

Kindness' Reward

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Chapter 1

"There you go, Mr. Badger. You make sure you stay off that paw now." Fluttershy told the small critter in front of her, one hoof holding up a bandaged paw while the other carefully stroked it's back. The badger gave a grumpy growl in response.

"Now now, it was her vegetable garden after all. If you're ever hungry, come see me, okay?" Fluttershy responded, patient as ever. She gave the badger back his paw and the creature wandered off. Fluttershy smiled and looked around. Today was just a perfect day in her mind. The sun had warmed the hill she sat on, making it all the more comfortable as she tended to the creatures that came to her for aid. She preferred to tend to them in her hut, where she could thoroughly clean and care for any wound or problem, but many wild animals weren't all that comfortable indoors, and she did her best to accommodate them.

However, her next visitor was no small critter. A cloaked figure emerged from the Everfree forest, turning to Fluttershy once she was clear. Fluttershy watched the figure approach, her nerves steadying as she recognized the pony behind the cloak.

"G-Good morning Zecora. How are you?" Fluttershy greeted her zebra friend as Zecora reached her and threw back her hood. Zecora came into town more often now, and she and Twilight visited one another frequently, but Fluttershy still didn't know the zebra that well. Her visit certainly came as a surprise.

"A morning it is, and quite fair, but I'm afraid it is a grim mood I bear." Zecora replied. Fluttershy blinked. Zecora's words were always rather pretty, but never easy for the pegasus to follow.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. Zecora nodded.

"I am sorry to ask, but of you I need a boon. Else I fear I'll be at my wits end soon."

"A...favor? What do you need me to do?" Fluttershy was hardly somepony most went to when there was a problem. She wondered why Zecora hadn't approached Twilight, or perhaps Applejack. They always knew what to do.

"I have found my stores raided by some manner of beast. I hoped you could discover what, at the least."

"Oh, I see." That made more sense. "I, um, I guess I can help with that."

"Your eagerness gladdens my heart. How soon can you be ready to depart?"

"Oh, we can go now." Fluttershy told her. Zecora nodded, turned around, and headed down the hill. Fluttershy got up and trotted behind her. She tried to hold back a whimper as they entered the Everfree forest. Even at midday it immediately got darker around them, the trees closing in and creating a thick roof above their heads. She knew that most creatures here wouldn't hurt them. Even the manticores were friendly, if you had the right touch. But there were the dragons, and the hydra, and all the darkness... the shadows themselves menaced her now. Fluttershy had never done well with darkness.

"So long as to my side you keep near, I promise you shall have nothing to fear." Zecora told her, apparently noticing her nervousness. Fluttershy nodded, swallowed, and tried to stop herself from trembling. Zecora lived in the Everfree forest after all. Surely there was nothing to fear with such an expert guide, right? Unless a tree fell on them, or they ran into a cockatrice, or they got stuck in a bog, or got stuck in a bog when a tree fell on them and were trapped as cockatrices got to them...

Fluttershy found herself getting woozy and realized she was hyperventilating. She stopped breathing in response, only to find herself getting light-headed. Just breathe, Fluttershy, just breathe. Remember what Twilight had said about breathing.

Fluttershy was sensitive to the noises of the forest, having spent most of her life in or around such places, and was familiar with its inhabitants. She knew the call of every bird, she could hear the growl of a mongoose in the distance, she knew the tracks in front of her. It brought some level of comfort to her, when she let herself relax enough to simply absorb all this.

Many critters made their home in or around the Everfree; it wasn't that long ago Fluttershy herself had gone into the forest to deliver a load of excess frogs to the nearby swamp. It gave her some small measure of comfort to know she was just as likely to run into something friendly as something not. And surely whatever had bothered Zecora was nothing more than a couple of rats that didn't understand the concept of property rights.

"And here is the place in which I abide; my stores I keep to the other side." They had reached Zecora's home, which was such an organic part of the forest that even Fluttershy hadn't noticed until they were upon it. Zecora led her around the back of her tree of a house to a sturdy wooden chest nestled against the trunk.

"None of it I shall really miss, though I do wonder what beast could have managed this." Zecora tapped a hoof on the chest. It hadn't been locked, but had been on a solid latch.

"Sometimes squirrels or raccoons get oh so curious." Fluttershy smiled in response. "They fiddle with latches and hooks, anything you can just nudge open. Locks work though." Zecora took this response in stride, simply nodding in return.

"If of my reagents they have their fill, I'm afraid they'll soon become quite ill."

"You mean this isn't food?" Fluttershy's eyes went wide. Zecora shook her head sadly and opened the chest. There were several small cloth pouches, each of a different color and labeled. Herbs and powders, Fluttershy realized, like what Zecora had used to create the poison joke cure. Furthermore, several pouches were tumbled open and there were empty spots in the middle of a row of bags.

"What need have I to store food? The forest provides for any mood."

"Oh dear. So, they'll get sick from eating what was in here?" Fluttershy asked asked. Zecora nodded.

"Oh no! We need to, um...we should do something."

"What would you have us do?" Zecora asked. "The forest is large, and of

us there are only two. I shall heed your advice and not rely on this latch, but as of the culprits we shall never catch."

Fluttershy nodded reluctantly, a sorrowful frown on her face.

"These reagents shouldn't be deadly, I think. Now why don't you stay for a drink?"

"Oh, um..." Fluttershy looked around "Maybe they didn't get far? Can I look around a little?"

Zecora nodded, and stood back, giving Fluttershy room. Some poor creature was likely out there, right now, nursing a bellyache, or worse! Fluttershy just couldn't bring herself to leave with this thought running through her head. She studied the area immediately around the chest, hoping for some sign of whatever critter had gotten into Zecora's supplies. The ground in the Everfree forest was almost always soft, bordering on boggy, and even small animals might have left prints. There was nothing right around the chest, so Fluttershy spread her search a bit more.

"Oh, that's strange. Zecora, do you wear horseshoes?." Fluttershy found a set of prints leading away from the home.

"Never in my life have I worn a horseshoe; zebras do not need them as you do." Zecora replied. She approached Fluttershy, curious, and saw the prints.

"Hmm." she frowned. "I had assumed I was raided by a beast, and quite sensibly. What kind of pony would do this is quite a mystery."

"You think somepony stole from you?" She asked. Zecora nodded, and Fluttershy realized that was the obvious answer given the evidence. Still, she couldn't imagine why anypony would steal, particularly from Zecora. Not only could nopony she was aware of use the herbs, but Zecora was always free with her supplies - take the poison joke incident for example, where she had mixed up more than enough cure for each pony even after being accused of witch craft.

"Maybe, maybe there's a reason..." Fluttershy mumbled. She found herself slowly following the tracks, and Zecora followed behind. In addition to all

else, she found herself wondering where the pony could be headed. The hoofprints followed a tiny path, more of a natural gap in the trees than any real trail, farther into the forest. She was so engrossed by the tracks that she ignored all else around her, not noticing as she got higher and the ground got rockier.

She eventually lost the tracks, prompting her to look up at her surroundings. She turned to Zecora, who looked perplexed and intrigued. She was at the base of a small mountain, the trees giving out as the ground became solid rock. She looked up and could see natural caves in the mountain side, one in particular right in front of her, a shallow slope leading straight to its mouth. Surely there wasn't somepony living here? Zecora made her home in the forest, that was true, but...a cave?

"Does, does anypony else live around here?" she asked. Zecora shook her head.

"There is no place for ponies upon this rocky shelf; as far as I know, it is only myself."

Cautious, scared but curious, Fluttershy began up the rocky path, unsure of whether she wanted Zecora to be right or wrong. She was several steps up when she heard a low groan. It made her lock up, afraid it was some angry beast she had just annoyed. But then she recognized the groan as that of a pony. She had heard a lot of such moans after the infamous 'baked bads' incident.

"Um, is, is somepony there?" she called out as best she could. The groan stopped short. Fluttershy thought she heard a gasp.

"H-hello?" she tried again, taking a step closer.

"G-go away! There's no one here!" came a reply. Fluttershy squeaked, stepping back instinctively. However, something about the voice made her frown. She recognized it, but couldn't place it. She turned, to find Zecora's brow furrowed. The zebra nodded for Fluttershy to continue, giving her some reassurance.

"Are you, um, are you okay?" she walked forward. "Did you, were you, um, the one-"

"Be gone! Uh, umm..." she heard a zap, and suddenly smoke billowed from the cave. Fluttershy nearly ran before Zecora caught her.

"Oh that was a bad idea..." the voice groaned. Fluttershy swallowed and tried to stop her shaking.

"Those are the sounds of a pony in distress." Zecora said lowly. "Let us get to the bottom of this mess." Fluttershy nodded, turning slowly back around. She knew Zecora was right, even if whoever it was clearly wanted to be left alone.

"A-Are you alright?"

"Please...." the voice was so strained. Fluttershy forced herself up towards the cave, Zecora on her heels. Whoever was in the cave coughed again but said nothing more. Fluttershy reached the cave mouth.

"Hello?" she blinked, unable to make out much in the dim light. A figure near the back wall coughed.

"I-I command you to leave! No pony is allowed to see me like this..." the voice finally clicked in Fluttershy's mind.

"Trixie...?" she stepped inside the cave, eyes adjusting to the light. It was in fact the blue unicorn. Her mane and tail were torn rat's nests, she was covered in scratches and gashes, and her ribs were visible. It was hard to imagine, but the pony's cutie mark identified her as the showmare that had come to and left Ponyville a month ago.

"Leave..." Trixie groaned, panting. Fluttershy could hear the other pony's stomach growl, and the once proud unicorn winced, eyes tearing up. Her head slumped down against the ground.

"Trixie!" Fluttershy rushed to her side. She was out cold, her breathing pained and ragged. "Oh, um...don't worry! Z-Zecora!"

"Mmm, the Great and Powerful Trixie approves..." Trixie moaned. She felt

so warm and comfortable, and hung peacefully between sleep and wakefulness. In her mind she was getting a spa treatment, an expert young mare filing her hooves gently until they would gleam as she rested on a mountain of pillows.

"Masseuse next." Trixie ordered, half-asleep. She heard a squeak. Why, the spa girl must be timid. Trixie smiled; she loved them cute and innocent. Then, suddenly, she felt a sharp pain in her hoof that distorted the illusion.

"Ow!"

"Oh, sorry. I, um, just need to get the splinters out." the voice made Trixie finally wake up. She opened her eyes, immediately shutting them again as the light attacked her poor retinas. Groaning, she tried again, slowly peeking out from behind her eyelids.

She was on something soft, a bed she guessed, feeling what was no doubt a pillow beneath her head. She was on her back, looking up at a yellow ceiling. She was very comfortable, but too confused to enjoy the sensation. She turned her head to look around, immediately wincing as she began to feel her aches and pains again. She forced herself to ignore this, and as she looked she found another pony at her side, sitting on a stool and holding up Trixie's right foreleg. A yellow pegasus with a long pink mane that hid half her face.

"You!" Trixie accused. "Who are you? What are you doing?" she tried to tug her hoof away. She was so weak that it barely twitched in the other pony's grip.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I had to get them out before they got infected. I, um, I'm afraid some already are..."

Trixie groaned. The pegasus used a pair of tweezers she held in her teeth to pluck out another splinter. Trixie looked at it, eyes widening. It was bigger than a toothpick!

"What happened?" Trixie asked with a groan. She felt more dead than alive.

"Zecora said you tried to eat her ingredients. You, um, poisoned yourself a

little... I keep a lot of medical supplies, so we brought you here."

Trixie began to say something, but remembered what the pegasus was talking about, at least partially. "Right, the witch-pony." she frowned. "Trixie was...not in top shape at the time. She rightfully assumed that the witch kept food, not... whatever that was. What a silly pony."

"She's, um, a zebra...actually..." the pegasus shrunk away at Trixie's frown.

"Well, while the Great and Powerful Trixie appreciates being pampered, she has had quite enough of this. She shall be leaving now." she looked to the pegasus, waiting for her response. The pink-maned pony just gave a worried glance, but nodded.

"...aren't you going to argue with Trixie?" Trixie asked, a little hesitant. The pegasus shook her head.

"Well." Trixie huffed. "Good to see somepony with some good sense. The Great-" she struggled to get onto her side, wincing at every movement, "and Powerful-" the pegasus stepped aside as Trixie got off the bed, her eyes watering, "Trixie does not- woah." she fell down where she stood. She groaned, trying to lift herself from the floor, but found she couldn't support her own weight. A horrible, sharp pang of hunger made her cry out a little. She looked up to see the pegasus standing over her, watching her with such open eyes. Trixie looked away.

"Would you, um, like some lunch first?" the pegasus asked. Her voice wasn't mocking or sarcastic like Trixie expected. She was asking that in all honesty. Trixie was astounded.

"...the Great and Powerful Trixie would like that, yes." she admitted, not looking back at her caretaker. The pegasus trotted away, just leaving Trixie on the floor. Trixie looked around from her low vantage point. It was a tidy, sunny room, as far as she could make out. Almost disgustingly cute, all yellows and greens with rustic wood accents, like she had stepped into the home of spring itself.

