

"A Gallant Wish_Script + Narration"

Written by inkshowdude

Raven's voice:
Corporal Gallant!

With a yell, the navy-colored unicorn soldier shot awake at the horrified bellowing of his own name. He took a moment to collect himself and breathe. coming back to the present point in time, safe in the barracks. That same nightmare yet again... He then noticed the other castle guards staring at him, as they wondered if he was okay.

Gallant:
Saw a mouse.

Light chuckles from his brothers and sisters in arms filled the room as Corporal Gallant's fellow royal guards took his joke as affirmation that he was fine.

Gallant:
Sorry everypony, "at ease". go back to-

Through the small windows lining the top of the sleeping quarters, a beam of sunlight shone into Gallant's eyes as he shifted his weight forward. Covering his eyes with his hoof, he realized the time.

Gallant:
Work. Lucky.

The other guards around the barracks geared up to stand at their posts for the day.

Gallant:
Right. On our hooves.

The whole room emptied as the Royal Guard, clad in their golden armor marched out to fulfill their duty. Never one to take a sick day, Gallant followed their lead. Every step along the way to his destination, he tried to unpack the mysterious terror that had by now plagued his sleep for days. Such an alien threat unlike anything he'd heard of in all his life. A repeating tragedy that felt so real, voices and faces that, although fuzzy, he could swear he had encountered before.

As he trekked past a doorway, still deep in thought, he saw her. Raven Inkwell, busy putting quill to paper for various documents. She was the mare who kept calling his name, he was sure of it. Calling his name with that horrified scream. But why? Every night the question asked, but never yet a question answered.

Whatever the case of this strange occurrence, he was a soldier with a job to do. So letting go of this maniacal mind mystery, Gallant stepped into place and stood tall and vigilant just outside the castle gates... Or at least that was the intention. In reality he was a groggy mess, barely able to keep peeled his heavy eyelids and unknowingly swaying from side to side like a stalk of wheat in a gentle breeze. Unable to keep his mind in one place, he thought to himself.

Gallant:

(Thinking) This is pathetic. I'm supposed to be alert, on guard. But right now I can hardly see half a hoof ahead of my face. What if a civilian were to walk by? Sees that the royal guard isn't on their A-game right now?

He raised his gaze up to Princess Luna's tower, adding another potential problem his current state was posing.

Gallant:

(Thinking) Or one of the princesses spot the weary soldier about to face-plant out of the job he's clearly too tired to keep?

Dropping his eyes to the streets once more, he continued.

Gallant:

(Thinking) Or worse yet. That Chrysalis character stomps back through here and makes a part two to her big bug attack on Canterlot Castle?

Gallant took a deep breath and did his best to match his fellow guards to his left and right. His body stood stoically, but his eyes drooped pitifully as if to purposefully sell out the devoted soldier as the weakest link of his chain.

Gallant:

(Thinking) I can't look so useless, I've gotta be ready. If I just close my eyes for a second... yeah, just one second. One.. tiny... little.

The sleepy sentry let his eyelids fall. Just for a moment. Just a moment is all he needed, just a moment of rest and he could do the task he'd been trusted to do... Right? This is efficient. This allows the job to be done better. Just a moment. "I just need a moment... How long has it been? I just need rest. What's happening now that I can't see? I'm only taking a second. They need me still, the job's not done. Wake up. What difference does a moment make, wake up. You can't quit yet, you're still standing. Wake up! You can't stop fighting, you're still breathing! Wake

up! Keep moving! This isn't about you anymore! It *can't* be about you anymore! Keep fighting! You're dead already but they don't have to follow your lead! Keep fighting! Wake up!"

Raven's voice:
Corporal Gallant!

That same distressed call.

Gallant:
...*What?*

Barely a second went by before this new silence was demolished by a sudden explosion. A horrible fireball and the dreadful air of lives lost. A void in nature left by numerous innocents torn from their mortal coil, not given even the time to scream before meeting oblivion.

Gallant:
gasp

Shaken to his core yet again, Gallant was jolted awake, only to be met with two blue eyes staring sternly into his. It didn't take the gold-plated guard long to realize exactly who owned those peering peepers; Captain Shining Armor, his higher up. Darn near his highest up. And the one pony that would have probably been the *most* upset at a royal guard sleeping at their post.

Gallant:
...You weren't on my disaster list.

Shining:
Stand at attention, soldier.

Gallant once again did his best to stand up straight but being the astute captain that he was, Shining Armor could easily see the many obvious issues with his subordinate, starting with his crooked stance.

Shining:
What's happening here? Last I checked, the bricks on this pathway weren't set at a forty degree angle.

Gallant:
Sir?

Shining Reached a hoof onto Gallant's shoulder and straightened him back up to standing.

Gallant:

Bwuh. Has the horizon always been a corkscrew, Captain?

Shining:

What's with you, Corporal? Even the new recruits out of training don't look *this* sleep deprived.

Gallant:

It's nothing, sir, just a few bad nights. I'm good and ready to pull my weight. And by tomorrow I'll have slept off this...

He gave pause. Not wanting to reveal too much to his superior, or re-live the nightmare for another second, he chose instead to be vague.

Gallant:

...Whole situation... So what's going on with me is nothing you should concern yourself with, Captain.

Shining:

I think it very much *is* my concern. As head of the Royal Guard, I have to make sure that every one of my soldiers can do what's needed of them at all times. Therefore, the mental state of each of you is always at the forefront of my mind. My duty is to protect Equestria in any and all ways that I can, and that has to include protecting all of you. So, what's with you?

Gallant:

...A nightmare, that's what. Nothing but a bad dream that keeps coming back.

He let out a burdened sigh. The more he divulged however, the more comfortable he felt about speaking the truth.

Gallant:

Though I swear every time I have it it feels more and more real. By now it's like I'm looking at a memory I don't recognize, or one I don't "remember" having if that makes any sense... which it doesn't. Because saying it out loud, I sound like a loon. *Is that offensive now that Princess Luna isn't Nightmare Moon anymore?*

Shining:

Exactly; Princess Luna is no longer the horrible monster Princess Celestia banished to the moon a thousand years ago. If this bad dream of yours is messing with your head, she'll step in and sort things out with you. It's her duty as Princess of the Night.

Ever the caring strategist, Shining Armor took a second or two to decide what might be best for the troubled pony.

Shining:

By now the barracks should be full from the night shift, so use one of the beds in the medical ward to get some shut-eye today. I'll have Corporal Ironhoof fill in for you at your post.

Gallant:

With all due respect, Captain Armor, the same thing'll happen as it always does. The same dream, the same lack of actual rest, I'd be slacking off for nothing. Captain, I can-...

Shining:

...Corporal?

Gallant:

Captain, I forgot what I was about to say mid-sentence, I think I need a rest.

Shining:

I'll talk to one of the princesses and see if Luna can get to you early. But again, sleep is what you need. Go take a cat-nap, Corporal.

Shining Armor continued his patrol, leaving Gallant to give a farewell of sorts to the others.

Gallant:

Don't let the castle burn down while I'm gone, and *I'll* try not to die in my sleep... *again*.

And with that, he was off to recuperate. While resting in the medical ward like he was instructed, Gallant was tossing and turning as voices and abysmal imagery swirled around in his sleeping mind.

"Dream Raven:

Personal assistant actually. But yes, that is me. And you are?

Dream Gallant:

In a lot of pain right now."

"Dream Chardonnay:

You drink my wines all the time!"

"Dream Cavalier:

I can't swim!

Dream Gallant:

Hold on!"

His head pounded with pain, every fiber of muscle in his body felt as if it were being pulled apart in all directions but still, he had to persevere. If he wanted to have a good night's sleep ever again, *he had to persevere*.

Gallant:

Come on, Luna... I can feel myself slipping out of it! *It hurts so much*. Come on! Stay here, Gallant, stay asleep... stay alive...

A blinding pain, sharp as a razor cut through his side and wrapped around his entire body.

Gallant:

Stay alive.

He could feel his heart slow and his mind start to fade. His vision swirled and began to fail as his lungs became rocks in his chest; un-moving, un-breathing, heavy.

Gallant:

They still need you... She... st-still...

Once again, barely a second passed. And once again the same fireball erupted, waking Gallant short of his much needed rest.

He didn't gasp or scream. Becoming almost numb to the terror, he just opened his eyes and sat up in the bed. He sighed, too tired to jest or lighten the mood. And as he took a moment to reflect on the repeated images of the night, his captain entered the room.

