

## Chapter Fourteen

The streets of Tranquillity were quiet as Princess Luna, standing on the flat roof of an apartment complex, lowered her moon in preparation for the coming sunrise. She slowly breathed in and out as it dipped lower and lower, eventually disappearing from sight. Technically speaking, she did not have to lower the moon – it was able to follow the course she had set for it upon its ascension.

But Luna wanted to lower the moon. She wanted to guide it along its well-worn path through the heavens, nudging it in the direction it ought to go. Part of it was recompense for her refusal to lower the moon over a thousand years before. Part of it was that she had missed seeing her moon as a friend rather than as a prison.

With the moon lowered, its princess lowered herself to her haunches to watch the sun rise over the sea she glimpsed in the east.

Slowly, colour bled into the grey world: a rich red, followed by a bright orange, followed by all the colours of the rainbow and more. Luna blinked. Her eyes were strong enough to withstand the light of the sun, but she and her sister had long before trained themselves to blink with some regularity, so as not to alienate their subjects.

The Princess's ears perked up as they caught the sound of a creaking door behind her. The creaking was followed by a soft patter of tiny hooves.

Luna turned around and smiled at her visitor. It was a young earth pony filly with a white coat and a pink mane. On her back was a purple set of saddlebags, embroidered with pink hearts. Luna's smile widened as she mentally noted that the filly looked a little like Celestia had in the very distant past.

"HELLO, YOUNG ONE!" Luna greeted, making extra sure to enunciate her words clearly for the child's benefit.

The little filly put a hoof to her mouth and blushed slightly. She swiftly reached her snout into the saddlebag on her left side and produced a notepad and pencil.

Setting the notepad down on the floor in front of her, she took the pencil in her mouth and scribbled a quick note, before tearing it off the pad and presenting it to the Princess.

Luna squinted at the note. Equestrian writing had changed a lot since her exile, and although she had spent a lot of time reading books and asking her sister about the most important changes, she still wasn't entirely comfortable with it – especially when it was mouth-written and not printed. Still, Luna managed to make out the words on the foal's paper.

*hello ur hyness  
my name is cotton candy  
thanks for makin al the flowers grow so qik  
my momy is a flowrist n shes very hapy*

Letting Luna take the note in her magic, the little filly reached her snout into her right saddlebag and

pulled out the biggest, most brilliantly purple Moonorchid Luna had ever seen and laid it before the Princess's forehooves.

Luna's eyes were beginning to tear up at the note when the little filly started scribbling another note.

*please rite on this paper princes  
i cant hear if u talk to me*

The filly presented her small pencil to Luna, who gently cradled it with her magic as she slowly wrote out a reply, using the same flowing script she used for important official documents.

*We thankest thou immeasurably for thy flower, Miss Cotton Candy.  
Please tell thy mother that it is truly the most beautiful Moonorchid we have ever seen.*

Cotton Candy's eyes widened at the elegance of Luna's hornwriting as her paper and pencil were floated back to her. She smiled widely and bowed to the Princess clumsily, before packing her saddlebags and cantering off with a short wave.

Luna waved her forehoof behind the little filly, and looked back at the Moonorchid.

The brilliant purple of its petals and the vibrant green of its leaves seemed to glow in the early morning sunlight. As Luna brought the flower up to her face with her magic, she felt better about herself – more confident; stronger.

A breeze whipped through her hair. However, this breeze did not feel a simple gust of air – it was softer, and somehow more personal.

Princess Luna turned her head to inspect her tail and almost jumped for joy at what she saw. Her cyan hair had turned a rich, dark blue colour and was dotted by tiny stars. It flowed in a magical wind and had become slightly transparent, but not to the degree Nightmare Moon's had been.

Suddenly, the roof turned a purple colour, as Luna focused her magic. Sure enough, the fog all around her and the rest of the island was more opaque and thicker than it had been the last time she had checked.

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"Ouch!"

Correspondence cocked an eyebrow at Melvin as the latter bashed his head against the roof of the shop for the third time that day. There were now three shallow indentations in the roof behind the counter, and Correspondence silently hoped that his boss wouldn't make too many more.

