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Dawn McKenna blinked at the screen of her console, stared at it for a short time, and then blinked several times again.

A temporary partner. A temporary partner? Since when did she get temporary partners who lasted longer than the length of one mission? It had been quite a while since she had withdrawn her application for a new partner: waiting around for an answer that wasn't 'just be patient, understaffing, and stop filing in triplicate, we get it' had grown too discouraging to bother continuing with. So why now? Why—

She frowned at the name. Zeb. Zeb. No surname, just 'Zeb'. But that sounded familiar, which was hardly strange, considering the company she kept. That was a nickname, though, had to be—

Someone knocked on the door, and Dawn abandoned the message on her screen in favor of racing Gwilithiel to the door. The fire-lizard had the advantage: she could fly, whereas Dawn was left dodging minis and abandoned yarn balls right and left. Gwilithiel swerved to avoid colliding with the door seconds before Dawn arrived to open it.

"We'll have to teach you how to turn doorknobs," she told the fire-lizard, and then aimed a grin at whoever had been knocking. "Hullo, welcome to RC 18, can I help... you?" She stared at the newcomer for a moment, and then blinked her way out of it.

"Yes, hi, I'm Zeb," the young man said, running a hand through his dark grey hair and giving her a small smile. "I got a message today that I'm supposed to be your new temporary partner."

"...right, yeah, that," Dawn said. Gwilithiel settled on her shoulder, chirping curiously; she stroked the gold's tail lightly as she moved aside. "Come on in. You wouldn't happen to be, uh, how to put it... the Zeb who took down Rose Potter, would you?"

"That would be me." Zeb stepped past Dawn and into the RC, fingers drumming nervously against the messenger bag at his side. "This isn't my normal form, but I've found it's less disconcerting for most people to meet me as a human."

“...right, you’re a... whatsit, a Luxray. That’s the one. Should be interesting. Anyway...” Dawn shut the door, shifting a little awkwardly and wondering what to do next. Gwilithiel chirped right in her ear; she cringed momentarily. “Uh, welcome again! We’ll find you somewhere to sleep and that, there’s definitely room somewhere. I, uh, haven’t had a partner in a while. Since about two years ago, actually. There should be room, though, we’ll find it, I know it’s there.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” Zeb reassured her. “I’ll still be staying in my own response center.”

Dawn blinked at him. “Sounds inconvenient, but whatever. We’ll make it work, I guess.” Gwilithiel trilled this time; Dawn sighed, and moved the gold’s head a little farther from her ear. In return, the fire-lizard nosed against her face and crooned.

“She’s lovely,” Zeb said, reaching out a tentative hand. “What’s her name?”

Dawn smiled. “Gwilithiel. She only hatched a little while ago; we’re still getting used to each other.” Gwilithiel leaned precariously forward to headbutt Zeb’s hand, and trilled. Her eyes whirled blue.

“My... old partner’s brother has a fire-lizard of his own.” Zeb scratched Gwilithiel’s head. “They’re interesting creatures.”

“Yeah, they are,” Dawn said. “What’s this brother look like? I remember him having some sort of name that starts with A, but I can’t exactly place him with the people I saw at the hatching, I was, uh, I was a bit pre-occupied...”

“Alex Dives. About my current height, fair skin, blond hair, wears a DoSAT patch pinned to his shirt?” Zeb prompted.

“Hm, sounds vaguely familiar. Was he the one who Impre—?”

[BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!]

Dawn grimaced, and started towards the console. Gwilithiel got there first: she barreled toward the button, landing on it and jumping to the top of the console. The noise stopped; Gwilithiel took to the air again, trilling triumphantly.

Dawn stared briefly, then grinned up at the fire-lizard. “Well, aren’t *you* clever.” She began to make her way over to the console again. “Right, then, let’s see what this is... *My Little Pony*? What? I barely even remember those as toys, this is ridiculous.” She paused, remembered she had a partner, and turned to look at him. “Uh. You don’t happen to know this canon, do you? I’ve only ever seen one episode, and it was something about a Doctor Whooves, I don’t even know.”

“Yeah, R—um, my old partner and I got a few missions in there before.” Zeb rubbed the back of his neck. “She knew the canon better, but I can manage.”

Dawn tilted her head briefly to the side, but decided not to comment on the lack of a name. She knew what had happened; she probably wouldn’t have managed to use her former partner’s name in that situation either, not if they’d been at all close. “Alright, then, that should work. Any clue what we need for weapons, disguises, that sort of thing? Do we seriously have to be horses?”

“I’m afraid so,” Zeb said. “Least likely disguise to draw attention, after all. I’ll go in as a pegasus; do you have a preference?”

“...something fun, I suppose,” Dawn said slowly. “I...really have no clue what the options are. Also, what’s all this about bravery and necklaces and random dragons? *My Little Pony* has dragons?”

Zeb spared a glance at the console and groaned. “Another Seventh Element. Fantastic,” he muttered. He looked at Dawn. “Yes, *My Little Pony* has dragons, but the only one we see for the most part is Spike, and he’s just a baby.”

“Spike,” Dawn repeated, and snickered. “He’s not somehow bleach-blond, is he?”

Zeb gave her a blank look. “Is that a reference to something?”