Gallant:

I thought you said you would talk to one of the princesses.

Shining:

It's barely been an hour and you've already had that nightmare? Man, you were underselling it. I talked to Princess Celestia, and she said that she'll see what her sister can do for you in the coming nights. As well as that however, she informed me of something very important happening up north. I won't be sharing details as it's classified, but Princess Cadence and I are gonna be up there for a while because of it.

Gallant:

You're telling me this, why?

Captain Armor was stopped in his tracks, simply glaring at his subordinate's disrespectful tone. Gallant's eyes widened as he realized his mistake.

Gallant:

...Sorry, Sir! Can I blame that on dream me? I think he's a bad influence.

Squinting at the corporal, Shining let it slide... Just barely.

Shining:

Well *anyway*, Celestia will *also* be sending over a group of ponies from Ponyville.

Gallant:

We have soldiers in Ponyville?

The captain chuckled at the prospect.

Shining:

Not quite. My sister, and her five friends. Honestly a more capable batch than most of the ponies around here.

Gallant:

Ha, taking that personally.

Shining:

Don't, it's a high bar.

Gallant:

Still not seeing what this has to do with me though, Sir.

Shining:

While things in that town are generally peaceful, those six ponies are the de facto guardians of Ponyville. We don't want to leave it without any guard presence, so you and a few others will be temporarily transferred to the station down there in the meantime.

Gallant:

You're gonna be sending a sloppy guards-pony further out into the public eye? Or is this some sort of secret exile? Section 8 me before I realize what happened.

Shining:

I know you wouldn't want to just sit on your laurels while you recover, you've made that much clear. And over there, guard duty will be quieter and much less taxing overall. So if you're still aiming to protect, this'll give you the space and time to do just that.

Looking down at his sorry state, Gallant could see the obvious. He didn't enjoy accepting it as fact, but this near bed-ridden body of his was a liability more than it was a shield. So if his captain thought it best to station him somewhere new, he wasn't going to argue.

Gallant:

...Yeah, I guess that works for me.

And so, Gallant would embark on his given assignment. He and the rest who were re-stationed were flown in on carriages that bore the same gleaming golden shine as the armor they wore so proudly. As they touched down onto one of the numerous dirt paths, many of the townsfolk around them whispered in awestruck glee at the rare sight. Lucky too. Without the distraction of all that “Canterlot glimmer” the masses might have noticed that among the marching line of gilded defenders, one of them appeared as though he had crawled fresh out of a morgue, the bags beneath his eyes so big, you could strap them to a saddle. He’d stick out like a sore thumb in any other case, surely. Nevertheless, Gallant survived the trip to his new, temporary post.

Positioned at the town’s center, he stood at the right-most edge of a five-pony line, just a shoulder’s width away from a curmudgeonly gray unicorn guard to his left.

Gallant:
(*Thinking*) “Quieter”.

Gallant took a look at the quaint town around him. The shops seemed lively and full of friendly customers, other ponies were out and about, absorbing the sunny weather and waving to one another in the most neighborly of ways. There was even the most precious sight of three fillies enjoying their weekend away from school, two of which were sat excitedly in a little red wagon as it was carted around by a small, determined looking pegasus on a scooter. Each and every face he saw was absent of worry.

Gallant:
(*Thinking*) Okay, Quieter. Captain Armor is right. I can’t protect anyone if my brain is too tired to out-class a parasprite in terms of complex thought. So, Ponyville is perfect for me...

Care-free as the vibes were, the distinct lack of the bustle he was used to from Canterlot was noticeable to say the least. Maybe “boring” wasn’t exactly how he’d describe it, but everything certainly felt slower in “Perfect Ponyville”.

Gallant:
“Perfectville”...

Curmudgeonly guard:
What?

Gallant:
Sorry. Didn’t mean to say that one out loud.

Arial Decanter:
Excuse me? Mister?

Both sentries were caught a bit off guard. Gallant was a little slow to locate the source of the plea, but got there eventually. It was a wide-eyed pegasus filly with a salmon colored coat, she couldn't have been more than four years old.

Arial Decanter:
I need some help.

Gallant:
Um, yeah- yeah! Is your cat stuck in a tree? Did a house catch fire somewhere around here?!
Are one of your friends deep down a well?!-

Arial Decanter:
My jar!

Gallant:
...Your?-

She lifted a wing to present a sealed jar of applesauce to the line of guards.

Arial Decanter:
I need some help opening my jar. It won't open.

Gallant:
Oh. Ha ha, yeah I can help you out.

Using a levitation spell, Gallant lifted the container from the tiny pony's grasp. As he did this, he got a glimpse of the label. "Sweet Apple Acres applesauce". Right. Ponyville was home to probably the most well-known apple farm in Equestria. Of course, there were only so many. All thoughts aside about this jar's genesis, he continued on with the task.

Gallant:
(*Thinking*) Yep! "Quieter". First "job well done" down. I think I could get used to the easy life down here.

With a satisfying, "pop" the lid came loose. As he said; a job well done.

Gallant:
There you *are*, an open *jar*!

Skylar Decanter:
Aerial! What do you think you're doing?!

Arial Decanter:

You said if I need help to get somepony.

Skylar Decanter:
Not the Royal Guard!

This new pegasus, the foal's mother, turned to Gallant to apologize.

Skylar Decanter:
I'm sorry about that.

Gallant:
Don't be, It's all good.

The mother guided her child away. This however, revealed an endless line of many more fillies, with many more jars of various sauces, salsas, and syrups needing to be loosened.

Gallant:
Yeah, Bring 'em on.

One by one, the navy unicorn pried each jar ajar, getting into a rhythm as each one became easier than the last. Eventually, the line was no more as he removed the final lid from the final container.

Gallant:
Looks like that's the last! Corporal Gallant, a fighter for the little guy!...s

Curmudgeonly guard:
Meaning to keep that one in your noggin as well?

Gallant:
As a matter of fact, not at all. I'm a jar opening world champ, and I don't care who knows it!

Curmudgeonly guard:
He's got a joke for everything. Just because most'a this job is standing about, doesn't mean you shouldn't take what we do seriously.

Gallant:
Aw, let me lighten my mood. I've had a rocky week.

Bringing his hoof to his gut, he was brought back again to those terrible nightmares.

Gallant:
Believe you me, when something goes down, I'll take it plenty serious...

Getting tired again. “Hardly a hoof in front of his face”. The hyperbole of that statement was diminishing as Gallant looked down at his blurry limb. His blurry, bloody limb... Blood? Then another drop, and another. It was coming from his eye, dripping down from his left and splashing onto his hoof. The time between drops got shorter and shorter until it was a steady, pouring stream of crimson iron. He shook his head to and fro and then... Gone. Hallucinations now? Obviously, something had to be done about that, but Gallant preferred to keep such severe troubles under wraps less he wanted his prior “section 8” comment to go from joke to just fact. He scrambled together an excuse to take a secret stroll, one that no higher-ups would need to hear about.

Gallant:

Ahem! Yep. rocky, rocky, rocky. But I bet some of that famous town cider I’ve heard about might help ease me. I hear that “Sweet Apple Acres” place only sells the stuff at around this time of the season, so this might be a once in a lifetime chance at a refreshing cider prize for all my **jar-opening escapades**. ...*Cover for me?*

The curmudgeonly guard pony side-eyed Gallant. But after a moment he looked to his left, and then his right, before rolling his eyes and relenting.

Curmudgeonly guard:
...Be snappy about it.

Gallant:
Sweet! I’ll grab a cup for you too!

Curmudgeonly Guard:
You’re darn right you will!

Cresting over the final hill towards Sweet Apple Acres, Gallant caught the sight of a line even larger than the parade of fretful foals from earlier.

Gallant:
Whistle Quite the que. Must be some *really* good cider.

Coming from all the way at the front of the line were sounds of a commotion. A loud argument broken up every now and again by a stray “Eyup!” and “Nope!” here and there.

Gallant:
Or...

Wanting to see what the disturbance was and if he could help settle it, Gallant began to make his way to its origin. Remembering only after he had pushed past a couple ponies, to ask the one at the caboose to save his place in the line.

Gallant:
Excuse me, sorry. -Hold my spot, okay! -Hi, sorry.

Then, at said origin...

Granny Smith:
For the last time, we couldn't care less about how your moldy grape juice is sell'n! We ain't *got* nor *want* nothin' to do with your "business issues".

Big Mac:
Eyup!

An elderly mare and her grandson, presumably the owners of the farm, were arguing with the noticeably besuited unicorn at the front of the line.

