

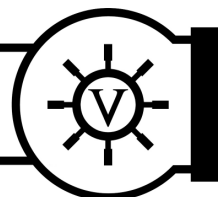
Whom the Princesses Would Destroy...

GhostOfHeraclitus

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	13
Chapter 3	25
Chapter 4	43

PONY FICTION VAULT



“*Quem reginae volunt perdere, dementant prius.*”

— Classical Equestrian proverb, roughly translated: “Whom the princesses would destroy, they first drive mad.” Their Royal Highnesses could not be reached for comment regarding how often this must have occurred to warrant its own proverb.

Dr. Spinning Top of the Cabinet Press Office pinged off a wall and steadied herself with an erratic burst of telekinesis. She reflected, not for the first time, that the Palace wasn't built for running. In fact, she thought, trying to distract herself from rising panic, the architect must have hated anypony who moved faster than a stately promenade. Nothing short of hate could justify making all the major corridors straight, uncluttered, and invitingly wide, and then giving them *polished marble floors*. With this thought still fresh in her mind she put her hoof carelessly on an inviting patch of carpet, discovered that it was apparently greased, and accelerated suddenly. A lot of things happened rather quickly, and she saw, if not her whole actual life, then at least the opening credits flash before her eyes. Before she could get to the really interesting bits, she found herself in the hooves of a bemused palace guard. He, obedient to his training, retained his stony expression but couldn't prevent the blush that turned his white coat into a simply fascinating shade of pink¹.

Spinning tried her best disarming grin and wiggled out of the stallion's hooves, provoking a fresh blush and what might well be a crack in the legendary unflappability of a Royal Guardspony. He could hardly be blamed. Spinning spent a number of hours every morning ensuring that just about any pony who saw her got weak in the knees. Today was certainly no exception. Her coat, the color of pale gold, was meticulously brushed and her mane was fashionably styled so as to best display the red and orange curls that she was always rather proud of. If she were to suffer an uncharacteristic attack of honesty, she'd have to admit she did it all at least partially out of vanity. But, above all, there was a hard-headed practicality about it. If your interviewer is drooling, it's simply *amazing* the sort of press statements you can get away with. In one incident, now enshrined in Equestrian Civil Service lore, she managed to use a rather fetching summer dress to get a fairly feckless young reporter for *Canterlot News Nightly* to report that there was no parasprite crisis and never had been.

¹ He was, after all, a mere corporal. Full control of the autonomous nervous system isn't attained until the rank of sergeant, just after you gain the ability to sleep with your eyes open, but just before you learn to speak without moving any part of your face.

“I am ever so sorry, my dear. I’m in the most frightful rush,” she said, picking herself up and, after another smile, rushing off down the corridor skidding, slipping and sliding.

The guard said nothing. His grandfather did say that the uniform would mean that beautiful mares would be simply dropping into his hooves, but he suspected this wasn’t quite what the old pony had in mind. Now that he thought about it, the old codger had mentioned something about beating them off with a stick, too. He eyed his spear speculatively. The blade *could* come off, after all...

Spinning picked up speed, panic threatening to overtake her. The news she had, well—emergency didn’t begin to cover it. If she didn’t get the information to the civil service status meeting in time they’d all be done for. She picked up the pace again, her hooves tapping out a staccato rhythm on the floor. She frowned fiercely. This was going to ruin her hooficure. The wide arched doorway that led outside was blocked by a tangle of ponies and gryphons, but she managed to slip past them all with relative ease. She had been working in and about the palace for years now, ever since she left *Equestria Daily*, and tourist-dodging and noble-avoidance were second nature to her. Happy to be under an open sky again, she ran out onto the shallow steps that led to the Sunrise Plaza. She had planned to rush down the stairs and make up time cutting across the lawns, risking the wrath of the gardening staff. Instead, she stopped, cold, when she saw...*chaos*. The plaza was overrun.

• • •

The cabinet briefing room tried much too hard, Dotted Line decided. The walls were paneled in hardwood, and discreet little firefly globes set in brass fittings lit the place with cold, expensive looking light. In fact, polished brass was much in evidence, even in places where it didn’t, strictly speaking, belong. Also making an appearance were the contents of the entire catalog of snobbish fripperies: gold trim, sage green baize, semi-precious gems, and leaded glass doing its level best to pass for diamond. Every available surface was plastered with paintings depicting ponies engaged in various heroic acts wearing expressions of either steadfast noble purpose or constipated agony, depending on your personal level of ill-willed cynicism. Dotted’s levels of cynicism, considerable even in the best of times, were particularly high today. He had to chair a meeting of the Council of Lords, which was the third least favorite of his duties as secretary to Her Highnesses’ government. It was just under trying to keep Prince Blueblood out of the papers² and cleaning up the mess left by the Discord Incident, but above organizing the

² A fool’s errand even when the benighted and spoiled little foal mistakenly thrust into the body of a full-grown unicorn was trying to behave. These days Spinning Top, bless her, had an entire office just for dealing with him.

Light Anti-parasprite Symphony Orchestra³. Consequently, Dotted was frowning as his eyed flitted past the images of prancing heroics. His expression softened as he took in the ponies actually in the room. They were an odd bunch, it had to be said, officials of the Equestrian Civil Service of various and varying ranks. What they had in common was that Dotted thought them very, very good at their jobs indeed, and that they, together, ran Equestria.

Now some might call this a vainglorious thought, a treasonous one, even, but it was the honest truth. The princesses *ruled* the country, none disputed that, at least not for long. The nobles claimed, gamely, to *lead* it and, whatever Dotted's thoughts on the matter were⁴, that was supported by any number of ancient covenants and hallowed agreements. The politicians of the government and the parliament *governed* Equestria, though this, Dotted suspected, was mostly theoretical. The success of Her Highnesses' Loyal Opposition and the no-less-loyal Party in Government at making reforms was legendary. At least in the sense that you may have heard of it, and it was certainly written down in a dusty old book somewhere, but you were exceedingly unlikely to ever see it with your own two eyes. Grudgingly, Dotted had to admit that it wasn't entirely the fault of the politicians. The ponies of Equestria, bless them, were quite taken with the political process. As a result, the average tenure for a cabinet minister was, at present, four months and falling, as popular opinion grew ever more mercurial.

The Equestrian Civil Service, now, the Civil Service ran the place. They made sure the bills got paid, they wrote down lists and pedantic reports. They kept minutes and filed things so that they may be found again⁵. They made sure that, no matter the crisis, no matter the chaos, tomorrow, when the dust settles and the casualties are tallied, normalcy can resume. It's quite one thing to welcome back Princess Luna from her exile and quite another to make sure all laws take into account two rulers. Not to mention getting the parliament to sign off on all the amendments. Still, it was Dotted's proudest day when Princess Celestia asked him to look into reinstating Luna's authority, and he could reply that all the problems were resolved, laws ratified, and changes made, and the relevant edict only required her signature. Her smile made all the sleepless nights and endless politicking worth it a thousand times over.

Dotted shook the thoughts from his mind. He was woolgathering again. Running his hooves roughly through his perpetually messy mane, narrowly avoiding a painful ding

³ Musicians can be so difficult to work with.

⁴ Chiefly, they were unprintable.

⁵ Or so that they may never be found again. It is amazing how many hare-brained schemes by eager cabinet ministers end up with the files 'lost', the transcripts 'mislaidd' and the copies 'tragically flung into the moat and set on fire'.

on his horn, he tried to focus on Leafy Salad's endless droning report on the minutiae of the Home Office. A run down of petty crimes addressed and fears of the populace assuaged. Reports of bushes rustled, stool pigeons interrogated, and a great many constables hitting the pavement so hard it complained of police brutality. Dotted adjusted the heavy silver chain that marked his office and fiddled with it. It was supposed to be clinched tightly enough around the neck to always be straight, and yet loosely enough so it would cause no discomfort. Such was the theory. In his case, no matter what he did to the clasp, he could get it to either choke him or to slip almost to his withers, hanging loose and crooked.

At length, Leafy's report came to a close. Dotted suppressed a sigh and leafed once or twice through the notes in front of him, his horn flashing with its usual muted aura.

"Right," he said, checking things off on various lists, "that seems to cover everything except... yes, except the Silverwing arrest."

"Ah," replied Leafy, his blue eyes suddenly growing cloudy. His hoof hovered an inch away from his perfectly coiffed blond mane. He thought better of it, and let the hoof drop. Instead, he settled on fluffing his wings a few times, doing his best not to appear defensive and failing. His white coat somehow contrived to look even paler.

"Yes. *Ah*. I remember telling you that you were to arrest young Silverwing discreetly. Quietly. Lord Silverwing promised to let the thing go through the courts without incident if we didn't make a fuss."

"We did arrest him without a fuss. A very neat job, I thought."

"Neat job? You call this neat, do you?" Dotted yelled. He levitated a dog-eared copy of *Equestria Daily* onto the table, turning it around to face Leafy with a vicious jerk. The front page was dominated by quite a lot of ponies in uniform carrying an expensively clothed colt on a pole. The colt was in manacles, wing braces, and several other forms of restraint, possibly obtained from a museum. He did not look particularly happy. Dotted jabbed an angry hoof at the headline that read "LONG POLE OF THE LAW". Dotted didn't look particularly happy, either. He directed one of his death glares towards Leafy. The kind of glare that warded off even the most persistent journalists and caused acute heart palpitations in provincial officials. Leafy was relatively unperturbed. He had gone to Uni with Dotted and had been on the receiving end of a great many glares over the years. They had long since ceased to trouble him in the slightest.

“Whose idea was,” Dotted hissed, waving his forehooves around in a vain attempt to encompass the magnitude of his unhappiness, “all this. Yours?”

“The details of the operation were chiefly the product of the Canterlot Metropolitan Police Commissioner. But she has my absolute support.”

“Does she, now? Forty constables? Forty, Leafy. How do you justify that?”

“Just five, I think you’ll find. The other thirty-five were off-duty and, by freak of chance, were all in the area where the arrest was to take place. As young Silverwing is a violent offender, as per statute, the constables were entitled to draft a Citizen’s Militia to help apprehend him safely. All nice and legal under *posse comitatus*. You know, hue and cry and all that.”

Dotted’s gray coat took on a disturbingly greenish cast. He opened his mouth several times, as if to speak, but finally closed it. Then, he spoke again, in a voice of somepony picking at a scab to see if the pain will come.

“The Royal Guard?”

“Crowd control. They have been sharing jurisdiction over that with the Met ever since the Unified Policing Act of—”

“Crowd control! There wasn’t supposed to *be* a crowd! How did the press, *all* of the press know to be there? You were supposed to keep it confidential.”

“I did. However, given the sensitive nature of the operation I had to send a memo—a confidential memo, mind—to notify the Secretary of State for the Home Office and his principal private secretary, of course, and also the office of the Mayor and the Coordination Committee for Civil Unrest and the—”

“How many?”

“About one hundred and ninety-eight ponies all told. Give or take the odd dozen. Of course, there was the chance of a leak but I had to follow regulations. Unfortunately, what with so many recipients there’s no chance that a leak enquiry board will be able to identify the culprit. Alas.” Leafy wasn’t even bothering with false dismay at that last part. Instead, he settled on a stony expression of defiance. He was generally a pony of smiles and sweet disposition, despite the stern nature of his job. Seeing him frown had the shock of the unexpected and the unnatural.