"Are you alright, sir?" he asked, the tiny hint of concern in his voice concealed by boredom.

"Uurgh, yes, Corr, I'm fine," Melvin replied, rubbing his head. "Maybe I wouldn't keep smacking my head like this if I could actually see. Are you sure you couldn't find any dragon-sized glasses in this whole town?"

"I looked everywhere, sir."

Melvin sighed heavily. "Typical Lunar Republic. I wish this place would get out of the Paleo-Pony Period."

"Perhaps you should be more concerned about your sudden growth than acquiring a new pair of glasses."

Melvin chuckled at this. "Corr, pal, everyone has to grow sometime. We may be similar ages, but I'm actually very young for a dragon. I mean, have you seen the sizes some of my species grow to? This sudden growth spurt is totally normal."

"If you say so, sir."

"Off with you, Corr! Go check the shops again! Place an order or something."

Correspondence nodded very slightly before turning around and swiftly cantering out the shop, leaving Melvin alone with his thoughts and his new, gangly limbs. Corr didn't think that he would actually find any glasses for his boss, but he was happy to take an extended lunch break.

Watching a tan smudge exit the white-and-brown smudge that was his shop, Melvin squinted and assured himself that his diligent new employee would be able to find him a new pair of glasses before the day was up. He looked down at a black smudge that was his glasses on the wood-brown smudge that was his counter and sighed heavily. He had had that pair of glasses for a long time.

Melvin switched his attention to the white smudge on the counter as he felt his eyes misting up. He was unable to read Correspondence's digest that day, but from what the writer had told him, he wasn't missing much. Every newspaper in Equestria was reporting on basically the same story, and while this made his and Corr's jobs that much easier and cheaper, wasn't all that interesting to hear about.

Apparently the strange, slow relocation of enormous and dangerous beasts from the depths of the Everfree Forest to the outskirts of Ponyville had hit a fever pitch, and citizens were on full alert for an outright attack. Enormous hydras, cerberuses and star beasts had somehow been pushed out of their natural habitats, and none of them were happy about it. Froggy-Bottom Bog was becoming overcrowded, and nopony knew what to do about it.

That day's *Ponyville Express*, Melvin had been told, had a stirring tale of heroism as its cover story. Apparently, Twilight Sparkle – Princess Celestia's personal student and arguably the most powerful unicorn in Equestria – had, with the help of the town's other unicorns, successfully rescued the apple orchard of a local farm from a Cancer's menacing pincers. The other unicorns had used a ground-breaking new magical technique, in which they fed their magic supplies into Twilight's horn, making her even more powerful than she already was.

The papers were optimistic about this brave defense, but most of them also carried an undercurrent of concern. So far, every magic expert and cryptozoologist who had arrived in Ponyville had been completely unable to figure out what had displaced the creatures and made them so aggressive.

Melvin didn't have any idea about what it could be either, but the stories made him glad that he was an ocean away from all the of the trouble. *Not because it frightens me, of course*, he thought. *Just because*

*I've got so many better things to do than listen to ponies panic about the Everfree. Now, if the Princesses were actually smart, then they'd just track down The Great and Powerful Trixie and have her single-hoofedly sort out the whole mess... but I di—*

Something golden glinted in the corner of Melvin's eye, interrupting his train of thought.

"Hello, Mr Melvin!" called a jovial voice, which Melvin quickly identified as belonging to Flint Hardrock, one of his regular customers.

"Evening, M-Mr Hardrock," Melvin stuttered, trying to not to focus on the shining gold dot in the middle of the smudgy brown mess that was the customer he needed to serve. "How can I help you?"

"Just the usual – one jar of Baltimore fire, please," Flint said, smiling extra wide, much to Melvin's dismay.

Mr Hardrock was a dark grey earth pony prospector who appeared to Melvin as a dark grey smudge – except for the very clearly defined, shining golden tooth in the left side of his mouth. It was the only thing Melvin had seen in days that wasn't a smudge, and he had to tear his eyes away from its glinting surface to tend to his business.