Gallant:
Woah, hey. What seems to be the hang up here?

Granny Smith:
Aha! The boys in bronze! Granny Smith by the way, but **get this youngin off our property!** If you could be so kind.

Chardonhay:
Youngin!? I'll have you know that I am now 22 years of age! My birthday week just started a mere two days ago in fact, **and you're spoiling it with your silly cider sales!!!**

The sight of the stallion staggered him where he stood. Gallant could swear he had seen him before; the sickly green coat that matched his unpalatable personality, the burgundy suit that contrasted with his bright blonde mane. There wasn't a second way about it, this pony was one Gallant had come across in his dream.

Gallant:
That's!.. bizarre.

The exclamation went unnoticed as this miffed magnate shifted his glasses back up the bridge of his snout and continued to complain.

Chardonhay:
I don't see why *you* have to make this into a whole a big thing. Just stay in your lane, sell your fruits, and keep away from the world of refined refreshments!

Gallant:
U-um.

A job needed to be done, a discourse needed to be resolved. This was merely a coincidence, anything else would make far too little sense. The young corporal shook it from his mind to settle the issue, trying not to think too much about the strange occurrence. Admittedly, a task that got easier as the distracting dispute went on.

Gallant:

Sir, you can't be holding every pony up so that you can argue with these folks. *They're all* just trying to get their drinks, and *these* guys are just trying to run their business.

Granny Smith:

Barely even! The *farm's* a business, the cider's a bonus! Every year we hoof-make what we can, then sell it till it's good and gone. After that, we **move on** and get back to work. Been that way ever since *I* was a filly.

Gallant:

See? They don't even sell year-round. Just go home and nap out for a day, their "big bad cider operation" will be dry by tomorrow.

Chardonhay:

Scoff I wouldn't expect a non-Canterlite to understand that this is about principle!

Gallant:

I *am* from Canterlot. The only difference between you and me is the mileage we get out of that organ between our ears. That, and how dapper I don't dress on a daily.

Chardonhay:

Couldn't be *pure*-blooded, otherwise you'd have some class.

Gallant:

What did you say?

Chardonhay:

Nothing.

Gallant:

This is petty.

Chardonhay:

I know you are, but what say, am I!

Gallant:

Alright, that's it. If I apologize for calling you stupid, will you lay off these guys and let every pony else buy their beverages?

Chardonhay:
You called me stupid?

Gallant:
groan

Chardonhay:
To stoop so low, / would never. It's proven to me once again that I am quite much more refined than most. Filtered and purified like the flawless product I brew! Yes, the perfect picture of wine plant perfection! And his name is Chardonhay,-

And there it was.

Chardonhay and Gallant:
-of Chardonhay vineyards!
Of Chardonhay vineyards.

A coincidence collapsing into a horrible certainty. Without a shadow of a doubt, Gallant had indeed crossed paths with this stallion before. In a memory he didn't recognize.

Chardonhay:
Ah. A name you are familiar with, is it? Go ahead, I'll see if forgiveness is on the table for you once I've heard your swift apology.

That willingness to argue had left him completely as the panic set in. All Gallant could do was take a slow step back.

Granny Smith:
The world don't revolve around you and neither does Sweet Apple Acres! So if you ain't gonna buy nothin', move your behind!

Chardonhay:
Oh, I "*ain't'int*" going to buy "*nuthin*", but you should best **believe** I have more to say before my behind is moved!!!

The heated back and forth became but a distant ringing. Gallant could hear nothing but his own thoughts blaring like a siren, echoing about the walls of his skull.

Gallant:
(Thinking) It is him! He's exactly the same! That's not possible, there isn't any way I or my subconscious could know who he is! How he looks, how he sounds, he's even talking the exact same way! **Everything**, right down to his wardrobe, is one to one!

Chardonhay:

Soon enough it will be grrrossly apparent that your family owned *juice shop* sells only that which is fit for the insects in the soil! Or the worms that inhabit those grotesque apples you grow. My wines are **quality**, and quality can never be beaten by podunk peasantry *like the likes* of you! You'll see it, yes you will! It won't be long before there's a bottle from my vineyard on every shelf from here to Los Pegasus! Tell me, does your *cider* have **worldwide** appeal?

Not a second later, a good friend of the farm got her first taste of the apple family's famous cider.

Zecora:

Now this is quite the heavenly drink!
On the plains of my home, they would love it I think!

Chardonhay:

Rghaaahhhh!

Chardonhay stormed away in frustration.

Granny Smith:

That's right! You get yer fancy, schmancy, suited patooty out'a here!

Big Macintosh:

Eyup!

Things seemed to wrap up well enough for the apple farm but meanwhile in Gallant's mind, the situation became more grim by the second.

Gallant:

(*Thinking*) It's no nightmare, it's a warning. Some kind of prophecy being put into my head!

His eyes took him down the long line of innocent consumers, each of them now on a timer counting down to a gruesome demise.

Gallant:

(*Thinking*) This is horrible! Never in a thousand years would I think there could be a group out there more dangerous than the changelings! Do the princesses know? Is it even possible that they could?! Everypony's at risk; Ponyville, Canterlot, Mainhattan, nowhere is safe and I could be the *only soul* who knows that!

Granny Smith:

Ooo dear! That's what you look like, a deer in lamp lights. Would ya like some cider here to help wind ya down? On the barn for help'n us with that, *wine whiner*.

A job needed to be done.

Gallant:
Y-yes, ma'am. Thank you.

Granny Smith:
Heh! Knew you'd say that! There's not a pony alive that could resist free apple cider. Not from our farm!

The shakey old farmer hobbled away and as soon as Gallant was no longer in her line of sight, he discreetly took his leave.

Gallant:
(*Thinking*) Sorry to make you fetch a cup for no pony, Ms. Smith, but it's loads better than the look on my face causing a panic.

Making a b-line all the way towards the carriages he rode in on, he picked up the pace slowly; stepping quick as one could without running through the center of town creating a scene.

Curmudgeonly Guard:
Hey, what about my cider, you hack!

Gallant didn't even flinch or bat an eye. He had to keep his cool, keep focused! He had to get to those carriages as soon as possible. It wasn't long before he could see the pegasi who flew his unit here. The lot of them were un-latching their harnesses and wheeling the glistening wagons out of sight.

Gallant:
Wait!

His words weren't terribly loud, but they were stern enough to make his winged cohorts jump.

Gallant:
Strap back in, we need to fly back to Canterlot Castle. It's a matter of life and death for all of Equestria.

The flight back to Canterlot felt like it took ages. As if with each beat of the pilot pegasi's wings, the arrival time was flung further and further down the clock. But eventually they did arrive, swiftly swooping down to land in front of the castle gates. Hopping down from the carriage, Gallant could hear the murmur of civilians, some were in awe, similar to the residents of Ponyville, while others were inquisitive as to what the lone vehicle could be doing here at this time. But the whispers didn't matter right now, Gallant nodded to some to reassure the many but his focus did not waver.

Into the castle now as his heart beat became louder than the steps of his hooves, the mixed murmurs of civilians melted into the rumblings of castle staff; all of whom were well aware that his presence was strange. Eventually even *those* whispers were drowned out by his beating heart. He picked up speed little by little, walking, speeding, galloping, sprinting towards the throne room. He didn't have time to waste, she had to know as soon as possible, he can't waste any more time, he has to move faster-"you have to move faster. More! Even faster than this! Don't you care about what's at stake?! They'll all die! You have to do something! Go! Run! Run faster! Hurry!"

Raven:

Alright. That is her entire schedule mapped out and ready! Well done, Raven, this week shall be nothing like the last thanks to your efforts, yes! No more of the usual hectic disarray! This week will be fine. You will be fine- well no- *I* will be fine. *Don't talk to yourself in the second person, it makes you sound like a...* is that offensive now that-... Oh, whatever. Fine is what I shall be! So long as I make haste! And get this over to-

Gallant:

Princess Celestia! Princess!

Rocketing past his fellow guards and bursting through the large doors of the throne room, The panicked protector howled the princess' name. Only to be met with the sight of Celestia's empty throne and her assistant beside it. Inkwell herself, looking on with confusion at the outburst and gripping her checklist tighter in her horn's magic spell.

Gallant:

Where is she?!

Raven:

U-uh...?

They were too slow to catch him before, but now with Gallant stopped before the massive chamber of marble and stained glass, the two guards he passed by tackled their disruptive colleague to the ground.

Gallant:

Guys, wait! I haven't lost my mind, this is a real emergency!