“Yuh-huh!” Dawn replied, nodding energetically. She paused, grimaced, decided not to try that particular combination again, and continued a little more calmly (at least, for her). “He’s a *Buffy* character. Snarky bleach-blond vampire who probably wouldn’t mind being a dragon for all of five minutes, actually. He’s kinda-sorta one of the good guys. Ish. Depends on the season and so on. Anyway, he’s awesome to watch, less awesome if you catch him when he’s evil or able to hurt humans. Still hilarious, though. Quite a lot like John Hart from *Torchwood*, they’re even played by the same guy...”

Zeb cleared his throat. “We should probably get going,” he said, nodding at the console.

Dawn shrugged one shoulder. “Sure. Weapons?”

“Hooves and teeth.” At her pout, he shrugged as well. “Sorry, but it’s a show for little kids. You really think they’ve got lethal weapons in there?” He paused. “Well, the Canterlot guards have been shown to carry spears, but we’ve never seen them actually used...”

Dawn considered this briefly, and then shook her head with a sigh. “No luck there, I’ve never bothered picking up a spear. Well, not one that I brought back with me, anyway. Something that Kel said once stuck with me—well, more that it’s...what was it, a foot-soldier’s weapon? Not

useful for a knight? And it got stuck in that spidren's be—?" She paused and cleared her throat. "Uh, right, anyway. No spears, I don't have any. Hooves and, uh, teeth it is. Why not. At least there aren't vamp!ponies." She stuffed a new pen into her pocket and picked up a new bar of Swiss Bleepolate. "There aren't vamp!ponies, right?"

"There'd better not be," Zeb muttered.

"Good." Dawn reached for the portal settings. "Beginning sound alright?"

"Where else would we start?" Zeb went to stand beside Dawn, pointing at the disguise generator. "You can be a pegasus, a unicorn, or an Earth pony."

Dawn shrugged. "You can choose, I'd only be guessing if I tried to figure out abilities and stuff. Uh, pegasus, maybe. Unicorn sounds weird and kind of heavy on the head, and being an Earth pony sounds even weirder, because I used to ride those as a kid. Like, really weird. As for starting, sometimes the beginning gets skipped if it doesn't have any charges. Lots of fun when that happens, sort of. It depends. Here, you set the disguises, I don't want to mess it up for a canon I don't know..."

"Pegasus for both of us, then. Um, do you mind if I...?" Zeb gestured at the panel.

"No, of course." Dawn stepped aside. "One of the buttons sticks every tenth time you use it, by the way. I keep meaning to get a Techie in here, but it hasn't happened yet. Don't worry if it starts up, it unsticks pretty quickly."

"No problem." Zeb keyed in the disguises and waited for her to finish entering portal coordinates. Dawn did so with two taps of a button, and then stepped back and looked up at Gwilithiel.

"Right, then," she told the circling fire-lizard. "You have to stay here, alright? We talked about this—okay, I talked and you did your emotions thing, but still. You can't come along. No hissing about it, either—I know you don't want to stay, but you're supposed to. Anyway, being inside a world made up of someone else's words gets old pretty quickly, when you're new to it. Hurts and so on. You're better off here."

Gwilithiel's eyes whirled orange, and she chittered a protest; Dawn sighed. "I mean it. You're staying. Play with the minis for a while, alright, love? I'll be back soon enough; you'll barely have time to miss me." She turned and opened the portal. "Come on," she told Zeb. "Let's go be cartoon versions of Greek myths!"

"So, these spiky vampires, do they also sparkle?" Zeb asked as he followed Dawn through the portal.

Dawn tried and failed to raise an eyebrow at him: her current disguise's face moved rather differently than she was used to. "Only if they're wearing glitter," she replied, "and they don't tend to." She tried to walk forward and fell in a heap, her legs tangled together. "Oof. Being a horse is *strange*."

"You want to walk with your opposite legs," Zeb said, stretching his wings and shaking to get his saddlebags settled properly. "Like, right front leg moves with the left back, and vice versa." He trotted forward several steps and nosed her into a less-unbalanced standing position.

Dawn tried this, and mastered it without too much more stumbling. "Still strange. Really strange. Right, wings! *Allons-y!*" She snapped the wings open on the second try and then began to flap them while trotting forward. "Nearly—come on—*aha!* I'm *flying!* Wheee!" She began to climb, flapping her deep-blue wings frantically. "Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's a *flying horse*—"

Speaking was apparently too much for her concentration: her wings began to flap at different speeds, and then one at a time, and then not at all. Her hooves flailed. She spun around in the air and finally landed back in a heap.

"Owww," she mumbled. "Nope. No flying. Nooooope."

"Are you alright?" Zeb asked anxiously, offering her a hoof.

Dawn grinned at him, decided not to worry about how she was doing it, and managed to take his hoof with only a little bit of flailing. "Had worse. I'm a *horse* now, you know," she added, and began to look around. "Horses are cool. What's going on here, anyway?"

"Judging by the screaming coming from the town square, I'm guessing either the Sue's shown up, or it's another creature from the Everfree Forest," Zeb said. "Shall we go investigate?"

"May as well," Dawn replied. Carefully, she folded her wings against her back. "So weird," she mumbled. "So's this face. Anyway. Town square. Let's go see it."

Zeb offered her a smile and gave his own wings a couple of flaps. He settled for a hover several feet off the ground. "This way, then."