"There we go, sir," Melvin said breathlessly, smacking the jar of dragonfire down on the counter breathlessly. "That'll be thirty-five bits please."

Flint paid the bits quickly and, with an amiable nod, picked the jar up between his teeth and turned around to leave the shop, mumbling a farewell. Melvin waved after him absently, his attention captured by the bits on his counter.

*Why are they so clear?* he wondered. *"In Celestia We Trust".... I shouldn't be able to read that!*

But Melvin was glad that he could, despite the mystery. He hugged the coins to himself, before slumping under the counter and adding them to his stash.

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Joyous Dawn tossed her copy of the *Dragonfire Digest* aside, sick to her stomach of reading about Equestria's issues. She then turned to her copy of that day's *Canterlotian* and scoured it for stories that weren't about Ponyville, or monsters, or the Everfree Forest, or magic theory related to any of those three things.

Page ten. There was a small blurb about the upcoming Lunar Republican election on page ten, and somepony had left the "u" out of her name. Dawn pouted and tossed the paper aside, letting it join the *Dragonfire Digest* and the *Fillydelphia Post*.

Joyous Dawn's demeanour softened as her horn lit up. A soft breeze seemed to blow through her mane as she sensed a gentle, welcome presence just outside of her door.

"Please come in, Barley," she asked, already pulling her door open with her telekinesis.

Barley smiled awkwardly from the doorframe. "Sometimes I wish you'd wait for me to know, Madam

President."

"And waste my special talent?" Joyous Dawn laughed heartily. "If you only knew the things I went through to get this cutie mark!"

"I'd love to hear more of those stories sometime!" Barley replied cheerfully. "Anyway, I picked up a copy of the *The Daily Moon* for you, ma'am."

"Thank you, dear." Dawn plucked the paper out from under Barley's left wing and levitated it in front of her face. "Oh my! Have you *seen* this, Barley?"

"I sure have, Madam President."

Dawn smiled smugly as her eyes scanned the article that dominated the front page of the Lunar Republic's most widely circulated newspaper.

### **NLR REPLANTS DECIMATED ORCHARD**

*Occupants of Fresh Pear Farmstead were pleasantly surprised to wake up to the beginnings of a new orchard on the land where their old one had been burnt down by a series of unprovoked dragon attacks. Mrs Pear, age forty, departed from her farmhouse in the early hours of the morning and was greeted by a cheerful group of unicorns claiming to be affiliated with the New Lunar Republic party...*

The article went on to explain the scientific brilliance of the group's use of poorly-understood Zap Apple seeds for their ability to grow new trees with astounding rapidity, which, compounded with the Lunar Republic's natural agricultural magic, meant that the country's dragon threat was almost entirely countered.

"We've already won!" Barley exclaimed. "There are gonna be a whole lot more ponies calling you 'Madam President' very soon, Madam President."

Dawn smiled gently at her assistant. "Now, now, Miss Barley. You and I both know that we didn't use the party's resources to do this just for votes. We did it because we *care* about this country, and because we want to see it become the agricultural powerhouse that we both know it should already be."

"Riiight..." teased Barley, belabouring a wink. "I got ya, Madam President."

Dawn's smile widened into a grin, and she gave a short chuckle.

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The fire crackled and danced in the brick fireplace, casting a warm glow on the small dining room of the Noble Manticore Inn. Of the four tables and sets of chairs, only one was occupied. Mr and Mrs Hospitality sat across from two of their guests.

"...and that's why it's called the Noble Manticore Inn!" Grassfire Hospitality finished, coming to the end of his well-practiced tale once more.

The unicorn couple sitting across the table smiled at the story. The mare of the group nodded politely, and the stallion said nothing.

"Forgive my husband, dears," apologised Petunia. "He just loves telling that story; so much so that I'm sure he hasn't even asked about you! Where are you two travelling from?"

"Oh, uh," the mare began hesitantly, glancing at her husband. "We're from Ponyville. Going to visit family in Neighton."

