

Chapter Seven

The dragon blinked its glowing red eyes. Sibwashie wondered to himself if the old-fashioned Equestrian had been too much. *And I spent all that time researching it!*

FWOOM.

A great column of flame from the dragon's mouth snapped Sibwashie out of his thoughts in an instant. He jumped out of the way of the dragon's fire just in time to avoid being roasted alive and fell onto his side. Sibwashie's eyes widened in fear, and he stared at the dragon in awe.

It wasn't long before the great black beast had set the pitiful orange orchard ablaze and was able to turn his attention to the frightened zebra beneath him. Sibwashie scrambled to his hooves and broke into a gallop, tearing the ground as he tried to escape the dragon's fire.

There was a flash, and suddenly orange flames licked the grass in front of Sibwashie. He reared up and almost lose his balance as he desperately twisted and tried to run in another direction.

FWOOM. The dragon breathed out another torrent of fire, this time to Sibwashie's side, singeing his fur. He darted away from the fire and glanced all around him, looking for a clear path.

There was fire to his left, to his right, in front of him and behind him. To his horror, Sibwashie realised that the dragon was trapping him in a ring of fire. It was not a complete ring, but the gaps were closing fast.

In a sudden moment of intense clarity, Sibwashie felt the ground under his hooves. It was soft and supple. Moving faster than he ever had before, he used his front hooves to dig up a mound of dirt, which he then kneaded into a compact ball.

Okay, he thought, I only have one shot at this.

The traditional Zebrican sport of Quagball was played by two teams of seven players each. Each team had to attempt to launch a ball through a hoop angled at forty-five degrees and mounted on a pole two metres above the ground. It was a contact sport. Players needed to be quick-thinking, quick-moving and to have powerful, accurate hindlegs.

Sibwashie turned around, lowered his stature and scooped the dirt-ball up with his hind legs before bucking it straight into the dragon's mouth.

Yes!

Coughing and spluttering filled the air as the dragon choked on the dirt. The great black beast flailed around in the air and made gurgling noises with his throat before departing, his wings unstable and his upward course haphazard. He was done bothering farms for the night.

There was still – as Sibwashie realized after a brief moment of elation – the problem of the fire. He thought back to the stories Grassfire had told him and his companions back in Hoofington. The traditional plainspony way of dealing with rampant fires was to ensure that the fire ran out of fuel by carefully burning

everything around it.

Sibwashie raced out of the incomplete ring of fire and rushed towards one of the few unburnt trees in the area. Using his jaw, he snapped off a dead branch, which he lit up at one of the numerous fires that burned around the orchard.

Sibwashie burnt a patch of grass, and then stomped the fire out with a hoof. He winced at the pain and hoped that his friends would see the blaze and come to his aid.

The other ponies were sitting around an outdoor table behind the farmhouse, twiddling their hooves and ineffectually trying not to appear nervous to each other. White Noise whistled in a jaunty and tuneless fashion, Sky Wave focused intently on her hooves, and Vibrant Pattern and Yellow Orange just sat and stared into space, absently holding onto each other.

"I wonder if your friend has made any progress," said Vibrant Pattern. "I do hope that his mediation abilities are good enough show that dragon the error of his ways."

"I'm sure he's doing gre—"

White Noise's words stuck in his throat as he noticed a column of black smoke rising up beyond the farmhouse.

"We've gotta go help," he blurted out, already on his hooves. "There's smoke."

The others sniffed the air and looked up to see the spiralling smoke. They gasped in shock, and within seconds the four ponies were galloping for the burning orange orchard.

On the way there, White Noise spied a small lake, which he directed his telekinesis at. Spluttering sparks from his horn and a sharp pain in his head reminded him that his magic was still recovering. *How much longer?! he thought. I really need my magic now!*

Sky Wave took to the air and soared towards the source of smoke, coughing and wincing as it got in her mouth and eyes. Despite this, she managed to get to what was left of the orchard long before the any of the grounded ponies. She saw Sibwashie brandishing a fiery branch in his mouth and stepping gingerly on his hooves.

"Sibwashie!" she cried. "I'm here, and the others are on their way! What should we do?"

"I'm glad to see you have arrived so swiftly to help me extinguish this fire
The others can help me starve it, but from you a raincloud I require!" Sibwashie shouted up to her.

Sky marvelled at her zebra friend's ability to rhyme his words even in the most stressful of circumstances and zoomed off to find a raincloud as he had instructed.