The agents found a giant red dragon standing in the middle of the town square, watching ponies run around in terror. Twilight Sparkle and Spike came running onto the scene, apparently to investigate the commotion.

Dawn tilted her head to one side. "Hm," she said. "Not quite Smaug. Good." She grinned at Zeb, and pointed at the panicking ponies with one hoof. "Feel like joining them? Could be fun. Oh,

hey, is that the baby Spike dragon? He's *adorable*, I want ten. In the 'someone else has to take care of them' way, of course, I have enough to deal with as it is."

"His name is Spike, and yes, that's him." Zeb gave the larger red dragon the stink-eye. "This one, however, looks a lot like the dragon from "Dragonshy". Dunno if it's the same one, though, they all look pretty similar."

Dawn shrugged. "Wouldn't know. Huh, that purple one's a main character, isn't it... she... he... something..."

Twilight took a closer look and saw a saddle on the dragon, and a pony wearing a cloak on it's back. She gasped as the unicorn leaped off of the dragon and filled her saddle bag with bits. Her horn lit up a beautiful orange while she levitated her things.

"And enter Sue!" Zeb glanced over at Dawn. "Er... I don't suppose you can write in this form, can you..." He sighed. "Okay then, we'll just have to wing it."

Dawn snickered. "Wing it, huh? Nice pun. I think we'll get along fine. Or, y'know, continue getting along fine, we haven't exactly run into problems thus far..."

"What pun?" Zeb asked blankly. "I just mean we're going to have to either remember all the charges, or come up with something on the fly—oh." He grinned sheepishly. "Okay, I see what you mean."

Dawn grinned back. "Yeah, we should definitely work well together. Uh, in the sense of being partners here. Anyway. What's this about the dragon scarring the poor pony things? That's definitely a typo, right?"

As they watched, the dragon reached out and swiped a talon at a nearby bit character.

"...It doesn't look like the Word World can tell the difference," Zeb said faintly.

Dawn grimaced. "Wonderful. Let's stay out of range, and hope the scratches revert with the end of the Sue. Is this Twilight pony in character?"

"For the most part, yeah," Zeb said, watching Twilight introduce herself to the Sue. "She'd be friendly, at least, though I think she'd be a bit more worried about the *giant dragon*. They're normally not nice creatures in this universe."

Dawn winced; her wings rustled. "That's a problem. I hate to say it, but hopefully our Sue can control the dragon."

The Sue **took off her cloak and revealed her light orange coat, and her long mane that was in a fishtail braid. Her mane was orange and black, so it looked like a tiger. "I'm Tigerlily."**

Tigerlily's cutie mark was a black dragon breathing red and orange fire.

"I train dragons."

Zeb facehoofed. "Okay, we can't really charge for the mane because Rainbow Dash's is even worse, but the cutie mark? The special talent? Dragons are vicious creatures, and they can't be tamed! See cute, little baby Spike there?"

"How about the fishtail braid?" Dawn asked. "Can we charge for that? And sure, I see the cutie."

Zeb shook his head. "Sorry, no charging for the braid. But yes, when Spike went through a growth spurt and changed into an adult dragon, he almost single-handedly—hoofedly? Clawedly?—destroyed Ponyville."

Dawn side-stepped nervously. "I don't think I want ten anymore," she said. "Hm. Right, then. That means our Sue's got a ridiculous job, huh? Charge for that. Should be easy enough to remember, she's got that one on her flank or whatever it's called on a horse, the name's escaping me." She paused. "Hold on, do I have one of those? Do *you*?" She twisted, trying to see, and had to toss her purple mane out of her eyes. "Bah. This is silly. You look for me, or something, or tell me how to get my mane braided too—in several braids, though, not a single fishtail. That just looks weird."

"Um..." Zeb fluttered sideways so he could look at Dawn's flank. "You've got some sort of red teardrop. Wait, no, I think that's a flame."

Dawn frowned as best she could and twisted again. "Huh, so it is. Ack. This is uncomfortable. Hey, is that a Scrabble tile under it? Or several?" She untwisted with a sigh of relief. "Well, that's cool. Fire. Fire's good. So's Scrabble." About to start looking for Zeb's cutie mark, she caught sight of **three dragons, each the size of a full-grown cat**, flying off the big one. "Ack! Not good, not good!"

"Yeah, very not good," Zeb agreed, grimacing. "Four Cute Animal Friends? That's got to be some kind of record."

Dawn grimaced. "It's close. I've seen more, but only because there were babies involved."

"...Do I even want to ask?" Zeb shook his head. "Never mind, I don't. Now then, what's—oh no."

Spike came running up to Twilight and the Sue and immediately belched out a letter from Princess Celestia.

"Twilight, come to Canterlot immediately with your friends and the new pony that has arrived."

"...the ickle dragon delivers letters? In about the weirdest way I've seen this month?" Dawn looked over at Zeb. "Is that...that's not canon, is it?"

"Actually, it is," Zeb said. "I've heard some wild fan theories speculate that since his fire is green and can transport letters, he's using Floo Powder, but that's a load of nonsense. It's just a part of his magic." He reached out and snagged the mini-Discord, all but flinging it through a portal.

Dawn blinked at the closing portal. "That was fast. Do you not like the minis here, or something?"