Raven:

Emergency?

Gallant pushed and struggled to deliver as much news as he could through the iron grip of the heavier stallions.

Gallant:

Millions of ponies will be in mortal danger if we're unprepared! I have to talk to Celestia!

From there, Raven was convinced. She hurried down the elegant, carpeted steps to get closer to the struggle.

Raven:

Un-hand him already! Don't millions of lives sound important enough for you to listen!?

The guards did as she asked and backed off.

Gallant:

Where's the Princess?

Raven:

She's in her garden, follow me!

Gallant followed her lead past the two thrones and down the passageway behind them. He was keeping pace well until all of the sudden, his right front hoof gave out beneath him. Was it sprained when he was tackled by the other guards?

Raven:

Whoa!

Raven was quick enough to catch him, close enough at least. But as soon as she did, it triggered more hallucinations. The walls cracked and crumbled, spilling blood and fleshless bones from the ruins. Beyond the shattered stone and beneath a churning overcast, the many demented silhouettes of horse-like creatures cackled and screeched in the distance, their proportions as twisted as their desire to kill.

Gallant:

Ah!

He stumbled backwards, landing on his flank as the illusions melted away.

Raven:

Are you alright?

Gallant:

...yeah- yeah! Just hurry, I'm fine!

They continued with utmost expediency, the bright light of the afternoon sun beamed down onto the pair as they emerged from the castle's interior. The princess they sought was standing among rows and rows of red tulips, silently admiring their beauty.

Raven:
Princess Celestia!

Slow and graceful, she turned her head towards the pony who called her name.

Celestia:
What ever is the matter to have you rush to me like this?

Raven:
This guards-pony here needed to see you at once! He comes bearing grave news of an incoming, nation-wide crisis!

Celestia:
Oh my.

Gallant:
Princess, There's a massive threat outside the borders of Equestria! Monstrous, blood-thirsty ponies that are only driven by some manic desire to eat us! I saw them. I **see** them every night in a premonition disguised as a nightmare! Something is warning me of these creatures in my sleep so that I can warn you!

No, Raven couldn't have heard that right...

Raven:
*Your "**emergency**" is that you had a bad dream?...*

Gallant:
Not a dream. At this point it can't be, too much lines up with the real world! We can't write this off as anything other than a sign of what's to come!

Raven:
Unbelievable! Your Highness, I deeply apologize for this absolute waste of your time. *Urgh! so embarrassing!*

In spite of the absolute bombardment of conflicting information, Celestia's calming tone never wavered.

Celestia:
Tell me, young soldier. What is your name?

Gallant:
...Corporal Gallant, Princess.

Celestia:

“Gallant”. With a name like that it comes as no surprise that you would take it upon yourself to alert us. Could I ask you to go into more detail about this foreseen threat?

Raven:
Beg pardon?

Gallant:
Y-yes, I can try... What I see is usually kind of fuzzy but from what I can tell, they all look like any old earth pony except their necks are hauntingly long, and they can shoot horn lasers from their mouths! *Then the teeth*. Row and rows of ‘em! Princess, something has to be done! We’ve gotta act now or else all of pony-kind will be their buffet!

Just like before, Celestia kept her graceful demeanor. It was as if neither fear nor worry could so much as touch the majestic royal. As if such emotions could only roll off her coat like water off the back of a swan.

Celestia:
Is that so? And all this was gathered from a repeating nightmare?

He nodded his head.

Celestia:
Come with me, my little pony.

Gallant:
Of course!

Raven:
Wh-. No, you can’t-

In one ear and out the other. It was honestly debatable whether or not Raven’s words got past even that first step, as the pair of ponies were already mobile. Not wanting to be left behind, *she* followed Celestia as well.

Celestia:
How long has this vision been haunting you?

Gallant:
A little over a week now.

Raven:
Princess Celestia, we do not have the time to humor this sooth-saying nonsense. You have a meeting with the Farasian delegates to discuss exports to the region, a cacophony of petitions

to look over an hour later, and *many* more preparations to get in order before Princess Cadence and Captain Armor set off for the *ystle-Crey mpire-ey*. We mustn't fall behind schedule!

Gallant:

You're Raven Inkwell, and you pride yourself on being Celestia's personal assistant. You told me yourself, in the dream! This isn't nonsense, it's a serious threat.

Raven:

So you dreamt up the already *very* public knowledge of my name and occupation. I'm almost offended that you think it requires divine guidance to figure them out.

Gallant:

Nightlight! Velvet Sparkle? They were there too!

Raven:

(sarcastic, but still angry) Hazzah! Now he's spouting the names of his captain's parents! I suppose the end must truly be nigh! Should I be quaking in my hooves now, or after we've all been cannibalized by laser giraffes?

Gallant:

If I can't convince you to believe me then fine, but don't throw this warning to the wind! Go ahead and see me as an absolute nutcase, prepare for the worst then discharge me if I'm wrong! Just don't choose to do nothing about this! I don't know everything about this awful future. I don't know why it came to me, what these enemies are, or why *you're* there every time, but you are! And you're in *danger*. I won't risk that happening, I'm not gonna let it!

Raven:

You scream in to make me look a fool, then dare to say it's for my sake? Because you woke up in a cold sweat needing to protect some damsel in distress of your boogiemare?

Gallant:

I know how this looks and I'm sorry about *that*. But I'll never regret doing what I can to keep ponies safe.

Raven:

(Sarcastic deadpan) What a hero we have on our hooves...

The trio reached the end of the hallway, where Celestia swung open a fancy set of double doors. On the other side was her sister, sitting at the dining room table.

Celestia:

Oh Luna! I require your assistance for quite the quandary.

It looked like she was melting. Princess Luna usually carried herself just as, if not *more* regal than her solar sibling but here, during her morning routine, mouth full from her heaping chomp of the uncut and unpeeled pineapple before her, there were a great number of deep-sea creatures that she could have been compared to in that moment. Her unfocused eyes lagged behind one another as she blinked, and overall looked like they were ready to fall right off her face with minimal warning.

Gallant and Raven:
Ulgh!

Celestia was unphased, likely having seen such this sight a million times before.

Celestia:
This here, is Corporal Gallant, one of the guard ponies from around the castle. He says that he is troubled by a nightmare as of late.

With her eyes still droopy and her mouth still full from her unorthodox breakfast, Luna groggily shot over her plain and simple disdain for her sister's current disruption.

Luna:
Tia. Why?

The two non-royals in the room respectfully kneeled down and bowed to the full-mouthed monarch.

Raven:
I apologize for my untoward exclamation, Princess.-

Gallant:
A-as do I.

Raven:
I just wasn't expecting to see you awake so early.-

Gallant:
Yeah, me too.

Raven:
(Gritted teeth) Cut that out!

Still so bright and cheery, Celestia carried on with her request.

Celestia:
Since it's the realm of dreams that's involved, I posit that you might be able to help him?

Clearly, Princess Luna was not ecstatic about her sister's assumption, or at least the time at which she decided to bring it up. But Luna *did* have the power to help with no good reason to say that she didn't.

Luna:
...I suppose.

Celestia:
Excellent!

With her work here currently complete, it was time she bid this soldier adieu.

Celestia:
I wish you luck on finding a solution to your sleeping troubles.

It was impossible to tell if the Sun Princess actually believed any of what he had told her, but all the same, Gallant did feel closer to said solution to this mystery.

Gallant:
Thank you. But please, heed my warning?

Celestia:
I will. But try and rest easy. We may not need to be as cautious as you think.

She snuck in a wink then left the room, with Raven following close.

Gallant:
Wha-what was that? Does she know something I don't?

Luna:
yawn No, she just must always *act* as if she does.

Now standing directly in front of who was largely just a hindrance to her most important meal of the day, Luna took a regal stance, then began to prod.

Luna:
Tell me more about what ails you.

Gallant:
Well... I've been having this "dream" thing, every night! About these horrible creatures storming the castle and tearing us all to shreds! Only...

He took a breath-long pause to turn his thoughts into something succinct and digestible.

Gallant:

I'm sure I don't have to explain this to you of all ponies, but you know how in a dream, it's usually like you're moving through jelly? Like the air is thick and viscous? Or it goes the complete *opposite* way, and your whole body feels loose and hollow? Well in *my* dream, it's not like either of those at all. My movements feel so jarringly *real* despite none of them being my choice. Not to mention the pain. Now, I've had some painful nightmares growing up, but what I feel *here* is on a completely different level! Whatever it is I'm experiencing couldn't be some bog-standard night terror, it has to be what's *going to* happen if we don't do something quick!