"How delightful! I hear it's wonderful there this time of year!"

Grassfire narrowed his eyes at the couple and began speaking in a low, conspiratorial tone, "You chose a good time to get out, what with all that monster business. My father always told me that only fools would build a town so close to Everfree. Surprising how it took this long for that to bit Ponyville in the fl—"

"Grassfire!" Petunia slapped her husband's shoulder with a forehoof, shooting him a disapproving glare. "He means no offence, dears."

"I agree with him," came the stallion's stern, low voice. "That town's a disaster waiting to happen – strike that, it's a disaster that keeps happening! Ursas, hydras, Cancers, what next?!"

"That so...?" Grassfire wondered aloud, smiling smugly at his wife.

"Yes, yes, my husband is right," added the mare. "We're hoping that things will be back to normal once we come back. You'd think that it would have been sorted out already, with all the scientists and wizards who've been cluttering the streets for weeks, but I suppose such things must take time."

Petunia sighed understandingly. "Oh, they certainly do, dearie... Grassfire, tell them about that minotaur who visited us back when we first opened up – now that was a mess!"

Not needing more than a slight nudge to get talking again, Grassfire launched into yet another story and regaled their guests with it until they finally excused themselves to go to bed.

One exchange of cordial goodnights later, Trapper and Tamer sat on their bedroom's queen-sized bed, poring over the letter they'd fetched from Dragonfire Delivery earlier that day.

"Boss wants us to hop on the first boat back to the Republic," the stallion Trapper said. "She wants to present us with our pay herself, 'for doing such a sterling job', she says."

Tamer chuckled. "Long as she doesn't stiff us, I'm happy to oblige. With the money that's coming our way, we can make a cruise of it."

"Sounds like a plan. Just don't tease the sea serpents this time, alright?"

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Joyous Dawn and Barley sat on a pair of cushions in the former's office. A radio on the desk was tuned to the Republic's only station, and the ponies' ears stood at attention waiting for the election results to be

announced.

Barley's wing flicked nervously. "Just a few more minutes," she whispered.

"Yes..." Dawn replied, her voice low and dry. Her ordinarily smooth, immaculate bun was a spidery mess of loose strands, and Barley could see bags under her eyes.

*"...and coming up after this next song: the results of yesterday's presidential election! The hard-working ponies at the Electoral Commission have been busy counting the votes all night and much of this morning, and they've just informed me that they're almost ready to make a statement!"*

*"For now, though, I'd like you all to just sit back and enjoy some relaxing tunes..."*

A slow, ambient track started playing, and Dawn frowned ever-so-slightly. Despite being written as "relaxing music", the song quickly frustrated her.

"It's okay, boss," Barley reassured, seeing Dawn's irritation. "I've heard this one before – it's only two minutes long!"

Dawn tried put on the widest fake smile she could and ended up with a blank expression.

Two agonising minutes later, the radio crackled as it transitioned from music to an announcer's voice. *"The votes have been counted, fillies and gentlecolts!"*

"At last!" Barley exclaimed cheerfully. "Tell us, Smooth Talk!"

*"Drumroll please!"* A drumroll started up in the background. *"Fillies and gentlecolts, the winner of the election – and your new ruling party – is – wait for it... The... NEWLUNARREPUBLICPARTY! Woo-hoo! Give it up!"*

A racuous sound of hooves beating against the ground drowned out the announcer's voice, and Dawn reached out a hoof to turn off the radio. Her facial expression hadn't changed.

"Barley," she began, speaking in a very even tone, "who did you say that radio present was?"

"Smooth Talk, Madam President!" Barley shouted, barely containing her excitement at the utterance of the latter two words.

The corners of Dawn's mouth turned up slightly. "Is he a government employee?"

"Yes, Madam President!"

Dawn glanced sideways at Barley before proudly raising herself up off her cushion. Her slight smile cracked into a full-on grin.

"For my first act as President of the Lunar Republic," she stated, "I am going to fire Mr Smooth Talk and hire somepony who knows the difference between a presidential election and a prize raffle."