Trixie's thoughts were interrupted by a small clatter. She blinked as she found a bowl of soup in front of her. She looked up to see that pegasus

pony smiling at her sweetly, having come back while Trixie had been distracted. Trixie looked back to the soup warily, then forced herself to lean forward. She put her lips to the bowl and began to drink. The soup was so warm, and felt so good.

"It's, it's okay. You don't need to cry."

Trixie stopped drinking and looked up at her crossly. "What are you talking about? The Great and Powerful Trixie does not..." she blinked and felt a streak of wetness down her face. She gingerly brought one hoof to her face and it came away damp.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie would prefer to eat alone." she said curtly.

"Won't you need help getting back into bed?"

"Hmph. The Great and Powerful Trixie is more than capable than taking care of herself."

"Oh...okay." Once again, where Trixie expected argument she got only quiet acceptance from the pony. She disappeared, and though Trixie couldn't see it, she heard a door closed.

Alone, Trixie got back to her soup. She felt more tears come and didn't have the will to hold them back. It felt so long since she had eaten, even longer since she had eaten anything substantial. The forest had seemed endless and thick whenever she had searched for an exit, but barren and full of hatred for her whenever she searched for food. There was no grass, the undergrowth smothered by the thick canopy. What leaves she had found had been bitter; berries had almost always been brightly colored and dangerous, and what wasn't clearly poisonous was usually scarce, such as a hoofful of foreign nuts or a patch of grass. It was as if the forest itself was evil; it had not just nearly starved her, but had grabbed at her legs and sides, it had tore her mane and tail, it had taunted her at every turn. So yes, she would allow herself to cry, just this once.

She drained the soup astoundingly quick, her throat sore as she gulped down the hot broth. She tilted the bowl up, getting every drop. Her belly felt bloated and painful, but she wouldn't trade the feeling for anything in the world. Surely now, she figured, she could get to her feet. She tried twice

before it dawned on her that all the soup had done was to make her heavier. She looked to her forelegs in frustration and realized she was bleeding from around her hooves, where the underbrush had always cut her worse and thorns and splinters had stuck in her. There were layers of pain to feel in that moment, from the dull ache of her muscles to the sharpness of cuts to the exquisite agony inside her. She was going nowhere.

"Um...you there! Pony! The Great and Powerful Trixie demands you come this instance!" she called, trying to lean to where she believed the door to be. She heard no response.

"Do you hear me? Come already!please?" she wavered. She heard the door click. She managed to look over and see the pegasus approach her.

"Do you need any help?"

Trixie scowled. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has decided, in her infinite benevolence, to indulge you for a while longer. You are now free to return to pampering me."

"Oh. Do you, um, want me to help you into bed?" The pegasus asked, acting as if she hadn't heard a word Trixie had said. Trixie scowled and looked away.

"...that would be acceptable." she muttered. She heard the pegasus trot around and suddenly felt a nudge in her side. She winced.

"Careful!" she shouted. She got no response, and the pony continued to nudge her. Confused, she tried to lift herself, as she assumed she was being prompted. Then she felt the other pony's head go underneath her. She found herself being lifted over the pegasus's back, briefly carried like a sack of grain. The pegasus turned to the side and lifted Trixie onto the bed. Trixie wriggled her way onto her back, placing her head back on the pillow. She looked at her hooves hanging in the air and frowned.

"You may continue the pampering now." she told the pegasus. The other pony just nodded calmly and got her tweezers out again.

"G-gentle now!" Trixie prompted, remembering how much it had stung

before. The yellow pony closed her eyes briefly and nodded. Trixie found the gesture demeaning. She was being...coddled.

"D-don't go getting ideas, you, you...commoner!" Trixie tried to sound intimidating. "Trixie is still great and powerful! If you had been what she had been through, you....ahhh....would not have even survived!" she found herself yawning. The weight in her stomach was beginning to settle, and her meal was sapping what little energy she had left as she began to digest it.

"Sleep would be good for you, you know." the pegasus said, managing to keep the tweezers in the side of her mouth as she spoke. She inched them back into position and leaned in. Trixie bit her lip as she felt something on her leg begin to leak. The pegasus just sighed and got off her stool.

"Hmph, I'm sure that's just what you want. The Great and Powerful Trixie at your....ahhbm, mercy." the pegasus came back with a washcloth in her mouth. She began to dab at Trixie's hoof. It came away with a small bloodstain, along with something disturbingly green. The pegasus was beginning to hum something gentle.

"What are you doing? The Great and Powerful Trixie is wise to your tricks."

The pegasus put down the washcloth, and to Trixie's surprise, began to sing.

"Hush now, quiet now, It's time to lay your sleepy head..."

"What? Are you seriously singing?"

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to go to bed..."

"The Great and...ahmm....is not some filly to be sent-"

"Drifting off to sleep, leave the sun and day behind you..."

"Stop...ahhm, stop that right....now..."

"Drifting off to sleep, let the joy of daylight find you..."

"Great and....powerful....mmmmm." Trixie's eyelids were closed, and her breathing slowing down. She slowly fell asleep, the pegasus waiting for the sound of a snore before carefully getting back to work.

Chapter 2

Trixie awoke slowly, feeling an odd peace about her that she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Her entire body tingled pleasantly, her muscles were entirely relaxed, and she found a smile on her face. She stretched a little and opened her eyes.

Almost immediately her mood fouled. There was less light than last time, but she could still make out the same yellow ceiling as before. She quickly remembered where she was and why. That pegasus, she had... tricked Trixie. Tricked her into accepting food and aid, Trixie realized. She wasn't sure what exactly the pegasus had done wrong. But the indignity of it infuriated her.

Trixie looked herself over and gasped slightly. Her body was more bandages than not, her legs entirely covered and several pads held to her sides with medical tape. She realized her muscles were relaxed thank to several damp clothes placed around her shoulders and hips. She shook them off and immediately regretted it, yelping as her bandages rubbed and made her aware of every cut and wound underneath. Slowly she rolled herself over to the edge of the bed. She slipped off and gingerly put her hooves on the ground. She winced but found herself still standing.

"Haha! The Great and Powerful Trixie is back in business!" she thrust one hoof towards the ceiling to punctuate her cry. Her face twitched as pain shot through her. "Ow..." she lowered her leg gingerly. Looking around, she spied a window and realized it was late in the evening, almost night time. She found the bedroom door on the other side of the bed and made her exit. If she was lucky, she would never see that sweet pegasus girl again.

"What?" she blinked at her own thoughts. That pegasus had been condescending, not sweet. She had also seen Trixie at her worst - which was still better than most ponies best, she assured herself. She needed to get out of here, her mind was still clearly addled. The door let out to a short L-shaped hallway that she navigated well enough in the low light.

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard a gentle tune being

hummed. She froze in place at the sound of it. If that pegasus thought she was going to work her magic on Trixie again, she had another thing coming. Trixie's eyes darted around, trying to find where the noise was coming from, as well as how she could escape.

"Oh, you're awake!" the pegasus appeared out of a doorway Trixie hadn't been looking at, a small tray balanced on her back. Trixie's eyes widened before she caught herself. What was she, scared of this pony? This nopony? She collected herself quickly.

"Ahem, yes. It is good to see somepony knows how to give the Great and Powerful Trixie the respect they deserve." she held out a bandaged limb. "But she is no longer in need of your services."

"Oh. Would you like to stay for dinner?" the pony asked. Trixie began to reply, but her stomach beat her to the punch. She found herself blushing, embarrassed by the display of weakness.

"Trixie is a most gracious guest, and accepts your offer of tribute."

"I made you a salad."

"That is...adequate for such a rustic, ugh, 'house' such as this."

"Would you like it in bed?" the pegasus asked. Trixie just stared at her. What was with this pony? Scratch that, Trixie thought, what was wrong with herself? This was just the kind of treatment she should be getting. But she had done nothing to prove her superiority to this pony, nothing to earn this devotion. Why did this pony go to such lengths?

"Trixie is more than capable of having her dinner downstairs, thank you very much. Trixie also refuses to have her meal on anything less than pristine silverware."

The pegasus, of all things, just giggled at her. Giggled at her! She walked away through a doorway, taking the tray with her. Trixie noticed she most definitely didn't hear the sound of silverware being removed from any cupboard. She sighed and trotted down the stairs, driven mostly by her hunger.

The kitchen was as rustic as the rest of the house, a surprisingly fine yellow table cloth placed over a table more suited to a family than a single pony. In a passing thought, Trixie imagined that the pegasus must often have guests. At one place was the bowl she had seen on the pony's tray. The pegasus was at a wooden counter at the kitchen's end, tossing a second salad as she hummed to herself.

"Well?" Trixie asked. The pegasus looked over.

"Oh, it's okay. You can start eating without me."

"Start- you- but-" Trixie stopped herself, realizing she was stammering. This pony was infuriating.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie demands, this very instant, that you-" her horn began to glow with magic, but all of the sudden Trixie felt herself lurch to the side, nausea coming over her.

"Ughh..." the world swam in front of her eyes. She heard a squeak.

"Oh, what happened? Are you alright?" she heard the pony rush up but couldn't see her.

"S-stay back!" she tried a spell again. It was an immediate mistake. The nausea overwhelmed her, and she felt herself stumble and collapse. Only she failed to actually hit the ground, feeling something soft prop her up. The other pony had caught her.

"Hurgh!" Trixie couldn't hold back, and felt herself retch, right there in the middle of the kitchen. She emptied her stomach in a series of heaves. Her throat burned and her eyes watered. She groaned weakly and felt herself pushed gently into a sitting position.

"There there..." came a soft soothing voice. Trixie tried dumbly to look around for its source. She heard the pegasus walk around, a tap ran, and a moment later something cool pressed against her face. She felt helpless, just letting herself be wiped clean.

"What...what has become of the G-Great and P-Powerful..."

"Sssh, sssh. You're just tired. You need lots of energy to heal. Here, it's okay..." Trixie's vision began to clear. It was filled with a yellow face and wide, open eyes. Eyes that told her to relax, that everything was going to be okay. Trixie's guard was down, and she found herself relaxing under the gaze. The pegasus began to guide her away. Trixie was more than willing to leave the site of her physical weakness incarnate.

Trixie found herself guided back into the main room. She noticed a lot of things she hadn't her first time through. A pillar with a strange little track around it, carefully carved holes in the walls, and birdhouses hanging from the ceiling.

"What kind of place...oh." Trixie nearly bumped into the couch she had been guided towards. She still felt woozy, and was more than glad to take her weight off her hooves. She got on carefully, laying down on her underbelly.

"I'll be right back." the pegasus said quietly. Trixie barely registered it and just nodded. She stared at her bandaged hooves dully, feeling worse than death. She didn't even feel the seconds pass, but all of the sudden the pegasus was beside her again. A bowl of salad was placed between her forelegs.

"You'll, um, you'll feel better once you eat." she was told. Trixie nodded and bent her head down. She tugged out a lettuce leaf and slowly chewed on it, taking her time. Swallowing was a little painful, but she managed. The leaf eventually disappeared, and she went back for another, this one with shavings of carrot on it.

She was halfway through the salad before she realized she was being watched. The pegasus was just sitting there, watching her eat. Trixie felt herself coming too again as she ate and scowled at the realization.

"Trixie does not sign autographs during meals, if that's what you're wondering."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not making you, um, nervous, am I?"

"W-what! Don't be foalish. Trixie does not get nervous. You are simply making a nuisance of yourself. It's quite unbecoming."

"Oh, you mean I'm disturbing you?"

Trixie sighed. "Yes close enough. Go...eat your dinner or something, would you?"

"Oh, okay. I'll be right back." the pegasus disappeared. Trixie nearly groaned, hearing her go to the kitchen and come back a moment later. She just sat there on the floor, right next to Trixie, and began on her own salad.

"Will you not leave Trixie alone for two minutes?" Trixie asked. The pegasus looked up, seeming so worried.

"But you're still sick."

"Trixie is not..." Trixie looked away. "And just why do you care? Are you some fan of Trixie's? Trixie isn't going to wake up to find herself strapped into bed, is she?"

"Oh, no, I'd never do something like that. You just looked like you needed help."

"What?" Trixie blinked. "But why are you helping?"

Now it was the pegasus's turn to show no comprehension. "Because you needed it."

"Ugh." Trixie sighed. "Fine, if you refuse to tell Trixie, so be it."

"Um, I..." the pegasus stopped herself and fidgeted.

"What?"

"If you, um, don't mind, what happened to you? You're very...thin."

Trixie looked to her side and frowned. She knew what the pegasus was getting at. She had lost a lot of weight, in terms of both body fat and muscle definition. Only now she realized how not only was her ribcage visible, but her legs had become rather spindly. It was no wonder she could barely hold herself upright, even given how light she must have become.