She remembered noticing what a clear day it had been. It was a clear night as well, and there was nary a cloud in sight. Except... Sky had to squint to see it, but she noticed a very faint, wispy cloud off in the

distance. It would hardly put out any big fires, but it would have to do.

White Noise and the farming couple finally reached the burning orchard just as Sky raced off to fetch the wispy cloud. Sibwashie caught sight of the three and beckoned them to him, where he instructed them to grab branches off trees and follow his lead.

Like Sky before him, White marvelled at Sibwashie's rhyming skills before heading off to follow his instructions. Given a few more years, the zebra would likely become a better speaker of Equestrian than he was.

Sibwashie assessed the situation around him. Sky was nowhere in sight – likely still looking for a cloud. White was wincing in pain as he stuck his hoof onto a small patch of grass he had just lit on fire. Yellow and Vibrant had their sticks in their mouths and were heading towards a patch of fire to light them.

Although his hooves were throbbing in pain, Sibwashie ran to help White Noise put out his patch of fire. Between the two of them, they made short work of the grass around the burning orange tree, and soon the fire starved and went out.

They were about to move onto the next patch of fire when they heard a horrified scream. Sibwashie spun around to see Vibrant Pattern lying on her side, almost entirely encircled by fire. Without thinking he twice, he dashed to her rescue.

"My... hooves... they hurt," she whispered as Sibwashie appeared at her side. "Dropped my... branch..."

The great zebra knelt down and maneuvered himself under Vibrant Pattern's body. He was able to lift the mare up quite easily, due to her light frame. But the added weight drove his hooves further into the ground than before, and he teared up with pain as tried to leave the ring of fire.

There was still an opening in the ring, and Sibwashie managed to get himself halfway through it before collapsing. He shucked Vibrant over his head and out of harm's way as he fell, but he himself landed directly in between two walls of flame, which crept ever closer.

Sibwashie tried to scramble up, but his hooves hurt too much. The fire was getting closer, and he didn't know if he had the energy to escape. If he wasn't able to, Vibrant would likely be killed by the encroaching flames.

Sibwashie heard wings flapping over him. He strained his neck upwards to see Sky. She was carrying a wispy cloud between her forehooves, which she now squeezed and strained for all she was worth.

A few drops of water left the cloud, but it was not enough to quench the raging fires. Sky squeezed the cloud until there was nothing left, and then looked around frantically for another. Clouds were the only way she could help Sibwashie, as he was far too big for her to be able to carry out of harm's way.

Sky spied a cloud in the corner of her vision and dashed off to fetch it just as White Noise came running up to were Sibwashie lay. He was bigger than Sky, but still not big enough enough to carry the enormous zebra. He supposed he would be able to do it with Yellow's help, but he could see that Yellow was already busy carrying his wife off.

White closed his eyes and let his thoughts extend to his horn. The magic that had built up within it was not large in quantity, but it was something. It certainly felt like there was more than there had been when he had tried to levitate the water in the lake. *Perhaps there's just enough to perform that spell*, he thought. *The one I've barely ever used and shouldn't even know.*

White Noise focused his magic, and surely enough, his horn began to glow for the first time in nearly a week. The air above his head crackled, and a body of white foam appeared. It was arranged in neat letters that read "Help has arrived".

The foam sign bobbed in the air for a moment before White shot it at the fire to Sibwashie's left. The foam mowed down the fire, reducing the ring by half. There was still, however, the wall of fire to Sibwashie's right to contend with.

As White was contemplating whether he'd be able to push Sibwashie out of the way or not, Sky suddenly appeared with a great big black storm cloud. She made short work of the rest of Sibwashie's ring of fire and managed to put out the few other remaining fires as well.

"My mother always told me that weather pegasi tend to leave extra storm cloud lying around for emergencies," she explained. "Turns out she was right."

White smiled at her before losing his footing and passing out, as an overdue feeling of pain tore through his temples.

The Lunar Republic's governor, a middle-aged stallion named Grain Harvest, paced across the boardroom impatiently as he and his advisors, associates and assistants awaited Princess Luna's arrival. The princess had arrived in the capital the previous evening, and would be holding her first meeting with the ruling elite of the Lunar Republic in over one thousand years this morning.

She was already ten minutes late. But she was also an alicorn princess capable of raising and lowering the moon, which made up for it.

At long last, the boardroom doors burst opened and the room filled with black smoke. The governor and his many cronies coughed and spluttered as Princess Luna entered the room.