"They're based on the spirit of chaos," Zeb said, brushing his hoof off on his chest fur. "You let them hang around, and bad things start happening."

"...noted," Dawn said. "Won't be keeping any. Hmm." She tapped one hoof on the ground, and tried not to think too much about her current lack of fingers. "I don't know—if some sort of *Doctor Who* thing exists in this canon, then why not Floo Powder? Just think of a Hogwarts full of ponies, it'd be adorable!"

"I've seen it, and it was not fun," Zeb said grumpily. "If I have to see one more alicorn twin sister of Harry..."

Twilight gasped dramatically that they had just missed the next train to Canterlot, but the Sue quickly stepped in to save the day.

"Hellooooo," Tigerlily rolled her eyes. "I have a well trained dragon that can fit like 10 ponies on her back."

"Did she just sass Twilight?" Zeb's eyes narrowed.

Dawn tilted her head to one side, found she disliked the new view, and tossed her mane instead. "That sounded pretty sassy to me. Especially with the eyeroll. And the drawn out 'hello'. I say—Twilight's ignoring the sass! Is that usual for her? She's kind of sweet, isn't she?"

"Twilight is best pony," Zeb said firmly. "But she wouldn't put up with rudeness. Not like that."

“Good for her,” Dawn said. “Time for the next chapter, then! Ooh, were the princesses the ones with the really flowy manes? I wouldn’t mind seeing them in person. Uh...in pony? No, this sort of ponies are also people, never mind. Chapter Two, let’s go!”

The second chapter began, tossing both agents into the air near the giant dragon and its load of seven passenger ponies. Dawn shrieked, but was fortunately out of sight of the Sue—not to mention the dragon. She flapped her wings frantically, trying to stay in the air. Zeb swooped in and grabbed her around the middle, yelling “I got you!”

Several feet away, a gold Pernese fire-lizard appeared out of *between* and trilled at pegasus! Dawn, her eyes whirling a slow violet-orange. Dawn gaped at Gwilithiel and would have fallen out of the air but for Zeb’s support.

“Gwilithiel!” The scene changed abruptly to the next chapter, and Zeb set Dawn on the ground before landing as well. Dawn continued in a whisper, trying desperately to avoid trying to figure out how she was talking rather than whinnying to begin with—it was starting to bother her. “Gwilithiel, you’re supposed to stay in the RC! You’re not allowed on missions, sweetheart, remember?” She reached out to pet the fire-lizard and realized that she was lifting a foreleg; she sighed, and cautiously stretched out her long neck instead. Gwilithiel flew forward and hovered, still trilling, darting in to touch her nose to Dawn’s. The disguised agent shook her head; the touch had tickled.

Images passed from the gold’s mind to hers: sleeping minis, a silent RC, an intense feeling of boredom. Dawn sighed.

“She’s not going back to HQ, is she,” Zeb said, rubbing his forehead with a hoof.

Dawn sighed again, staring briefly at the forehead-rubbing. “She’s bored. Very bored. I can send her back, but she’s not about to stay there. We’re going to have to have another talk, I can feel it.” The fire-lizard landed on her neck, crooning. “Definitely a talk,” Dawn muttered, though her tone was fond. “Talking sense to a baby fire-lizard, this is my life right now.”

“We can try to send her back, but she’ll just go *between* again, won’t she?” Zeb asked. He sighed and muttered under his breath, “If she doesn’t cause any trouble I don’t see why she’s not allowed to stay.”

Gwilithiel trilled right in one of Dawn’s ears; the agent flinched, and reined in the instinct to toss her head wildly. “She would,” she said once she had herself under control. “She’s... tenacious. Golds often are, so of course that’s the beauty I get stuck with—only the most stubborn of children for me.” She sent a wave of affection towards Gwilithiel, who crooned—directly into her ear.

Zeb shushed the fire-lizard when a vague copy of Canterlot Castle sprung up around them. He peered around a corner in time to see the Mane Six plus Sue come running into **the hallway, where the colorful glaze recordings stood in glory.**

"We're here!" shouted Twilight as the ponies bursted into the room. "What's the emergency?!"

"She's the emergency," replied Celestia while calmly pointing at Tigerlily.

"Me?" said Tigerlily. "What do you mean, ME? I just got here and you're blaming me!" she inched closer and closer to Celestia, who backed up in shock. "Just because you're some princess doesn't mean I won't stand up to you!"

"Oh, for the love of—" Zeb facehoofed. "Celestia being cowed by her is bad enough, but why, why, *why* does she think it's acceptable to talk to a princess that way?"

Dawn cocked her head to one side, careful of Gwilithiel. "Because no one ever trained her to be polite to royalty? Perhaps we should drop her somewhere with very touchy—and very powerful—monarchs. Unless this princess is normally one, in which case let's get canon to snap back and then give her to Celestia."

Zeb stared at her, his mouth falling open. "Give her... to Celestia," he said faintly.

Dawn blinked back. "Yes, give her to Celestia. Unless she's not the sort of monarch to be touchy?" Gwilithiel crooned again. "That's a serious question, you know—I don't actually know, uh, anything much about this canon. I'd be having a horrible time of it without you here."

Zeb shook his head. "Um, no, Celestia would probably just make her say she was sorry and that would be it."