"It's, it's been a month since you left Ponyville. Have, um, you been lost the whole time?"

"Ponyville!" Trixie's eyes went wide. "We're in Ponyville?!" she leaped to her feet, eyes darting around. The pegasus was up and besides her before she knew it.

"Sssh, oh dear, please, it's okay. We're not inside the town."

"W-we're not?" Trixie felt herself gently pushed on, but it was all she needed to sit back down. A strong wind could have moved her at this point.

"I live on the edge of Ponyville. Um, are you okay?"

"You! You are from Ponyville then! You saw....that, that upstart make a foal of Trixie! No wonder you don't, don't respect her!"

"Oh, um, I, but I do respect you. I respect everypony." the pegasus drew away

"Don't lie to Trixie!" Trixie railed. "How, how could anyone respect me-respect her, after, after such an embarrassment..." she turned her head away, realizing her eyes were watering. She felt the pegasus put an arm around her.

"There there..."

"And stop treating Trixie like, like a little filly!" Trixie tried to shrug the pegasus off her. When she looked over she saw for the first time that the young mare actually looked upset.

"I, you seemed so sad..." the pegasus replied, backing away. "I'm sorry."

"Ugh. Look Trixie....stop looking at Trixie like that. Trixie just...are you crying?"

"Uh uh." the pegasus shook her head with a squeak, wiping her eye. It was the most pathetic thing Trixie had ever seen, and she found a lot of ponies

pathetic.

"Look, Trixie is....oh, alright. She is... very grateful for your aid."

"Huh?" the pegasus looked up, eyes half-hidden behind her long mane.

"Trixie...does not get lost. She has also never needed to stoop such barbaric practices as the wilds demanded. She may have gone without much food that past month. She counted her last meal, oh, about a week ago."

"A whole week...." the pegasus mumbled.

"Even Great as Powerful as she is, Trixie was not prepared to fight an entire forest. She...would not have lasted much longer." finally admitting to what had happened, Trixie began to lose it. She began to shake where she sat.

"All those cold nights...every attempt to find an exit ending in confusion....the hunger..." she didn't realize she was crying until a hoof brushed away the tears. It wasn't her own. She looked over to see the pegasus just smiling at her, though her eyes were worried and sad. Trixie was amazed at how much the pegasus could convey without saying anything. She wanted Trixie to feel safe.

"S-stop that. Don't p-pity Trixie."

"I, I wasn't." the pegasus shied away. "I, um, just thought you needed some, well....kindness."

"K-kindness?" Trixie almost believed it, but shook her head. "Bah, another word for pity." She sniffed and wiped an arm across her face. She winced, having forgotten the bandages around her arms.

"But..."

"Trixie is done with her dinner." Trixie pushed the bowl away. "And requires a bath."

"Oh, well, um....okay." the pegasus turned away. Trixie slid off the couch,

following some distance behind. She couldn't believe how little control she had over her emotions. The weeks had worn on her, she couldn't deny that to herself. The hunger had driven her to stupidity, that much was certain. When berries had made her sick and leaves were too bitter, she had turned to drastic measures. She had believed she had stolen a bounty from that witch-pony. They turned out to be everything that had made her sick before and more besides. If this pegasus hadn't come along....no. No more of that she told herself.

The pegasus led her upstairs and through another door in the hallway. The bathroom was small, simple, but it had a nice enough freestanding tub. There was a mirror above the sink which Trixie immediately headed for with a smile. She got up to it, and,

"Waaaah!" she reared away from the mirror in fright, making the pegasus jump.

"Oh, is there another spider? I asked them not too..."

"What, what has happened? That is not how the Great and Powerful...." Trixie stopped, slowly approaching the mirror again. Her face was gaunt, her eyes red, and her mane....by Celestia, her mane! Much of it had been torn or roughly cut, which in truth she had known, as it had gotten tangled in thick undergrowth or branches and she had had to force it free. She had promised herself it wasn't that bad, but it was jagged, uneven, and what hair remained was so dusty and dirty it looked brown instead of silver. There were enough twigs sticking out to build a bird's nest. She glanced behind her, in her horror realizing her tail was much the same.

"I, um, didn't want to do anything while you were asleep." the pegasus told her. "I have some scissors..."

"No, no, stay back!" Trixie turned around backed away from her. "Trixie will not have a hair on her mane ruined!"

"But it's already..."

"Why? Why Trixie?" Trixie shouted, hysterical. Everything began to unwind, finally. "Why did every last thing have to go wrong? First her carriage, and hat and c-cape, and that wasn't enough? What cruel goddess would go to

such lengths to destroy her? She's a showmare! Of course those stories were made up! Why did they have to....why did this have to happen...what did I do to deserve this?"

The pegasus tried to approach her, even though she looked scared out of her mind, her eyes wide. Trixie backed into a corner.

"Trixie can fix this! She's great, and powerful, a-and smart and beautiful. I-I can fix this." she strained harder than ever before, her horn glowing in a wavering blue light. Again nausea overcame her, but she tried to power through. It felt like her head was coming apart, cracking like an egg. She cried out, but kept forcing herself.

"Trixie, no! Please, no!" the voice sounded so far away. It was enough to break her concentration even so, her magic fizzling away. She lurched forward, the world spinning, and again found the other pony there, catching her and holding her up.

"Oh dear, please, the sink..."

"Trixie is f-fine..." Trixie said, forcing herself to swallow. She felt something on her back. It took her a minute to understand what was happening.

"Are you...petting Trixie?" she asked, trying to lift her head. All she got in response was a squeak, and the motion stopped.

"You do pity Trixie...." her voice wavered, "She doesn't blame you. Get the scissors."

A moment later Trixie sat there in front of the mirror, eyes dull as the pegasus snipped away almost all of her mane. Trixie found herself sniffing. She hadn't cried this much in years, and it was overwhelming. She glanced up at herself in the mirror but couldn't bring herself to watch.

Almost all of Trixie's hair came off in the end, in order to even it out the pegasus could only leave a couple inches. It made her mane quite curly, making her look younger than she really was. Apart from being dirty, the cut looked nearly professional. Her tail was likewise a silver-and-dirt tuft.

"Trixie supposes you could have done worse....ummm..." Trixie blinked. It

occurred to her that she hadn't once asked for the pegasus's name, nor had it been offered.

"Oh, I'm...Fluttershy..." the pegasus smiled weakly as she guessed what Trixie was after.

"Fluttershy. Trixie doesn't remember you from her performance."

"Oh...I was there..."

"Did you know those ponies? The ones Trixie showed up?"

"They, unm..." Fluttershy backed away. "They were..." she mumbled too quietly for Trixie.

"Say that again?"

"They were my...."

"Speak up, would you!"

"They were my closest friends...." Fluttershy admitted. Trixie cringed.

"Yet...you still aid Trixie."

"Everypony deserves some kindness." Fluttershy told her gently. "Would you like that bath?"

Trixie just nodded. She couldn't think what else to do. This pony admitted she had no reason to help her, in fact it looked like she had reason to hate Trixie, yet still she timidly offered more and more. So she just watched as Fluttershy turned to the tub and got the water running. The pegasus tweaked the faucets a little before turning back to Trixie. She looked like she had something to say, but hesitated.

"What now?"

"I, um, would you like help with your bandages?"

"Oh." Trixie looked herself over. She did look like she was halfway through

being mummified. Without her magic, she could only imagine the tedium of unwrapping herself.

"Why not? You've already wrapped Trixie up once before."

"Oh, I just, since you're awake this time..."

"You mean...you're worried about Trixie's dignity?" Trixie asked, chuckling dryly. "Oh, that's rich. Hah! You- ow." Even a short forced laugh reminded Trixie of the bruises about her ribs. She rubbed her side gingerly for a moment.

"Ow, yes. A-heh..." she looked up to find Fluttershy just staring at her with a tilted head and sad, sad eyes. Trixie found she couldn't meet those eyes and, to her shame, had to look away.

"Just do it." she told Fluttershy, holding out a foreleg as she sat down. Fluttershy nodded and leaned in, getting to work. Trixie watched as her wrappings came undone, revealing a matted coat spotted with dried blood. Fluttershy pushed away the bandages and lowered to the pads around Trixie's middle. Trixie tried not to wince - where it wasn't ticklish it was sore. She had bruised herself multiple times traversing unfamiliar terrain. Then Fluttershy lowered her head even further, practically sticking herself between Trixie's thighs.

"What are you doing?!" Trixie yelped. Fluttershy just looked up at her and blinked. That was when Trixie noticed she was bandaged up to her thighs.

"Nevermind..." Trixie looked away, trying to hide her blush. Fluttershy had all the care of a professional, and soon Trixie was completely unbound. Just in time for the pegasus to turn around and turn off the taps.

"I'll go clean up." Fluttershy told her.

"Yes, why don't you...I mean, go ahead." Realizing that the pegasus pony was going to clean up her sick in the kitchen, Trixie faltered briefly. She decided to just step into the tub as Fluttershy left. The hot water stung her at first, but she began to relax as she slid into it.

"This...is luxurious. Ah, for such a hovel, that is." she was so addled by her

recent ordeal that she was actually enjoying such shoddy accommodations. Surely she would be back on top in no time at all. Except...Trixie looked herself over. She was painfully thin, and even now felt quite weak. Her wounds would take days or even weeks to heal, and now her mane, her lovely mane! Even when she had been close to death, even when things had gotten grim, Trixie had had faith in herself. Things would turn around, she would pull through. Well...she had pulled through. This was it. She was weak, nearly helpless, sick and wounded. This was her big comeback. Trixie sank lower in the water.

She felt her senses dull and forced herself to stay awake. And what of that other pony, that Fluttershy? Trixie didn't understand her. Perhaps Trixie would find herself slapped with a giant bill when she could finally leave, something like that. Except...from the looks of things, the pony honestly wanted Trixie better. Perhaps she really did just care...no, that couldn't be it. She couldn't have a crush on Trixie, could she? What other motive could she have for all her kindness?

Trixie couldn't deal with that right now. Crushing or not, Fluttershy had been of great aid to her, and deep down, Trixie knew she owed the pegasus her life. So above all else, she feared getting thrown out before she could fend for herself. She'd be forced out into the cold again, or worse, be forced to face Ponyville. For the time being she was warm and had food in her stomach, albeit not much, and for that she was grateful. She had been at death's door before. She was walking away from it now, but each step was a journey in of itself.

Trixie forced herself to relax, the water taking the edge off her fears and worries. The bath was perfect for her bruises particularly, as well as her aching muscles. She kept drifting off, forcing herself to wake up before she slipped down further in the tub. She found it surprisingly easy to just relax and not think, feeling that even thinking took more energy than she had to spare. Eventually the water cooled and she decided to get out. She carefully stepped out of the water, and

"Ooof!" her legs collapsed underneath her. She blinked, trying to figure out what had happened. It was just like before, she realized. Panic swept across her. First her magic, now this...?

"Uhm, you there! Fluttershy! Fluttershy! Oh Celestia I don't want to die."

"Trixie?" the door opened beside her. Trixie found herself whimpering.

"I can't get up. Why can't I get up?"

"Oh, you're still, um, still weak Trixie, and your muscles will be relaxed. Don't worry, you can stand, you, that is, you probably just weren't expecting it."

"O-oh. I- Trixie knew that. Y-you can help Trixie up now."

"Why don't we get you to bed. Here." Fluttershy lay down beside her. Trixie crawled over and put her hooves over Fluttershy's back. She got the feeling that the only reason Fluttershy managed to stand was because of how light a load Trixie had become. The pegasus stood up, allowing Trixie to use her as support as she stood on her back legs. She brought down her forelegs carefully, and found herself remaining standing. She stared at her hooves for a moment

"Fluttershy?"

"Hmm?"

"W-why do you aid Trixie? Really?"

Fluttershy was quiet for a moment as she exited the bathroom. It was enough time for nightmare scenarios to play themselves out in Trixie's head. Now was when she found out Fluttershy was a stalker, or charging her for every minute, or had invited the residents of Ponyville to laugh at her and this was all preparation.

"Everypony deserves some kindness. And everypony needs somepony looking after them." Fluttershy's voice was gentle, almost like a lullaby, but Trixie refused to be lulled.

"What? No they don't. Trixie has never needed anypony. She's done fine all by herself. But... does this mean you don't expect anything of Trixie?"

"Just for you to get better."

"...I don't understand. Why go to such effort?"

"Kindness is its own reward." Fluttershy said simply, her voice so quiet and soft. They had reached the bedroom, and Fluttershy helped Trixie into bed. Trixie looked around.

"This is your bed, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's fine. I like my couch a lot."

Trixie nodded and crawled under the covers. She watched Fluttershy head for the door. It wasn't until the light had gone off and Fluttershy had left that Trixie finally realized the words on her lips.

"Thank you, Fluttershy."

Chapter 3

Trixie made her way down the stairs unsteadily the next morning, feeling rested but hungry. She realized as she walked down that she was being watched. Looking around, she found a white rabbit standing on a small end table, glaring at her. It made her feel unwelcome, but Trixie just glared back at it.