"As you wish, Madam President!" Barley had a feeling that she wouldn't soon tire of saying that, no matter how many of her favourite radio presenters her boss fired.

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Sky peered over the leathery edges of Venkra's wings, letting her eyes take in the vast ocean below them. Water extended as far as she could see in every direction.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, trotting closer to Venkra's right ear.

"Perfectly fine, thank you!" replied Venkra. "I flew much further than this every twenty years for around two hundred years, you know."

"Oh! Was that for the Great Dragon Migration?" Sky asked, remembering the time her parents had allowed her to watch it as a very young foal.

"We dragons don't generally call the migration 'great', but yes, it was for that. The idea behind it is to get the younger and more restless dragons out of the old folks' spines and to give them a chance to practice flying with their new wings."

"Fascinating!" called White. "It's astounding how much we ponies have got wrong about dragons!"

Venkra smirked. "Yeah... you guys aren't known for your expertise on creatures other than yourselves."

Sibwashie, who was sitting rigidly and staring straight up, managed to loosen up for a second to chuckle at this.

"Anyway," White redirected, feeling a bit put out, "what are we going to do when we land? About the rampaging dragon, I mean. What's the usual procedure in these circumstances, Venkra?"

"Well, it depends..." Venkra began, speaking carefully. "There are different kinds of 'dragon rampages', and treatment depends entirely on what kind is happening – something you can't know until you see the dragon for yourself."

"Different kinds?" asked Sky. "What kinds?"

"Well, there's what happens when a dragon succumbs to her innate greed, like what happened with me in the treasury. And then there's..."

The sound of great wings beating against the wind was the only noise that reached their ears for a few moments, as Venkra gathered her thoughts.

"...there's the other kind of rampage – a rarer one that's much harder to snap a dragon out of," Venkra continued. "It's the kind that happens if a dragon's... *gafcomp* is... killed."

Sky gasped.

"The dragon's eyes turn milky white and he goes into not a fit of greed and desire, but a violent frenzy,



prompting him to destroy everything in his path. The dragon's grief at the murder of a *gafcomp* is a wild and terrible thing." Venkra's voice had taken on a sad, contemplative tone.

Thoughts connected in White's brain and before he could ask the question he was busy phrasing, Venkra spoke again.

"It happened to my father."

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Corr trotted through the quiet streets of Port Welcome, on his way to work early in the morning, before anypony else was stirring. His boss Melvin was a diligent worker, and Corr knew that he'd find the shop already open, even at the early hour. It helped that Melvin slept in the shop's backroom.

Letting out a short, measured sigh, Corr steeled himself for the day ahead. He had thus far been unable to find his boss a pair of glasses that would fit the latter's ever-widening skull and had for the past few days been tasked with reading aloud every scrap of writing he came into contact with. Corr was a quiet pony; he estimated that he had done more talking in the previous three days than in the three months before that. A rustle of his saddlebag made a swishing noise, informing him that he had not left his much-needed bottle of water at home that morning.

An eyebrow raised above Corr's right eye as the shop came into view. The door was locked and he could clearly make out that the sign was flipped to the "Sorry, We're Closed" side.

His pulse quickened as he checked the watch on his foreleg. It was completely unlike Melvin to sleep in this long – he was a very early riser. Corr knew that his boss had been acting a bit strangely since the start of the unexpected growth spurts, but this was on a whole new level.

Assuring himself that Melvin had just had an uncharacteristic late night, Corr turned his head back to rustle around in his rightside saddlebag. He found his key to the shop nestled between two copies of the *Dragonfire Digest* he had prepared a few hours before.

The key was fitted with a mouthgrip, so Corr had little difficulty turning it in the lock and unlocking the door. A forehoof pushed the door and he peeked around it into the dim room beyond. Nothing stirred.

*CREAK.* The door slowly opened the full way, and Corr stepped inside, feeling uncomfortably aware of the sounds his hooves made on the wooden floor. Entering the shop without being greeted by Melvin was downright eerie.