"...Well, then," Dawn said. She looked a little disappointed. "That won't do for an assassination method. We'll have to find something else."

"We could throw her in the volcano in the dragons' territory," Zeb suggested.

Dawn shrugged. "If you think she deserves the One Ring treatment, sure. Why not."

"Sorry, you probably have a better idea," Zeb said, looking at his hooves.

Dawn blinked at him. "What? I mean—you just heard my better idea. It doesn't work. We may still come up with something we like better, but—I mean, I don't even know this canon, why would I have a better idea that works?"

Zeb shrugged. “Because you’ve been around for a while and have a lot of experience?”

Dawn blinked at him some more. “So? I mean—for one thing, I’m pretty sure you don’t actually know how long I’ve been around for. For another—newbies can have great ideas just as well as veteran agents can. And a third thing—you’re not exactly a newbie, are you? You’ve taken on two Legendaries. I’ve never even set foot in one, not that I’d want to. Not to mention the fourth thing, which is that you know this canon and I don’t. Why in the world would my ideas automatically be better?”

“I’m still a complete rookie,” Zeb mumbled, still looking at his hooves. “Only been around three months.”

“And I’ve been here... wow, nine years this December,” Dawn said. “Wow. Time flies. But, I mean—look, you heard me just now, right? With the monarch idea? I don’t know the canon at all, so it didn’t work. And then you just now, with the volcano thing? That sounds like it’d work. Like it *will* work. And that’s because you know this canon, and you know what’s right and what’s wrong and what’s a good location for Sue disposal. Nearly nine years an agent, and there’s no way I could’ve come up with that without doing some extra research. Why put yourself down?” Gwilithiel chittered, her eyes whirling violet.

Zeb shrugged. “My... old partner. She wasn’t very nice near the end.” He sighed. “I don’t think it was her fault; she used to be nice before she went crazy.”

“Well...” Dawn hesitated. “Um. Well. Um. Look, I didn’t know your partner, I don’t want to say things based on what you’re saying and the bits I’ve heard from Des, but...I mean...well, how about we try to put that behind you? Not her, I don’t mean you should forget her or anything, but... from what you just said, she’d put you down? Or your ideas?”

Zeb nodded, turning away and trying to discreetly wipe his eyes on his foreleg. “And I kept wishing she would stop, just stop, but I thought maybe if she just vented a bit she’d get better and then Little Miss Mary happened and we started fighting and I never got to t-tell her sorry before she ran away...”

Dawn raised both arms to hug him, and nearly fell over before she remembered they were now legs. She scowled, and gingerly stepped closer to nose at his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I’m really sorry. If it helps, I’m sure she’s figured it out by now. She must have, if she knew you well at all.” She nosed some more, moving until they could lean against each other and wishing the disguise had come with *arms* of some sort. Wait, couldn’t ponies hug? Hadn’t there been some strange bending of forelegs in the one episode she’d seen, something to do with a secret agent...?

It didn't matter: she trusted her balance far, far less as a pegasus than she did as a human. All hooves on the ground it was, at least for now.

Zeb leaned against her and closed his eyes. "She died. Never found out I was still alive."

Dawn blinked several times, and then stamped a hoof. "Listen," she said. "Listen, I'm stuck with no arms right now, but the minute we get back I'm giving you an actual hug, alright? Unless you don't like being hugged, in which case we'll find an alternative. But if not, I'm hugging you. Alright?"

Zeb gave her a watery smile. "Alright." He nodded back at the characters. "We have a mission to worry about."

"We do," Dawn agreed, "but we also have lives." She sighed. "Back to work. Don't think I'll forget about that hug."

"Duly noted." Zeb sighed when, rather than getting mad at the Sue's words, Celestia simply smiled and said, **"She's the one."**

"Cue reveal that she's the seventh Element of Harmony," Zeb said, sighing even more heavily.

"Twilight," explained Celestia. "Ever since you became an alicorn, the pattern got mixed up. Now there are two pegasi, two earth ponies, one unicorn and one alicorn. There is a seventh element of harmony. The element of bravery."

Zeb gave Dawn a look that basically said 'What.' "And that's another thing about Seventh Elements. They never make any sense! If you absolutely *have* to add another Element, why not make it something like, I don't know, acceptance? Understanding? Where does this 'bravery' stuff come into play?" He snorted out of his nose like a bull. "At least it's not 'shadows' or something stupid like that, but still..."

Dawn watched him for a bit, mostly uncomprehending, and then finally lifted a forehoof to pat him on the shoulder. It took her several tries and half-rearing to manage it, and she had to side-step afterwards to keep her balance. "We'll get it in the end," she promised.

Gwiliethiel, curious, stopped clinging to Dawn's mane and took flight, landing on Zeb with a small *thump*. He sighed and craned his neck to nuzzle the little gold, gritting his teeth at the fic.

Celestia took out the box full of the elements and handed the necklaces to the pony that it belonged to. Then, she opened a secret compartment at the bottom and revealed a necklace, like the other elements, but in the center was a jewel shaped like a ball of fire. It was a beautiful shade of orange.

Celestia placed the necklace around the Sue's neck and declared her the seventh Element of Harmony. Dawn eyed the necklace, and then turned to Zeb.