"Do not mess with Trixie, rabbit, or she may make you part of her next routine."

The rabbit did not look amused. A noise distracted her, and Trixie looked up to realize the birdhouses hanging from the ceiling were occupied, small sparrows talking to one another from their houses.

"What kind of house is this?" Trixie just stared on. Another bird emerged from a larger house. It was a robin that began to whistle a tune. To Trixie's surprise, a silky voice sang back, wordlessly, in perfect key.

"Good morning- oh, Trixie!" Fluttershy entered the room from the kitchen. Trixie realized she had a light blush on her face and immediately scolded herself. Why was she blushing?

"Would you, um...like breakfast?" Fluttershy asked. Trixie frowned at the way Fluttershy kept pausing and flinching.

"You've carried Trixie, cleaned her, touched... a large part of her body... why do you still fear her? You see how...disgraceful she has become."

"I, just...I'm sorry." Fluttershy muttered, kicking at the ground. Trixie sighed.

"Trixie is...not trying to offend. She promises she is as benevolent as she is wise." she held up her head, still feeling a little of that old pride. At least until her gurgling stomach reminded her of why she had left bed to begin with.

"You mentioned breakfast, did you not?"

"Oh, yes." Fluttershy nodded. "Do you like oatmeal?"

Trixie nodded and continued down the stairs. That bunny watched her the entire time. He did not approve of her, that much was clear.

"Angel be nice. She's our guest." Fluttershy told the bunny as she passed by. The rabbit shook his head and hopped away, for which Trixie found herself unexpectedly glad. She followed Fluttershy in the kitchen and took a seat as the pegasus got to preparing breakfast.

"Trixie has been...thinking on your words last night."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Trixie... does not know what you expect of her. But she has nothing to give in return for your kindness. So, she promises to be out of your hair soon. She can leave after breakfast."

"You...want to leave? Already?"

Trixie nodded. "Trixie is a self-made pony. She does not rely on others for aid, not more than necessary. She shall pay you back one day, she swears."

"You don't have to..."

"Trixie has made up her mind." Trixie said, keeping her head high. She didn't see Fluttershy's worried glance before she got back to breakfast. She soon handed Trixie a piping hot bowl of oatmeal. Instinctively, Trixie tried to levitate a spoon for her meal.

That's a funny place to put a table leg, Trixie thought. She blinked. Everything was sideways, and she realized she could feel the wooden flooring against her side. She was being shaken lightly.

"Trixie! Oh, please wake up."

"What...what happened?" Trixie found her mouth awkward and hard to

work.

"You, um, blacked out a little. Healing takes time. Please...you're not better yet."

"But Trixie is... is a self-made pony..." Trixie realized she was whining. No, not whining she told herself. Just complaining.

"You'll feel better after breakfast." Fluttershy was helping her off the floor and she hadn't even noticed. She sighed and nodded. Fluttershy got back to her meal and Trixie did the same, eating like an earth pony, much to her chagrin. The oatmeal was heavy, and she soon found herself not wanting anything after the first couple bites. She looked up to find Fluttershy watching her tentatively. The pegasus gave an encouraging nod to her. Trixie swallowed and forced herself to go back for more. She managed a half dozen bites before realizing anything more would make her sick again. She stared at the still mostly-full bowl.

"It..is time for Trixie to take her leave of you, Fluttershy."

"But..."

"No no, she shall not overstay her welcome. You...were most gracious of a host." Trixie turned away from the kitchen table. She wanted to prove that this was her comeback. That she was strong and powerful enough to return from this. As she exited the kitchen and made for the front door she heard Fluttershy trot up behind her. Trixie remembered herself and opened the door manually, rather than with magic. She looked outside; Fluttershy's hut looked out to green gardens, a winding dirt trail leading eventually to Ponyville. Trixie paused, unable to bring herself to that first step.

"Are you, um, really sure?"

"Trixie...will not be a burden."

"But...you've just had breakfast."

"Well, that is true..."

"And, it's cold in the morning."

"Trixie can feel the chill..."

"And, where, I mean if you don't mind me asking, where will you go? With, without magic?"

"Perhaps..." Trixie bit her lip. "Perhaps Trixie has not thought this through as much as she should."

"Would, would you like to stay for lunch?"

"Well, Trixie is hardly the kind to turn down such a gracious offer." she turned away from the door. She glanced to Fluttershy, who clearly had more to say. Trixie sighed and nodded.

"Would...would you like to see Nurse Redheart? I'm, um, more used to caring for animals, not...ponies." she looked guilty. Trixie looked herself over.

"You've done just fine as far as Trixie can tell."

"What about your magic?"

"Trixie...doubts any mere nurse might be able to help. Besides, Trixie simply needs her energy back."

"Oh, okay."

"So." Trixie turned to her. "What precisely does a pony do with their days when they aren't wooing crowds of ponies?"

"I, um, I take care of animals. And today's grocery day."

"Ah..."

"Would you like to spend some time in the garden? I find it very... refreshing."

"Yes? Yes, that sounds...adequate." Trixie honestly had no idea how that sounded. A bit boring, perhaps. Still, Fluttershy's smile was comforting as

she led Trixie out the back door. She found that Fluttershy's home backed onto gentle hills that separated her from the Everfree forest. The tree tops were visible from where they stood, and an involuntary shiver went through Trixie at the sight of them. It would be a while before she ventured into any woods again.

"Isn't it lovely?" Fluttershy smiled, eyes on the sky. Trixie couldn't tell what she meant. It was the day, nothing special. Had the pegasus never seen the day before?

"I love to help all the little animals. But it's nice just relaxing out here too. Here." Fluttershy guided her to the crest of a hill. There she lay down straight, right on the dirt. Trixie was flabbergasted.

"And...now what?"

"You have to, um, sit and wait." Fluttershy said. Trixie frowned. This was ridiculous. She should be...her mind stalled. What? Putting on a show? Dazzling a crowd, earning her bits? In her month alone, most of Trixie's thoughts had been preoccupied on getting back at Twilight Sparkle, the mare that had so spectacularly shown up Trixie. However, without so much as a spark of her magic, it seemed a futile endeavor. Which meant that for once in her life, she had absolutely nothing to do, nowhere to go. So, Trixie lay down beside Fluttershy. She looked around for a moment, feeling out of place, an intruder to something.

"This is-"

"Sssh." Fluttershy was calming, not commanding. Still, Trixie scowled. She wasn't sure which was more annoying, Fluttershy's timidness or the control the pegasus somehow exerted over her. Still, she quieted down. Fluttershy's eyes were skyward, and Trixie looked around.

"Here comes a friend." Fluttershy's voice was whisper quiet, Trixie looked around, not understanding what Fluttershy was getting at. There was nopony around.

"Hello there." Fluttershy said. Trixie looked back to the crazy pony - and saw a hummingbird sitting on Fluttershy's hoof. The pegasus giggled.

"And how are you today?" Fluttershy asked. The hummingbird buzzed in response. Fluttershy giggled again.

"Can you...you can't talk to them." Trixie stared at her

"I've always been able to connect with animals." Fluttershy told her, closing her eyes briefly. Suddenly a second hummingbird came by, sitting by the first. It buzzed excitedly at Fluttershy.

"Oh how cute! I'm so happy for the both of you."

"You...you're insane. Trixie has been staying with a mad mare."

"Oh, no." Fluttershy answered calmly. "They've just had eggs! Why don't you give it a try? Hold out your hoof..." Fluttershy gestured. Trixie blinked, preparing a tirade, when-

"I mean, please?" Fluttershy asked. Trixie found herself stopping and staring. Fluttershy's eyes were just so...big, so open, and in them Trixie could read hope, fear, nervousness...

"F-fine." she stammered, holding out her hoof as directed. Why did her cheeks feel so warm again? Fluttershy nodded to the hummingbirds, and one fluttered over and landed on Trixie.

"Oh, oh my." Trixie tried to hold herself still as the bird hopped about. Fluttershy giggled.

"Y-you better not make a mess on the Great and Powerful Trixie." Trixie scolded the bird, not putting any real anger behind her words. The bird responded with a tilt of its head and a happy buzz.

"Aren't birds wonderful?" Fluttershy asked. Before Trixie could respond, the pegasus whistled a small tune. Suddenly something dropped on the top of Trixie's head.

"Ahh! What is it! Did it mess up Trixie's mane? Um... any more, that is?"

"It's, it's just a robin. Come down little one, you're scaring her."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie was not - oh, wonderful." the robin fluttered off her head and next to the hummingbird. She looked over and saw Fluttershy smile at her, comforting her. Trixie found a smile on her face without understanding why.

"You're doing great. Why don't you relax, I, um, I should get going into town." With that Fluttershy stood up. Trixie felt herself panic.

"Wait, where are you going?" she convinced herself it was only because she was so unfamiliar with the animals around her. Even that made her realize how much fear seemed to rule her.

"Don't worry, they'll be fine. Be gentle." Fluttershy walked off. Trixie looked back to the birds on her hoof. One whistled at her.

"Oh dear." Trixie felt another bird land on her head.

Several minutes later, Trixie felt paralyzed. She was being treated like a lawn ornament, well over a dozen birds of all kinds on her head, her forelegs, even her back. A few had started a rousing chorus a few minutes ago. Trixie sighed. She was having a hard time relaxing with all this wildlife around her.

"You!" suddenly a voice came from above. Trixie blinked and looked up. The birds startled away.

"What are you doing here?" the voice accused. Trixie realized it was behind her, and she got up, turning around just in time for something to hit her. She cried out, feeling like she had been tackled by a raging bull, knocked clean to the ground. She looked up to find eyes like pink fire filling her vision.

"I caught you! I don't know what you're up to..." a blue pegasus with a wild rainbow mane growled at her. Trixie felt her eyes water - not only had the tackle made her side begin to burn, but the pegasus was pinning her down, stepping on her legs and belly.

"I...who...what." the sense had been knocked out from her as she stammered.

"What are you doing here? Were you sneaking up on Fluttershy? Don't you dare hurt her! You...hey, what happened to your mane?" the pegasus' fury was overcome with confusion. "Are you crying?"

"Please get off Trixie. You're hurting her." Trixie knew she was whimpering, but she couldn't help it as the pain worsened. The brash pegasus blinked.

"What...oh colt, what's wrong with you?" the pegasus looked her over. She finally fluttered off Trixie. Trixie gasped and rolled onto her side. She choked back tears, the pain not subsiding. Something inside her seemed to shift in a way she was sure it wasn't supposed to.

"Woah...you, um, okay there?"

"Fluttershy!" Trixie found herself calling the name without thinking it. "Fluttershy!" she sobbed.

"Wait..you know...um..." the pegasus looked around, backing away from the weeping, broken mare. "I-I'll go get Fluttershy."

Several minutes later, Trixie was still trying to stop her sniffing as Fluttershy lay an icepack over her side. She had been moved with care on to Fluttershy's couch. The pegasus turned around and looked at her rainbow-maned companion, who watched them warily. She shrunk away under Fluttershy's gaze.

"Why did you do that, Rainbow?" Fluttershy sounded more disappointed than angry.

"I-I didn't know! I thought she was going to...I don't know!"

"So...you attacked her?" Fluttershy asked. Rainbow, which was her name as far as Trixie knew, looked away.

"She didn't look bad until I got close. I was just trying to..."

"Could you please go get Nurse Redheart?" Fluttershy asked. Rainbow blinked.

"What?"

"I, um, don't know, but I think she has a cracked rib now. She's really, really weak, Rainbow. And I, I can't leave her alone. Please?"

"Okay. I'm...sorry, Fluttershy." Rainbow barely got the words out. Fluttershy shook her head. It wasn't her Rainbow should be sorry to, and everypony in the room knew it. The cyan pegasus glanced at Trixie one last time before heading for the door. Fluttershy turned back to Trixie, who had lowered her head between her hooves.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Uh huh." Trixie mumbled. "Trixie remembers that pegasus. She was right to be angry."

"But..." Fluttershy frowned. "...I..."

"Don't bother." Trixie told her bitterly. "Trixie gets it. Oh, goddesses, she gets it. Celestia must be punishing her for some transgression, though Trixie knows not. Helping her is a futile task, something will come to break the once Great and Powerful Trixie again. Apparently she deserves this." her expression was a mix of sorrow and stubbornness, part of her still refusing to give in.

"No pony deserves this." Fluttershy whispered. Trixie looked up to see Fluttershy's eyes were wet. After all she had faced, it wasn't her aches or pains or distraught heart that broke her. It was the sight of such a gentle, caring creature so broken up that sent Trixie over the edge. She began to sob freely, weeping for herself and for everything that had happened. Her life was in tatters. She had lost everything, and for every step forward she took she was just dragged back. She couldn't take any more.

