts."

The next lines came as a soft whisper. "You've seen that happen to me."

Sky bit her lip.

Blinking the beginnings of tears out of her eyes, Venkra resumed talking at her normal volume. "A bigger dragon obviously has a bigger hoard, and if a big dragon with a big hoard is still sane and rational, they must have a lot of self-control. That's why the King is so massive – he has the greatest self-control of all of us."

"So... having a *gafcomp* means you don't need self-control to stop your greed?" Sky asked tentatively.

"Pretty much, yep," replied Venkra. "I must say, it's a relief to be rid of that little voice in the back of my head that kept telling me to ransack your saddlebags, but I can kiss goodbye to getting any respect... Not that any of this is your fault, Sky! Please don't think that!"

Sky thought that, but put on an understanding face for her friend's sake. "So, uh, is there anything I have to *do* to be your *gafcomp*? Do I have to, like, move to Dragonia?"

"No! No, of course not," Venkra gasped. "Sky, being a *gafcomp* doesn't even mean we have to see each other often! Just knowing that, uh, you're out there somewhere is enough to... woah, this sounds kinda weird."

Sky nodded. *Dragons are so strange*, she thought.

"Uh, you know, Sky, my father had a *gafcomp* in his twilight years," Venkra said, her face brightening up.

"Really?" Sky replied, perking up.

"Her name was Mary. We always called her his little pony friend, which annoyed her greatly, because she was a donkey. It was kind of funny."

Sky chuckled. "Is she still around?"

"Oh, uh, no," Venkra replied hastily. "She, uh, there was... there was an accident."

"I'm so sorry to hear that! What happened?"

Venkra bit her lip and rubbed the back of her neck. "It's not, uh, not something I really like to talk about. I'm sorry. I'll tell you... just not right now."

Sky didn't press the issue, but gave Venkra a sympathetic look.

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White was seated on the stone floor, unmoving. His eyes were shut tight, and his horn was glowing. *Concentrate...* His ears perked up at the sound of a piece of parchment being incinerated. The glow of his horn dimmed as he focused his magic inward. A warmth in his stomach told him that he was succeeding.

Before his lesson from the King, White had cast only a few ambient spells for various classes, each for no more than an hour. He'd always been frightened that he'd cast one, forget about it, and have it drain all of his magic. But thinking back on his journey, he found that that fear didn't have much of a hold over him anymore.

*BZAP!* White felt his horn pulse. He opened his eyes to see an intact scroll hang in the air for an instant, and then plummet to the ground. A slight scent of smoke mixed with the smell of cut grass told him that his spell had succeeded.

***Well done, White Noise***, came a voice in his head. ***Open it.***

White enveloped the scroll with his magic and unfolded it before his eyes. It contained a short message, written in painstakingly perfect calligraphy.

*All dragons share a bond, and now so dost thou, Mind-Dragon. Bear thy new title with pride, and wield thy power with responsibility.*

*Strength is in numbers. Insight is in communication. A mind is better shared.*

White looked up from the scroll and into the King's face. His wide smile showed his many large teeth.

"This same scroll was presented to Princess Celestia five hundred years ago," he said. "Along with her and three others, you are now a *Mind-Dragon*. Do not abuse your position."

"I won't, your Majesty," White replied gravely, dropping down into a very low bow.

"Good." The Dragon King seemed pleased with White's response. "Now, is there anything else you require of me?"

White was about to reply that there wasn't when he suddenly remembered something, and chastised himself for almost letting it go unsaid. "Umm, yes, your Highness. There is one thing... to do with the Lunar Republic."

"The Lunar Republic?" asked the King. "Is that on the moon?"

"No, your Majesty, it's an island – around halfway between the Zebrican and Equestrian shores, I think. Anyway, it's been having a, uh, a bit of a... 'dragon problem'."

The King raised an eyebrow. "A 'dragon problem'? How do you mean, young Mind-Dragon?"

White told the Dragon King all about the dragon who had been burning up farms all around the Lunar Republic, how Sibwashie had failed to reason with him, and how they'd had to organise a more antagonistic solution to the problem.

"...and so we'd really like to be able to deal with the dragon without choking him with dirt, but he's burning down crops that ponies need to live," White concluded.

"Interesting. I must admit that I had no idea there were any dragons living on that island. I do try to monitor as many members of my species as possible, but the ones in Dragonia simply must take priority." The Dragon King put a clawed hand to his chin and got a far-off look in his eyes. "I am going to cast my mind towards this island and take a look at the mind of this dragon."

"Towards the island?" White asked "But, you told me that telepathy works along the lines of relationships, not physical locations. I don't understand."

"I'm glad you've been listening," the King replied. "Geography-based telepathy isn't something many of us use often, but it's necessary in this case because you haven't given me a name. I can't make use of the standard spells without a name. Now, let me concentrate."

The room went quiet as the Dragon King receded into his own mind, and White stood patiently waiting. After a few minutes, a sudden twitch in the King's face made it clear that he'd gotten through to the dragon.

"Ahh!" The King gripped his head in pain, and his eyes snapped open. "I've found him! The dragon... the dragon in the Lunar Republic is in great pain! He has lost his mind and become an unthinking monster! It hurts to watch the crude machinations of his broken mind!"

White gasped as the Dragon King jerked his head up to the ceiling of the cavern.

**"White Noise," boomed the King. "Thou must make haste to the Lunar shore to rescue this poor soul from himself! Our subject Ms Venkra shall fly thee and thy companions there! Now go!"**

Having given his orders, the King looked down at White, made a shooing motion with his claws, and pulled his neck away, hiding himself from view in his collection of treasure.

"But how will I...?"

***You are a dragon in the mind now! Limitless are your resources! When you arrive, you shall know what to do.***

"Bye, then," whispered White, rubbing his temples with a forehoof as the doors creaked open behind him. He still didn't feel very confident. "Thank you, your Majesty."

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White's friends swarmed around him as he left the throneroom, their faces eager with questions. Before any of them could ask him anything, however, he held up and forehoof for silence. "Guess where Venkra's taking us and what we're going to do when we get there."

"First question, The Lunar Republic. Second question, we're going to help that dragon out," Sky replied.

White stared at her. "How did you know?"

"The King's voice is pretty loud, and these doors aren't *that* thick," she said matter-of-factly.

"Wait, I'm taking you somewhere?" Venkra asked incredulously. "Why would I" – she glared at the closed double doors – "Okay, okay, I'm taking them somewhere! Keep your scales on, Uncle Kasdar!"

Venkra shrugged towards her friends, and the four of them made their slow way back through the tunnels and out of the cave.

"Alright, ponies, hop on," Venkra ordered, once the travellers were standing on a jutting out ledge of Mount Olym once more. "Sky, you can fly alongside me for as long as you feel you're able, but there ain't gonna be any rest stops on this journey. My bedtime isn't for another thirty years."

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