

## ACT II

“Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.” Juror #5 stopped, and read the next ballot very slowly. “Not guilty. And guilty.”

“Boy, how do you like *that*,” said Juror #3, standing up and slamming a hoof on the table.

“And now the chicken flaps her wings,” said Juror #2 in disgust, her own wings bristling.

“All right, *who* was it?” said Juror #3. “I think we have a right to know.”

“Excuse me,” interjected the Forepony. “This was a secret ballot. We agreed on this earlier. If the voter wants to remain secret—”

“What do you mean?!” shouted Juror #2, genuinely upset now. “There are no secrets in here! And I know who it was.” She shoved her hoof into the Forepony’s shoulder.

“What’s the matter with you?” she continued, condescendingly. “You come in here and you vote guilty with the rest of us and then this slick preacher pulls a stunt to try and tear your heart out with stories about the poor zebra, all alone in Ponyville, so misunderstood. So you change your vote, completely ignoring the facts. If that isn’t the most *sickening*—”

“N-now hold it—” stuttered the Forepony.

“Hold it!? We’re trying to banish a guilty zebra from Equestria—anypony, and I mean *anypony* who does what she did doesn’t belong here. And all of a sudden you’re paying attention to fairy tales?”

“Please, I just want to say something. I have always believed that a pony is entitled to have unpopular opinions. We all have the *right* to disagree.”

“Fine, then you disagree. Why did you change your vote?” Rather than answer, Juror #5 simply glared.

“She ain’t got nothin’ to tell ya,” said Juror #4 from underneath her hat. “She didn’t change her vote. I did.”

Juror #2 *flumped* into her chair, slack-jawed. “*What?*” she managed, voice cracking.

“Perhaps you’d like ta know why.”

“Not really,” said Juror #3 huffily.

“Let her talk,” said the Forepony, visibly trying to calm herself from being shaken so badly.

“Thank ya kindly.” She pointed at the mute pegasus still facing the wall.

“This pony chose ta stand against us. That’s her right. It takes a good deal o’ courage ta stand alone; even if ya believe somethin’ very strongly.

“And despite that, she left the verdict up to us. She bet tha farm, hopin’ for support. And I gave it to her. I want ta hear more. Ah still think the zebra’s prolly guilty. I’m almost plum sure of it, s’matter of fact. But it ain’t right to have somepony banished when the vote isn’t unanimous. That ain’t how things’re done. It ain’t how things’re done in a family, and it ain’t how things’re done in the legal system, either. The vote is four to two.”

Juror #2 leaned towards the Forepony. Under her breath, and with a sheepish grin, she said: “Look, I was a little... excited. You know how it is. I... I didn’t mean to get nasty. Nothing personal.” Rather than reply, Juror #5 started writing on a piece of a paper, openly ignoring the apology. She was clearly breathing through her nostrils, not trusting herself enough to open her mouth. It turned out she was writing “Vote #2” on a second envelope, which she slid the five ballots into before sealing.

“Fine,” said Juror #3. “You want to talk? Let’s talk. If the zebra didn’t curse her, then who did?”

“Technically,” said Juror #1, “that’s not a question we should be asking. We’re not concerned with *who* did it, but rather whether the zebra is *the one* who did it.”

“Well *who else* could have done it?” asked Juror #2. “I don’t mean to be rude, but if we can agree that *no pony else* could have done it, then it *logically* must have been her.”

“Could...,” started Juror #5. Her eyes widened and she thought to herself before speaking. “Could... what if the victim cursed herself?”

“Of all the—”

“What are you—”

“*Ridiculous!*”

“Hay now, let’s not get—”

“Can you do that?”

“—*stupid* ideas, that—”

“—going on about? How—”

“*Utterly* preposterous!”

“—our overalls in a twist.”

“**GIRLS!**”

“—and I said ‘*Oatmeal*, are you crazy?’”

“Girls,” repeated the Forepony, slightly quieter but clearly excited. “Please, just listen. I know it might sound a bit crazy. But. The victim was a unicorn. And we know she was angry – especially with the zebra.”

Juror #1 looked like she was about to say something, but the Forepony raised a hoof. “And we all know ponies don’t exactly think rationally when they’re angry.” Juror #1 snapped her mouth shut after having her own words used against her.

“Now,” she continued. “I’ve lived in Canterlot most of my life. I went to magic kindergarten there. I didn’t really think about it before; I guess that’s something I’d rather forget. But I *do* know that spells don’t always work the way you want them to. Especially when you’re angry. Or, uh, startled by something.”

