

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 fr' 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 the 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 in-fighting.

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 travellers 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 railines.

"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 a 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.

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