"We have ARRIVED!" boomed the Princess's powerful voice. "We doth EXTEND our warmest GREETINGS to GOVERNOR Grain Harvest and her FINE associates, and we WOULDST like to EXPRESS our sincerest HOPE that this visit shall PROVE beneficial to both OUR country and thine."

"Somepony needs to teach her Equestrian," whispered one of the governor's assistants to another.

"W-welcome y-your highness!" squeaked Grain Harvest as he shakily edged over to Luna to kiss her outstretched hoof. "I hope you have enjoyed your stay in on our humble little island so far."

"YES!" replied Luna, still not adjusting to an indoor voice. "We have been MOST pleased at the fine treatment WE have received at the HOOVES of your diligent staff! We have also enjoyed the FRUITS of this fine land's many FARMS and GARDENS. We do not REGRET our gift to you ALL those centuries

AGO."

The governor and his associates smiled wearily. Although Princess Luna was at least a thousand years older than any of them and many times more powerful and accomplished, they couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her. For all her royal posturing, she seemed to be little more than an immensely powerful lost child.

"And we thank you for that, Princess," said Grain Harvest. "It is the magic of your moon that is taking this country from poor island state to a major contender in the global scene."

Luna looked around the room. There were too many ponies there – too many judging eyes and ears. She had something important to talk about, but she knew she wouldn't be able to mention it to so many, many ponies.

"COME Governor, we wish to HAVE words with THEE. Lead us to a place WHERE we can conduct a PRIVATE conversation, between us and thou ALONE."

Vibrant Pattern and Yellow Orange prepared the guest room for the three travellers. Although Sibwashie had not succeeded in negotiating with the dragon, they were still immensely grateful for his selfless rescue of Vibrant, and for the help his friends gave them with the fire.

It turned out that both Yellow and Vibrant had completed some first aid training back in Manehattan, and the two swiftly tended to the travellers' wounds and their own. Most of the twenty hooves that entered the farmhouse that night were treated for burns and bandaged.

Once this was done, the still-unconscious White Noise was gently deposited on one of the guest room's sleeper couches, and his friends followed suit. Sky and Sibwashie were asleep before their heads hit the pillows, and they slept soundly until the next morning.

"Good morning," said Sibwashie, rising and stretching as rays of sunlight peered into the room through the curtains.

"Good mor– wait, what?" replied White, finally rising from his comatose state. "Uh... slick awning?"

Sibwashie raised an eyebrow and smiled kindly.

"Why aren't you rhyiming anymore?" asked Sky, who had just opened her eyes. "I know it's not because you can't find any more good rhymes."

"You two saved my life last night," Sibwashie replied gravely. "In Zebrica, it is customary to rhyme when speaking to casual acquaintances, superiors and colleagues. We forgo the formality when dealing with close friends and family."

The room was awash with silence as Sky and White contemplated the meaning behind their friend's gesture. The three travellers had been through a lot together, and they still had a long way to go before their journey came to an end.

"That's... quite an honour," said White Noise at last.

"You deserve it," Sibwashie replied. "Especially you, White Noise. I cannot imagine how much pain you must have had to go through to perform that spell while your magic is still recovering."

"What was up with that spell, by the way?" interrupted Sky. "I saw you casting it just as I reached Sibwashie with my cloud. Where did a communication technology unicorn learn to summon magical fire-eating foam?"

White Noise chuckled and gave his friends a sly look.

"Besides telekinesis, unicorns generally only have a few spells, *all related to their special talent*," White said. "What most don't know is that there's a pretty simple way of learning other spells. All you've gotta do is recontextualize the spell as something relevant to your talent."

Sky and Sibwashie gave White blank looks.

"Okay, a more concrete explanation then. If you had looked closely at the foam I summoned, you would have seen that it spelt a message – 'Help has arrived', to be precise. It did this because my special talent is communication – creating means of communication. By making the foam I summoned an overt means of communication, I was able to 'hack magic', as we say, and move beyond my basic repertoire."

"I think I understand," said Sky. Sibwashie nodded in agreement with her.

"Don't think it didn't take its toll on me, though. All that recontextualization takes a lot of magic to get right, and I think that little spell managed to deplete what little magic had built up again."

Yellow Orange entered the guest room as White finished his explanation. Despite the rest he had had the previous night, he still looked tired. His right forehoof was tightly bandaged; it had been the only one he'd had to use when starving the fires.