Luna:

You think yourself to be a seer?

Gallant:

No!.. yes? L-look, I don't mean to be disrespectful, I'm only telling you something that I can't explain any other way!

Luna:

Hm... Then you will show me this peculiar nightmare. Let us have you rest, and I will find you in the realm of dreams. Whether you see the future or not, we will find an answer.

Luna tapped her horn onto Gallant's forehead with a dazzling pulse of magic.

Gallant:

What did.. you.. you just...

Luna:

I will see you soon, Corporal Gallant.

The world slowed as his body started to fall. He was asleep before he hit the ground. It was dark for a while, before an intense pain scattered across his eye. The darkness lifted at the clanging sound of his helmet clattering to the ground, with two fang-shaped gashes over its left side. When Gallant got his bearings, he found that he was face to face with one of the cannibalistic creatures he had been dreading were real.

Gallant:

One of those monsters! I've never seen one so clearly. This room is new too. Is this a different dream? Now of all times?!

The wicked horse lunged its long neck, extending it to launch towards Gallant. However, faster than he could process, Gallant's body sprung into action with seamless flow. It was as if he'd been fighting for minutes already, and this was simply his next move. His horn began to brighten as he swept his head to the side, launching a bomb of sparks into the creature's face to daze it.

Gallant:
No, why would this crazy *thing* be here if it was?

He looked down, and over at his woundless stomach.

Gallant:
I've never been this far back before. It's the same dream, but new terra—*What's the matter slinky? Losing your appetite?— ...what?*

The creature writhed and wretched as it regained its senses, locking back on to its now bleeding prey.

Diomedes horse:
The Horses of Diomedes, never run from a kill. Not when served, on a *golden platter!* Talk more. Your lungs, your throat. *Your chatter keeps them warm.* **Ehogghh**, and your **screams** will make them taste so delicious!

Gallant:
—*rgh.*— Diomedes?..

Gnashing its horrid, yellow teeth, the monster shot forward with bloodthirsty intent. But Gallant was ready. He pivoted around on his front hooves and bucked his hind legs into his opponent's bottom jaw with perfect timing. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to seal the deal. The attack hadn't phased the creature for long before it lashed its neck around to clamp down into Gallant's side.

Gallant:
Agh!

It then ripped away, tearing a large hole out of his abdomen. Had the attack not knocked him flat, his innards would have been at the mercy of gravity, causing many vital organs to be on the floor. The widening golden eyes of the Diomedes horse became crazed as it reared up to charge again.

Diomedes horse:
FRESH FLESH!

The feral fiend rushed in once more to finish the fight and secure another successful hunt. But Gallant wouldn't have made it this far if he were one to give up. His horn started to glow again and using every ounce of strength still in his body, he levitated a hefty, ceramic alicorn bust that was just barely in his range. He then brought it down onto the predator's head just before it could reach him, and with one loud "crack!"...

This fight was over.

There was one less of those evil creatures in the world... If that was all he could do. If that was the last contribution he could ever make...

Gallant:
—*at least... got one...*—

From far down the hall echoed a squeal of terror. That Chardonhay fellow again, no doubt. And it sounded like he wasn't alone.

Prince Blueblood:
St-step back, you repugnant creature!

A job had to be done...

Gallant:
—*Can't punch your card out yet. No dying 'till the job is done, soldier.*—

He staggered to his hooves and held his innards tightly with his magic, knowing that he would be dead within seconds should he ever let go.

Gallant:
—...*W-who knows... maybe they've got a really big bandaid handy.*—

Much further down the corridor, the blood-stained beast from Diomedes closed in for its gourmet meal. But like a speeding bullet, the ceramic head carried by a sparkling red glow smashed into the creature's temple. The bust shattered on impact, revealing that the horn of the statue had pierced the monster's brain.

Haggard by the wound he was hiding, the corporal checked to see if either of the others were at risk to match him.

Gallant:
—*Are either of you hurt?*—

Chardonhay:
I-is it..?

The three looked over at the now destroyed and deceased attacker. It's gray matter now pooling on the floor beneath its crumbling skull.

Prince Blueblood:

Ugh, revolting. You there! Bring us to safety at once! You are a royal guard right? Then quickly!
Guard the Royalty before you!

Gallant:

—uh. Got it. Corpral Gallant at your “royal” service. You got names?—

Chardonhay:

Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Chardonh-

Prince Blueblood:

-Prince Blueblood.

Gallant:

—Right. You’re who that is. Well, there’s a series of escape tunnels underneath us, we can use ‘em to get out of here. Follow me. And keep quiet, alright? Otherwise we’ll see if your blood is actually blue.—

Prince Blueblood:

You question my royalty!?

Gallant:

—That’s not what... never mind, let’s move.— Starting to look a little more familiar.

Just after that thought, Princess Luna made her entrance; walking out from thin air and glowing with the calming blue aura of her magic.

Gallant:

You’re here!

Luna:

Did I not say that I would be?

Gallant:

Ye-, I mean yeah but-.

He decided it was best to cut his losses on this one.

Gallant:

Whatever, I’ll be sure to think twice next time I want to shout a cliché your way. But already I can tell you more about the monsters we’ve been facing here. For one, I found out that these creatures can talk. The one I was fighting called itself a “Horse of Diomedes”. I could hear it so clearly too. This is the most “lucid” all this has ever felt.

Luna:

The effects of my sleeping spell; those who are under its enchantment can perceive their dreams with more clarity.

Gallant

Your solution to my painful nightmare was to make me feel it more?!

Luna:

If we can find out why you are having said nightmare, this may be the last time you will need to feel it at all.

Gallant:

I hope so...

After many twists and turns down the narrow, brick-lined corridors, the small group Gallant led rounded a corner and was met with another trio of familiar ponies.

Gallant:

—*What the, more survivors?*— Inkwell...

By her side were Captain Armor's parents, Twilight Velvet and her husband, Nightlight.

Twilight Velvet:

What do you mean survivors?

Gallant:

—*Hang on, I know you. You're Raven Inkwell, aren't you? Princess Celestia's secretary?*—

Raven:

Personal assistant, actually. But yes, that is me. And you are?

As their conversation picked up, Luna floated back to think to herself.

Luna:

(*Thinking*) Admittedly, he has a point in saying that this is no average dream. I felt it the instant I stepped into his psyche, this place carries a unique aura. Though maybe... not entirely un-familiar...

Raven:

I know the way out if you'd like to join our parties together.

Gallant:

—*I'd be glad to. I'm not arrogant enough not to accept help from someone of your status and renowned intelligence.*—

Raven:
Y-yes, well, follow me then.

Raven was flattered, and quite honestly, a little flustered at the sudden complement. Gallant couldn't help but match that energy, at least on the inside.

The group merged and moved together down the unlit tunnels. They were walking for some time; an unsettling journey through the dark, interspersed with occasional conversation and pretentious complaints from the prince and his new, wine-brewing lackey.

Luna:
Very interesting.

Gallant:
Does something surprise you here? Gonna be real honest, that doesn't sit too well with me.

Luna:
Worry not. I need to observe a little more to confirm my suspicions, but if I am correct... you may not have anything to fear.

Gallant:
See now *that* was a set of very easy things to say as the pony who's *not* holding their guts in their—*Oh for crying out loud, will you two just shut the fuck up already!*—... *Well okay*, I guess we'll wait for you then. I was right, you *are* a bad influence.

Prince Blueblood:
You can't talk to me like that! I'm royalty! I'll have your badge for this you lowborn cretin!

Gallant:
Justified though.

Luna:
You do not know the half of it.

Tired of the prince's nonsense, Raven chimed in to knock him down from his self-appointed pedestal.

Raven:
Shut *up*, Blueblood, you insufferable imbecile, or I shall teleport you back into the jaws of those creatures myself!

Prince Blueblood:
Well I never!

Both of the dark blue dream visitors snickered at Blueblood's dismay and soon after, the group was in motion again.

Meanwhile, outside the realm of dreams, Princess Celestia and the *actual* Raven Inkwell were sitting on opposite ends of the meeting room table, with the former happily sifting through petitions.

Celestia:

(*Laughter*) And *this one* is asking for glitter to be mixed into the rain clouds during spring so that the flowers sparkle when they bloom! How silly is that?

Raven hardly heard her. Her mind instead was occupied by the stress of a missed meeting, staring at the large set of doors behind her as minute after minute they failed to swing open. Celestia could almost see the physical weight of Raven's worry dropping her head lower and lower towards the table, as stress compounded on top of stress.