“Fantastic. That’s just brilliant. Lord Silverwing is going to run roughshod over all of the service. He has every right to complain to Her Highnesses now. You do realize that, right? What on Celestia’s own Equestria possessed you to—”

“Dotty, I—”

“Don’t you ‘Dotty’ me. I ought to—”

“I met the young mare young Silverwing tried to... well. She’s fine, the doctors say, but she still flinches when somepony she doesn’t know enters the room. She, well, she’s the same age as my Rose, Dotty. Barely a mare. They have foals in the Met, too, you know. Sisters. Relatives. What do you think—”

Dotted had his mouth open, face twisted in anger, ready to say some truly unfortunate things. As he listened, however, his expression softened. After a while he held up a hoof, and Leafy grew silent. The briefing room was quiet, too. Usually there was always a background hum of conversation or the rustle of pages turning, but now there was nothing. Dotted took a deep breath. Then, another. Finally he said, “Fine. It’s, uh, fine. I’ll find a way around it. Somehow. I’ll find some way to spike the appeal to the princess.”

He paused for a while, fiddling with the silver chain around his neck. It still hung crooked. After a few moments during which Leafy looked distinctly worried, Dotted lifted his eyes from his notes and there was a definite gleam in them.

“But don’t you think you’ll get to walk away from this one. Oh no. You’ll be right there when Lord Silverwing uses me as a punching bag. He’ll be all over me like a cheap suit. He’ll crawl right up my—”

“Uh, Dotty, do you think we ought to continue the meeting?”

“... right. We’ll move on to the report from the treasury, then.”

There was a subdued groan from everypony in the room. No such thing as good news from the treasury department.

• • •

Why her? Why here? Why now? *Why a school trip?*

Spinning Top was not a happy pony. Tourists she knew how to move past. Nobles worried her not at all. Even foreign dignitaries, no matter how exotic, barely slowed her

down. But foals? Foals on a school trip? Impossible. Briefly, she considered asking the teacher to help. However, after a few frantic seconds trying to locate her in the chaos, she saw that the plum-colored earth pony mare had her hooves quite full just trying to stop the foals from damaging anything too badly. Grimly, Spinning set to her task. She ran down the stairs and then into the mass of foals running, playing, and strenuously avoiding the teacher. She was barely a quarter of the way across the plaza when everything went wrong all at once. It started with a shout.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS POLITICAL PROTESTERS! SMASH THE STATE!”

Just as her beleaguered mind tried to process what she just heard, something orange, blurry, and really quite fast flew right at her. She realized that this was a foal and, without even thinking about it, leaped ahead to catch it before it cratered onto the flagstones of the plaza. She managed to grab the little orange missile from the air, spin with as much grace as was possible under the circumstances, and land on the ground on her own four hooves. More or less. There may have been some thoroughly undignified scrabbling. At this point a great number of thoughts could have occurred to her. Say, wondering what on Equestria was a ‘Cutie Mark Crusader.’ Or, why was the filly now in her hooves wearing a balaclava of all things. But the thought her slightly befuddled mind decided to go with was, “Where did the *tree sap* come from?”

She flung the surprised filly onto her back, hoping that the sap wouldn’t stick too badly, and galloped towards the teacher. Then, with deft application of telekinesis, she dropped the filly into the surprised teacher’s forehooves, exchanged frantic, mutually apologetic grins with her, and galloped past without having stopped for more than a second. As she ducked and weaved around, between and, on occasion, under the foals at play, she could hear, indistinctly, the teacher scolding the orange filly.

“If I find a circled ‘A’ on your flank rather than on the report about this trip, young filly, I shall be very cross.”

Whatever the filly’s response was, she couldn’t hear it. With a final leap that took her sailing over what appeared to her untrained eye to be a cross between a game of hopscotch and civil war, she landed onto the narrow flight of marble steps that lead to her goal—the main administrative building and the civil service status meeting.

• • •

“How do you *lose* sixty million bits? That’s a roomful of gold!”

Dotted found it difficult to concentrate on the discussion which wound itself, inevitably, around the upcoming vote about the annual budget. He should be thinking about ways to get political support. He should be pondering the effects of a possible new governor of the Royal Equestrian Bank. He should be listening to the clever ponies from the office of the treasury. He wasn't.

"Well tell the Right Honorable Member for Cloudsdale North that, despite popular belief, this government is not run on twinkly snowflakes, and the power of friendship. Quite a lot of bits are required."

He should probably be thinking about the fact that Leafy had to remind him, essentially, that he was a pony and not just a machine for implementing policy. Again. He should really be thinking about that long and hard, possibly with a glass of something quite potent close at hoof. But, he wasn't.

"He doesn't need roads because he's a *pegasus*? Are you kidding me? Does he not also need food? Is it pabulum for his base, or is the pony really that thick?"

He let the words wash over him, arguments and counter-arguments blending together into a wall of noise. It was rather relaxing if you ignored the words. A bit like listening to foals at play, really. He should have been thinking about economics and parliamentary procedure, but he wasn't. He was thinking about a number.

"Where precisely does he think that the funding for the weather factories comes from? Griffonstan?"

The number was thirty-seven.

"Well how much of a cut does he want?"

Thirty-seven minutes to be precise. That's the time until the end of the meeting. And after the meeting came the tea break. Thirty-seven minutes to tea. It was all Dotted could think about.

"Fourteen percent? Is he on salt-licks? We'd have to cut the entire education budget. Please tell me that's his negotiating position."

He wanted that tea. He needed that tea. He could ask for some to be brought 'round, of course. But to drink tea during a meeting would... disrespect it. Tea was special. It was a refuge from the world, to be drunk in peace. And he had precious little peace these days.

“What do you mean there’s no negotiation?”

But he couldn’t just wait it out. That’d be grossly irresponsible. And, whatever Dotted’s faults were, he was never irresponsible. The tea had to be earned. And that meant that the problem with the budget had to go away. The Right Honorable Member for Cloudsdale North, eh?

“Well you can tell that pompous old fool that the ‘Historic Independence of the Pegasus Peoples’ is a load of horsea—”

Dotted raised a hoof. Instantly, everyone fell silent and looked expectantly at him. He allowed himself a small, private smile. You couldn’t demand something like this. You couldn’t ask for it. Not really. No amount of obedience, no amount of fear could make it happen. It had to be respect. The ponies at the table may know his faults. They may know him to be, on occasion, surly, cynical, acerbic, and ill-tempered. But he had earned their respect. And that, at least, felt good. Even on days like this. He turned to the young earth pony mare who had the unfortunate job of representing the treasury on these meetings and gave her an encouraging smile.

“Balanced, tell me, is the MP for Cloudsdale North still Sky Slicer the elder?”

“Yes. This would be his... ninth term, I think,” she replied, consulting her notes.

“Lovely. Here’s what we do. We shave a percent and half off the budget. We can put the parasprite relief back with a supplementary funding bill, safely away from election season. The bonds those bits were meant to pay off don’t mature for another six months, anyway. This will show willing, so the moderates can support it and save face. You get the Chancellor to sign off on the proposal and I’ll get the PM to do the same. The PM’s clever. She’ll see it is the only way out of this mess.”

“Sky Slicer still influences a large bloc of votes, Dotted. It may not pass. The crisis of confidence that will precipitate, well... The bit is going to take a nosedive for a start. Can’t even imagine the consequences in domestic politics. A cabinet re-shuffle at the very least. Probably going to end up with a vote of no confidence.”

Dotted let her finish. She was the newest member of this little group⁶ and Dotted always liked to see how his new colleagues thought. He was pleased and let this show a bit in the friendliness of his tone.

“You are not wrong. He’ll have fewer allies than you suspect, though. This is a risky move even for him. But, even with last minute changes-of-heart he still has a great deal of clout. Which is why I have a special mission for you. After the Chancellor gives the go-ahead, which he will, you need to go to the House and tell Sky Slicer that Dotted Line sends his regards and directs his attention towards the fact that the deeply unfortunate details regarding the Cypress Hall project fiasco are not buried as deep as the Honorable Member might wish. Mention, too, that he’s up against some fairly stiff competition this election. Add that, given the recent spate of leaks from government circles, it would be both tragic and regrettable if he were to lose his seat over the aforementioned unfortunate details getting into the hooves of certain papers. *Cloudsdale Post* comes to mind. Now, he should be crying for his mother at this point, so what you tell him then is—”

Dotted was interrupted by the doors busting open, admitting a breathless and bedraggled Spinning Top. In the interest of honesty it should be pointed out that she was bedraggled by her own standards, which meant that perhaps four hairs in her mane were out of place. Dotted would have to be groomed, primped and coddled for upwards of six hours before he could aspire to ‘bedraggled’. In order for him to get to what she’d consider winsomely dishabille, some sort of plasticizing agent would have to be employed. Liberally. She took in a big gulp of air, exhaled hastily and, quite uncharacteristically, shouted.

“Oh, everypony, I have the most awful news!”

“We know,” said Leafy with a puzzled frown, “about the *Equestria Daily* headline. Where were you?”

“Not that! Worse! Twilight Sparkle’s coming to Canterlot. Tomorrow! It’s a surprise visit.”

⁶ They didn’t really have a proper name. One reporter dubbed them the Shadow Council which was preposterous, entirely too dramatic and cast a blameless group of selfless public servants in an unfairly negative light. Or so Spinning wrote in the relevant press statement. The reporter, incidentally, was reassigned just two days after penning the article. To report on the weather in the San Palomino desert. This gave him a good deal of time to ponder his situation. The words ‘sunny’ and ‘hot’ are, after all, quite easy to spell.

And at that, the briefing room exploded into bedlam. Everypony suddenly had a great deal to say and absolutely no time to listen to anypony else. Dotted found it difficult to focus again. He should have been thinking about the security nightmare that this posed. A personal friend to both Her Highnesses *and* a major asset in the defense of the realm were visiting bound together in one small, unassuming body. He should have been thinking about the logistics nightmare this caused, as a safe and suitably luxurious berth had to be found for the personal guest of the Solar Princess. Above all, he should have been thinking about the chaos this would cause both internationally and with the nobility. Every time Twilight Sparkle was scheduled to meet with the princess, he had to reassure pretty much every ambassador, legate, consul, and special envoy, often personally, that Equestria wasn't going to invade anypony just yet. And the nobles would go simply *insane*.

But he wasn't thinking about any of this. All he could think about was a number. *The* number, rather. And how it just got impossibly huge. He sighed. This was going to be a very long day.

One hour, six minutes after the Civil Service status meeting, Dotted was standing in front of the library tower that was once the home of Twilight Sparkle. To his right was Leafy Salad. To his left, a castle guard. All three of them wore identical expressions of mute horror. There was goop on the ground. There was goop on the walls. There was even goop hanging from the ceiling in thick ropy strands. Yellow, viscous, and slimy-looking, it gleamed, greasily, in the early morning light. Occasionally, a bit fell off and landed on the ground with a wet sloshing sound. This would invariably make all three ponies wince. It wasn't the suddenness of the sound. You could see the drop coming from a mile away. It's just that when you heard the disturbingly organic slithering sound of it landing on the ground, you were suddenly quite sure you never wanted to hear it again.

Dotted reached out with his telekinesis and grabbed a scoop of the sticky gunk. He brought it next to his nose and sniffed, carefully. He sniffed again, risking a deeper breath. Then, with great care, he popped a speck of it into his mouth.

"It's custard," he said in completely flat tones, "with just a hint of vanilla. Which leads me, rather neatly, to my next question. Why is the erstwhile home of Princess Celestia's very favorite student covered in four feet of custard? With a hint of vanilla?"

The guard winced. "Target of opportunity in royal food fight, my lord. As I understand it, Princess Luna developed a new and exciting spell for the generation and deployment of weaponized custard. In, uh, bulk. It was somewhat more successful than initially predicted," he replied.

Dotted's eyes narrowed. "Apparently. Are you new here"—he peered at the guardspony's insignia—"corporal?"