"I want it," she said decisively. "Unless you really want it, but *look*, it's shaped like a ball of fire! And it's a 'jewel'! Isn't it shiny?" She grinned.

"You can have it if you like," Zeb said, opening a portal to the next chapter and flying through. He nearly dropped the remote in shock when everything became outlined in thick, bold lines. "Whoa! What happened?"

Dawn stared at Gwilithiel, who was examining her newly dark outline with finicky interest. "I...don't know. I don't do that much in animated continua. Uh...check the Words, maybe?"

Zeb did so, and he rolled his eyes. "Looks like the entire chapter is in bold font," he reported.

Dawn sighed. "Figures. Alright—what are we up against now? And how many more charges do we need to see? Being a horse is pretty weird."

Zeb sighed and scanned the Words. "Looks like Celestia ordered the Sue to stay in Ponyville, and now—" He waved a hoof at the scene before them; the Mane Six and the Sue were in a park, sitting in the grass and talking. "Now this."

"This is amazing!" exclaimed Pinkie Pie. The ponies were sitting in the grass at the park. Not only is there another element of harmony, but we have a new friend too!"

"To be honest, I've never had any real friends. I've only had my dragons," said Tigerlily. "I didn't even have a family."

"So..." Dawn tilted her head, eyeing the ponies. "This sounds...I mean, it's not like it can't be done well, but if we're in here, I'm going to guess this is just a tragic backstory. Unless I'm proved wrong. I'm quite happy to be proved wrong. How about you, Zeb? Thoughts?"

"Sounds like a tragic backstory to me," he agreed. "And I would be very surprised if we ever get any elaboration on said backstory. Aaand of course now she's showing off."

The Sue had hopped up onto her dragon's back and began performing loop-the-loops; Rainbow Dash complained loudly of her showing off, and when Applejack noted the hypocrisy, she flew off in a huff.

"These chapters are kind of on the short side, aren't they?" Zeb noted as he and Dawn were dragged along into the next.

“Juust a bit,” Dawn said. “Oh, good, our outlines are back to normal.”

Zeb looked down at himself and breathed a small sigh of relief. Gwilithiel crooned.

The chapter started off with Apple Bloom complaining to Applejack about the fact that she didn’t have her cutie mark yet.

“So—this cutie mark thing, is it canon? That she doesn’t have hers yet, I mean? And also, should I be reminded of young teenagers here? Because I kind of am.”

“Yes, the cutie mark thing is canon. Apple Bloom and two of her friends sometimes get episodes devoted to them trying to earn theirs.” Zeb smiled. “And they’re supposed to be the equivalent of... I think perhaps ten, in human years?”

“Wow.” Dawn’s head moved from side to side as she watched the scene; Gwilithiel tracked her movements for a little while and then sprang, pushing off Zeb’s neck and flapping her wings twice before landing on Dawn’s neck again. Dawn obligingly stilled while the gold caught her balance. “Cute,” she added. “Ten-year-old ponies. Well, the equivalent of ten-year-olds, anyway. I hope the human versions are—”

Apple Bloom took Applejack’s suggestion to go ask the Sue how she’d gotten her cutie mark and raced off, forcing a scene change that dumped the agents in Twilight’s library. Zeb yelped and nearly fell face-first into Dawn’s side; Dawn staggered, but managed to stay on her hooves. On her neck, Gwilithiel rose to her hind legs, wings fanning the air, and shrieked.

“Shh!” both agents hissed. Dawn reached for the fire-lizard and nearly fell over; swearing in time-honored PPC invective, she did her best to send waves of calm in the gold’s direction. “Shh, shh...”

The Sue’s Cute Animal Friends looked up at the noise and chirped curiously, but she shushed them and continued making breakfast. Gwilithiel eventually settled.

All of the sudden, three ponies shot through the door on a scooter and rushed over to Tigerlily.

"How did you get your cutiemark!?" they said in unison.

Cutiemark the mini-Discord appeared in front of Dawn’s face, its little wings flapping quickly. A moment later, Sweetiebell appeared next to Cutiemark, closely followed by Cutiemark Crusaders. Dawn yelped and shied away from the multicolored creatures.

“Zeb?” she said. It came out squeaky. “Zeb, portal! Get me a portal! And, and hands, I need hands—”

Zeb opened a portal and whistled softly to get the minis' attention. "Inside-out umbrellas and cotton candy clouds through here!" he said, waving a hoof. The minis zipped through and he shut the portal behind them. Dawn breathed a heavy sigh of relief and remembered not to lift a hoof to pat Gwilithiel when the gold twined around her neck, crooning and tugging at her mane.

The Sue sighed and began to dramatically recount the story of her past through third person narration.

Tigerlily lived in an orphanage in a small village. No one knows where she came from. Someone just left her on the steps in the middle of the night and never returned.

She went on to describe how her village had been guarded by dragons until **One day, when she was still just a baby, griffins attacked Tigerlily's village and destroyed everything.** The other ponies fled and left her behind to be raised by dragons, **as if she was one of them.** Things apparently went smoothly until one day a griffon attacked the Sue's adoptive dragon brother and almost killed him.

At the same time, there was a sonic boom, and a beautiful rainbow lead Tigerlily's gaze to the orphanage, old and falling apart. At that moment she realized who she was. She sprinted at the griffin, kicking him in the face just in time. He fell to the ground, motionless, and the other one flew away. The wounded dragon looked up at her in shock.