Celestia:

Try not to fret about the meeting, Miss Inkwell, it's only been a few minutes. I personally find this quite humorous! All of the rushing we had to do to make it on time only for the *Farasians* to end up being late?

Raven:

Forgive me if I "fret away" anyway, Your Highness, but this is a very *important* meeting, not only for trades and commodities, but for Equestria's relations with outside regions. Did you know that most ponies didn't even know what a Zebra *was* until about two years ago?!

Celestia:

They'll arrive in due time.

Another petition caught Celestia's eye as she spoke.

Celestia:

Oh ho ho! And in the meantime, look at this one! A petition for "Bestie Buffet Day" to be made into a national holiday. "Where you and your best buddy can get free cupcakes at your local town hall." Oh I like that!

So often it was an uncertainty over whether or not the princess was mocking her assistant. For all Raven knew, Celestia was genuinely so content in her role of a thousand or so years, that truly nothing could cause her any anxiety. All the same, the loyal aide pressed on with respect.

Raven:

Forgive me again, Princess Celestia, but I'm not looking at another "amusing"^{-trite} petition until I know exactly where those delegates are.

Just as Raven finished speaking, a scroll carried by green flames appeared before Celestia.

Celestia:

Oh? Your timing couldn't be more impeccable my pupil.

Raven:

One of Miss Sparkle's letters?

The tall princess nodded, then took a moment to watch the letter float in, pulled by her magic. She then turned her attention back to Raven, steering the conversation into this new direction.

Celestia:

When I sent her to live down in Ponyville, I genuinely wondered if it would really help her. She was a lot like you, Miss Inkwell. Always wrapped up in her studies like you wrap yourself in your work.

Raven:

Ha! And being like me is such a bad thing, she needed to be "helped"?

Celestia:

Perhaps that's not the right word.

She turned her gaze back down to the scroll as she brought it closer to her heart.

Celestia:

I wanted to *show* her the beauty of friendship. I wanted her to see the value in choosing to nurture healthy relationships. An attempt alone can do a pony wonders... Twilight was on a path to forever be alone. To run her plotted course in life, before reaching the end without any pony to say goodbye. She would have lived... and been gone, without ever knowing how much more she would've enjoyed her time had she been surrounded by others who cared about her.

Raven:

...Princess, are you planning to ship me off somewhere to "fix" my state of mind?

Celestia:

Every pony walks a different path, Miss Inkwell.

An oddly cryptic answer for a largely sarcastic question. Though before Raven could put together a follow-up, the colossal meeting room doors started open with a thunderous click.

Raven:

Aha! They're here! This is wonderful! We can pick up this talk about the existential another time, Princess. We can finally start this-... Princess Celestia, where are you going?

By the time Raven had turned her head back around, Celestia was already halfway out of the door to the next room, waving Twilight's letter high.

Celestia:
One moment, I must read this letter.

Raven:
No no no, Celestia, please! We cannot delay this further!- *(to the delegates)*-I'm terribly sorry, have a seat and wait here for one tiny moment please. Princess Celestia!

She scurried away to chase the princess down while the Farasian delegates made their way to their seats.

Back in the dream realm, the survivors were now in the caverns beneath the castle. Gemstones gleamed and glittered, contrasting against the matte stone walls, and Luna watched the six struggling ponies like a hawk, making sure not to miss any vital details.

Twilight Velvet:
A... dirigible?

Gallant:
—An evacuation airship. It was a part of the recommendations your daughter made actually. I read her thesis paper on incorporating magic into more safety protocols in the castle. She has some really interesting ideas.—

Twilight Velvet:
That's my girl.

The proud mother smiled at the cave above as if her vision were piercing the stone and crystal to see the stars above. The sight still warmed Gallant's heart, even after all the times he had seen it. And even though he knew what fate was waiting for her at the end of this dream...

He tried not to think about it.

Gallant:
Wondering which one of me said that? You never know, could'a been the pony who's never seen this dirigible deal in my entire waking life. To be fair, I've run through this thing so many times, I'm starting to memorize my lines.

Raven:
There it is!

Raven pointed a hoof towards a recess in the cave wall. Inside sat what looked to be a ball of tarp, and not the vehicle of salvation that was promised.

Prince Blueblood:
It's official. You've definitely killed us.

Gallant:
—*Ugh, it needs to be activated with the spell first, you idiot.*— **blows raspberry**

Luna:
Pray tell, Have you ever interacted with Miss Twilight Sparkle?

Gallant:
Have not.

Luna:
Read a paper of any kind she had written?

Gallant:
Still no?

Luna:
Interesting indeed.

Before Gallant could start to put together the same pieces that Luna did, the famed dirigible came into being with a beautiful array of bright, swirling magic. Everything was quiet as the ponies climbed aboard. Even the endless box of anti self-awareness that was Prince Blueblood was out like a light after Twilight Velvet became fed up with his high-horse prattling as well, fed up enough to deal with him accordingly. Though he had made sure to cause proper trouble before that when he attempted to selfishly set sail before other survivors enroute to the same balloon could arrive.

More time passed and more survivors found themselves in the reassuring presence of the colorful zeppelin. Guiding *this* batch was Princess Cadence, another alicorn, who instructed her group to pile in by the many while Raven and Gallant kept the drifting airship from floating astray.

Gallant:
My least favorite part;... From here, barring a few pompous hiccups, things actually seem sort of hopeful.

Cadence:
(In the distance) Get back! Don't take one step closer!

Gallant
Until manure hits the fan...

There was a small horde of Diomedes creatures flooding in from the same passage that Gallant's group had trekked before them. They were led by a taller, lankier horse with jet-black hair and while what she said was unintelligible from the distance Gallant was at, it was clear that *her* command sent the horses she led lurching and clamoring towards the escape balloon. Her pawns targeted the smaller, more defenseless ponies, not daring to touch the alicorn princess; that was prey *only* for their leader's teeth to tear.

The gruesome villain unhinged her heated maw, and launched a scarlet laser at Cadence who, in turn, tried to block the beam with a shield of magic. The attack however, only deflected into a new trajectory, holding the same destructive energy and careening into the side of the cave. The vibrations of the massive falling rocks caused two of the fleeing survivors to lose their footing and fall into the rapid river below them. Gallant sprung into action.

Gallant:
—*Hold on!*—

He spread his magic thin, dividing it between lifting the two drowning ponies and keeping his organs in his body.

Cavalier:
Hellp! I can't swim!

Maid Dusty:
Don't let me go! Don't let me go!

Gallant:
...Not that..**grh**... it'll matter to me for long. —*hnng, I can't... I.. can't... *yelp of pain**—

It was too much. What little energy Gallant had left to hold his grip was gone. The spell holding his stomach was the first to give, and the resulting pain caused the other to flicker out and die. Two souls were lost to a watery grave, and the third, Gallant, layed dying on the ground.

Raven:
Corporal Gallant!

Gallant:
...*I'm so sorry*...

Luna floated down and held his wound with her magic to mitigate the pain.

Luna:

Well, I do have some... mixed news. Overall in our favor.

Gallant:

Whatever it is, it can't hit me worse... also thank you...also ow.

Luna:

Usually, in a dream, the personalities of familiar ponies who appear are embellished; Skewed one way or the other, have certain traits about them exaggerated by the dreamer's subconscious. But that is not what I see here. Blueblood is as stuck up and cowardly as normal, Miss Inkwell as diligent. Twilight Sparkle has written that exact paper about castle defenses, and... poor Cavalier has never learned how to swim. Everypony I have seen has acted exactly as they would have in the real world, so I indeed believe that you were on to something before.

Gallant:

What?

Luna:

You said that you did not believe this was a standard dream. Well, regarding that half of your theory, you may be correct.

Gallant:

Not a-.. *you* said I would have nothing to fear if you were right! That's the worst—*agh*— news you could have possibly given! What do we do! What do we do if this really *is* some messed up prophecy!?

Luna:

We do nothing. For I also believe the *other half* of your theory is wrong... The realm of dreams is precisely that, another realm. And as it is so easy for the sleeping mind to venture into this place, so too is it that the echoes of other worlds may brush past and leave their mark.

Strengthened further by strong emotion, desires, or fears.