A low rumbling sound reached Corr's ears from beyond the door to the back room. Wasting no time, Corr hurried to the door and knocked on it with a slightly shaking forehoof.

"Good morning, sir," he said sharply. "It's a few minutes to opening time."

There was no response.

Corr put a hoof to his chin. "Oh, sorry! Silly me! I meant to say that it's a few minutes *past* opening time. You'd better get out here, sir."

The low rumbling returned and swiftly became a loud roar. Corr stumbled back as he heard a loud thud from behind the door. *Maybe that tactic was a little too effective*, he thought.

Corr barely had time to snap out of his thoughts and roll out of the way when a great claw crashed through the backroom door, sending splinters flying everywhere.

"ROAR!" The claw retracted and a big, angry eye glared through the hole in the door. It focused on a spot on the wall just above Corr. His blood froze.

*Was that...? No, it can't be...*

"S-sir?" asked Corr, voice shaking.

The dragon behind the door growled in response.

Corr's ears flattened against his head, and he slowly backed away from the angry dragon eye that was staring him down. He fought to control his panicked mind and tried to come up with a logical plan.

*I'll get help*, he decided. *I'll go straight to the police station and see if they can do anything about this. But first, I need to get out. Back away slowly... back away slowly, and then close the door.*

Trying to take his mind off the possible dietary habits of large, savage dragons, Corr slowly backed out of the door and softly but firmly pushed it closed.

*Lock it!*

Thankfully, Corr had left his key in the lock when he entered the store moments earlier. Within seconds, he had locked the door and was galloping down the street, garnering a few raised eyebrows from the few ponies awake at that time.

The police station was two blocks away. A breathless Corr stumbled into its lobby and collapsed against the front desk, panting heavily and looking uncharacteristically distressed.

"Well, what a surprise!" came a bubbly, girlish voice from behind the desk. "Whatever could have happened to get the stony-faced Correspondence into such a state?"

Looking at Bluebottle, his childhood friend, straight in the eyes, Corr stammered, "Dragon! Dragonfire Delivery! Big! Scary! Hungry!"

"Well, no, Mr Melvin is actually a pretty small dragon –"

"Not recently! Look, point is, he's grown all big and he's angry! He smashed the door of our backroom in! I've got him locked up, but he could escape any sec—"

Corr was cut off by a loud roar and a heavy thud. Eyes widening, he spun around and rushed out of the police department, Bluebottle hot on his hooves.

A gigantic blue-scaled dragon with an armful of golden bits and jars of dragonfire towered above the low building of Port Welcome, standing just a few metres outside of Corr's workplace. His head was pointed at the sky, and his mouth was open in a loud roar.

As Corr and Bluebottle stared, the dragon lifted the slanted roof off the top of the building directly across the street from Dragonfire Delivery and poured his horde into it.

"I see what you mean," Bluebottle said to Corr, growing serious. "I'm on it."

"How?!" Corr demanded.

"This distraught thing kinda suits you, Corry," Bluebottle teased, flicking her blue wings open and narrowing her brown eyes. "Do me a favour and use the radio in the station to call for some backup."

Before Corr could say anything about protocol, Bluebottle took off and shot towards the great dragon who was terrorising her fair town.

"Hey scaly!" she shouted. "Take this!"

Bluebottle spun around in the air to point her back legs ahead of her, in direct collision course with the dragon's snout. She closed her eyes and braced for impact.

Before her hooves hit the dragon's snout, she was snatched up by a pink blur from the side.

"That's a really stupid idea," said a mare's voice. "Do you have any idea how tough dragonhide is?"

Bluebottle opened her eyes in surprise to find a pink mare with a crimson mane carrying her. "Hey! What are you doing? How dare you assault a police officer!"

The mare rolled her eyes. "You'll thank me later."

The pegasi touched down on a flat rooftop within moments, and the pink mare turned Bluebottle's head to face the dragon – only she now found herself facing two dragons.

"That one's on our side," Sky whispered into Bluebottle's ear.

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