She felt a soft pressure on her face, and then over her back, around her. She blinked rapidly to clear her eyes. Fluttershy had stood up to wrap her arms around Trixie, forelegs around her neck, cheek brushing Trixie's own. Trixie paused, her mind going numb, not knowing how to react. She just lay there and felt Fluttershy around her, holding her tight. Slowly she found herself relaxing under the gentle hug, the tears beginning to dry. She

resisted it at first, but the feeling was overwhelming, calmness and tranquility practically radiating from the pegasus. Trixie awkwardly guided her own forelegs around Fluttershy, bringing them to meet just above the pegasus's wings. The movement ached, but she forced herself into it. She held Fluttershy tight, afraid that otherwise the mare would vanish and Trixie would find herself truly alone again. The words she had failed to tell Fluttershy last night came to her again. She didn't hesitate this time.

"Thank you Fluttershy. Th-thank you." she whispered. Fluttershy shifted and slowly brought herself out of the hug. Trixie feared she had ruined it, that she had done something wrong. Still, she had no choice but to let Fluttershy free. The pegasus backed away.

Trixie's fears were allayed when she saw Fluttershy's face. Calm, smiling, eyes hopeful.

"Better?" she asked. Trixie nodded, despite the fact the pain was worse than ever. A blush spread across her face. The Great and Powerful Trixie did not weep, stammer, or hug random ponies. But, the thought came to her, she wasn't exactly great or powerful anymore, was she? She felt that this thought should have depressed her more than it did.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Fluttershy was at it right away.

"Oh, hello. Please come in." Fluttershy stepped aside to let in a white earth pony with a red cross cutie mark, followed by the Rainbow pegasus, and then - Trixie gasped. There she was. The purple mare that had so thoroughly ruined Trixie's whole life.

"Y-you!" Trixie forced herself to her hooves. "You, how dare you!" she leaped from the couch, and stumbled. "The G-great and P-p-powerful Trixie will...will..." the world swam in front of Trixie's eyes. She stumbled, but as always, she found Fluttershy by her side.

"I..." she could tell it was Twilight's voice, even if her vision was too far gone for her to make out the mare. "I came when I heard Rainbow Dash searching for the nurse. Trixie...I-"

"You came to mock Trixie!" Trixie cried, gnashing her teeth. "To see how

you've laid Trixie so low! What you've done to her!"

"Me? You blame...me?"

"If you hadn't...if..." Trixie leaned more on Fluttershy, aware her legs could no longer support her.

"Trixie, I didn't bring in the ursa minor. I had to protect the town! I came because I was worried about you. I always worried where you ran off without any of your things."

"You...worried?"

"Please, girls, she looks feverish." this unfamiliar voice must have come from the nurse. "Try to get her back on the couch."

Trixie felt herself lifted off her feet. She couldn't tell what was going on, and realized her eyes were full of tears. She blinked them clear as best she could, but everything remained slightly blurry. She was panting.

"Fluttershy?" she murmured. Yellow came across her field of vision and she smiled. Okay, she thought, she was safe now. With that, she closed her eyes, and her awareness of the world faded away.

Trixie awoke groggy, confused as to everything beyond her own name. She was distantly aware she was on her back, her eyes open. She wasn't blind, she realized, it was just very dark. An open window let in enough moonlight for her to make out details about the room once her eyes adjusted. She heard something like a sigh and looked to her right.

Fluttershy was fast asleep but sitting upright, resting on a stool beside the bed. Not fully aware of herself, Trixie reached over and brushed Fluttershy's cheek gently. It was enough to wake the pegasus up with a startled peep.

"You're awake! I was so worried." Fluttershy held onto Trixie's extended hoof. Trixie smiled.

"Am I going to die?" she asked. The idea didn't scare her, oddly. She couldn't cheat the grim reaper that long.

"N-no!" Fluttershy shook her head. "The doctor said m-malnutrition made your, um, your bones brittle. You, oh dear, had a cracked rib and were...bleeding inside." she shuddered. "They had to...they had to..." Trixie looked where Fluttershy was looking. She was on top of the sheets, letting her see her underbelly. She had fresh stitches down her side, part of her coat sheared away around it. Trixie's senses began to come back to her, and she wrenched her gaze away.

"I...I can't afford such a..."

"Um...it's okay..." Fluttershy hid behind her mane. "It's...it's paid for."

Trixie slumped her head back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

"No more lies." she said. "Why? You can't be that well off. You can't do this for any pony who comes by, or needs something. Why aren't I in a hospital now?"

"I.."

"Because you wanted to care for me yourself. Why? Why do you care? I-I don't understand."

She heard Fluttershy shift, and when she looked over she found her caretaker had stood up, her front hooves on the bed. She looked so scared, but after a moment gathered the courage to speak, albeit whisper quiet.

"You were so lonely. I've been friends with Rainbow for a long time, and, and I knew, when she bragged the most...she was the most scared. I knew you were scared, and...I wanted you to have a friend. I thought maybe, I...I could be..." she smiled. "Don't worry. I don't have a lot of expenses, and with everypony coming to me to take care of their pets... it was really no trouble."

"But why? What do you get out of it?"

Fluttershy smiled at her, simply and sweetly. "Kindness is its own reward. I....want to be your friend."

"Me?"

"Y-yes. You, um...you seem so strong, so brave."

"Me?" Trixie chuckled, but cut herself short with a wince as pain shot down her side. Fluttershy nodded, eyes darting to Trixie's stitches.

"You, well, never, ever gave up. How...?"

"A great and powerful amount of stupidity." Trixie said dryly. She looked away. "I'd be dead ten times over without you."

"But you would have fought."

"I have always fought." Trixie said. "Every day of my life."

"Really? Um, Trixie?"

"Yes?"

"C-could you, um, tell me? About yourself...if you don't mind..."

"What do you want to you know?"

"Oh...everything..."

Trixie took a deep breath. She was a storyteller, and had spent years talking about herself. But this was no tale of her greatness, and she had no flashy tricks or artistic flourishes to add. Still, now that Fluttershy had asked, Trixie found herself wanting to tell her.

"Trixie's earliest memories are of a small orphanage in Canterlot..." she began. A long and winding yarn unraveled from there, beginning with her childhood. Her childhood was not really that bad, the orphanage always having enough for them to eat, and there were many fillies of Trixie's age if she ever desired company. She had been neither popular nor unpopular, at least not until that faithful night. Her true story, as far as she saw it, began

with the orphanage's talent show, when she had been given a small hat and cape and told, like all the other unicorns, to just do her best trick. The thrill of being in front of the other children, the way she drew power from their attention while others cowered... the discovery of this thrill as a source of her magic, the way she dazzled the small crowd with a light show that, while she now realized was no more than the magic equivalent of third-rate sparklers, had made her stand out against the lackluster levitation tricks that comprised the total of the average unicorn's talent at that age. Trixie was the first of her age group to earn her cutie mark, and in her mind it set her apart for greatness.

Next came her short adoption by an old mare of a professor, no doubt intrigued by Trixie's talents. Only, rather than nurture her talent, the old mare had simply expected Trixie to be a particularly proficient maid, not an actual daughter. This led to Trixie's isolation during her formative years, and she combatted the boredom and loneliness with the only diversion the household had to offer - books. Diving headfirst into self-education, she stole the textbooks of her 'mother' and read late into the night once her chores were finally done, discovering her great talents with spellcraft extended far beyond mere flashing lights or billowing smoke. When she felt herself of age, though she was still more of a filly than a mare, Trixie performed a very dangerous and skillful transmutation. Normal transmutations, turning a rock into a hat or whatever, would be undone if the magician's magic waned, but Trixie took a couple of items from her 'mother' and crafted for herself permanent, exact replicas of the orphanage's hat and cape, made to fit her now of course. With hat and cape around her, Trixie felt herself ready to escape from her miserable home and make her way to Hollyhoof, where surely her talent would make her a star like never before.

After a brief time hitchhiking that taught her harsh lessons about the world beyond her home, Trixie managed to arrive in Hollyhoof, barely a bit to her name despite the modest sum she had left with. There she eventually roomed with a mare that would become Trixie's first crush; a fellow aspiring actress, but one who had had the good sense to splurge for a bus ticket away from her home. Trixie had found that Hollyhoof cared less for talent than it did a pretty face with a particularly narrow middle - the back of Trixie's mind noted the irony that, more than half-starved, she probably finally fit their requirements. She had worked bit pieces, a living background to third-rate movies. Finally, she had caught her break, after arguing with

another bit player had forced Trixie to show up the other pony just like she had done in Ponyville, and her flashy performance had caught the director's eye. Trixie was given a chance, told where to audition, what to say to get in, and how good her odds were. She had of course rushed home with the news, ecstatic, and slept the night fitfully as eagerness combated her desire to be at her best the next day.

When she finally awoke, of course, the remnants of the sleep spell were obvious to her. The audition had come and past. Eventually the truth would come out, as the other mare had slipped in as her, and then won the spot easily. She would get her break, as it were; a minor speaking role in a horror film, though apparently her character had died quickly enough she wasn't really noticeable. Trixie couldn't stay, their shared apartment being in the other mare's name. She gathered what few bits she had saved over rent and food, and once again abandoned everything else in the world, convincing herself that with her hat and cape, she could make the world hers. She would make them see how Great and Powerful she really was.

In time, Trixie felt the world did begin to see. She learned to dance for her dinner, setting up on street corners and panhandling, her extensive magical knowledge turned to parlor tricks to attract passerby. It was funny, to her, that her career finally took a turn for the better only when things couldn't get any worse. Small towns were always in need of entertainment, and by now an accomplished hitchhiker, Trixie began to make her rounds in the outskirts of Equestria. Eventually she made enough to rent permits at most towns, allowing her to set up in town square and really put on a performance. Within a couple years she had saved enough to buy herself a home; a small show wagon for her to travel in, even if she still had to move it herself or hire help from town to town. Finally came her arrival in Ponyville, and all Fluttershy already knew.

As she unraveled her tale Trixie felt something inside herself unwind, something she had held close to her heart for so long loosening its grip on her after all these years. Somepony finally knew, knew who she was and why she did what she did. They knew the mare behind the act. She hadn't intended it, but hadn't been able to stop it. As she finished, she saw tears dripping freely from Fluttershy's eyes, the pegasus making no attempt to wipe them away.

"You...you're..."

"Please...don't pity Trixie any more."

"I-I don't." Fluttershy told her, finally wiping her eyes. She held out her arms, just looking at Trixie and waiting for her. Trixie smiled, and inched over slowly, carefully. She held out her own arms and Fluttershy leaned in. They grasped one another in a gentle hug, resting their chin's against one another's shoulders. Trixie's smile widened and she closed her eyes. She couldn't place the feeling that swept over her, but whatever it was, she didn't ever want it to end.

"Thank you, Fluttershy. I-I am honored to call you my friend."

"Me too Trixie."

"Heh. Trixie has not been much of a friend, has she? You'll have to be patient with her."

"You're fine." Fluttershy told her. Trixie had nothing to say, so she just squeezed Fluttershy a little tighter. Fluttershy squeaked, but that didn't stop her from holding Trixie tighter as well. Trixie didn't want to let her go, but her side began to ache. Fluttershy took her signal as she let go and they detangled from one another. When the pegasus got back on her stool, Trixie could see she was blushing. Trixie leaned back and looked at her side again, her stomach turning at the surgical gash.

"It looks to be healing well." she frowned. "Was...magic used? It doesn't look fresh."

"You...um..." Fluttershy looked away, mumbling. It slowly came to Trixie what she was trying to say.

"Fluttershy...how long was Trixie out?"

"O-only, um, a day... and a half"

"It's been over a day?!" Trixie yelped, immediately wincing. "Ahh..." she studied Fluttershy's face. "You...cared for m- for Trixie all through out that?"

"I-I...yes."

Trixie just turned back to the ceiling, staring blankly up. Helpless, comatose for that long. She wondered if Fluttershy had managed to feed her - her mouth didn't seem dry, so she imagined the pegasus had at least managed to get her to drink. It was only now that she discovered her hunger, the sensation so familiar to her she was beginning to ignore it until it grew painful. She vaguely felt she should be enraged about the indignity of it all, being laid so low, yet searching her heart revealed gratitude that she had made it through. Gratitude and something she still didn't understand.

"Some of the others came by after we brought you back." Fluttershy told her. Trixie turned back to her and blinked.

"Rainbow Dash felt so, so bad. Please don't be mad at her." Fluttershy said. "And Twilight...she felt worse."

"It...wasn't her fault. Trixie understands that now."

"It wasn't your fault." Fluttershy said. Trixie smirked.

"Trixie never said it was." she quipped. Fluttershy shrunk back, her mane falling in front of her. Trixie forced herself to inch over and reached out, brushing Fluttershy's mane back.

"You shouldn't hide yourself." she told Fluttershy. "Take pride in who you are."

Fluttershy just smiled in return, but seemed honestly thankful for the gesture. Trixie could read it in her eyes. She eventually broke her gaze to look around the room, her mind turning.

"It has been some time since you've had your own bed, isn't it? Trixie shall take the couch tonight."