“And what do *you* know about it?” said Juror #2. “You said it yourself; maybe unicorns in *kindergarten* have problems. Hay, us pegasi have trouble flying when we start out at flying school, too. But it’s not like you’re going to forget how to do it once you’ve learned it.”

“I didn’t say unicorns *only* have problems when we’re in kindergarten,” the Forepony retorted. “I speak from experience.” She pointed to her left flank. “My cutie mark actually symbolizes magic. My *special talent* is quite literally magic. And yet... sometimes, even *my* spells don’t work the way they’re supposed to.”

“And sometimes,” added Juror #6, “I can’t get myself to fly. When I’m scared.”

“Ugh,” said Juror #2. She started massaging her temple. “This is stupid. We’re not *getting* anywhere. So what if the two of *you* have problems? That doesn’t mean the *victim* has ever had any problems.”

“Don’t mean she didn’t,” said Juror #4, reasonably. “No pony asked. Maybe somebody

should've."

"Well nopony *did*. And besides, what does it matter? Why would she curse herself?"

"She might not have done it on *purpose*," said the Forepony. "Accidents happen, don't they?"

"Why wouldn't she just *say* it was an accident, then? You're just spinning theories. The zebra's counsel didn't even make these sorts of arguments. What are you, her lawyer?" She squinted, suspicious. "Whose side are you on?"

"I don't believe I have to be a lawyer for one side or the other," said Juror #5. "I'm just asking questions." There was a short span where nopony talked.

"I dunno," said Juror #4, again first to break the silence. "She *mighta* cursed herself on purpose."

"And *why* would she do that? Why would she lie? What has she got to gain?" asked Juror #3.

"Might be she just wanted a little attention," said Juror #6.

"*Attention?* Seriously, *attention?!?*" Juror #2 flew up to the ceiling, commanding the room's attention. "That's it. You keep coming up with these bright little sayings. Why don't you send one in to the Equestria Daily? Maybe they'll publish it for you."

The cowpony suddenly jumped to her feet, and in a flash there was a lasso around Juror #2's neck. She yanked, and the pegasus was sprawled on the table. There were several shouts, but one voice was clearly distinct over the others.

"You take that back," Juror #4 growled. "You take that back right now. You oughta have more respect. You say stuff like that to her again," she threatened, "and Ah'm gonna lay you out." With a quick flick of the hoof, the lasso was back in her possession. She started twirling the rope back into a circle, and she hung it on her flank before sitting down again. Her eyes were locked in a silent challenge.

Juror #2 glared from her fallen position. She scooted herself off the table as nonchalantly as possible, attempting to preserve an air of grace. Brushing invisible dust from her shoulder, she settled herself in her chair, but said not a word. Her wings were slightly erect from barely

contained anger.

“Now go on, sugarcube,” said Juror #4, eyes still settled on Juror #2. “You were sayin’?”

Juror #6 just cringed in her chair. “Nothing,” she managed.

The cowpony sighed. “Look, I didn’t mean ta scare ya. But Ah reckon you have a point. Ponies do things fer attention all the time, even when they don’t realize it when they’re doin’ it.”

“What do you mean, darling?” asked Juror #1. “I *always* know when *I* want attention.”

Juror #4 sighed again, this time more deeply. “Let me put it this way. No. Actually, let me tell ya a story. When I was younger... well hay, I still do. Let me start over.” She took a moment to collect her thoughts.

“I grew up on an apple farm. I’ve been a farmer all my life, s’matter of fact. It ain’t easy work, and the hours’re long. It’s farmers like me that keeps food on tables.

“S’far as I can tell, ponies don’t really give much thought to where their supper comes from. They don’t rightly unnerstand the work that goes into turning a tiny seed into a meal. An’ most proolly never will.

“I know what it’s like to be plum ignored. Most every day during sellin’ season, y’all can find me hawkin’ mah apples in my old cart near Sugarcube Corner. Of course I get customers, and they’ll talk it up with me ‘casionally; that ain’t mah point. But it’s a rare day when somepony talks to me... just to talk to *me*. To most everypony, I’m just a vendor on tha street, plyin’ mah trade. And in a way, that’s entirely right. But in another way, that’s entirely wrong.

“Now. I know I’ll never be a famous pony. There’ll never be a statue made of me. There’ll never be a book written about me. Ah’ll rarely, if ever, be quoted. The only recognition I get is in tha family. Even then, it’s just for doin’ what’s already expected of me. And most o’ tha time, that’s just fine.

“But. A few years ago, Ah think I let it get to me. My big brother was too hurt to work, my little sis’ was too small to work, my Granny was too old to work, and we were deep into Applebuck Season. So I told myself I was gonna buck every last apple offa every last tree at Sweet Apple Acres.”