"Uh, yes my lord. Just transferred in from Los Pegasus."

"Well, in that case I might as well take the time to tell you: I'm not 'your lord'. I'm not anypony's lord, grace or honor, for that matter."

The guardspony regarded him with a flat, expressionless stare. You could tell he was thinking about this, and Dotted's estimation of him shot up a notch or two. Say what you will about Shining Armor, but you certainly got a better class of guard these days. A lot less grunt and a lot more thought. Dotted approved. Partly because of his own beliefs and partly because he knew this sort of change infuriated the more reactionary sort of noble. After a while, the guardspony replied.

“Very well. How may I address you?”

Despite the mess and despite himself, Dotted grinned.

“The name’s Dotted Line. So you could try Dotted. Or Line. Or ‘sir,’ if you are feeling especially deferential. How shall I address you?”

“My name is Swift Wing, sir.”

“Capital, Swift Wing. Glad to meet you. Now that we’ve got protocol out of the way, let’s get back at the matter at hoof. I estimate that, if pressed, and we are, we could get the tower de-custarded by tomorrow. Is the damage bad inside? Just please don’t tell me it’s full of custard,” Dotted said, giving the dripping walls a once-over.

“Oh no, sir, there’s no custard in there.”

“Good. Good.”

“Wouldn’t be room.”

Dotted’s smile didn’t so much disappear, as drain from his face. “What do you mean ‘Wouldn’t be room?’”

“The jam, sir.”

“Jam?”

“Yessir. It’s full of jam, sir. Gooseberry, sir.”

There was a drawn-out silence. Dotted looked expectant and Swift Wing responded with the sort of expressionless impassivity that must be lesson zero in the Royal Guard training program. Leafy, who had missed breakfast today, had long since managed to worm one of the windows open and was now experimenting with adding the custard to the jam. He had that rare, blissful look of a pony whose lot in life could only be improved with the addition of a scone. Finally, Dotted couldn’t stand it anymore and, with commendable self-control, asked:

“Why is the tower filled with gooseberry jam?”

“Well, sir, Her Highness Princess Celestia beheld the custard onslaught, sir, and, yea verily, did she summon the ancient powers of alicornkind...”

Dotted raised a plaintive hoof. “Enough. Enough. I think I get the picture. Was the East Wing also the site of battle, then?”

“Not recently, sir, no.”

“Good. Okay. Now, what we’re going to do is”—his telekinesis flipped open a saddlebag and fished out a thick file bulging with bookmarks—“we’re going to put Ms. Sparkle in suite 7a in the East Wing. As I understand it, those were her quarters before being assigned to this tower. If anyone asks, the tower is being remodeled. Because the floor is unsafe.”

“You want us to lie, sir?” The guardspony sounded shocked.

“Not a lie. The floor is unsafe.”

“Only because it’s under several feet of jam, sir.”

“Details, Swift Wing, details. Now, Leafy, what you need to—Leafy?” Dotted looked up and saw that Leafy had acquired a cloud of exceptional fluffiness and had, for some time now, been experimenting with an innovative new jam sandwich design. “Leafy! Get down here!”

With extreme reluctance, Leafy Salad put his prototype breadless jam-and-custard sandwich away and glided to the ground. “Oh come on, Dotty, I missed breakfast.”

“I missed my morning tea, Leafy. I’m running on distant memories of caffeine and rapidly dwindling reserves of goodwill. You’ll eat when we’ve solved this mess. Now, trot on over to the East Wing and have them check out room 7a. We’ll need to update the security precautions and move a few items of furniture from this place. The wardrobe, I’m told, contains some personal effects. So get a few ponies to, I don’t know, hose it down and ship it to the East Wing.”

Leafy launched himself in the air with a swift wingbeat, but then paused, halfway between earth and sky. He gave the deserted tower a look of deep, almost touching, longing.

“Can’t I just...?” he began.

“No! Come on, let’s get this sorted and I promise I’ll buy you the entirety of Pony Joe’s stock,” Dotted pleaded.

Luckily, as is so often the case, where appeals to reason and devotion to duty failed, naked bribery succeeded. Leafy brightened up, and, with a few powerful wingbeats, became a rapidly dwindling dot in the distance. There was a moment of silence and then the guardspony spoke:

“Begging your pardon, sir, but who was that pony? You act that way in the guard, sir, and you’ll end up reassigned to a post so distant, sir, it’d be impossible to find without a mapping spell and a guide dog.”

Dotted gave Swift Wing a mournful look. “That, my dear corporal, is the Permanent Under-secretary of State for the Home Office, the princesses help us all. In his defense, he’s a lot more... stable when he hasn’t skipped a meal. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to be complained at by the assembled nobles of the land.” With these words Dotted Line galloped off towards the Old Palace, leaving a moderately befuddled Corporal Swift Wing in his wake.

The corporal was lost in thought. Mares unexpectedly falling into his hooves, crazy officials, towers entirely covered in custard... Well. Everypony was right. Serving in the palace was completely different. And insane. He resolved to buy his grandfather a number of ciders next time he got leave. And this time, when the old pony starts his crazy stories, Swift Wing was going to be taking *notes*.

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Over the years, as the post of Cabinet Secretary changed hooves, certain expectations formed about the nature of the cabinet secretary. It would usually be a level-headed mare with the patience and general disposition of a schoolteacher and the most exquisite Canterlot manners. An elegance of dress and deportment was likewise assumed, as well as a classical education in one of the very finest of Canterlot academies. Dotted Line fitted these expectations... poorly. In a lifetime of fitting out as only a short, ill-tempered, northerner unicorn can, it must be said that being Cabinet Secretary was his greatest accomplishment. The appointment was so unexpected that a few courtiers were certain the Princess was making another one of her little jokes. Some days, Dotted wondered if it really was a joke that just got way, way out of hoof.

At first impression he looked like every inch, and there weren’t a great many of those, a northerner. Thick, grey coat that resisted even the most vigorous chemical straightening agents. Black mane that overhung the eyes and would, if not strictly controlled, eat combs and terrorize hairbrushes. A low sturdy build that clashed horribly with its

surroundings. In Canterlot, everything streamed ever-heavenward, while Dotted clung low to the ground, as if he were afraid somepony would steal it.

Even worse, the nobles of Canterlot whispered in scandalized tones, his education was entirely inappropriate. Whoever heard of a cabinet secretary with a *chemistry degree*? Not to mention the sheer scandal of his family. Troublemakers to the last pony with no ancient legacy, no pedigree. Common craftsponies, who came into money running a distillery, of all things. They were, in the opinion of just about anypony who was anypony in Canterlot, a religiously aberrant and politically unhinged group of lunatics. Living on an island well off the coast near Vanhoover, an island that was so far removed from the glamour that is Canterlot as to be in another country entirely, certainly didn't help.

As a result, the nobles of Canterlot didn't much care for the cabinet secretary and he, in turn, didn't much care for them. This goes a long way to explain why, as he was sitting in the Disquietingly Green⁷ Salon of the Old Palace, meeting with the assembled Council of Lords, he had a pounding headache. There was only one item on the agenda: Twilight Sparkle, and how her arrival would spell Doom For Us All.

"... it is unnatural and unseemly for Her Highness to be so close to a *common* pony! This visit is merely a devious scheme devised, deviously, to have Twilight Sparkle, if that is her real name, ascend over us and rule with an iron hoof!" said Lord Trottingham, winding down a particularly turgid speech.

"That's not how the Equestrian political system works, my lord. It's just a friendly visit, nothing more."

"Then the princess is to transform her into an alicorn, breaking the First Covenant! Then she will ascend to power and rule over us all with an iron hoof."

"That's not how alicorn biology works, my lord. Just a friendly visit. No transformations. No iron hooves. Some tea. Possibly a scone or two," Dotted replied wearily. This had been going on for a while. He had already given up on lunch and the stark reality of missing afternoon tea was creeping up on him. He could certainly do with a cup of tea and the possibility of a scone.

⁷ The rooms were named by the Princess who was, in that century, in something of a puckish mood. Other rooms include the 'Salon of Desperate Yellows' and the 'Irritatingly Long Gallery'. Luckily for school tour guides in the subsequent centuries, the name 'Hall of Phallic Pillars' was vetoed, with as much tact as possible, by the then Cabinet Secretary. Sadly this act of heroism remained unrecorded by pony history.

As much as he was annoyed by the paranoia of the assembled nobles, he couldn't help but sympathize a little bit. If only Twilight Sparkle weren't so...*efficient*. At this point, there wasn't a member of the royal house not deeply in her debt. The same royal house that her brother, who occupied a position of no mean political power himself, just married into, in fact. And there were all those rumors about her and the princess being a bit more than just friendly. Dotted shook that thought loose. Decent ponies didn't think about that sort of thing. And the worst thing, the very worst thing about Twilight Sparkle, was that she acted as if she was completely unaware of the political clout she wielded. It had to be an act. It had to be.

"Perhaps she is secretly the foal of Celestia, born in sin, and destined to flourish as a new alicorn! This visit is an opportunity for Her Highness to acknowledge her! And when she does..." began Lord Trottingham who, it must be said, never let what he privately considered to be a good turn of phrase go to waste.

"... iron hoof, my lord?" Dotted interrupted, mildly.

"Well. Uh. Yes."

"I've met Ms. Sparkle's parents, they are lovely ponies and, and this is important, neither royal nor alicorns. Just unicorns, my lord, same as you or I. And they most certainly *are* her parents. A moment's observation will show the similarity and a few instructive minutes in the hall of records will show that the birth certificate is in order. The visit is just for talk and tea, my lord. No announcements of any sort."

"Any of those documents could have been forged! And of course she'll be placed with a decoy family she resembles. But that is all beside the point, you don't expect us to believe that someone like Twilight Sparkle is just 'dropping over' for tea, do you?"

Dotted Line was impressed. He could actually *hear* the inverted commas slotting into place.

"Yes, my lord. That is precisely what I expect you to believe. It is the truth, after all."

"Nonsense! We all know what the true purpose is! It's to continue a shameful practice, a *dalliance* between Her Highness and a *common* pony taking advantage of privileges that were never meant to be hers!"

Well. They had heard the rumors, too. Possibly started them. And there were... fairly scandalous stories circulating in manuscript or in tiny print runs. Now, normally, he would have found a way to stop them. Even in the absence of a strictly legal framework

there were ways of exerting pressure. However, he'd gotten direct instructions from the princess that he's to leave the matter alone with a pointed reminder that Equestria had no law against *lèse majesté*. And, okay, he'd read a few of the stories. Well, most of them. Purely in the interest of research, of course. Not that he'd want that fact publicized, of course. Which, actually, gave him an idea...

“And where would you get such a preposterous idea, my lord? Items of dragon-penned propaganda, by any chance? I must admit, I am *surprised* by your choice of reading material.”

That shut them up. Of course they've read the stories, but they would never dare admit it. Not in front of their peers who, okay, also read the same stories. The funny thing is that they knew everyone else had read the damned things, too. The trick was not to be the first pony to admit to it. Pride's a peculiar thing sometimes.

“Of... of course not. Nonsense! But there is talk...”

“My lord, there is always talk. Always will be. But I assure you, this is a simple visit, nothing more, nothing less. The Princess will make no announcement of any kind, especially not an announcement, oh I don't know, pronouncing Twilight Sparkle her immaculately conceived starchild and the new Overtyrant of Equestria. And we can stay here belaboring the point until Ms. Sparkle has come and gone. But...”

“That she has *come*, Dotted? That's what we fear. We can only hope for the latter,” said Lady Cloudsdale, her tone suggestive. She added what she presumably thought was a sly, knowing wink. Sadly, it was rather more reminiscent of the onset of conjunctivitis.