"Oh, no, that's quite alright..."

"No no. Trixie is your friend, and has relied on your kindness far too much." Trixie slowly got herself off the bed. Fluttershy looked as if she wanted to do something, say something, but couldn't bring herself to. Trixie got onto

her legs and found herself still standing, though she did wobble a bit.

"Trixie, please..."

"Trixie shall be fine, Fluttershy." Trixie smiled. "And she'll be just downstairs, okay? You need some proper rest."

"But...okay." Fluttershy responded. "Good night."

"Good night." Trixie exited the bedroom. The hallway was nearly pitch black. Trixie felt her way along, knowing that any magic would likely end with her on the floor again. She almost tripped down the first stair, and made it cautiously after that. The main room was brighter thanks to large windows facing the moon. Trixie headed for the couch. She wasn't actually sure she could sleep, but she could feel she was low on energy. Oddly not as desperate as before; she guessed as much bed rest as she was getting was doing her a world of good. She would rest on the couch until either the day came or something else to do came to her. She glanced to the window and yelped as something moved. She made out the silhouette of a rabbit. It was the same one as before, and it was still glaring at her.

"Don't worry little rabbit." Trixie chuckled. "Trixie is relatively sure you could beat her if it came to it." she continued toward the couch and rabbit. The bunny glanced to the staircase and back to her. Trixie felt that somehow, she understood.

"Calm yourself. Trixie would never harm a hair on her head, she promises you that." Trixie said, climbing onto the couch. On second thought, maybe she could sleep after all. "She would never let any harm come to Fluttershy." she yawned. "I promise."

Chapter 4

The next morning, Fluttershy and Trixie shared a breakfast of oatmeal again. Trixie found it easier to get around and ate almost an entire bowlful. She realized most of her original wounds were healing nicely, and while her side was tender it wasn't painful to move, usually.

"The others will want to know you're up." Fluttershy said. Trixie glanced down at the floor.

"Will they really care?"

"They're my friends too." Fluttershy responded. Trixie nodded, understanding what she meant.

"Shall we... go out?" Trixie asked. Fluttershy paused.

"Are you...are you sure? They could come..."

"Trixie has healed excellently under such adept care." she smiled at Fluttershy, who blushed slightly in response. "Besides," Trixie said softly, "she promises not to exert herself. She doesn't want to spend a single day more bedridden."

"Okay. A day out would be...nice." Fluttershy smiled. Trixie nodded and waited as Fluttershy cleaned up breakfast. They made their way to the door. That same rabbit was standing on a table nearby, watching them. He gave Trixie a wary nod.

"Aww, Angel likes you. He's usually not very good with strange ponies. Or... anypony."

"He and Trixie have an understanding, it seems." Trixie smirked. Fluttershy opened the door and they stepped outside. Trixie had to blink several times to adjust to the sunlight. She breathed deep in the morning air, feeling revitalized. She found Fluttershy watching her.

"What?"

"Oh, um...nothing." she looked away, failing to hide her blush. Trixie couldn't understand it, but it had an odd effect on her. The feeling from last night returned, not as intense but more noticeable to her. She tried to keep her head straight and followed Fluttershy into town, finding herself instinctively looking to the pegasus, merely out of curiosity of course. It was a few minutes walk, giving Trixie time to prepare for what she'd find. She had imagined her return to Ponyville many times over the last month, as fuel to continue on when her conditions worsened. With a flash and a bang she would return to town, earning back her respect, forcefully if required. All sorts of scenarios had run through her head, from a duel with Twilight Sparkle to beating an Ursa Minor herself to more ridiculous ploys involving framing Twilight or turning her friends against her. All this just seemed...wrong to Trixie now. She didn't feel bitter, and held no ill-will towards the other unicorn. It surprised her, scared her even. Had she changed so much? And if so, how?

The town came into view, and Trixie stopped to look at it. She had thought it a backwater hovel before, but now she realized it was quite a profitable, idyllic little town, bustling with life. Probably wholly self-sufficient at that; she remembered passing farmland on the way in. Most of the town was earth ponies, but a good number of unicorn and pegasus ponies were about as well. Almost everypony who passed had a smile on their face, enjoying some simple pleasure of life that Trixie couldn't fathom. All these ponies, however, had seen Trixie's boasting and one-upping, as well her subsequent spectacular failure. Trixie found her legs locking up.

"I-I can't do it." she stammered. Fluttershy turned around.

"Trixie?"

Trixie shook her head and backed away. "I've fallen too far. Too far gone. I'm a shell of the Great and Powerful Trixie. I can't go through with it."

Fluttershy approached her and put a hoof up to her cheek, giving it a gentle stroke. "Be proud of who you are." she echoed Trixie's advice. Trixie looked away.

"I don't know who I am anymore." Trixie told her.

"I do." Fluttershy replied. She lowered her hoof and turned back to Ponyville. She took only a couple steps away before looking back, waiting for Trixie. Trixie paused, not sure how to feel. She felt drawn to Fluttershy as if on an invisible thread. Fine and delicate as it was, that thread was the strongest force she had ever felt in life. Trixie forced herself forward and followed Fluttershy into town. She was still Trixie. She refused to cower at the sight of layponies; at least, that was what she tried to convince herself.

Trixie got odd looks in town. Mostly curious, and almost no pony seemed to recognize her. Those few that seemed to identify her tended to stare, often shocked. Trixie found herself sticking close to Fluttershy, as if for protection. Were it not for the mark on her flank, she figured, she would be an entirely different pony to them.

"Where are we going?" she asked, realizing they were cutting right through town. She tried to keep her head from hanging, but it was hard to have pride when lifting a spoon had sent her spiraling to the floor not long ago.

"To the library. That's where Twilight lives."

"She lives in...a library. Of course." Some of the old Trixie remained after all as she scoffed at the idea. Fluttershy glanced back to her, and her eyes were...saddened, disappointed. Trixie immediately regretted herself. A small part of her asked who this pony was to order around Trixie with a glance. A friend, Trixie thought back, that's who.

Fluttershy led her to a hollowed out tree near the other end of town. She knocked and entered - it was a library after all. Trixie forced herself inside.

"Hello- oh! Fluttershy...Trixie! I didn't know you were up." Twilight turned from the desk where she had been pouring over some dusty old tome.

"Since last night." Fluttershy offered. Trixie took a deep breath and turned to Twilight. She just looked her up and down, trying to sort out her feelings in this underwhelming confrontation. This...this young mare, no doubt a few good years Trixie's junior, had stepped in and done what Trixie had been fairly sure was impossible - best her at her own game. Trixie had blamed her for everything, even though she knew it had been her 'fans' that had brought the beast into town. Yet now...

"Trixie, I'm so sorry about what happened." Twilight said, sincere and worried. Trixie's eyes widened.

"You? You're...sorry?"

"I thought we should just let you go...without any of your stuff, or any idea if you knew the area, or..." she looked away. "I really should have known better."

"Twilight...Trixie has spent a long time thinking on that day. And she has thought long and hard on your role in that day." Trixie said. Twilight's eyes widened, and Trixie saw what she least expected - fear. This mare, with all her power and all her friends, feared Trixie. It brought a bitter taste to Trixie's mouth; once she had wanted Twilight to fear her. But it only served to remind her of her own rage, of the way she had lashed out at everypony. Trixie approached Twilight slowly, stared at her, and then brought herself down, going onto two knees while her back legs stayed up.

"I-I am sorry." Trixie said. Twilight stepped back.

"Trixie..."

"Trixie understands now, not every pony is like her. You never meant to show her up. Trixie envied your power, but she understands that she forced your hoof with her actions."

"It wasn't your fault. Snips and Snails..."

"Were led astray by Trixie's boasting. But aside that, no, Trixie apologizes for the insults she inflicted upon you and your friends."

"Trixie, please, you don't need to..." Twilight looked incredibly awkward. Trixie raised herself up.

"I...you..." Twilight stammered uselessly. Trixie nodded.

"You did not expect this of Trixie, did you?"

"To be honest? No, actually."

"Trixie, perhaps, has a new perspective on life." Trixie found her gaze sliding over to Fluttershy before she caught herself. Twilight noticed and nodded.

"I think...um..." Twilight scratched the back of her head, looking awkward. "I never wanted to make an enemy. I'm glad you've pulled through."

Trixie nodded. "Trixie couldn't have done it on her own."

Twilight nodded. "I learned that lesson."

"Oh?"

Twilight smiled. "I kind of used to think, well, that friends got in the way. That they distracted from what was important. I was a bit of an introvert"

"You?" Trixie tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She could see Fluttershy looking to her hesitantly, and wanted the other pony to know... something. That Trixie was trustworthy of her friendship, she imagined. "No. What, what changed your mind?"

Twilight chuckled. "Same as you, in a way. I wasn't given a choice in making friends. I don't regret it."

"I...Trixie didn't realize it, but she supposes..."

Twilight nodded, and conversation petered out. The three ponies looked at each other, slightly hopeful, slightly awkward, before Twilight gave a cough.

"We...I kept what we could salvage from your cart."

"Y-you did?"

Twilight nodded. "I didn't know where to send them. We...only looked a little, to respect your privacy, but we couldn't find any home address or anything."

"That's because Trixie doesn't have a home." Trixie responded glibly. Twilight startled.

"You mean the wagon was your home?"

"As much as it could be called such, yes. Where are Trixie's things?" Trixie hadn't imagined getting anything back. She dearly missed her old hat and cape now that it occurred to her.

"Oh, in the basement." Twilight nodded to a stairwell amongst the shelves. Trixie and then Fluttershy followed her in single file.

"And how did you come to live in a library?" Trixie asked. Now that she had stopped seeing Twilight as her foe or rival, Trixie admitted she was curious about her. They looked to have a surprising amount in common.

"Oh, um...Princess Celestia set me up here."

"The Princess?!" Trixie stopped, nearly making Fluttershy run into her. Twilight flinched.

"I'm, um...her personal student."

"...you. You are the Princess's... You." Trixie's brain stopped working. So much for the common ground theory.

"I...don't like to brag."

"...so Trixie is aware." Trixie managed dryly. "You...I." she sighed. "Of course. Of course!"

"Hmm?" Twilight had led them down into what looked like a combination storage room and laboratory. Trixie looked away.

"I hope you know how lucky you have it, Twilight Sparkle." she said lowly. Twilight tried to say something, but her mouth worked silently. She turned away and walked up to a chest in the corner of the room. Trixie walked up as Twilight opened it.

"It's...everything!" Trixie exclaimed. Her books, her notes, her mirror, her wallet...full of all her bits! Trixie felt like pieces of her life had been restored.

"It was really hard not to open those books. A couple of those books weren't even in my school's library."

"Probably because Trixie stole them from Celestia's school. Well, from a teacher at that school at least."

"How did you know I...you stole these?"

"In a way, yes. Call them family heirlooms."

"What?" Twilight's confusion deepened. Trixie sighed.

"Trixie will explain to you another time. If it is of such a concern to you, the books can stay here. Trixie hardly has the room for them in any case."

Twilight nodded, at least slightly mollified. Her brow furrowed again however, and Trixie could see the question forming in her head.

"Did you go to-"

"No. Another time. Trixie is most grateful however, do not get her wrong. Where is..." she looked closer, her heart sinking. "Where are my hat and cape?"

"What, they're-" Twilight stopped, and Trixie noticed the unicorn looking past her. When she turned around, however, it was just Fluttershy.

"I'm... sorry Trixie. It's all here." Twilight said. Trixie slumped but nodded.

"So Trixie sees." she sighed. "Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. Since, since you will have the books, could Trixie ask you to store her things a while longer?"

"Oh sure, I mean I have the space."

"Well then." Trixie turned to her. "You have done Trixie a great service. Trixie hopes from here on out we can be...agreeable towards one another."

"I would like to get to know you better." Twilight said, trying to smile. Her eyes kept glancing away from Trixie back to the open chest, specifically the books. Trixie stopped herself from rolling her eyes. She was getting the sneaking suspicion that Twilight might possibly be a bit of a nerd. A sweet nerd nonetheless, certainly showing Trixie more kindness than she had dared hope. So, Trixie smiled back, finding the gesture surprisingly easy.

"That would be welcome." she said, before turning to the stairs. Her mind turned to the 'others' Fluttershy had mentioned. Those she had mocked and outdone on stage. The pegasus was one, and Trixie imagined that they might be even by now. Then there had been an earth pony and a rather high-spoken unicorn....

Trixie was nearly out the door when she turned to ask Fluttershy about her friends. It was then she realized she hadn't been followed. "Fluttershy?" Trixie turned around. The library was empty except for a small purple dragon shelving books in the corner. Trixie nearly startled before remembering that she had seen him in Twilight's company before. A dragon assistant? The girl had even more to boast about if she ever desired. Still, the dragon appeared to be ignoring her, and Fluttershy nor Twilight were anywhere to be seen. She headed back for the stairs, and heard two ponies talking as she neared.

"...her whole life."