This *is* also the secret behind premonitory dreams. Events in one world may precede another, a step out of time. And if the two worlds are similar enough, those visions from one may bleed over and warn a dreamer who has yet to act on such tragedy, like a form of sympathetic magic. Though I do not believe this is the case in this instance, for we have never heard of these "Diomedes Horses," and rather doubt they exist in our world. This was a horror that befell some version of us, but it will not be one that harms the Equestria we know.

With all four hooves still planted firmly in the grave, Gallant stared slack-jawed at the princess.

Gallant:

...Was that really the *only way* you could've told me? That was the most **stressful** roller coaster I-.. **sigh** So, this "dream" is some, repeating record from another universe, and the horses of Diomedes aren't real, not to us.

The sharp, stinging pain shot up through Gallant, reminding him of his dire wound.

Gallant:

But this *feels* real, and it keeps showing up every time I sleep for even a second. Why is all of this coming to me, what can I do to make it go away?

Luna:

If this is happening to you every night, then the realm of dreams does have *some* reason... If you haven't found it thus far, it is possible said reason lies further past what you have seen.

Gallant:

One big problem with that.

Nightmare Moon:

—**CELESTIA!**—

As if on cue, an overwhelming cascade of darkness bathed the land above, strong enough to be felt below the surface and throughout the crystal caverns. Not long after, a white-hot beam tore in violently from above, cutting through the stone ceiling like a searing knife through clay. It struck the pony-filled emergency airship and blasted it to pieces, reducing all hope into a ball of flame and charred bone.

Gallant:

I don't remember much from here, but I die shortly after that big, fire-y, problem... There *is* nothing past this.

Luna:

Have you checked? When you die is when you wake up, but what if you held on a little longer? Ignored your inner panic?

Gallant:

Princess Luna, the master of easier said than done!

The pain caught Gallant once again, causing him to bow his head down as he exhaustedly affirmed his esteem for the princess.

Gallant:

Respectfully of course.

Luna:

I won't lie to you. It will be unnerving and may hurt a great deal, but my sleeping spell will help you to stay. Steel your mind and push past your demise. I will try and help with your pain best I can.

It certainly didn't sound fun, but neither did leaving the rest of this mystery unsolved and burdening his sleep. He knew that Princess Luna was right, she had to be. Gallant picked himself up from the ground, and stood as tall as he could with the injuries he had.

Gallant:
...Okay.

He left the rest to his multiversal counterpart. Beaten and bloody, the valiant soldier charged forth with a courageous heart, ramming into the leader of the Diomedes horde and sending them both tumbling through the current of the same river that claimed two innocent lives before them. The toothy, twisted menace let out a haunting final howl as she was spat out through the high exit of the crystal caverns, doomed to fall many stories onto the rocky terrain below. And Though Princess Cadence had saved Gallant from the same ugly end, his injuries had already decided his fate.

This was the end of the road, surrounded by the only two survivors left to hear his final words.

Raven:
Corporal Gallant...

Gallant:
—*Pleased to serve with you... Miss Inkwell. You're a heckuva... heckuva mare... for a quill-pusher. Might've asked you out on a... on a date if I'd... if... I'd made it out... of... thissssss...—*

So dark. So cold. It was so hard to breathe. But did he need to? This strange void, it's almost more than he can comprehend. He tries to take a deep breath in, but he can't. It doesn't hurt, "but still, I can't breathe. Don't panic. I can't see. *Don't panic.* Breath, come on! -No. I don't need to, relax. *It's too dark.* Don't think. *Is it still cold?* Don't think. *I can't feel anything! I can't see!* Don't think. Don't breathe. *Luna!? Luna, Where am I!? Don't. wake. up*".

Raven:
Good morning... Corporal Gallant...

Gallant whirled around, startled. But he could see again, and all of his injuries were gone; though an apparition of his former self, his body was now unscathed. Piece by piece, the rest of the world came back into view as he saw Raven again. She was bundled up for cold weather and somberly speaking to a headstone deep within the castle cemetery.

Raven:

It's, ah, me again. I know you're probably sick of seeing me by this stage but, ah... well... I must admit, I do get a degree of comfort from coming and talking to you each week. More so than I get from the court appointed therapist even. Not to say that my therapy isn't going well, it is, I just... find it easier to talk to you, that's all. There's probably something awful about me that ponies could read into that. Raven Inkwell, the mare so bad at social interactions she literally feels more comfortable talking to a headstone than flesh and blood ponies... It's just... you were there. The therapist was not. She cannot quite understand what it... felt like to witness that night. She says I have PTSD. I have no reason to doubt her on that. But still... it is hard to talk of what happened, even all these months later. *sigh* Half a year. It seems impossible. It's Autumn now. The leaves fall off the trees more and more each day. I wonder if you liked Autumn? What was your favorite season?

Instinctively, Gallant opened his mouth to answer, to console, to give some reassurance that some version of him was listening. But he had no words.

Raven:

Usually, I find the colors at this time of year very impressive but... this year, I find myself unable to appreciate them. Everything seems duller to my eyes than it used to. Or perhaps it's that I can no longer find beauty in a season characterized by nature dying.

Just as she had done before, Luna stepped out from the aether behind Gallant.

Luna:

Another new scene, I presume?

Gallant:

She's miserable... and makes it sound like the whole world is too...

Luna took in the new surroundings. Based on the color of the foliage, she surmised that it had indeed been quite some time since the initial tragedy. And looking further past the branches, she saw a larger than life statue in the center of the graveyard. It was of Celestia and her protégé. Placed where it was as a memorial for the deceased, she knew that. Luna sat down, and bowed her head with respect.

Raven:

Princess Luna wants the castle almost exactly as Princess Celestia originally built it but infused with protection spells right into the stonework this time so no-one can ever knock it all down again like... *(whispering) like she did...* She's not the same anymore, Gallant. Not since she came back from Diomedes. Not since she became... *that* again... Most of the populace don't even know she reverted. I think they would panic if they did. If I asked her, that would probably be the reason she gives for why we need to keep it secret. But I think.. you and I.. we both know that's not the whole truth. She's ashamed of what she became- what she did. She wasn't in her right mind but... Well, no amount of logic can

counteract that level of guilt... Even I am... unsure how I feel about her now. I was aware that even Princess Celestia had to use force to keep Equestria safe during conflicts of the past but... it is one thing to read of such things in dusty history books and quite another to witness it with one's own eyes. Perhaps if she did not so clearly need me right now, I would apply for a post elsewhere. **mirthless chuckle** What am I saying? I'm the seventh generation of inkwells to work for Princess... Celestia. Hmm.

Then it was Raven who glanced over at Celestia's tomb. She held her gaze to it, leaving Gallant a window to say his thoughts out loud.

Gallant:

I can't help you... I've been watching you fall for days. I want to do something! To catch you!..
Was this stop only here to tell me I can't?

He took a step forward, desperate to have her hear his words...

Gallant:

I'm here! I'm back! But we've lost... you all have. There's nothing I can do. I can't even tell you
not to be sad.. that I can hear you... that I've failed you...

...Then sat down and dropped his shoulders, remembering the futility.

Gallant:

Have I failed you?..

The brisk plating of Luna's royal garb provoked no reaction from Gallant as she landed a hoof on his back.

Luna:

In a world not your own, there's no use feeling guilty for what you have or have not done; The choices seen before you were never yours to make. You cannot change this world, but that is not why you are here. The Corporal Gallant who hailed from this foreign Equestria may have fallen, but he had not failed. Through bravery, and through sacrifice, he had even earned one
final wish...

Gallant:

A wish?

Luna:

You can hear it, can you not? Deep within your heart and soul. The reason you were brought to
this moment.

Raven:

I think about death a lot, these days...

Their attention was returned to the poor, grieving mare.

Raven:

When I die, will I face it as bravely as you did, Corporal Gallant? Will I cry and scream and fight against my end when it comes? Or will I simply give up and let death take me?

Gallant:

...I just want her to be happy.

A songbird flew by overhead. It perched itself onto the lowest branch of a nearby tree. Against the chilly, withering leaves the bird's feathers stood out like a perfect oil painting. A soft pink highlighted by accents of yellow and purple; the colors associated with Princess Mi Amore Cadenza, the Princess of Love.

Raven:

Uh... oh. Well. Yes. Princess Cadence... she has not been back since the funerals... she has declined all missives I have sent her. Returns my letters unopened. I hope she is alright. Well, as alright as one can be in her circumstances. I can barely imagine how she is feeling. I barely knew you, Gallant, and I miss you. She and Shining Armor were so much in love that it saved the entire capital during their wedding. To have that love cut off so abruptly... so cruelly... **sigh** I wish I *had* known you better, Gallant. I wish we had met under different circumstances. I wish you were still here so you could ask me on that date. I think... I think I would have said yes.