Dotted gave up on subtlety and channeled all his frustration into a glare. This made the noblemare physically reel back. Dotted wasn't fully aware of this, but when deprived of tea for too long he would adopt the intense air of someone restraining himself, with considerable difficulty, from wanton murder. The Equestrian Civil Service had a small and incredibly informal subcommittee whose chief duty was to endeavor to keep the cabinet secretary pleasantly marinated in tea at all times. For the good of Equestria, in general, and the subcommittee, in particular.

“Right. Lords. Ladies. If no...*sensible* further comment is forthcoming, I declare the meeting closed. If you are still not satisfied, you are encouraged to petition Her Highness. Such is your prerogative.” Dotted allowed about three seconds for somepony to interject and then slammed the gavel in front of him on its stand. He employed so much strength that the head wobbled and threatened to fall off. He stalked out without

even bothering to look behind him, ignoring the buzz of conversation. He knew pretty much what the nobles would be saying at a time like this, and it was best not to even hear it, for the sake of his much-abused nerves as much as anything.

Outside, he took a deep, desperate gulp of air. The palace generally smelled of jasmine and roses or freshly mowed grass, but right now Dotted would have happily inhaled inside of a pigsty. Anything to get the stench of nobility out of his nostrils. He took another breath and nearly choked when he saw an extremely dejected looking Leafy Salad waiting for him.

“Leafy? Aren’t you supposed to be getting security for Room 7a?”

“Ran into a bit of a problem there.”

“How big a bit?”

“The room isn’t there.”

Dotted closed his eyes and pressed one hoof, hard, against the bridge of his nose. He stood like this for a few moments, offering a silent prayer to Celestia. He used to be quite religious, back in his, hah, salad days. His whole family was, in fact. In these turbulent modern times they clung to the old ways and ancient certainties all the more fiercely. His faith, such as it was, had long lapsed. Mostly because it’s quite hard to keep to doctrinaire religion when you occasionally take tea with your deity. Still, in times of stress, he reverted to the habits of youth.

Sweet Merciful Celestia, grant me strength so that I may not strike the pony before me dead. It’s not his fault and I sort of like him. Besides, his wife would never forgive me. Amen.

“What do you mean, *not there*? Destroyed?”

“I mean not there. Just... gone.”

“How?”

“I think it would be better if you took a look,” said Leafy and took off. Dotted Line, earthbound as he was, followed him at a slower pace, cursing the midsummer heat and his thick coat. It was, he thought, much easier to offer prayers of thanks for the sun when he was in his pleasantly mist-shrouded island home. Sincere ones, certainly.

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To Dotted's immense relief, Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns was on summer break. Students were right up there with nobles and journalists on Dotted's list of ponies he'd rather not deal with. Thus, the corridor was empty save for Leafy Salad and a group of teachers looking distinctly ill at ease. The corridor was painted an institutional green about halfway up the wall and whitewashed above that. This, he'd heard from a psychology major he'd dated in the distant past, was meant to have a calming effect on the inmates. It always set his teeth on edge.

The walls were also adorned with modern art, well, decorations would be the only word. Mostly because the objects lacked any conceivable earthly use and thus could only be called decorations, despite the fact that they didn't really decorate all that much, or well. The alternative nomenclature he'd favored during his younger days, namely 'junk', got him into a few drunken arguments with art majors. These days, of course, he was more tactful than that. On good days, at least. Dotted took a good long look at the room numbers: there was room two, four, six... and there was room 7a as large as life.

"Leafy, what are you playing at? There's 7a, right there," said Dotted and motioned towards the door.

"No, Dotty, that's the *door*. The room is gone."

"Well, where the hay does the door lead to?"

"It leads to... here, in a way," Leafy said and then picked up the pace of his speech as Dotted Line made a beeline towards the door. "They said that it sort of loops back and they warned us not to look because it is supposed to be, and I quote, 'profoundly disturbing.' I... I really don't think you ought to—"

Dotted opened the door.

He was profoundly disturbed.

He found himself face to face with, well, himself. He'd seen mirrors before, obviously⁸, but this was different. Everything was reversed, for a start. After a lifetime of mirrors it was disconcerting to lift the left hoof and see your reflection do the same. But what was even worse was that he could feel his own breath coming back at him. Sense the magical presence of another unicorn that was, in fact, him. Nervously, he adjusted his chain of

⁸ A number of ponies would take one good look at his scruffy mane and dispute the point.

office. So did his double. It hung no less crooked than for the original. It was disturbing, alright.

Still, in a previous life he was something of a scientist. A chemist, sure, but discovery was where you found it. So he reached out with one tentative hoof. He and his doppelganger were just about to touch, hooftip to hooftip, when there was a flash, a bang, and, for a brief while, the sensation of *speed*. Then, for a rather longer while, there was quite a lot of the sensation of *pain*. When the race of malignant dwarves that had started performing the Anvil Chorus moved on from his poor, battered head, he risked opening an eye. The sight of Leafy and a stricken-looking teacher swam reluctantly into focus. Dotted fought to gain control of his lips and finally managed to squeeze a few words out.

“Poni’s Exclusion Principle?”

“Poni’s Exclusion Principle,” replied the teacher, looking considerably relieved that the chief of the Equestrian civil service didn’t die, not quite, on her watch.

With some protesting from his aching joints and bruised back, Dotted got up. He walked, unsteadily, to the door and closed it shut. Then he turned to the remaining teachers and spoke.

“Fine. This is a minor difficulty—”

“Dotty, the buckin’ room is *gone*, pardon my French. Ms. Sparkle will just have to stay in a guest su—” Salad tried to interrupt.

“Minor difficulty! I am not about to tell the Sun Goddess that we can’t arrange a visit by her student. Whatever happens, Celestia will not be disappointed. Now, Professor Abacus, was it?”

Ivory Abacus, Regius Professor of Dimensionally Transcendent Mathematics (Lun.), twitched to attention. She looked around, surreptitiously, and found that most of the colleagues she was hoping would back her up were gone. It was amazing, really, the skill of an academic getting out of an unwanted appointment. A few had been inching away ever since the Secretary showed up, mostly the older ones with experience with this sort of mess. A further few, the younger ones, made up in alacrity what they lacked in experience, and bolted at the first opportunity. And one, a certain Ivory Abacus, was too occupied watching the cabinet secretary pivot through the air to get any distance in. This sort of misfortune really demanded a long, erudite jeremiad from someone of her stature and education. Something in Classical Equestrian, perhaps. She would have to think of

something later because, at the time, the only words that came to mind were, “*Oh, ponyfeathers.*”

“Yes, my lord secretary?” she ventured, cautiously. Judging by the precipitous drop in the temperature, that wasn’t the thing to say.

“Not your lord anything. I work for a living. Now, you are the head of the Board for Unscheduled Reality Excursions, am I right?”

“That’s... how do you know that? That’s classified!” she protested.

“Yes. And I do all the classifying. Now, you of all ponies should know. How did this happen?”

“Well, the room was kept as it was when Twilight Sparkle was a student here. Under your predecessor's orders. We suspect—uh.” She turned around in a vain effort to garner support from her colleagues, and found none. “Ahem, we suspect that it is an old experiment by Ms. Sparkle that, uh, got out of hoof. She was always very skilled at dimensional manipulation, you see, and left unattended a casting grid may develop... eccentricities. This is how we believe the dimensions got torqued.”

“I see. Well, professor, here’s what I’d like to do: get the Board together and fix this.”

“Fix it?”

“Bring back the room. Untorque the dimensions. Fix it. Surely, a student’s abandoned experiment isn’t too much for your considerable talents?”

“Well no, but... uh... certainly. We’ll get right on it!” the professor replied and with an uncertain nod towards Leafy ran off in search of equipment and absconded colleagues.

“Marvelous. Leafy? How’s that wardrobe coming along?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. Twilight Sparkle is going to be able to sleep in her own room tomorrow or my name isn’t Dotted Hieronymus Line.”

“Oh, right, your middle name is Hieronymus. I wonder, did you *wrong* your parents in some way... ?” Leafy, replied grinning.

“Shush. Wardrobe. Now.”

“Can you confirm the allegations that Twilight Sparkle is coming to Canterlot in order to perform a *coup d'état*?”

Spinning’s smile widened a little bit. She focused a little more effort into radiating good cheer and agreeable helpfulness. Not because she wanted to. What she wanted was to scream and, possibly, strangle the reporter in front of her. But this was an imperfect universe, and sometimes you simply couldn’t get what you wanted. She let a little more sincerity leak into her eyes. Perfect. Or close to it, at any rate.

“Now, my dear colleague, how can I possibly confirm something like that? Ms. Sparkle is a close personal friend of Her Highnesses.”

“You can’t confirm it because it’s true or because it isn’t?”

In the privacy of her head Spinning swore. This was going to turn into a right and proper hatchet job. She can deny anything she pleases, that just means that *Canterlot News Nightly* will run something with a headline like “CABINET OFFICE DENIES COUP D’ÉTAT ATTEMPT” or, if they are feeling particularly vindictive, “CABINET HIDING COUP D’ÉTAT ATTEMPT?” She can try to stonewall but all that will produce is, “CABINET UNABLE TO DENY COUP D’ÉTAT” or, “TWILIGHT SPARKLE COUP D’ÉTAT STILL NOT DENIED.” For a brief insane moment she considered confirming everything, just to see the look on that reporter’s face as she capered and danced off into the sunset, magnificently lit by the flames of her burning career. It was a tempting vision. Then she came to her senses, and settled for a genteel laugh and stalling tactics.

“I can’t confirm it because it’s preposterous, Sans. Now that’s all the time we have for now, but there’ll be a full statement with time for as many questions as you need this evening.”

There was an immediate buzz of frustrated journalists, and Spinning raised her hooves, leaning into the lectern, and made a placating gesture. At length, they all filed out of the press conference room. All, that is, save Sans Serif from *Canterlot News Nightly*, and an earth pony mare with a dusky rose coat who sat in the row of seats nearest to the door. The mare was apparently engrossed in her own notes, and Sans was giving Spinning an appraising look.

Her time of recess was chosen with the utmost care and malicious intent. Sans could rush to the presses now and put out an early edition, doing the story up as he best saw fit. But that would mean that the contents of the evening press brief couldn’t be reported until

tomorrow. The presses couldn't keep up with both an early and a regular edition in one day, not with the sort of circulation *Canterlot News Nightly* wanted. And Spinning Top knew this just as well as Serif did. So, it came to a bluff—did Spinning have something actually worth reporting? And would missing out on it for a whole day make Serif's paper look incompetent compared to everypony else?

Sans Serif's gaze grew more piercing, as if he could discern what she was hiding through sheer force of will. Spinning returned a look that said nothing at all. Empty amicability, false helpfulness, and not a single solitary bit of useful information. They kept this up for a few moments more, a study in mutual distrust and frustration, and then Serif suddenly stamped both forehooves and stalked out of the room, all a-quiver with nervous energy. Spinning allowed herself a brief moment of triumph. That cool manner and professional mien was just an act. In truth, when his composure cracked, he was rather a frenetic pony, she thought.

Soon enough her sense of triumph waned entirely. She had, at best, bought a few hours. If she didn't pull a real live rabbit out of a hat come the evening, the reporters were going to tear her to shreds, and then write articles that can only be described as apocalyptic. And, push come to shove, she didn't really have a rabbit on hoof or a hat to pull it out of. This is why she paused while leaving the room and announced, to no pony in particular, and in a voice pitched so low hardly anypony could hear, "I do believe that I could use a nice cup of herbal tea. Mint, I should think."