"I never would have thought..." Twilight responded. Trixie paused. She forced herself to call out through a suddenly tense throat.

"Fluttershy! Are you coming?"

"Oh!" the yellow pegasus appeared in the stairwell. She smiled up at Trixie.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay any longer?"

"I...not today. Are there not others?"

Fluttershy nodded and followed her up the stairs. They exited the library and Trixie slowed down to walk abreast of Fluttershy.

"You don't need to excuse Trixie."

"Huh?" Fluttershy blinked and then turned away, guilt clear on her face. "I-I wasn't. They, they all need to know..."

"Why? To pity Trixie?"

"They need, um, they need to know how much you've fought. How strong you are."

"I..." Trixie looked away. She drew a blank, so just let Fluttershy guide her through town. Her gaze kept sliding away from the town and back to the pink-maned pegasus that Trixie owed so much. She nearly didn't notice as Fluttershy turned to two particular ponies.

"Hah, see! Told you I could do it!"

"Yeah, but you didn' get th' clouds right!"

Fluttershy giggled, and Trixie looked over to find a familiar blue pegasus hovering nearby, arguing with a slightly less familiar orange earth pony.

"Hello Applejack, Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy's voice was so quiet, yet apparently her friends were used to picking it up and turned to her.

"Well howdy sugar...cube..." Applejack's face fell. Trixie felt the earth pony's eyes bore a hole through her.

"See, told you!" Rainbow Dash hissed, loud enough for everypony to hear. Applejack nodded, not taking her eyes off Trixie.

"Ah see it but Ah don' believe it." she approached Trixie slowly. Trixie leaned back.

"Um, Applejack was it?"

"Eeyup. Surprised you remember. Ah was only the pony you hog-tied on stage."

"T-Trixie apologizes. Trixie was only-"

"Trixie, Trixie. What, love the sound of yur own name so much y' can't bear not to hear it?" she circled around Trixie like a shark. Trixie didn't have a response.

"Well, oh Great and Powerful-"

"Stop that."

Everypony blinked and turned to the owner of these words. Fluttershy was staring at Applejack. For the first time since she had met the mare, Trixie saw Fluttershy get mad.

"Pardon?" Applejack asked, dumbfounded.

"She never meant to hurt you, Applejack. S-she told you it was a challenge. B-but she's still sorry." Fluttershy's voice was unsteady, but she managed to keep her head up.

"Sugar, this is Trixie! Miss 'Great and Powerful' and whatnot. She brought an ursa major, er, minor-"

"How did she do it?"

"By bragging!"

"But, you, you bragged you could....you bragged you could clear your whole farm yourself."

"Th-that was different!"

"Rainbow Dash bragged to you. In the, um, the iron pony thing. Do you hate her?"

"Tha' was also different!"

"You know, AJ." Dash said, coming down to the ground. "She kinda has a point."

"Wha- not you too Dash! C'mon, where's yer loyalty?"

"I am being loyal - to Fluttershy. I don't like it either, but trust me, Fluttershy wouldn't hang out with her if she was trouble. Come on AJ."

Applejack turned back to Trixie and looked her in the eye. Trixie just blinked, unsure what to do with herself. Her instinct was to glare back at the earth pony, but she knew it wouldn't help anything. Part of her called it cowardice, but the other part claimed it to be wisdom that motivated her. In any case, Applejack snorted and turned away. She didn't stop walking, apparently finished entirely with the group.

"Hey." Dash caught Trixie's attention. "Sorry about that. Oh, and the whole puncturing-your-spleen thing. That was my bad."

Trixie chuckled. "Was it now?" she shook her head. "You were trying to protect Fluttershy. I can hardly blame you." she smiled to the yellow pegasus, which earned her a brief smile in return. Dash looked between them, curiosity showing itself on her face.

"Well...yeah, right. So no hard feelings?"

"Not really." Trixie replied. She smirked. "Maybe a little."

Apparently the brash pegasus could accept this, grinning widely at Trixie. "Heh. Don't think about getting me back. You're looking at Ponyville's number one prankster."

"Prank? Me? Why the thought never crossed Trixie's mind." she chuckled. Dash laughed back and took to the air.

"You know Trixie? You're pretty cool." with that, Dash was off. Trixie chuckled a bit more and turned to Fluttershy.

"Quite the compliment." she joked. Fluttershy's eyes were bright.

"Actually... I think she's starting to like you." Fluttershy replied. Trixie blinked.

"Really?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Dash is really cool. She's fast, and strong, and can do oh so much..."

"Alright, alright, Trixie gets it." Trixie said, surprised at her own curtness. Something about having Fluttershy talk up another pony just didn't sit right with her. Perhaps it was taking away from her own greatness, Trixie mused. Still, she could see Fluttershy had been caught off guard by Trixie's sharp tone. The unicorn's mind raced to salvage the conversation.

"I know! A new title is in order!"

"W-what?"

"Trixie the Cool! No, it doesn't have the same ring to it." Trixie joked. Fluttershy brightened and giggled. Trixie's heart warmed. It shouldn't matter to her, she told herself. So what if these ponies liked Trixie? Did she think she was going to stick around? Did she think these ponies would have more than a passing impact in her life? Her smile faded.

"Oh, except, um, Applejack..." Fluttershy said, misconstruing the source of Trixie's small frown. "But don't worry. She's just...stubborn."

"Mhm. It's not like it will matter, in the long run."

"What?"

"Trixie is already well enough to walk around town, Fluttershy, look at her. And she has bits to her name again, enough for a small wagon if I remember right. How much longer until she must leave this town?"

"...w-what about your magic?"

Trixie flinched. "Oh...yes. Trixie had almost managed to forget."

"So you'll stay?"

"A little longer, at least." Trixie admitted. Fluttershy smiled at her. Trixie felt oddly relieved by this decision. She had to remember that this couldn't last. She needed to be strong, not become any more dependent than she had already allowed herself to become. She looked around, trying to guess

where they were going.

"The white unicorn. Trixie remembers her." Trixie realized aloud.

"Rarity." Fluttershy said with a nod.

"So, is it the five of you then?"

"Six. Pinkie Pie is, um, out of town. I don't think you met her. She'll be back next week."

"Oh. The six of you, all friends with one another..." Trixie shook her head.
"How do any of you ever get anything done?"

"It's always...exciting." Fluttershy said with a small smile. Trixie could only imagine. It did sound...exciting. Trixie imagined what kind of antics they could get up to. It was probably up to her friends to drag Twilight out of her library most of the time. Fluttershy was good with animals... she wondered if any of the pegasus's friends had pets. They probably had to come to her for help. And Rarity, she was the fashionable one, Trixie remembered her. By Celestia, how she got along with Applejack was anypony's guess. Trixie smiled. The stories they must have...she was just interested in the stories, that was all. She wasn't envious in the slightest.

"This is Rarity's shop." Fluttershy told her quietly. Trixie looked up in surprise, unaware of how long she had been daydreaming. Trixie found the shop bright, flashy, nearly gaudy - absolutely perfect. It was like a high-class circus tent. As a showmare, she couldn't help but respect the flashy store front; it had to attract the eye of every last passerby. Fluttershy led her inside.

"Rarity?" Fluttershy called into the empty shop.

"Just a minute!" came a call from the back. Trixie looked around. The dresses on display were eloquent, all colors of the rainbow. Trixie felt pangs of desire - any money she had had gone towards mere sustenance or essentials, but with her wagon finally bought for, she had set her sights on something eloquent, something as dashing as these dresses. She wouldn't trade her hat and cape for the world, of course, but she had been sure something to play up her natural beauty would be just what she

needed to take her act off the streets and to the royal court.

"Fluttershy, darling!" a white unicorn with a perfectly curled purple mane stepped out of a back room. Fluttershy walked over and greeted her friend with a quick embrace, one that the unicorn returned. Trixie raised an eyebrow. She guessed these two were closer than most.

"You're not here for that...order yet, are you?"

"No, no." Fluttershy shook her head. "Take your time. I was showing Trixie around."

"Oh yes." Rarity looked past Fluttershy. Her eyes widened and she held a hoof to her mouth, stifling a giggle.

"Excuse me?" Trixie had not expected this reaction.

"Well, glad to see someone has already received their comeuppance."

"What?"

"Your mane, dear, your mane!" Rarity started to laugh. Trixie blinked and looked up. Realizing what Rarity meant she lowered her head.

"I know." she whined. "All Trixie's beautiful locks, the years of care and careful grooming!"

Rarity stopped her laugh and gave Trixie a second look. "Why, my dear, I never knew you had such style!"

"Please! Appearance is the most important part of Trixie's show! She can hardly flash and dazzle looking like anypony."

"Oh I know! Why, I am forever trying to convince the others to put a little more care into their looks."

"Let me guess, Applejack?" Trixie asked. "Ugh! Has she even seen a brush?"

"Oh dear Celestia I've asked the same thing myself." Rarity said with a

wave of her hoof. Trixie nodded.

"You know, Trixie has often thought that she could have done with something more...dazzling. She was The Great and Powerful after all. Um, is, is. Excuse me."

Rarity chuckled. "Well well. I wouldn't have imagined, but I think you and I may get along fabulously."

Trixie lifted her head, holding herself proud. She looked over and saw that Fluttershy was positively beaming, eyes closed and the cutest little smile on her face. Trixie began to smile back before a small voice in the back her head reminded her of the situation.

"Well, for the short time Trixie is here, at least."

"Oh? You'll be leaving soon? Why ever would you do that?"

"What? Trixie has no home here!"

"Are you sure about that dear?"

"What?" Trixie blinked, but Rarity just gave an enigmatic smile and turned away.

"I hate to be rude but I do have work. It's been a pleasure."

"I...what?" Trixie turned to Fluttershy. The pegasus said nothing, hiding behind her mane again. Trixie gave the pegasus a look that she ignored by turning away. Trixie had no real choice but to follow her out, shaking her head at whatever she was missing. When she left the store she found Fluttershy standing just outside, watching the sky.

"It's such a beautiful day, isn't it?" Fluttershy whispered. Trixie looked up. She was about to ask Fluttershy what she was getting at when she felt a light pressure on her side. She looked over to see Fluttershy had closed her eyes and was leaning just against her.

"Yes..." she said softly. "Yes, it is."

Chapter 5

Trixie found the days passed by quickly and peacefully from there. She began to develop a routine. By the time she awoke Fluttershy was making breakfast, typically oatmeal, a warm and filling meal that started the day right. Trixie would take her mornings easy, still recuperating. She had gotten her books back from Twilight, and would review them, often in the garden if the weather held. She would then usually accompany Fluttershy into town in the afternoon, having lunch with her or just taking the chance to stretch her legs. She began to fill out little by little, her coat gleamed once more, and she regained her former energy. Only one thing stood between her and true health. That was why, nearly a week since her first visit, Trixie found herself in the Ponyville library again, Twilight Sparkle staring at her.

"Absolutely no magic?"

"None at all." Trixie shook her head. Twilight frowned.

"What happens if you try?"

Trixie shuddered. "Nausea. Trixie would rather leave it at that."

"Hmm."

"Well? Will you aid Trixie? Some book in here must-"

"There's no need. I know what it is." Twilight replied. "It's something we were all warned about in school."

"What is it? Is it curable?"

Twilight shook her head. "Trixie, there's absolutely nothing wrong with you. I mean physically."

"What?" Trixie's brow furrowed.

"Almost nothing stops a unicorn's magic, short of a few poisons that you

clearly don't have, as well as... you know. Even if your horn was damaged, you'd have some. The horn is a focal point for our magic, but it resides inside of us."

"what are you getting at?" Trixie asked crossly.

"It's an emotional block." Twilight turned and levitated down a book. She opened it and sent it over in front of Trixie. Trixie glared at the open page. Twilight kept talking as Trixie read along.

"Unicorn magic is a function of imagination and emotion. That's why our spells are internal, not incantations like some other magical species. Sometimes trauma victims or those with psychological ailments find themselves locked out of their own magic. Attempts to access the magic can cause a wide range of symptoms, usually depending on the trauma"

"Trixie is not crazy!" Trixie growled.

"No." Twilight said calmly. "But you nearly died of starvation, and then had to undergo emergency surgery for internal bleeding."

"Oh. Yes, that." Trixie backed down. "How does one fix it?" she awkwardly fumbled for the page with her hoof.

"Therapy, self-help...the fact of the matter is, Trixie, some part of you doesn't want to do magic. If you want to get it back, you need to identify why."

"That's...ridiculous! Trixie...Trixie is nothing without her magic! Why would she..."

"Trixie, it's okay." Twilight reached over and put a hoof on Trixie's shoulder. Trixie scowled at first, but sighed and turned her head away.

"Trixie...doesn't understand. You are sure?"

"Nothing can block a unicorn's magic, short of death or intervention from the goddesses. I... trust me, I don't think you've upset either Princess."