She placed her forehead against the front face of Gallant's headstone. Gallant himself then did the same on the opposite side.

Gallant:

—I want to make you happy...—

Raven stood, and left the cemetery. Paying her respects to a few others on her way out. Gallant and Luna were left behind to watch before Gallant had his own words to lay at his grave.

Gallant:

Okay... I'll do it. I promise.

He turned to face Luna.

Gallant:

You were right. This was the answer. And now, I've got a game plan, more or less.

He knelt down and bowed as low as he could; the only way he could think to express his unyielding gratitude.

Gallant:
Thank you, Princess Luna.

Luna:
You are very welcome, Corporal Gallant. Now, It is time for you to return to the world of the waking. I do hope that you will find it easier to rest now moving forward. Fare thee well.

Gallant:
Farewell... And I'm sorry I called myself a lunatic.

Luna:
Pardon?

Gallant:
Nothing. Just had to get that off my chest.

Luna turned around to leave.

Luna:
Wake up, Corporal Gallant.

He shoved all jokes aside and beamed with an appreciative smile.

Gallant:
Thanks again. Seriously.

The Princess of dreams, the moon, and the night reciprocated with a single head nod before both ponies walked their separate ways, returning them to the more tangible Equestria that they each called home. Gallant opened his eyes. They didn't feel so heavy. Looking around he noticed that he was back in the medical ward, the room still as empty and silent as it was before. Peaceful. He wasn't back to "one hundred percent", but he could feel it, the nightmare was gone; It said what it needed to say and finally felt distant. All that was left to do now was to keep that promise.

He leaped out of bed, landing on all fours, *was swiftly reminded of his sprained right hoof*, but then shook it off as he started towards the throne room. Pain soon turned to determination with Gallant walking, speeding, galloping, *sprinting* to his destination. Before long, he was face to face with the guards who gave him that sprain to begin with, and there was no way they would allow him to get past the same way twice. He needed to think on the fly, outsmart them even.

Gallant:
Uh... No worries this time guys, *I've...* been summoned?

Expertly done. The throne room was emptier than it was last time, seldom a pony in sight.

Gallant:
Not here. 'Know where to check next!

The race continued; darting down through the doorway past the royal thrones and taking every corner through the corridor Raven had led him down when they first crossed paths. Now at the garden, he was right! She was there! Conversing with Celestia about what was surely important princessly duties.

Gallant:
Raven! Er- Miss Inkwell!

Raven:
Oh, I recognize *that* voice...

Gallant skidded to a halt just short of the two and here, looking the literal mare of his dreams dead in the eye, he realized only exactly now that he had no plan for what to say. That shouldn't matter, right? He knew how he felt, knew those feelings were true. So as long as he spoke from the heart, everything would turn out alright. Yes. Yes! He was ready. He again looked Raven in the eye, and spoke from his heart...

Gallant:
E-. Buh.. wanna, date?

Imbecile.

Raven:
...**laughter**

A steak through the heart would be an inaccurate simile, *that* would be merciful, *this* was nothing less than torturous!

Gallant:
(Thinking) *Seriously? That's* the best you had! Everything I've been through today **alone**, and I panic here too?!

Surely it wasn't game over yet. Laughing is a positive emotion, right? Maybe this was salvageable?

Gallant:

A-allow me to try that again. -I know I made a pretty rough first impression with you before and now a pretty *weird* second impression here, but, uh. Here me out? No. *That's also not the right wording.* Um.

Okay, Well the laughing stopped. Now she was just staring at him, a hoof on her cheek, waiting for his next amusing sentence.

Gallant:

(*Thinking*) Criminy! I'd take all the laser giraffes in the world over this! The other you made this look easy! Call her smart, say she's pretty, **do literally anything that isn't what you're doing right now.**

Third time's the charm. Gallant turned fully around, took a deep breath, then spun back to face Raven and start from the beginning once more.

Gallant:

Hi. Corporal Gallant of the Royal Guard, and I was wondering if you would like to go on a date with me! You're smart and you're pretty- and **funnily** enough, I wish I was having a nightmare right now.

He was sweating bullets, no sense in hiding it.

Raven:

Right. Well, you're lucky this gave me a proper laugh, else I'd be kicking your sorry rear to the moon and back after the *stunt you pulled earlier today.* So I'll help you save some sliver of dignity; you can go back and tell your "barracks boys" that she said, and I quote, "*Why, you seem like a perfectly sound and **stable** individual, but we. are. busy.*"

Celestia:

We're through with all of the more involved tasks for today. I'm sure I'll be fine to handle the rest on my own.

Raven:

What?

Celestia:

Everything that's left to do shouldn't require too much assistance, and if I'm wrong I can ask somepony else to fill in for you. Do you not trust me to keep organized from here?

Raven pulled in close to Celestia.

Raven:

Help me.

Celestia:
Ah-ah. Showing you.

Raven:
What!?

Celestia:
Come to think of it, you've outlined my entire schedule for the week, correct? I have your notes and I can follow them to the letter, so take a vacation for yourself.

Raven:
Princess Celestia, I don't need to take a vacation any time soon! I-in fact! I've already taken one this year if you'll remember.

Celestia:
Then have another. You deserve it after all.

It was unbelievable. Raven *couldn't believe* what she was witnessing. Princess Celestia had been known to tease and make odd decisions in the past, but to try her hoof at being a matchmaker now of all times? Did she even know if this crazed soldier could be trusted after how their first encounter went? While all of this was going on, Gallant took a large step backwards and began to whistle; trying to act "natural" in this supremely awkward situation.

Raven:
You! You head case of a stallion! Why me!? I don't care what sort of heart to heart you must've had with Princess Luna, but out of all the mares in this castle alone you could've possibly chosen to "schmoose up" out of the clear blue sky, why in the name of Equestria would you choose me!?

Gallant:
Well? Because... Something tells me you have a good heart. And you work hard to put others before yourself, so you deserve to smile. You deserve to look around at the world and feel warm, deserve to see the orange autumn leaves falling to the ground and... and be happy.

He found his words. He spoke from his heart.

Gallant:
...I want to try and make you happy. Would you give me the honors of a hearty attempt at it?

Now, Raven was still angry, that couldn't be denied. However, no pony had ever spoke such a kind hearted sentiment to her before. She didn't know how to feel, and it read on her face as it was tinted with the slightest pink hue. Not too far up the path, Equestria's elegant solar princess was sniffing a rose she had plucked from the foliage around her.

Celestia:

“Gallant”. With a name like that, it comes as no surprise that he’d want to sweep you off your hooves.

Raven:

(Gritted teeth) **Celestia!**

Gallant:

Look, at the end of the day, this is completely your decision. I’m not gonna be a creep about it, that would sort of *destroy* the whole “happiness” point of me asking-

Raven:

Oh, shut your mouth. This was already set in stone as soon as the princess got that look in her eye. She wants me to take a vacation? Fine... I suppose I don’t see the *harm* in... -sssstarting it with you.

Unbelievably lucky. That’s how Gallant felt. It was already apparent that he didn’t deserve her. He had to be the luckiest stallion ever to live, die, and live again. His face matched her’s with that slight pink hue.

Gallant:

Cool!

On Gallant’s lead, they locked elbows and were off to enjoy the world around them.

Gallant:

Hm. Y’know, when I was stationed in Ponyville for like, five minutes or what have you, I saw that they had a bowling alley.

Raven:

You want to fly all the way over to Ponyville to get your flank whooped in bowling on a first date?

Gallant:

Whooped?

Raven:

I’ve been around a lane or two *million* in my time. “*Strike*” is my *middle name*.

Gallant:

Exciting! But don’t get too comfortable, I was a mini pro myself way back when. They called me “The Horned Hornet” when I smashed through those pins!

Raven:

“They” being who, exactly?

Gallant:

Me, myself, and I! The name never stuck with anypony else, but I'll earn it today when I best you on the lanes!

Raven:

Ugh, now I *have* to win for *your* sake. You'd never survive the world with a name like that.

Celestia watched the pair as they exited the garden and soon after they were gone, Princess Luna flew down from her tower to make something very clear to her sister.

Luna:

Tia, if the next pony you decide to play "favorites" with has trouble sleeping, do not *dare* bring it up with me on my breakfast hour.

Celestia:

I wouldn't *dream* of it.

...

...

...

Luna:

Sister, I truly wonder if it is brain damage sometimes.