And this was also the reason why, several minutes after Spinning had gone, the rose-coated mare got up and walked out of the room taking care to head in completely the opposite direction. And why she, completely at random of course, arrived at the same exclusive tea shop as Spinning not half an hour later.

The shop was in one of the more fashionable districts of Canterlot Town, nestled between a small park and a windswept promenade. From the outside it was a low, unassuming building clad in pinkish marble, much like its neighbors. Also much like its neighbors, it was pulled back well away from the street, hiding behind an immaculate formal garden like every hedgerow was a trench, and every piece of decorative shrubbery a bastion. It had no sign, no identifying marks of any sort, nothing save a street number plate.

This wasn't the sort of shop that advertised. If you were of sufficient means to afford its prices and of sufficient refinement to get past the exceptionally picky door guards⁹ you knew about it. If you weren't, it was for the best if you knew nothing. A cup of tea in this place would set you back about the daily wage of the average pony—an exorbitant sum by anypony's standards. However, what all those bits bought wasn't the excellence of the tea, but discretion. Absolute, inviolate discretion. What happened inside one of the plush, comfortable private meeting rooms would stay inside, no matter what.

Spinning sunk deeper into an overstuffed chair upholstered in sage green velvet and let out a contented sigh, sipping a bit of her mint tea. Hoof picked in the most pristine of wilderness and sun-dried, she was assured, and then mixed with exactly the right sort of green tea and prepared to exacting specifications. It *was* good, that much was true, but only somepony fanatical like Dotted could possibly appreciate all the subtleties that were, supposedly, there. After a few more appreciative sips, the door opened and the rose-coated mare walked in and, wordlessly, took a seat on the other side of the small lacquered table.

They waited, silently, as the tea steward slipped in, hoofsteps soundless on the thickly piled carpet. He put a teapot and a cup gently onto the intricate doily next to the newcomer, bowed low and left. The two mares held their collective breath until they heard the massive walnut door click shut. Immediately, the mare with the dusky rose coat and pale-blue mane grinned widely and spoke.

“Spinning, my dear, it has been too long!”

“Too long, Lilly, altogether too long. How's life in the trenches?” Spinning matched her friend's grin with one of her own. She had whole arsenals of smiles, grins, smirks, and not a few sneers of all sorts and shades, from barely perceptible to effusive, but the one she wore now was quite a rare breed. It was genuine and entirely free of artifice which, for Spinning, was a rare pleasure. Gilded Lilly was an old, old friend. Certainly, they were nominally on opposite sides since Lilly had stayed with *Equestria Daily* while Spinning went off to join the Service. That enmity, however, was a wan, threadbare thing. They had known each other for years, meeting in the sort of school young mares of their exalted social class attended. Then, they read classics at Canterlot Royal University together, and finally they worked alongside each other at *EqD*. That was far more important than the picayune details of who worked for whom.

⁹ A place such as this did not employ 'bouncers'. Perish the thought. However, sufficiently annoyed, the magnificently liveried guardsponies would demonstrate a facility with bouncing, and, indeed, splatting, that'd be the envy of any salt-lick on the wrong side of the tracks.

“We manage. Somehow. I won’t lie, it’s not as it was. It’s all circulation, I’m afraid, these days. Readership numbers. Demographics. No pony has time for a proper story. That’s why they have me covering the ‘Twilight Sparkle Will Doom Us All’ angle. Rubbish and they know it, but it sells. Especially to the sort of idiot who’s of interest to our advertisers.”

“I was wondering why they had you here. Aren’t you supposed to be covering foreign affairs?”

“In theory. But nothing the editorial board cares about is going on, and well, since they have me they might as well use me, even if it’s to cover domestic politics rubbish like this.”

“What’s Breaking News doing, then? Isn’t that his beat? Editor of the Domestic Affairs desk and all that?”

Gilded Lily snorted. It was the world’s most genteel and respectable snort, but a snort all the same.

“Oh, he, well, he’s moved up in the world, hasn’t he. Hoof-picked hatchet man for the board of directors, he is now. Too important a pony to be working mere stories, not when he can be out terrifying the staffers and pushing around proper journalists.”

“Dear me. From lector to lictor, then?”

“Something like that. Times have changed, Spinning. You were right to get out when you did, I fear. Now it’s all circulation, pleasing the advertisers, and maximum scandal for minimum journalism. I’m going to have to go back to the office after that magical press conference of yours and write a hatchet job, right on spec. Not a single damned word of it will be true, of course, but it’ll bring in the readers. It’s not like I have that much choice, either. I’m either to do what I’m told or get reassigned to cover flower shows. If that.” Lilly took a deep draught of her tea, some sort of infernally complicated meld of rooibos, merigold and lemon grass, as if she were desperately trying to wash out a foul taste from her mouth.

“Ah. Well. I can possibly get you out of that, as you say, hatchet job.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, it’d be *grossly improper* of a member of Her Highness’ Civil Service to meddle in the internal affairs of such a respected and respectable paper. A breach of ethics, at the very least. I couldn’t possibly theoretically do it. But...”

“Yes?”

“Would you be inclined to consider a hypothetical scenario?”

“Always. As long as it is entirely hypothetical, of course.”

“Of course. Well, *hypothetically*, what would happen if a breaking story were to occur during the press conference later this evening? One that’s, say, entirely consistent with the interests and skills of the journalist now assigned to the aforementioned hatchet job. Say, surprising developments in the Northern Griffonstan situation.”

“How hypothetically surprising?”

“Envoys of the two principal sides in the conflict meeting. Here. In Canterlot.”

“*Envoys from the Free Gryphon Republic and the Greater Griffonstan Empire here?*”
Gilded Lilly didn’t shout. Not quite.

“Hypothetically.”

“Well. If this reporter were to have some sort of proof. A written document, for instance, of good provenance, she—”

“Or he.”

“Of course. She or he, as you say, would be able to convince the editorial board to let aforesaid journalist do her, or his, damned job for a change. Somepony else would have to be assigned to the Twilight Sparkle Secret Daughter of Discord story. Is there such a document, incidentally?”

“Well there would have to be. Given protocol there would have to be a confidential memo from the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister, say. If, of course, this wasn’t an entirely hypothetical situation. A, a, *gedankenexperiment*, if you will.”

“And who would leak this confidential memo?”

“Leak it? Celestia preserve us, Gilded, no pony would be insane enough to leak something like that. No, no, that could only lead to charges being brought under Section Two of the Official Secrets Act. Very grave business.” Spinning’s expression became almost comically lugubrious.

“Ah. So this hypothetical reporter is out of luck?”

“Funny you should mention luck. The only way this hypothetical reporter could possibly get the information is if she—”

“—or he—”

“Naturally. If she or he were to accidentally come across it. A stroke of good luck, you see. Maybe, say, some pony would leave it lying around. Carelessly. You know how the Civil Service loves its triplicates in triplicates. Well with so many copies—two for the archives, one for the principal private secretary, the list goes on and on—the odds are pretty good that one would be left around where simply any pony could stumble across it.”

With these words, Spinning extracted a slim manila folder from her saddlebags and tossed it onto the luxuriant carpet. Carelessly. Where simply any pony could stumble across it. Unsurprisingly, some pony did. This some pony leafed through it, smiled, and then asked:

“Won’t this cause diplomatic incident? I assume no media presence is wanted.”

“Well, the situation is purely theoretical, but I would think that, yes, the envoys are very much in favor of doing this quietly. However, this represents no difficulty. In this scenario confidential dispatches from the Foreign Office indicate that the FGR deputation plans to walk out of the meeting before it even starts. Protests over the cease fire being broken, to pick a random explanation. Still a media coup, but not one that’ll put anything in jeopardy. Every pony wins.”

“Except of course the Civil Service. It’s strange they get nothing out of this.”

“Well... we could say that this hypothetical journalist is quite competent. The head of the press office—not I, of course, but a hypothetical head of an entirely hypothetical press office—would vastly prefer some pony less... incisive. Some pony trusting. Not inclined towards suspicion.”

“A useful idiot.”

“Your term. Not mine.”

“A *hypothetical* useful idiot.”

“Something of the sort, yes.”

“Well, I can see it clear how this entirely fictional journalist could leverage his or her exceptional influence over the paper in question which, of course, remains nameless, and get somepony specific sent.”

“Lovely. That’s just the sort of thing that’d benefit the Service in such a scenario.”

They sipped tea for a while in companionable silence. Then, as if just remembering, Gilded spoke.

“To change the subject *completely*, Spinning my dearest, have I told you about our Lifestyle & Fashion reporter? Name of Hot Scoop? Recently joined up. Very popular with the management. Very... trusting?”

Spinning Top grinned again, as widely as when the meeting started. The grin was as free of artifice as the one before but had nothing of the friendliness. Oh no. This particular grin is most akin to the sort of grin one finds in tropical waters approaching, say, drowning ponies. It generally has a fin on top.

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“*Hazard pay?*” Leafy wasn’t a happy pony. Oh no. Not in the slightest. What he wanted was to get a bite to eat, get some more bites to eat, nip off home early, hug his wife, and spend a pleasantly futile afternoon trying to teach his youngest to play Parcheesi. Futile, because little Marigold hadn’t quite passed the stage where she tries to nibble on the pieces, and pleasant because the sight of her trying to muster enough dexterity to roll dice, flapping her stubby little wings to keep herself upright, is, in Leafy’s entirely biased opinion, the most adorable in all of Equestria.

What he didn’t want was to spend a minute more in what was quickly shaping up to be a labor dispute fetlock-deep in gooseberry jam. Unfortunately, what he wanted or didn’t want didn’t really factor in the situation all that much. He thought about running a hoof through his mane and thought better of it. Getting cleaned up was going to be a nightmare as it is. Instead, he settled on fluffing his wings, making sure that the bright white feathers were clean. He took a deep, calming breath and tried speaking again.

“Why would you need hazard pay? It’s a wardrobe!” He turned to Corporal Swift Wing looking for support and found none. Swift had settled back into the stony expression of a guardspony with nothing to do right now except exist. He was there to help keep away journalists, almost a dozen of which had to be expelled from the grounds despite their protestations that an interview with Twilight Sparkle was absolutely essential for the future of a free press in Equestria. They first had to drive all of them off before laboriously pushing their way through the gooseberry and custard avalanche until they finally managed to get up to the top floor of the tower where the wardrobe stood, jam and custard dripping off it.

The forepony in front of Leafy blinked patiently and replied in a broad Trottingham accent.

“Well yes, sir, indeed, just a wardrobe. But, begging yew pardon, a wardrobe owned by Twilight Sparkle herself.”

“How’s that hazardous?”

“Well, sir, everypony knows she’s a right peculiar pony. She has vast mystical powers, she does. Defeated Discord himself. Vanquished an Ursa Minor with nary a hair missing from its starry little head. Hero of Equestria thrice over, she is.”

Another workpony piped up.

“I heard the princess sent her to wake up a dragon and tell it to clear off, and it did!”

“No no,” replied yet a third, “she *owns* a dragon. It sends her mail and guards her, I heard.”

Soon enough it was a hubbub as every workpony had something to add.

“Not that dragon! That’s a little one she made out of magic. I’m talking a *proper* big one with flames an’ teeth like swords, a hundred feet high. She up and told it to bugger off and it did!”

“Wasn’t that one of her friends?”

“I hear she brought low, right, this vast demonic hound with three heads. It’s supposed to be guarding bleedin’ *Tartarus*, right, and she just—”

“—went and followed the dragon migration, didn’t she, with two of her—”

“With eyes, right, like pools of light and stuff—”

“—me mate says she’s the cleverest pony in all—”

“—that’s what I’m telling you, just *made* wings for a friend of hers like it was—”

“—a friend of hers, right, fastest pony alive—”

“—turned to stone, isn’t it, right in the gardens—”

“—that’s right, *time travel*—”

Leafy waited until they all finally fell silent. Then, wearily, he spoke up.