"My wife and I would like to thank you travellers for your help last night," he said. "That blaze was bigger than any before it, and if not for your help, the entire farm may have burnt to the ground. We have tended to your wounds, and would like you to have some oranges as a parting gift."

Yellow reached into his saddlebag and gave each of the travellers three oranges.

"These are no ordinary oranges," he said gravely. "They come from my family's private orange orchard, and have been enchanted at great cost. They will not go bad. Eat them when you require strength or healing."

The travellers thanked Yellow for his kindness and put away their precious gifts.

"Yellow Orange, I am truly sorry that I was unable to stop the dragon from burning your farm. But perhaps my friends and I can help you in another way, saving you from future harm."

Yellow's ears perked up, and he poked his head out of the door to call his wife.

"We're interested," he said.

Once the governor and Princess Luna were sitting in the governor's office, behind a locked door and away from prying eyes and ears, the Princess lowered her voice to honour the governor's high status.

"We hath heard tell of many strange goings-on about this island and with its ponies," began Luna. "Tell us, Governor, what be the meaning of thy campaign to maketh me thy queen?"

The governor shifted nervously in his seat.

"Oh, you've got it all wrong, your Highness!" he said. "The, uh, 'Princess Luna's New Lunar Republic' campaign is not *my* doing. It's all the work of my opposition, the 'New Lunar Republic', as they call themselves. The whole thing is a ploy to gain ponies' votes!"

"Opposition? Votes?" Princess Luna asked. "Is there a war here? Thou speakest in riddles, governor!"

Grain Harvest sighed inwardly as he realised that the ancient Princess had no idea how the Lunar Republic's political system worked, or even what democracy was. He supposed she couldn't be blamed.

"Well you see Princess..." he began, going on to explain his country, the party system, and its various ramifications.

"We... think we understand," replied Luna tentatively, after Grain Harvest had finished explaining, repeated a few key points, and fielded a lot of the Princess's questions. "So... thou represents the 'Farmer–Trader Alliance', and thy 'opposition' is the 'New Lunar Republic'? And the two groups compete for the hearts and minds of the citizens, so that the prince – *governors* of the winning group can ascend to the throne and rule the land? But... only for three years at a time? And thou is the latest in this string of 'elected' governors?"

"Yes, your Highness, that's it exactly."

"And it is the New Lunar Republic – not thy party – that desireth our queenship?"

"That is also correct."

"Oh."

Grain Harvest got the sense that he had misspoken at some point. He glanced up from his desk at Luna, who stared blankly at the wall behind him.

"Please don't see it as disrespect, Princess Luna!" he implored, making eye-contact with the Princess. "It's not that we don't think you'd make a good leader for our nation – I daresay you'd be a better one than me. It's just... well... you and Princess Celestia were meant to rule Equestria together, right?"

"This is true."

This is true, Luna thought. The words echoed in her mind after she said them, and she backed them up with more words and phrases, like "we were meant to rule together, dear sister" and "half the day is night". But the seed of doubt was already planted.

White Noise quietly drank the juice out of his first orange as Sibwashie began speaking. He could feel the pain in his hooves receding as the tangy liquid washed down his throat.

"Although I tried to reason with the dragon and my words fell short
I found another way of dealing with him – a method of a more violent sort.

"In my homeland, where the elephants roam and the lions prowl for prey
We have learnt to use the ground to build our houses and keep danger at bay.

"I will teach you the dirt-shaping techniques we use in the place of my birth
And show you how to accurately buck, as in Quagball, a solid sphere of earth."

Vibrant and Yellow were bewildered by Sibwashie's words at first, but he ensured them that what he intended would be made clear upon demonstration. White Noise recommended that he eat one of his oranges to quell the pain in his hooves before trying to pack dirt or buck balls with them, and he did so.

When Sibwashie was ready to demonstrate his unique method of dispatching dragons, he found that his audience consisted of more than just the farming couple. Vibrant and Yellow had called for and gathered a small group of young, fit stallions and mares – some barely out of foalhood – all eager to learn what Sibwashie had to teach them.

As it turned out, Yellow Orange and his wife were not the only farmer ponies who had had their farms decimated by the dragon. Many of the stallions and mares came from the farms of their parents (or in rare cases, their own farms), where the same thing had happened. From what they said they had heard, it seemed to be happening all around the island, and on a regular basis.