Tigerlily let out an imitation of a dragon roar, signaling the others to come help. She looked at her flank and was surprised to find her cutiemark, a dragon breathing fire.

Zeb slowly lifted a hoof and planted it on his face with a sigh. Dawn tossed her head briskly and then tossed it again.

"I don't think I followed that," the older agent said. She tossed her head a third time for good measure while Gwilithiel clung. "Nope, not following. There are griffins in this canon too? And, and she has a dragon for an adopted brother? And, *and*—a pony roaring like a dragon just seems weird. Really weird. I don't want to try it."

"Okay, the thing with the rainbow?" Zeb took his hoof away from his face and stamped it in the dirt. "That's how the Mane Six got their cutie marks. After Rainbow Dash first pulled off the Sonic Rainboom, the other five saw it from wherever they were and discovered their special talents through it. Bit more complicated than that, but basically? She's copying the canon characters."

Dawn sighed. It came out satisfyingly heavy with her current lungs. "Charge it," she said. "I mean, unless all ponies get their cutie marks like that, but it sounds like they don't. I get that copying the main characters is an easy thing to do, and pretty exciting, but honestly? It's less

satisfying for both the reader and the writer than coming up with something different, maybe even something unique in a non-canon breaking way. Does this canon have an OFU, Zeb?”

“Where do you think I’ve been sending all these minis?” he said grumpily when **Rainbowdash** appeared on top of his head. He snatched it off and tossed it through a portal.

“...True.” Dawn went ‘heh’ and lowered her head briefly. “That—that was a silly question, please do feel free to forget I asked. Wow. How many minis are we up to now, then?”

“Too many.” Zeb took another look at the Words. “Two chapters left. Do you want to go ahead and kill her now? I say we have more than enough charges. I mean, I think we do. If you want to keep going, that’s fine, too!”

Dawn looked at him for a moment, her expression going serious and a little sad, but then she shrugged. “You’d know better than I would,” she told him, her voice as close to normal and cheerful as she could make it. “If you say we have enough charges, and there’s nothing major coming up that we need to witness, then we’ll take her out now. Anyway, I’ve had enough of hooves. I could use some arms right around ten minutes ago.”

Zeb gave her a small smile. “Some random OC shows up next chapter, but he can be left to assimilate, I think.” He opened a portal to later that night in the Sue’s bedroom. “We’ll get her while she’s sleeping,” he whispered.

Dawn smiled back. “Sounds good,” she whispered. “Uh—how do we do that, again? Do we trample her? Drop her from high up? No, wait, the volcano idea, with the dragon irony. Do you still want to do that? And, hm, how do we do the charging...” She thought for a moment. “Hm. I can sit on her? I think you’d better do the charges, since you’re the one who has more than a vague idea of what they mean.”

“Sitting on her works,” Zeb whispered back. He tiptoed through the portal, waited until Dawn was through, and shut it only to open another to the volcano from “Dragon Quest”. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Dawn whispered back.

Gwilithiel trilled eagerly and took to the air.

“Arceus above and below!” Zeb swore as the Sue sat bolt upright, looking around wildly. When she spotted the intruders, she opened her mouth and *roared*.

From outside, her dragon roared back in response, and the sound of flapping wings began to get louder.

Zeb lunged and tackled the Sue out of bed, where they went rolling across the room and through the portal in a feat accomplished only by cartoon physics. Dawn watched them go, open-mouthed, and then realized that there was a full-size animated dragon on its way to the room.

“Gwilithiel!”

The little gold trilled and swooped around her head. She could sense Dawn's urgency, but was having fun.

“Gwilithiel, *now*,” Dawn insisted. She took several quick steps toward the portal. “Move! There's a dragon coming, and it's not like the ones in your home canon!”

The gold sped towards the window, but swerved and doubled back at Dawn's surge of alarm. Dawn reared, her wings flapping frantically, and managed to nudge the fire-lizard toward the impatiently flickering portal; Gwilithiel finally flew through. Dawn followed, catching a glimpse of dragon over her shoulder and landing on the other side in a tangle of wings and hooves.

“...being the seventh Element of Harmony, and of bravery to boot,” Zeb was saying. “Having a trajeck backstory, being raised by dragons, getting your cutie mark the same way as the Mane Six, and really, really, *really* making me mad.” He kept his hooves planted on the Sue's limbs until Dawn had stumbled to her feet and gotten her wings refolded, whereupon he ripped the Sue's Element necklace off with his teeth and jumped to the side to let Dawn charge at the Sue. The older agent battered at Tigerlily with all her hooves at various points until the Sue fell into the volcano. Gwilithiel soared overhead, excitedly chittering encouragement.

On the other side of the portal, the Sue's dragon suddenly decided he had better places to be and flew off, already thinking of where he would start his new hoard. The three baby dragons set off in pursuit.

Zeb dropped the necklace on the ground and stood looking out at the lava where the Sue had fallen. She didn't re-emerge. “It's over,” he said finally. He bent and picked up the necklace, dropping it into his saddlebags.