“Yes, okay, all of that generally happened. More or less. But what’s that supposed to do with an ordinary wardrobe?”

The forepony seemed surprised.

“Ordinary? How do yew expect, sir, a pony like that to have an ordinary anything? It’s bound to be filled with books of magic and dangerous magical instruments.”

Another workpony looked apprehensive and spoke up.

“Or monsters! I heard she keeps a few around just so she can practice for all her, like, daring heroics.”

And with that the floodgates broke. Again. No pony knew what was in there, but everypony had a pet theory.

“It could be a gateway, right, for an entire private universe she keeps for experiments.”

“—brains in jars, like a whole collection—”

“—the skeleton of Starswirl the Bearded animated by—”

“—tentacled monstrosities from beyond—”

“—Celestia’s crown—”

Leafy waited until the noise died down. The forepony had the good grace to look embarrassed for a few moments and, at length, spoke.

“By rights, sir, we ought to have some of them hazard suits. Just in case.”

“We don’t have the time to—” Leafy stopped himself. This wasn’t how you got things done. “Okay, lads, okay, how about this. I open the wardrobe to show you there isn’t anything dangerous in there and then you haul it out so we can give it a scrub and get it where it needs to be. How’s that sound?”

“With hazard pay?”

“I’m willing to go as far as time-and-a-half.”

“Done.”

Leafy sighed. This right here was why the permanent secretary for the labor department retired last year. Bound to be. Home office was so much easier. The worst you had to deal with were criminals and such. A cakewalk compared to this. He walked over to the wardrobe, hooves squishing in the dense jam, grasped a brass ring that served as a handle, and heaved. The thick door creaked open, and, suddenly, as if he were spring loaded, a pony sprang out from the wardrobe. One hoof bore a notepad attached by a sturdy piece of thread, and the other was halfway to the mouth with the pen.

“Ms. Sparkle! What is your response to the allegations that you are secretly—”

He stopped. He caught the sight of the guard, expressionless, the workponies, confused, and Leafy Salad, caught somewhere between apoplexy and murderous rage. His face fell. Finally he spoke, his voice far less strident.

“—I am so arrested, aren’t I?”

• • •

It was now much later. Events, as they say, eventuated. The board convened under the watchful eye of Dotted Line, who had mournfully accepted that there wasn’t going to be any evening tea. At all. Which means that even if he started drinking tea now, to make up for lost time, he’d still be an evening tea short. Forever. These depressing thoughts were what occupied him as the board discussed shear forces on the fine structure of the intradimensional integument, debated the energy differential, and had a minor hissy fit over the correct way to hold a differential thaumometer. Apparently, the hoof-over-hoof school considered any use of teeth to be heretical.

Then there was some spellcasting, some more spellcasting, a few well chosen curse words that damn near turned the air blue, further spellcasting that, in fact, did turn the air blue, and additional curse words, these more panicky. As far as Dotted could make out, the dimensional knot was wound tightly around the domain of Ykzlpxl!k, The Disemvoweled One, Devourer of Souls, Approacher At The Gate, and a few dozen other choice cognomens. This, Dotted gathered from the way faces had gone colorless and the vocabulary colorful, was very much a Bad Thing.

“Can you... unknot the dimensional... knot... thing, then?” Dotted asked, fumbling over the terminology. Chemistry, fine. He even retained a few vestiges of higher mathematics. But dimensionally transcendent physics? Not even when he was an actual practicing researcher, let alone after all these years surrounded by equinities graduates.

“We have to. No time to waste, either. It could snap at any moment and turn the door to 7a into a portal leading to the Nightmare Realm of The Disemvoweled One, where, under alien stars, icy black winds...”

“Very bad. I got the point. No need to go all *Daring Do and The Soapstone Statue*,” said Dotted, massaging the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, I loved that book,” said Ivory Abacus, suddenly grinning like a schoolfilly about forty years her junior.

“Mm-hmmm! Especially the Sunken City and the Dreaming One! Definitely the best recent one! I have it signed, you know,” said a gray-maned stallion, who looked old enough to be Dotted’s father. Although Dotted’s father, for all his faults, would never be seen dead wearing a bow tie quite so hideously hued.

Ivory Abacus’s eyes lit up. “Signed! That’s amazing! I hear the next book is going to be about...”

“If we could focus on the immediate, existential, and, possibly, metaphysical threat posed by the unspeakable horror *right next door*, that would be just peachy,” said Dotted his temper briefly escaping control. Academics! Besides, everypony knew that the best *recent* one was *Daring Do and The Amulet of Yendor*. That sequence in the City of Gnomes? Classic.

“Sorry. Right. We have to sever the link right now. There’s only a minor, uh, difficulty.”

“What kind of ‘uh, difficulty,’ precisely?”

“Well a, a, physical, uh, *aspect* of the Disemvoweled One may briefly manifest, as we apply the dimensional seal.”

“What sort of aspect?”

“Well, uh, the relevant texts describe it as batrachian and tentacular. Which is peculiar, because I don’t know of any frogs with tentacles.”

“Peculiar. Yes. That’d be the word I’d use. Do you need my help?”

“How are you at dimensional seals?”

“Hopeless.”

“Combat spells?”

“None to speak of.”

“What *can* you do?”

“Chemistry. Administration. Organization. Oh, and I can distill whisky.”

“Really? Whisky?” said Professor Abacus, perking up for the first time.

“Oh, yes. Family trade.”

“Well, we may need that particular talent *afterwards*. To keep the nightmares at bay,” she said, grinning humorlessly.

Yet another of her colleagues, a younger stallion with an orange coat and serious bearing, spoke up.

“I don’t suppose we could call the princess?”

Ivory tried to respond, but Dotted cut her off, his face stormy. He spoke quickly and loudly, his carefully tended Canterlot accent abandoning him more and more with every passing sentence. By the end, he sounded as if he had just walked off the train from Vanhoover, eager to seek his fortune in the big city.

“Absolutely not. She labors tirelessly to keep us all safe, not to mention to keep the sun where it ought to be. She hardly ever rests and barely has a moment for herself. This visit by Twilight Sparkle is the first opportunity for her to relax in *months*. I will not, under

any circumstances, drag her over here so she can work more. If we call Her Highness every time going gets tough, *what, then, is my—*” He stopped, breathing hard and corrected himself, “I mean, what, then, is our purpose? Isn’t this sort of thing why your board exists in the first place?”

Ivory’s jaw dropped in astonishment, but she managed to pull herself together quickly enough to reply.

“Uh, yes, yes, the Board exists to resolve situations like this. And, really,” she said, turning to her orange coated colleague, “it isn’t that bad, doctor, this ought to be no more than a class two manifestation. We tackled one like it with no significant difficulties, no more than two weeks ago.”

The orange coated pony who had brought the matter up lifted a placating hoof. “I apologize,” he said, his voice conciliatory, “Mr. Secretary. I just, well, being cautious—”

Dotted interrupted him with a raised hoof of his own.

“It is I who should apologize. There was no call for me to, well, get emotional.”

An awkward silence reigned for a few moments. Finally, Ivory broke it.

“Right. Well. That’s settled, then. We proceed as planned. Mr. Secretary, I trust you’ll keep vigil here. In case we need help?”

Seeing Dotted’s nod, she walked over to the door and started to spellcast. The rest of the board followed her, ready to pounce. After a while, the sight of the corridor behind the door melted away to be replaced by a dorm room, remarkable only in its tidiness. The entire board rushed into the room just moments before the door slammed shut. There was about ten seconds of silence followed by a scream that started high enough to annoy bats and descended, without pause for breath, into a *basso profundo* growl. Then, more silence, followed by a wet sloshing, slurping noise. Some more screams, these of normal ponies. An ululation. The sound of a giant rubber band being snapped. The tinkle of broken glass. Buzzing insects.

Dotted Line was just inching towards the door, unsure what exactly he’d do when he got there, when he heard a cough behind him. He turned and saw two workponies in the

livery of the palace carrying with no apparent effort a large, ornate wardrobe, the sort in which you'd confidently expect to find a portal into a magical land¹⁰.

"Uh, hello there yew secretarial lordship. Where do you want this wardrobe, then?"

"Secretar—" Dotted was just about to start spitting invective, and possibly just spitting, when he had a sudden terrible thought. His eyes narrowed. "Did Leafy Salad tell you to address me like that by any chance?" he asked, his voice like syrup over razorblades.

"Yes, yew secretarial lordship, sir. That he did. Said you was right particular about how yew was being addressed, he did."

"Charming. Put the wardrobe right there. The room is being... uh... cleaned." He tossed a few bits their way. "And do me a favor and have a few pints of cider on my account. Princesses know when I'll next have the occasion to see a bar, let alone hoist a few."

The workponies grinned and scarpered, presumably headed ciderward. Dotted closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose again. Custard covered towers, squabbling nobles, dimensionally dislocated rooms, dark creatures from beyond time and space and now Leafy, who thinks *now* is the right time to push Dotted's buttons. And the way he went off on a rant just now. *What, then, is my purpose?* What, indeed... This was getting to him, he knew it. "Sweet Celestia, give me strength," he muttered.

"Well, I can try, Mr. Secretary, but I make no promises."

He knew that voice. Oh, he knew it well. A voice he dreaded and hoped for in about equal measure. His eyes shot open and his pupils contracted into pinpricks. Right before him was Celestia. The Solar Princess. The Unconquered Sun. She Who Calls Forth The Dawn, and so on, and so forth, into a list of cognomens, titles, and poetic flights of fancy that was even longer than that of The Disemvoweled One. On the most formal of occasions when the entire title would need to be announced, the herald would have to stop for breath three times. A proper, trained Canterlot herald, to make matters worse. A pony who could run through the entire list of titles of the Griffonstan Emperor in one go. A mere civilian would probably asphyxiate.

Faced with his ruler, his deity, and his boss, all at the same time, he found, to his horror, that he had no idea what to say. His brain, already feeling underappreciated and ill-used, shut down. Seeing that there would be no help forthcoming from headquarters, his legs

¹⁰ Well, more magical, anyway.

took the initiative and tipped him into a bow so forceful his snout bounced painfully off the polished marble floor about an inch from the Princess' gold-shod hooves.

"Your Highness!" he spluttered, once he gained at least partial control of his faculties. "I—meaning no disrespect—a figure of speech..."

She laughed, and glory be, he felt better. He wasn't sure if it was magic, or just the princess being the princess, or even if there was any difference between the two, but when she was around he was...*serene*. And there was a word no sane pony would use to describe him. But it was true. He felt serene. Calm. *Forgiven*. Once, when he had drunk far more than it was good for him, he described it to Leafy and Goldie as the feeling of grace. Mercy far greater than he deserved. They had looked at him funny so he let the matter drop. Later, he ascribed it to the drink. But it really was true. The moment he saw her he knew—the princess was here, and nothing can go wrong anymore. As long, of course, as the princess is happy. There's always a catch, isn't there?

"Get up, please. You've shown ample deference, I assure you."

"Of course, Your Highness," he said, getting up with some difficulty to his hooves. "My apologies. How can I help you?"

"No apologies necessary. I've been told this is where you'd be. Is Twilight Sparkle staying here, then?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The library tower was adjudged inappropriate. Safety concerns. State of the floor, you understand."

"Isn't it almost entirely filled with jam?"