"And what really gets me," White Noise said, as he and Sky were sitting on the grass, watching Sibwashie's training. "What really gets me is that everypony seems to have been attacked by the same dragon. They've all described a black-scaled dragon with a dark purple underside and evil red glowing eyes."

"He's gotta be a pretty busy dragon then," Sky replied.

"Yeah, *busy* burning ponies' farms for no personal benefit. It makes no sense!"

"Maybe it does. To the dragon, though – not to us."

"And it would matter to the dragon because... because I don't even know why it would matter to the dragon. I don't know dragons. Not the big ones, anyway."

At that moment, what had been White Noise's quest for knowledge of a dragon-specific branch of magic

gained a second purpose: the search for understanding. He, Sibwashie and Sky were going to go to Dragonia not just to plunder secrets and ideas from the dragons' minds, but to understand them – to understand why a dragon would attack sailorponies on a beach, or orange trees on a farm.

The president of the New Lunar Republic (or the Movement for the New Lunar Republic, as it was officially known but seldom called) stared out of the window of her office, which was located at the top of a two-storey building in Tranquillity, the island's capital (and only) city.

Her name was Joyous Dawn and she was a unicorn of around the same age as the island's present governor, although she looked a good deal younger. The effect of her neatly tied-back black mane on her dark red coat gave her a severe look – one that she was proud of. Dawn was emphatically not a pushover, and wanted ponies to know it.

She was known to her followers as a dynamic and charismatic leader, and a worthy successor for Mercury, the mysterious mare who had started the movement and then disappeared a month after its establishment. Her cutie mark was an hourglass, overlaid by an ornate telescope. It symbolised her vision and her ability to see things from a long-term perspective.

To her opposition, she was seen as a dangerous opponent, but not an unworthy one. Although there had been murmurs of discontent with regards to her latest, Luna-centric campaign, most ponies still saw her as a hard-working and terribly intelligent politician, likely to make a very positive difference in the country should she be elected.

Dawn lifted the teacup on the desk behind her with telekinesis, and brought it to her muzzle for a long, refreshing sip. Elections were barely a fortnight away, and she still had a lot of work to do to ensure her continued success in the polls. However, most of the puzzle pieces had already fallen into place, and it was looking as if the completed puzzle would display a picture of Joyous Dawn being sworn into office by solemn government official ponies.

Despite the return of Princess Luna's moon fertilisation magic, there had been a drastic drop in agriculture output in recent weeks. Agriculture was, in Dawn's estimation, the only thing the current government cared about. If they couldn't even protect that which was most important to them, then there was little chance of Grain Harvest seeing another term.

Princess Luna's recent arrival was also an interesting and potentially useful development. According to Dawn's sources, she would be staying in the country for an extended period of time – until a few weeks after the elections, to more precise. Sources also claimed that she was incredibly curious about the ponies who wanted to crown her Queen of the Lunar Republic.

Dawn smiled as she put down her teacup down on the windowsill in front of her. The princess would find out about them soon enough. When she did, she'd come to investigate at head office. And Dawn would be waiting for her.

A knock at the door distracted Dawn from her thoughts. Her ears perked up and her horn glowed a faint red.

"Come in, Barley," she said, face still to the window.

The door opened and a very light yellow pegasus mare entered the room. Joyous Dawn turned around to greet her, and smiles immediately broke upon both of the ponies' faces.

"I still think it's really weird when you do that sensing thing, Joy," Barley said. "It makes visiting you like going to the fortune teller, except you manage to call ponies by their names instead of just saying 'I've been expecting you'."

"Ha, perhaps so," Joy replied jovially. "But there's no point in letting my special talent go to waste, now is there? That spell was the first thing I learnt after getting my cutie mark – it's pretty important to me."

"Fine, fair enough. Anyway, I came to ask you about something: there've been complaints about a dragon attacking farmers' crops recently. At first it was just one farm, somewhere near Port Welcome, but it's been getting worse. Why, just this morning we received letters from at least ten different farms all around the country asking us what we'll do about the dragon if and when we get into power."

Dawn put a hoof to her chin and stood in silence for a moment. Then she smiled.

"We've got barely a fortnight until voting day, and this couldn't have come at a more perfect time. Let the concerned farmers know that a vote for the New Lunar Republic is a vote for *a new* Lunar Republic, and that new Lunar Republic doesn't include crop-raiding dragons."

Barley was already seated on the floor, furiously writing the president's words down on a pad of paper with her mouth.