“Dear, I’m not sure I see where this is going,” said Juror #1, gently.

“I’m gettin’ there,” said Juror #4. “The problem with that plan... was that on some level, I think I knew I couldn’t do it. I just didn’t want ta admit it to myself. So I worked late into the night. I started losin’ sleep. I wasn’t eatin’ right. I basically made myself miserable fer no good reason. At the time I just attributed it ta stubborn pride.

“Of course, ponies noticed. It’s easy to ignore somepony if they’re always tha same. It’s easy to ignore somepony if they never seem ta stand out. But it ain’t so easy to ignore when the perky salespony you see most every day at the market is suddenly exhausted, fallin’ asleep in the middle of conversations, runnin’ into signs and trippin’ over rocks...”

“And it later occurred to me that maybe – *maybe* – I had sorta wanted to be noticed all along. Maybe somepony would offer to help? Maybe somepony would show concern? Maybe somepony would appreciate the work I do? Somethin’. *Anythin’*. I just had to go to... a bit of an extreme.”

She coughed, and pulled her hat back over her eyes, blushing silently.

“So...,” said Juror #3. “You’re trying to get us to believe the victim is lying about the curse just for attention?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know,” replied Juror #4. “Ah’m just sayin’ it’s *possible*. That unicorn never mentioned havin’ a single friend. In fact, pretty much the only thing she *did* talk about was how many contracts she always has. Seems t’me like she’s probably always so focused on her business that she hardly has time to make friends. And that can be a real sad thing. Imagine the attention she’s gotten since this whole thing’s happened. Ya see?”

Juror #1 bit her lip, thinking to herself. “There might be some truth in that.”

“I can’t believe this,” moaned Juror #2. “Ponies don’t curse themselves for attention. Why, I’ve got a fan who follows me wherever I go. I mostly just ignore her; she can be pretty annoying. She’s done a lot of stupid things to get me to pay attention to her, sure. But something like this? No. I’m not buying it.”

“I don’t see how any of this makes a difference,” said Juror #3, snappily. “I thought we said earlier that there isn’t a unicorn spell in existence that can explain what happened to her. So it’s *impossible* that she cursed herself, even if she wanted to. Nope-a-dope.”

“That’s right,” said Juror #2, turning to the pink earth pony. “You’re absolutely right.”

“*Thaaaaat* might not necessarily be true,” said the Forepony.

“*What?*” Juror #1 did not look amused. “You *were* listening to the evidence, weren’t you, dear? They must have gone over it a hundred times. *Three* expert witnesses. All of them saying the same thing. And nothing to the contrary.”

Juror #5’s eyes shifted to the giant stack of notes beside her. “Yes. But I don’t quite buy that evidence. I have some, uh, extra special training. Observe. Watch that water cooler over there in the corner.”

A red magical aura surrounded Juror #5’s horn. She closed her eyes. “Now,” she said, “I’ll need to concentrate for a few seconds, but you” -- she gestured to Juror #2 -- “punch me exactly when I say.”

“*What?*”

“Just do it; you’ll see.”

The water cooler started expanding, and shrinking back. The water inside started bubbling. It seemed to grow a few black tendrils. Juror #5 was visibly straining under the effort, her eyes now shut tightly.

Juror #3 inexplicably vibrated in her seat. Something *weird* was about to happen.

“I’m not sure this is legal...” started Juror #1, but she was interrupted with a loud:

“***Now!***”

Juror #2 socked the purple unicorn in the gut, and the water cooler simultaneously transformed with a *\*pop\**.

“Oh, it’s *hideous!*” shrieked Juror #1. The cowpony gave a low whistle. Juror #6 fell off her chair and backed away, frantically headed towards the nearest window.

A red balloon escaped from somewhere under one of Juror #3’s arms, and zipped about the room releasing air with a whining *Bzz-zzzzzzzzzt*. And then it died on the table.

“Ow,” said Juror #5, clutching her stomach feebly. “You didn’t have to punch *that* hard.”

“Hehe. Sorry. I didn’t know how hard you wanted it.” Then she looked over at the... thing... in the corner. “Yeesh.”

Gently sitting down, Juror #5 said, “I think I’ve made my point.”

Juror #6 timidly raised a hoof into the air.

“Psssh,” said Juror #3. “It doesn’t look anything *like* what happened to that poor unicorn. And I suspect what you did just now can be undone.”