Dotted Line was a veteran of talking with the princess. He didn't change his expression. He didn't even blink. He just kept talking, hardly missing a beat.

"Only mostly filled with jam, Your Highness. Most of it on the floor. Hence the safety concerns."

The princess, on the other hoof, was a veteran of talking to anypony at all.

"Of course. Gooseberry jam is well known to be perilous. Well, staying here will certainly be a nice reminder of her foalhood. I must say, it's gratifying to see that you take such a careful, personal interest in so trivial a matter."

“When the hospitality of Your Highness is at stake, no matter is trivial, Your Highness.”

“Really?” said the princess, arching a delicate eyebrow.

“Of course, Your Highness. I have to make sure that everything is”—there was a prolonged buzzing noise from 7a, terminating in precisely the sort of sound windsurfing on the rim of a wineglass would make—“*perfect!*”

“Even by keeping vigil in front of her accommodations? And what, may I ask, is going on in there?”

Dotted Line froze. One did not lie to the princess, no, but it was crucial for her to go and relax. Her favored student and, if Dotted was any judge, dearest friend was coming tomorrow and not a thing could go wrong. Not if Dotted could help it. And if he couldn't, what *use* was... He shook that dangerous line of thought loose and settled for the economic use of the truth.

“A spot of interdimensional pest control, Your Highness.”

“Really? I wasn't aware that there were any, ahem, *pests* in the palace,” she replied with the glint in her eye that meant she was amused.

“Of course not, Your Highness. Which is why the fine ponies from the Board for Unscheduled Reality Excursions are hard at work in there. Keeping it that way. Eternal vigilance”—there was a series of crashes from the room, followed by a skidding noise, another crash, a sort of hollow booming noise, and ultimately a very final sounding crash—“and devotion to duty! Professor Ivory Abacus says that, appearances aside, it's merely a, uh, class two manifestation. Routine. Nothing for Your Highness to fret about.”

“Your pest control team is an example to us all, I'm sure. And I trust the good professor's expert opinion, naturally. However it is another matter I wished to hear your opinion upon.”

“Anything, Your Highness.”

“I've received a most interesting petition from the Council of Lords,” Celestia said, gesturing to a guard in her retinue who promptly handed her a tightly rolled scroll.

“Oh,” Dotted said, or tried to, anyway. His brain went on strike again. He had just managed to arrange his lips into an 'O' of surprise when fine motor control abandoned him once more and he fell mute.

Celestia unrolled the scroll with delicate application of telekinesis and made a show of reading it carefully.

“Let’s see here. Yes. It’s a petition for me to deny allegations that Twilight Sparkle is my”—she peered into the scroll with theatrical care and attention—“immaculately conceived starchild’ and that I intend to declare her ‘Overtyrant of Equestria’, says here. Apparently after this she’s to rule Equestria with an iron hoof. Would you care to comment?”

“I... well... You know how nobles are, Your Highness. Very, uh, protective of their privileges. There is a certain amount of, perhaps, understandable, ah, *tension* around your favored student.”

“Starchild?”

“Well I...”

“I didn’t think Lord Trottingham even knew the word ‘immaculate’.”

“Possibly I...”

“And overtyrant? Really!”

Celestia paused with a frown of almost comical proportions. Seeing Dotted’s slightly panicked face, she quickly replaced it with a gentle smile with just a hint of worry in her eyes.

“I intend to deny the allegations as the petition requests. Of course,” Celestia continued.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Do you think I’m likely to hear anything more about it?”

Dotted Line deflated. It was grossly unfair to be expected to keep up with a divinity.

“No, Your Highness. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Excellent! And that, my little pony, leads us back to the beginning of our conversation.”

“It does, Your Highness?”

“Indeed. You were calling out for strength, if I recall correctly. In heartfelt need, by the sound of it.”

“I, well, figure of speech Your—”

“Nonsense. Let it never be said that I ignore the wants of my most loyal of subjects,” she said. The princess gestured towards another of her guards who passed a cylindrical bundle to her. He had the guard-approved expression of extreme stoicism, but a discerning observer might notice something that could very well be the ghost of a grin hovering around his lips.

The princess unwrapped the bundle, delicately, and handed it to Dotted who grasped it with his own, much dimmer, telekinesis aura. It was a thermos. With religious reverence Dotted screwed open the lid and took a deep breath. It was full of tea. The very finest tea. Suddenly, all was right with the world. Every problem, soluble. Every difficulty, surmountable. There was tea, and tea was the solution to all problems. Or rather, had the amazing ability to replace all problems with a more fundamental one, viz. why wasn't there any more tea?

“And so, Dotted Line, do you find yourself appropriately invigorated?” Celestia asked, smiling.

“Yes, Your Highness. Beyond all measure. Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Think nothing of it. Now I must leave the problem of Twilight Sparkle's visit in capable hooves. Do call if there are difficulties with the, ahem, pest control. As for me, duties of state call. Naturally, I'm trying to clear as much of my calendar for tomorrow as possible.”

With these words Celestia left. Just as she did, the door to 7a sprang open and Professor Ivory Abacus shot out, trailing slime, ichor, and strange wriggly things, which resembled a cross between a nematode worm and a can opener. She smacked into the opposing door, got up, fell over, got up again, cast a personal shielding spell, and ran back in shouting something about resonance. Dotted regarded this calmly for the space of twenty heartbeats. He took a deep draught of tea, closed the thermos with care, and deposited it in his saddlebags, nestled safely between thick files. Then, with a certain amount of flair and absolutely no plan whatsoever, he galloped into the room. Once inside he had just enough time to think, “Oooh, the tentacles are *shaped* like frogs. That makes sense.” Then, darkness and chaos overtook him.

It was now much much later. So late, in fact, that the term ‘early’ was beginning to take precedence. Doctor Golden Dawn dabbed the cotton swab held in her practiced telekinesis into some more tincture of iodine and applied it to her squirming patient.

“Ow,” said Dotted Line, wincing. The attendants who had arrived in the aftermath had managed to separate him from his saddlebags and the thick silver chain that signified his office, but no power in Equestria could get the, now quite battered, thermos out of his hooves. The thermos was his link to a better, saner world. A world with tea in it. A world with sunshine, laughter, and the distant but invigorating prospect of a scone. But no jam. He had, he thought in the vague way of the recently concussed, gone quite off jam. And custard. And when he got home, which should be any week now, his pantry would have to undergo a culling. Just in case.

“Please hold still.”

“It would be easier to—ow—hold still if you weren’t doing—ow—that all the time,” said Dotted resentfully. He was the last patient and the only one who required any particular medical attention. The Board had, at most, a scrape or two, but were otherwise quite unharmed. They had stayed in the impromptu triage center in the corridor just outside room 7a just long enough for various species of ichor to be brushed out of their coats and had long since departed. Apparently, as was customary after a successful dimensional untorquing, they had departed for a meal of stewed broccoli, which was traditional for reasons too obtuse to explain, and as many potently alcoholic drinks as they could stomach, which was traditional for reasons too obvious to explain. Dotted, still a bit fuzzy in the head, made a mental note to send the Board a case of his family’s very finest private reserve. They had deserved it.

“Serves you right, Dotty. What on Celestia’s own Equestria were you doing charging a big monster like that?” replied Golden, giving him a look somewhere between concern and annoyance. They had known each other for a great many years, and this wasn’t the first time she had to piece him together after a brilliant plan turned out to be not quite as brilliant as originally thought.

“Seemed like—ow—the thing to do at the time. You know. For—ow—Equestria! That sort of thing. Civil servants take the same oath as the Royal Guard, you know. To serve the sisters two, and all that.”

“Yes, but you weedy bastards aren’t chosen for martial prowess, now are you?”

“That’s some—ow—bedside manner you have there, Goldie.”

Doctor Golden Dawn gestured, grandly, around the hallway. As grandly as was possible, anyway. The corridor was largely quite unharmed, but there wasn’t much to gesture at even in the best of times. Drab institutional walls. Uninspired and uninspiring *objets d’art*. A wardrobe that had seen better days and, possibly, better centuries as well. As she understood it, the battle never left the dimensionally transcendent dorm room, but at one point a tentacle broke out from behind door 7a and scooped the unfortunate wardrobe up. Once it turned out not to be food, it was ejected back out. With some force.

“Do you see a bed here? No. You do not. So, shush. You are lucky to be alive.”

“We did banish it in the end, you know.”

“No. Professor Abacus banished it.”

“I helped!”

“How, pray tell?”

“Providing tactical distraction at the opportune time, of course.”

“You mean by being chewed on?” said Golden, tutting as she inspected the many scuffs and scrapes across her friend’s head and shoulders. “Well that seems to be it. Report any nausea, craving for blood and/or flesh, dizzy spells, and dreams of vast sunken cities, and try to hold off on fighting any more fell gods for at least forty-eight hours.”

Dotted grinned weakly and gestured towards a grotesque protuberance on his left temple. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What? Oh. The brain-worm of The Disemvoweled One? Well it’s dead, the ether took care of that, so it’ll do you no harm. Not that there was that much brain for it to feast on, of course. Wait a few hours, and it will separate on its own. Should be painless.”

“And I’m supposed to carry the damned thing on my head? Why can’t you remove it?”

“I *can* remove it, Dotty, but not without taking along with it a portion of your skull.”

“I’m quite attached to my skull. Sentimental reasons, you understand.”

“I assumed as much.”

“So I get to keep this thing on my head until *tomorrow*? I look ridiculous!”

“For you that’s a high bar to cross, but yes, a bit more than usual. I guess we could convince the good professor to part with a specimen. Attach it to your other temple. You know. Symmetry,” said Golden, grinning wolfishly. Dotted, in turn, replied with a glare that said that, school chum or not, Golden was perilously close to the edge. She merely grinned wider still. Much like Leafy, it had been decades since Dotted’s death glares had any appreciable effect on her. Well, not entirely true. They did make her nostalgic. Before the situation could escalate, possibly into an exchange of embarrassing college anecdotes, they were interrupted by Leafy Salad who ran into the hallway as if the assembled hordes of Tartarus were after him.

“Dotty, we got—what’s that on your head?” he said.

“My pet brain worm. I shall call him Jeff,” Dotted replied.

“It’s female, actually. The males are microscopic. The term, I think, is extreme sexual dimorphism,” said Golden, primly.

“Jeffina, then,” said Dotted, shooting her a look. “So. Leafy? What have we got? Please don’t tell me it’s a problem. I don’t think I can handle any more.”

“No, no we got—what *happened* here? What happened to the wardrobe?” he asked gesturing at the stricken thing, now more kindling than furniture.

“It got damaged in transit,” replied Dotted, his expression deadpan.

“Transit?”

“Yes. Transit from right there where it was standing, to that far wall there. Short trip, lots of damage. You know how it is, you order a parcel from across Equestria and it’s always in the last leg of the delivery that some bright mailpony decides to feed it through a woodchipper. Similar thing here, only tentacles were involved. Well, one tentacle, but it was quite a big one.”

Leafy looked worried. He turned to Golden, who was suppressing with considerable difficulty a grin, and asked: “Is, uh, is he okay?”

“Physically? He’s fine, modulo the odd scrape or bruise,” Golden replied, grin having finally won. “Mentally? He was like this when I met him, I’m afraid.”

Dotted glanced from one of his oldest friends to another and briefly considered murder. He had a way with words. The eulogies at their respective funerals would be quite moving, he'd make sure of it. Finally, reluctantly, he gave up on the idea. He quite liked Leafy's wife and, now that he thought about that, Golden's marefriend too. They didn't deserve it. Instead he settled on:

"He's right here, you know, and he'd quite like for you two to stop your little routine. Leafy, will you please tell me what it is we got? An award? Free donuts at Pony Joe's? Court summons? A complementary set of Wonderbolts memorabilia? The advanced reader's copy of *Daring Do and the Stygium Scepter*? Oh, please let it be that last one."