After thinking for a moment, Dawn added: "Reword it to make it say 'New Lunar Republic' fewer times. I'm all for brand recognition, but this may get a little confusing."

The sun had just set as the *Moonchaser* left Port Welcome. White Noise stood on deck, watching the dock recede as the gentle breeze filled the ship's sails and sent it further and further away.

Before leaving the farm, he had made a promise to Yellow Orange and Vibrant Pattern that he would do what he could to find out the cause of the dragon's strange behaviour when he got to Dragonia. Dragons were mysterious creatures, and the only way he was going to understand them was by talking with some.

"Maybe you can also ask them how we should apologize for all the dirt-bucking we're going to do," Vibrant Pattern had said. "I hate to antagonize the dragon like this, but we really have no choice. If he's going to act like a barbarian, then we really don't have any choice than to give that right back to him."

Sibwashie stood on the other side of the deck, looking at the sea that spread out in front of him. He wasn't looking towards Zebrica – the *Moonchaser* would have to go around the coast of the Lunar Republic before he'd be able to do that – but he pretended he was. He hadn't been home in over a year, and he was eager to see his family and friends again, if a little anxious about discovering how much had changed

in his absence.

Below deck, Sky Wave lay on her bed, feeling her seasickness returning. She considered eating one of her oranges for a moment, but immediately dismissed the idea as a waste.

Instead, she fished one of the oranges out of the saddlebag that lay strewn across the cabin floor and just looked at it. It was bigger than any orange she had ever seen before and, unless it was just a trick of her eyes, seemed to glow faintly in the dark room.

Upon entering the Hoofington branch of Dragonfire Delivery to get his morning papers, Grassfire Hospitality was surprised to see a lanky red dragon standing behind the counter in place of the usual short, stout blue one.

"Good morning sir, and welcome to Dragonfire Delivery!" said the dragon, smiling toothily. "How may I help you today?"

"Well, um," began Grassfire. "I don't think I've seen you around here before. Where's Melvin?"

"Melvin has been reassigned, sir," replied the dragon. "His expertise was required elsewhere! I'm Groze, his replacement!"

"Well, okay then," replied Grassfire. "Awfully sudden. But anyway, I'm here for my usual newspapers – although I guess you wouldn't know what those are. Today's Fillydelphia Times and Ponyville Daily, please."

"Certainly sir," said Groze, already writing requests for the newspapers on blank rolls of parchment.

Dragonfire Delivery's local newspaper service had been Melvin's idea. He'd implemented it in Hoofington as soon as White Noise had left, and had then confirmed it as a good idea with White via correspondence somewhat later on. White's response had been enthusiastic, if a little rushed.

"That'll be seventy bits please, sir," said Groze, upon spitting out the two newspapers.

As newspaper delivery cost two jars of dragonfire and the cost of the paper itself, Grassfire tried to avoid purchasing his papers more than once a week. He loved to know what was going on in Equestria, and read new and exciting stories from around the country, but he wasn't made of bits.

Thanking Groze, Grassfire tucked the papers into a saddlebag and trotted out of the store. He waited until he was seated in his private study in the Noble Manticore to read his newspapers.

Equestria was a busy place, and there was a lot of interesting stuff going on in both Fillydelphia and Ponyville, but what caught Grassfire's eye the most was the Ponyville reports of monster sightings and attacks.

Being on the edge of the Everfree Forest as it was, Ponyville was one of the more dangerous hamlets in Equestria. Even so, the monsters that roamed the forest seemed to have little interest in the little town,

and generally stayed away from it, unless provoked.

Grassfire knew all this, and – much like the Ponyville Daily reporters – was perplexed at the strange behaviour of the Everfree monsters in recent days. Large and dangerous hydras had been spotted as close to Ponyville as Froggy-Bottom Bog, and a cockatrice had caused quite a stir in the town the previous afternoon. In addition, nearby farmers had reported hearing strange noises at night and seeing large, shadowy figures skulking around their fields.

Ponyville's foremost magic expert and librarian, the famous Twilight Sparkle, was investigating the matter, but had not yet turned up any answers. She was, as the paper said, reluctant to divulge her early, underdeveloped suspicions and theories. "It's got something to do with magic" was all the reporters were able to force out of her.

Grassfire put down the newspaper and reclined in his study chair. The morning sunlight shone in through the window to his right, warming him in its gentle glow. *It's got something to do with magic.*

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