“Probably,” said Juror #5. “But what I did was combine three different spells all at once. Anypony who doesn’t know what I was trying to do would have a tough time reversing it. Right now, I’m probably the only pony who could change it back, except maybe for Princess Celestia or Princess Luna. And even then, I might not be able to, because I made sure I was interrupted... so even *I’m* not exactly sure what happened.”

“Big deal,” Juror #2 scoffed. “You just said that you had to combine three spells *and* get punched in the stomach just for *that*” (gesturing to the monstrosity) “to happen. And like you said earlier, your *special talent* is magic. The victim in this case is just your average unicorn. She probably can’t do twenty percent of the stuff you can do, even when she screws up.”

“That’s as may be, but—”

“I most certainly could *never* make anything that dreadful,” added Juror #1.

“Also, you *just* said that it can probably be reversed,” said Juror #3. “But that unicorn? Even Princess Celestia couldn’t change her back. She’s probably cursed forever unless some zebra un-curses her.” She pondered the idea. “Not that any of them *would*.”

Juror #6 raised her hoof slightly higher.

“I said it can *probably* be reversed; I don’t actually know.”

“You *do* realize that if it can’t be changed back, that you just broke the law,” opined Juror #1.

“I am well aware,” responded Juror #5. “It’s no matter. Water coolers are inanimate objects, and if necessary, I will pay for its replacement. We have bigger issues to deal with

here.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to prove,” said Juror #2. “So you ruined a water cooler. Good going. Now suppose you tell me why in Equestria anypony would even risk doing something like that to herself. *You* didn’t even do it on yourself; you used a *water cooler*. And not only were you focusing on a water cooler, but you had to be *interrupted* just for it to work. Are you seriously suggesting that some *random* unicorn somehow had the ability to cast *three spells at once*, she needed to cast them *all at herself*, and that on top of it all, she was *interrupted* at just the right moment? Oh, and that the zebra in the room just *happened* to be talking about curses at the same time?

“Think about it! If these wild theories are enough to find that zebra not guilty, then apparently nopony is ever guilty of *anything*. Because you can *always* spin some crazy yarn that nopony’s thought of. Just because you can think it, it doesn’t make it reasonable. The judge told us from the very start that we’re supposed to separate the facts from the fancy. Well, as far as I’m concerned, you’ve gone well *beyond* the facts and well *into* fanciful tales.

“And anyways, how do *you* know what happened?” she said with an air of triumph. “*You* weren’t there!”

“That’s right,” said Juror #5. “I wasn’t there. And neither were you.”

Juror #6 put her hoof down and finally spoke. “I’d like to call for another vote,” she said.

“What good is *that* going to do? You can’t seriously...”

“A vote has been called for,” said the Forepony. “And I don’t think we need to keep these votes secret any more. All for not guilty, raise your right hoof.”

Juror #6 and Juror #4 did as they were told. The rest of the room didn’t move. “One, two,” counted the Forepony. And then she raised her own hoof. “Three. The vote is three to three.”

“I *can’t* believe this,” said Juror #2. “*You*.” She pointed at Juror #6. “You come in here with your heart bleeding all over the floor about this poor zebra, and you keep making these excuses and wild stories. And somehow you’ve got some softhearted old mares listening to you. Well, *I’m* not. I’m getting real sick of this.”

She looked around. “What’s the matter with you ponies? This zebra is guilty! She’s got

to be banished! We're letting her slip through our hooves here!"

"Slip through our hooves?" said Juror #6. She stood up, some flare in her eye. "Are you her banisher?"

*"I'm one of them!"*

"Perhaps you'd like to banish her yourself?"

"This zebra? You bet I would!" She stood proudly with her chest out, cyan wings preening.

"Then I'm sorry for you."

*"Oh. No. Don't you start that with me."*

"What it must feel like to... *want* to banish her."

Juror #2 curled her lip. "... shut up."

"That's *terrible* of you."

"I said, *shut up*."

"You're a sadist."

**"SHUT. UP."**

"You want to see her banished because you personally want it. Not because of the facts."

**"SHUT! UP!"** And just like that, she was flying across the table, her hooves outstretched towards Juror #6. Just as quickly, there was a lasso around her waist. Juror #3 and Juror #1 each stood up, and started holding back the struggling pegasus, pushing her down onto the table. From the looks of it, the Forepony was also ready with a spell, her horn faintly glowing.

**"LET ME GO! LEAVE ME ALONE!"** Juror #2 snorted, smoke coming out of her nose. **"Curse you,"** she spat, now pinned. **"Who do you think you are? I'm a Wonderbolt. Or didn't you know?"** She flashed a badge from her wallet. "You can't talk to *me* like that."

“You... you don’t really mean you’ll curse me... do you?”