"A letter. Well, transcript of a letter from Twilight Sparkle to Her Highness. Just arrived by dragonfire."

"A stirring tale of friendship problems conquered, no doubt?"

"A, uh, change of plans," Leafy replied, with the air of someone building a house of cards. On quicksand. During an earthquake.

Dotted covered his eyes with a hoof. He took a breath, cradled his battered, scratched, and dented thermos and said, "Okay. Hit me."

"She's going to be staying with her parents during her visit."

Leafy Salad was impressed. Dotted managed to curse without drawing breath or repeating himself for four whole minutes before he had to resort to making up brand new and especially foul oaths and curses. After a while, the stream of invective petered out and Dotted merely sat in fuming silence. Eventually, he seemed to plateau at some new baseline of anger, where he appeared normal, even quite calm, with only the errant twitch or tic betraying how close he was to taking hostages.

"Okay," he said. "Is their house covered with chocolate fondue?"

"No."

"Any other sort of comestible?"

"No."

"It is in Equestria?"

“Uh, yes.”

“Not inhabited by any sort of malign spirit?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Brilliant! At last, something goes according to plan. Broadly speaking, obviously. Very broadly. How’s the security situation?”

For the first time today, Leafy actually look relieved.

“Excellent. They are expecting Her Highness, Princess Cadance, to visit in roughly the same period, so all the usual precautions are already in place. Night Light and Twilight Twinkle have been briefed, and they know how to act, not to open parcels, how to deal with the press, and that sort of thing.”

“A royal visit too? That’s tricky. Why is she there?”

Leafy looked perplexed for a moment, then looked at Golden and tried to gesture surreptitiously at his head. She shrugged.

“Because,” Leafy began in a puzzled voice, “she’s their daughter-in-law? Remember? The wedding? You got drunk and then we all shared a cocoon until it got blown up by weaponized love? Are you sure that brainworm didn’t, uh, get to the creamy center, as it were?”

“Pretty sure,” Dotted replied. “Sorry. It’s been a long day. I do know she’s their daughter-in-law, I was just wondering why she’s there now of all times. Doesn’t matter, I guess. Right. Well it all seems sorted. I think I’ll head to the landing platform. See it all through. Make sure Twilight gets here safely. After that it’s all in the hooves of the Princess. Metaphorically speaking. After all, what can possibly go wrong now?”

Leafy winced. He was not, by and large, a superstitious pony, but it was impossible to live as long as he had without developing a firm belief that the universe listened for sentences like this. After all, just as you think you see a light at the end of the tunnel...

“Dotted! Thank Celestia I found you!”

... it turns out to be an oncoming train. And the train is on fire.

Spinning Top rushed into the room. If she looked bedraggled this morning, now she had reached the level of being utterly wrecked. Utterly wrecked, by the standards Spinning used, meant that a minute examination of her mane, possibly by using a magnifying glass, would reveal the need for it to be brushed.

“Dotted!” she said again. “You simply must—what’s that on your head?”

“Jeffina.”

Spinning looked desperately at Golden and Leafy Salad who, in turn, made a placating gesture with his hooves. The sort that, between the ponies that knew Dotted well, means something along the lines of, “He’s no more crazy than usual. Just go with it.”

“Right,” she said, looking back, uncertainty clinging to her words. “You simply must talk to the reporter from *Equestria Daily*. There’s all sorts of wild rumors going around about how Ms. Sparkle is some sort of starchild: half-alicorn, half-draconequus, and half-dragon. I’m delaying everything with the promise of a press conference that will reveal all, but I thought to give *Equestria Daily* an exclusive first. With luck, that’ll get the less scrupulous reporters to try to get the contents of the interview by subterfuge. It’s going to be a mess. That should buy us enough time to run damage control. But before we do that, you have to squash all the crazy rumors before they get really out of hoof.”

Dotted Line smiled the brittle, cheerful smile of somepony who’s not merely on the edge, but is actually dancing and capering on it.

“Oh no. We can’t have that. Fine, where is this reporter?”

“Just down the hall, uh, the thing on your head?”

“Jeffina, yes.”

“Right. Jeffina. Can you leave it here, please?”

“No chance. Sentimental reasons, as Golden Dawn here can tell you. Where I go, she goes!”

With these words, Dotted sauntered down the hallway, rounded a corner and came face to face with a green-coated and orange-maned earth pony mare. She had been named Hot Scoop by affectionate, if unwise, parents. The moment she clapped eyes on him she launched into a breathless sentence that had clearly been prepared in advance:

“Hot Scoop for *Equestria Daily*, Mr. Secretary. Do you have any comment for our evening special edition regarding the shocking allegations that—What in the wide wide world of Equestria is that thing on your head?”

Dotted beamed at her, his smile guileless, and his eyes soaked with innocence. The look, in short, of a liar, born and bred.

“Well—may I call you Hot? Yes? Thank you—it’s a decorative brain leech, my dear Hot. Avant-garde body-modification fashion. All the rage. I am surprised that a pony of your caliber—no, no I don’t say that to all reporters—hasn’t heard of it. Why, I personally heard tell that no less an authority than Photo Finish declared decorative brain leeches to be THE trend for this season. And you haven’t heard this from me, you understand, but Lady Cloudsdale...” And so it went, the original question all but forgotten. After all, you can write about Twilight Sparkle being Discord sent back in time to stop himself any day of the week. Fashion trends, on the other hand, are precious perishable goods. While most ponies decried the frivolity of the modern press, Dotted *relished* it.

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It was now much, much, much later. Late enough that Celestia had raised her sun. Dotted peered at the glowing orb hidden between a few errant wisps of cloud. His slitted eyes were dull and, frankly, so was his mind. It had been a very long day. The words of the Prayer To Greet The Sun came to his mind, unbidden. It’s amazing how the things from your foalhood stay with you, whether you want them to or not. He shook the words aside. She didn’t want to be worshiped, he knew. Even if she deserved it.

He settled back onto the marble bench, hugged the dented, scarred, slightly slimy and tragically empty thermos to himself, like a foal might a stuffed animal, and leafed through his papers. A report from the foreign office explaining that, with aid from the PM, they’d managed to convince the rest of the world that, no, Twilight Sparkle isn’t going to be coming for them in a cloud of numinous flame. A report from Leafy that all the security precautions were in order. A copy of *Canterlot News Nightly* with, and here Dotted allowed himself a smile of triumph, the headline “FASHION SENSATION SWEEPING THE NATION.” The report on Twilight, Lovechild of Discord, was pushed back onto page seven. Three column inches, sandwiched between an ad for liniment and last week’s crossword solution. The smile became a grin.

Dotted put the papers back, and glanced around. He was on a marble bench that some thoughtful architect had left near the doorway into the palace proper, just on his right. On his left was a delicately arched bridge that connected the palace to the landing

platform. The platform itself was a disk of stone held aloft by a cantilever of delicately sculpted marble and, Dotted knew, a few dozen carefully threaded spells. The center of the disk was kept bare for the sky chariot that would bring Twilight Sparkle, but the rim was occupied by an astonishing number of Royal Guards, each scanning the sky with practiced eyes. Far above, Dotted knew because he arranged for it, a wing of the best fliers in the Guard was patrolling. And somewhere, hidden from view, was a number of unicorn mages particularly skilled in the more sneaky forms of magic keeping an eye out for surprises. And, of course, the Princess would be here at any moment. Both of them, in fact. Luna was staying up late. Dotted yawned. So was he. Very very late.

He sighed. A very long day, but everything was finally going to go well. As long as he didn't think of what was ahead. Another day of struggling with the damned treasury. Fresh idiocy from Sky Slicer. Celestia knows what else. He pushed those thoughts aside. He'll think about that later. For now, he'd just bask in success. Of a sort. He pulled the thermos closer and waited. He'd see it through.

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Twilight stepped off the chariot, pleased that she'd get to see her beloved mentor. The weather was wonderful, if a bit cold this early and this high up, and she had plenty of time. Perhaps even enough time to take a stroll along the streets of Canterlot itself and buy... what was it, again, a decorative leech? Rarity had burst into the library just moments before the chariot arrived, clutching an early edition of *Equestria Daily*, and talking *incredibly* fast about keeping up with some trend or other. Unfortunately, this was after the all-important First Coffee, which Twilight needed to be in any way equine, but before the almost-as-important Second Coffee, which Twilight needed to be in full use of her faculties. As a result her friend's words were a bit blurred. If it weren't for the bag of bits Rarity had pressed into her unresisting hoof, Twilight would half suspect she dreamed it all up. Seaweed wraps she understood, and even mud baths to an extent, but decorative leeches? Fashion is a funny thing.

She took a moment to thank the pegasi pulling the chariot and wave at the guards that awaited her. There really did seem to be an awful lot of them. She trotted over the bridge towards the palace, the guards just ahead and just behind her, scanning the sky. Raising her eyes slightly to admire the early morning sky, she noticed a flight of pegasi just overhead, flying in lazy circles. Funny. It seemed early for flight practice. She put those thoughts aside. Maybe she was just used to Rainbow Dash and her deep and abiding love of naps.

Not far from the door she saw a pony supine on a marble bench. It was a short but heavily built gray-coated unicorn stallion with a frazzled black mane and a complex expression that managed to find room for frustration, misery, relief, and dejection all at once. One hoof cradled a battered, scratched, scarred, slimy, and altogether abused thermos, as one would a foal, and another held the pony's head, as if its owner was half-expecting it to burst.

Twilight felt sorry for the poor fellow. Normally, she wouldn't stop for anything or anypony when on her way to see Celestia, but there was something about the intensity of expression that arrested your attention. Besides, this gave her an excellent opportunity to work on her cheering up technique. Friends cheer up their friends when they are down. She didn't need a Friendship Report to figure out something that simple. Thus, it followed that to be a good friend, Twilight would have to learn how to cheer somepony up.

In Ponyville, however, practice was exceptionally difficult. Pinkie never let anyone be in a bad mood long enough for Twilight to make even the most basic of checklists, let alone set up a proper experimental protocol. Pinkie herself was rarely in a bad mood and Twilight felt, quite strongly, that cheering her up was for, ah, advanced students. Very advanced and exceptionally brave. Practicing basic cheering up on her would be like trying to learn mountaineering on Mt. Canterlot itself, viz. not advisable in the slightest. Not that this fact stopped the Cutie Mark Crusaders, of course. Oh no. Luckily the tree sap held them fast to the cliff face long enough for Rainbow to come and rescue them.

Well, here was a pony who embodied the very ideal Form, as Broadwithers would put it, of a bad mood. The perfect subject! Even better, Pinkie was safely distant in Ponyville. She was still hard at work trying to make courgette muffins taste anything but awful. And best of all, Twilight had a perfect cheering up line. From a book, even! Admittedly it was one Rarity was much taken with, but that's not important right now. Seize the moment!

She approached the pony, and tapped him awkwardly on his back. "Uhm, there, there," she essayed on general principle. That that was what ponies said when they wanted to cheer someone up, wasn't it? "Chin up." That was another one that mystified her, but it seemed to be the sort of thing you said under the circumstances. Now, she judged, it was time for her to let loose with the really cheery line. She could hardly wait. "Tomorrow is another day, right?" She paused, quite interested to see how the Cheering Up effect would manifest itself.

The pony was quiet for a moment, and then lifted his head, gingerly, to regard her with eyes that were twin pools of misery and dread. “Oh, sweet merciful Celestia,” he wailed, “not another one!”