Dawn backed away from the volcano, breathing heavily. “Phew. Good. Let's do whatever else needs doing, if anything, and go home. I have minis to feed and a fire-lizard to scold. Not to mention arms and fingers to regain. Also, why haven't we been whinnying and whickering and stuff like that? Why are we just talking like we normally do? For that matter, why are we able to move our mouths like—Radagast on a bunny sled. Let's go home before I break the canon's logic, or my own brain, or something.”

After checking to make sure none of the canons needed neuralyzing, the agents portaled back to Dawn's response center. Dawn got off her hands and knees with a relieved sigh, rubbing the

latter and then brushing off the former. Gwilithiel, her normal appearance restored, flew away to dart around Tafe the mini-Badgermole, who was ambling sleepily from one corner of the room to another.

Zeb shook himself out and stretched, yawning and showing off a huge set of fangs. Dawn, turning to remind him of the hug she'd promised, came roughly face-to-mouth with the teeth; she yelped and jumped back.

"What! Flaming Denethor, *what!* How'd you get in here? Why're you—ohthankgoodness, that was a yawn—" She took a deep breath, and then another. "Okay. Okay. How'd you get in here? Are you an agent? Please tell me we can communicate, this'll just get awkward otherwise—"

"And this is why I decided to introduce myself as a human," Zeb grumbled.

Dawn stared for a little and then more or less felt her way to the nearest seat, where she collapsed. "Zeb. You, you're Zeb." She made a face, shook her head briskly, and then tried again. "No intruder, that's good. No danger, that's good too; danger's annoying when I'm not expecting it. Uh—I didn't know Luxrays looked like that."

"Oh. Um, is this okay?" Zeb said, looking down at himself. Dawn looked as well—not that she'd stopped looking—and frowned.

"What—yes, of course. I just...really wasn't expecting that." Dawn sighed. "Look, um—sorry for yelling, Zeb. I've never actually met a Luxray—I didn't have a clue what they look like, I didn't even know where to begin to assume. I don't know much of anything about... *Pokémon*, isn't it? I think I know Pikachu, and something about a kid named Ash and 'catch 'em all', and these kind of red and white ball things?" She rubbed a hand over her face and stretched out first one leg and then the other. "I really have no idea what I'm talking about. Maybe we should start over." She glanced at Zeb's paws, blinking a little too hard, and then held out a tentative hand. "Hi. I'm Dawn McKenna, DMS—though you obviously know the last bit from experience now. Do you, uh, do you shake hands? Or is what I'm doing completely ridiculous?"

Zeb grinned—not realizing he was just further showing off his teeth—and held out a paw. "You're fine. I should have remembered disguises have a tendency to drop upon returning to Headquarters. Sorry I didn't warn you."

Dawn took the paw and shook it several times before letting go. "Oh well. Not like a shock here or there is bad—keeps me on my toes. At least I'll know for next time." She looked him up and down, her expression admiring and slightly puzzled. "So...you're a Luxray, and a Luxray is a... four or five foot tall blue-and-black lion of some sort? With a star-shaped tail? That's—I have no idea how you'd ever end up with—but anyway, that's pretty awesome. Do you ever go into missions without a disguise?"

"I haven't yet, but I don't mind, really." Zeb shook himself and his mane suddenly crackled with sparks.

Dawn's eyes widened. For a moment, she was more or less frozen in place; then the spell broke, and she grinned, actually bouncing to her feet. "*Cool.*"

"Thank you." Zeb ducked his head, embarrassed.

Dawn tilted her own head to one side, considering her temporary partner's latest action. Then she shrugged. "Well, anyway. Fluffy blue lion who is my partner, I think I owe you a hug, yeah?"

Zeb shrugged. "You don't have to if you don't want to..."

"Nonsense," Dawn said briskly, in a way that didn't actually sound very much like her at all. She felt it was called for, though, and she let the momentum of the briskness carry her forward. "You needed a hug; I didn't have arms. Now I do. So unless you're uncomfortable with hugging people outside of disguise..."

"No, hugging's fine," Zeb said quickly.

Dawn grinned, hesitated for about two seconds while she considered the mechanics of hugging a Luxray, and then stepped forward to wrap her arms loosely around his neck. Her hands sank into his mane; her grin cycled through excited and awed and landed on gleeful.

Awkwardly, Zeb managed to place a massive paw on Dawn's back. The older agent tensed briefly, then began to relax. Slowly, her grin faded; she hugged Zeb a little tighter, leaning her head ever-so-slightly into his mane, which tickled where it touched her ear. She pulled her head away, and tried again.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, once she'd settled her head so that nothing tickled her. "Not to make you sad again, but I'm sorry. And I know you don't know me well, not yet, but you're my partner now and I have it on good authority and my own observation that you're a good sort. So if you need a hug, or to talk, or not to talk—to be distracted—I'm usually somewhere around. Okay?"

"Okay," Zeb said, his voice tight. After a minute, he pulled away. "I look forward to working with you again," he said, giving her a small smile.

Dawn smiled back. "Same here. I think we're going to have fun. Now: if I were to try watching some of this show we just visited—where would you recommend me to start?"

"At the beginning, of course." Zeb tilted his head to one side. "You want to watch... now?"

Dawn grinned her normal grin with its touch of insanity. “Sounds like a plan. I need a handful of words with Gwilithiel, but then I’m free—so if you don’t mind waiting ten minutes, I’d say we’re set!”