"Um... right, of course." Trixie replied, thinking back to her hysteria a week

ago. She shrugged off Twilight, beginning to pace. "This is...disturbing to discover, Twilight." she forgot when it was she had begun to address the other unicorn on a first name basis. It had come naturally to her at some point.

"I could lend you some self-help books if you want. This is a library after all." Twilight smiled at her. "I'm sure you'll get through it. We're here to help."

Trixie nodded, trying to smile back. It was amazing how quickly she had found herself accepted into the fold amongst Fluttershy's friends. Well, for the most part - Applejack had yet to speak to her since that first day.

"Trixie won't be needing those, uh, hopefully. She will think long and hard on this, rest assured."

Twilight nodded. "Take care. Say hi to Fluttershy for me."

"Alright." Trixie took her leave of Twilight. She wandered through town with her head low, mind churning. She was interrupted by a sudden loud gasp. She looked up to see a pink earth pony staring at her. Trixie blinked and the pony was gone.

"What was-"

"Oops, forgot your invitation!" a cheery voice behind her made Trixie jumped. She turned around and found the pink pony there, an envelope in her mouth. She matched Fluttershy's description.

"Wait, are you Pinkie Pie?" Trixie asked. The pony bobbed her head, smiling with her eyes. She leaned forward, prompting Trixie to take the envelope from her.

"Wow, I thought I knew everypony who knew me!" Pinkie Pie giggled.

"Um...my name is Trixie" Trixie cleared her throat. "The Great and...oh, nevermind. Fluttershy told me about you."

"Oh yippee! I'm gone for a week and I get a new pony when I come back! Yip yip yippee!" she began to bounce around Trixie. Trixie wondered just

what was meant by her 'getting' Trixie like some kind of toy.

"See you at the party!" Pinkie Pie said, having bounced behind Trixie. The unicorn turned around, but she was alone again. She looked around, but the earth pony was gone.

"Party?" Trixie fumbled the envelope open, still not used to doing things manually. Sure enough, it was an invitation to a welcome party. The place was Sugarcube Corner, and the time was tonight. Trixie's name (and title) were on the invitation.

"But when... how..." Trixie shook her head, remembering how Fluttershy had tried to describe her friend. She had assumed the pegasus's nerves had colored her description, but it looked like she had been accurate. Unsure what to do with herself, Trixie decided to head back to Fluttershy's hut.

Trixie let herself in and looked around Fluttershy's home. Angel was warding off some birds inside that were trying to get at a cob of corn the bunny was gripping tightly. The birds scattered as Trixie approached.

"Hello Angel, is Fluttershy home?" Trixie asked, used to the bunny by now. He glared at her, clutching his prize tight. Trixie laughed.

"Trixie will have her own lunch, do not fear."

The bunny nodded and pointed her to the back door before hopping off. Trixie nodded and walked out the back. She could immediately spy Fluttershy on her favorite hill, almost swarmed by squirrels. Trixie rolled her eyes as she approached, a smile on her face.

"Hello Trixie." Fluttershy greeted her. The critters parted around the unicorn, but didn't flee. If Fluttershy didn't fear her, the animals certainly weren't going to.

"Could Twilight help?" Fluttershy asked. Trixie sat down and looked away. She heard Fluttershy shift, squirrels chittering in annoyance as she displaced them.

"There there." Fluttershy held up a hoof to Trixie's face. Trixie blushed - she

couldn't understand how Fluttershy did it, but she could bring a blush to Trixie's face whenever she wanted, or so it seemed.

"Twilight believes my magic is gone....because I want it to be. She called it an emotional block."

"Really?"

"It can't be true. Trixie has been a freeloader for too long. She never wanted to impose on you."

"You haven't Trixie, I promise." Fluttershy responded. It was a conversation they had had more than once over the past week. Trixie shook her head.

"You cannot lie, Fluttershy. Trixie eats your food, and sleeps on your couch. Yet you refuse her bits all the same."

"Trixie." Fluttershy shifted closer, almost right against Trixie. "I, um, it's not a bother. I'm..." she looked away. Trixie found herself becoming accustomed to Fluttershy's mumbles, and she made out her words now. "I'm glad to have you. Really."

"You are too kind, Fluttershy." Trixie found herself getting quiet. "Trixie only wishes to repay that."

"Kindness-"

"Trixie knows, she knows. Kindness is its own reward. You may convince her of that yet." she smiled at Fluttershy. This time, it was Trixie that brought a blush to the other pony's face with such a simple gesture. For a few moments, Trixie allowed the silence to hang for a few moments. She tried to study the day around her, figuring out just what made her feel so content. The sun must be doing her good, she figured. She glanced back to Fluttershy, only to find the other mare was doing the same to her. Fluttershy looked away quickly.

"Oh, and Trixie ran into Pinkie Pie." Trixie said, deciding to move the conversation along.

"She's back?"

"And already planning a party, like you said. It's a welcoming party. It looks like it's... a party for Trixie. How...?"

"She does that."

"Trixie supposes she should be honored."

"You're not?"

Trixie took a breath, and looked away. She didn't want to admit it. It was something she had never encountered before, and was a sign of how weak she felt she had become.

"You're nervous." Fluttershy said, not phrasing it as a question. Trixie closed her eyes and nodded.

"Trixie understands she is not all-loved. She is powerless to defend herself this time."

"Trixie...you're not."

"I am....imagine finding your wings had stopped working. Or...you couldn't speak with animals anymore."

"That's not what I mean." Fluttershy told her. Trixie opened her eyes to look up. Fluttershy's eyes were so warm and peaceful now.

"You have all your friends now. I...I get real scared a lot. I thought I was powerless. But with my friends..." she smiled. "I know I have ponies that care for me."

"Hmph, how lucky for you..." Trixie replied. She immediately regretted it as Fluttershy drew back, letting her hurt show. Trixie could feel it, feel a pang in her chest.

"Fluttershy, I didn't mean..." she sighed, and tried to gather herself.

"Trixie... no. Listen, I know you care. I don't understand why, but I know you do. Perhaps you're the first, really. But 'The Great and Powerful Trixie' is a lone pony, a wandering mare. She always has been. You simply cannot be

there for her, and we're both fooling ourselves otherwise. She must stand on her own, or fail on her own. It is the only way for her to live."

"Then... here" Fluttershy extended a wing and twisted around. She brought her head to her wing and grabbed a feather in her teeth. She jerked her head back, flinching, and the feather came free. Trixie just looked on as Fluttershy brought the feather up and placed it behind Trixie's ears, tucking it in with her short mane.

"What's that for?" Trixie asked. Fluttershy drew back and let her mane fall over her face.

"I just....now I can always be..." she blushed and ended in a squeak. Trixie paused.

"You can always be... I understand, I think. Thank you Fluttershy. Perhaps Trixie is not powerless, not now."

Fluttershy's blush deepened, as pink as her mane. Trixie almost laughed at the adorable display.

"Come, you haven't had lunch yet, had you?" she asked, heading back towards home - Fluttershy's home, she had to remind herself.

Trixie stepped into the Sugarcube Corner, Fluttershy right behind her. The party was already in full swing, and few noticed her entrance. Pinkie Pie must have - before Trixie knew it the party pony was upon her.

"I'm so glad you made it! I've been preparing all day! Well, I've been getting home too, and then I said hello to you, and then to gummy... I've been preparing for almost half the day! We have punch and presents and party favors and pop and ponies - as guests!" she giggled. Trixie found herself backing away.

"Yes, well....Trixie will find it all, she is sure."

"Oops, time to change the music! Be right back." Pinkie bounced off. Trixie gave a sigh of relief. She glanced to Fluttershy, then twitched her ear,

feeling the feather she had kept in her mane. Reassured by the presence of both, Trixie entered the party proper.

Trixie found herself greeted by many ponies as she walked through, bringing a smile to her face. Most were fairly friendly, having seen her around town in Fluttershy's company. A few even asked her about her show, recalling that she had actually managed to dazzle and impress before the usra incident.

"Yo, Trixie!" Trixie heard a familiar voice and turned around. Dash smiled at her, but as Trixie turned to her a strange frown crossed over the pegasus face.

"Hello Rainbow Dash." Trixie said cordially. "Did you want something?"

Dash shook her head and the frown disappeared. "Nothing, I was just...hey, you seen Fluttershy?"

"Trixie left her near the punch." Trixie pointed over.

"Dash!" a third pony joined them, an orange pegasus filly. "You said you were going to have her tell that one story!"

"Oh, yeah, right." Dash said, looking distracted. "Uh, hey, Trixie, can you tell Scootaloo about the Ursa Minor? Scoots here was in Cloudsdale, I'm not real good on details."

"Me?" Trixie's eyes bulged. "You want...me. To tell that story?"

"Well Twilight is all 'oh it's not a big deal' and junk." Dash rolled her eyes.

"That story."

"Please." the filly looked up at Trixie. "Dash said it was cool."

"Listen, Trixie does not have the ti-"

"Pleeeeeease." the filly's eyes widened. She was just so scruffy and....adorable.

"Kid, Trixie would but-"

"Pleeeeeeease." The filly's eyes filled her head. Trixie sighed.

"Fine, fine. Ahem. Trixie believes it begins with the arrival of a particularly eloquent and classy showmare..." she began to tell the story to the enraptured filly. And as she did so, a part of her she had nearly forgotten began to wake up. Trixie didn't have her spells to aid her, but she began to add life to the story with motion and tone. She gesticulated most of the time, miming the actions of the mares that had challenged her, and how they had each been defeated. She lowered her voice to add suspense as the ursa thundered into town, waking everypony up, and raised it as the ursa entered the town with a mighty roar. That part of her she had left dormant roused. Other ponies took notice. Soon she drew a crowd as she danced about, space clearing for her. She leaned in to tell the ponies of the ursa's gnashing teeth, she drew gasps as she mimed the crushing of her own wagon. The showmare inside Trixie came back to life.

"And with a surge as magic brighter than the moon in the sky, the young mage swept the ursa minor back into the forest from whence it came, never to return to the town of Ponyville! And when she turned to survey the damage she found that the showmare had already vanished into the night, not a trace of her to be seen." Trixie finished, making the crowd's eyes widen. It was a story of their own town, one they had experienced not so long ago, but in Trixie's hooves it had become something magical, something larger than life. The party had all but stopped, everypony drawn in by the tale. Suddenly, the clapping broke out. Everypony in the room clopped their hooves against the ground, applauding and whistling at her. Trixie beamed. She felt alive again.

"Thank you, thank you! You are too kind." she tried to do a flip of her hair before remembering she had no mane to flip. She chuckled to herself - no pony had minded.

"Another, another!" the filly Trixie had started the story for bounced up and down. "That was so cool!"

"Oooh, ooh! This is like, a million billion times better than the clown I was planning!" Pinkie pushed to the front. "Another story would be super! Super duper! Super duper, um, looper!" if that pony grinned any wider, Trixie

thought to herself, her head was going to come apart at her mouth.

"Oh great, juss what we need. More lyin'" a voice came to Trixie's side. She looked over to see Applejack staring her down.

"Disappeared mah hoof. An' what happened to all yer boastin' in that story, hmm?"

"Trixie...always embellishes a little. She tells what's important to the story."

"Pah! Ah knew y' were just the same ole Trixie. Oh, sorry there, Great an' Powerful, right?" she glared at Trixie. Trixie backed away.

"Applejack, it's a party..." Pinkie Pie tried, looking hurt that her friend was bringing down the mood.

"It is? Oh, sorry, Ah figured it was 'listen to the snake-in-the-grass' time. Given that she can't seem t' keep her mouth shut long enough to let us ponies get along. What, saw a crowd an' ya juss had to be th' center, didn' ya?" she accused. Trixie shook her head, backing away.

"Trixie didn't-"

"Trixie, Trixie." Applejack mocked. "Maybe you could at leas' charge us to lissen to you lie, then you could stop leanin' on Fluttershy!"

"I-I'm not."

"She's too kind for her own good." Applejack growled. "Lettin' you use her like that."

"I...I..." tears brimmed in Trixie's eyes. She couldn't face this. She wasn't great and powerful, she was as worthless as the farmer pony claimed. She turned and fled, the crowd parting before her. She ran into the night, tears streaming from her eyes. Inside, Applejack snorted and nodded.

"Couldn' argue wi' the truth, could she? Glad that's...hey, anypony else feel cold all of th' sudden?" she looked around. She realized there was a wide berth around her. Confused, she looked around. Then she met a pair of expressive eyes that now conveyed an anger like she had never imagined.

Trixie was done crying by the time she heard another pony above her. She looked back to the open chest with all her old gear in it. What a foal she had been. She should have left town the moment she had been able to stand on her feet. This town had poisoned her. She didn't even know who she was anymore.

Muttering came from upstairs - no doubt somepony with that dragon Trixie had barged past. She had just needed to remember that she had ever once had pride, ever once been a somepony, strong and beautiful. She glanced up, and carefully brushed the feather out of her hair. She brought it in front of her and stared at it. She glanced to the chest, and back to the feather. Slowly, carefully, she placed the feather in the chest and closed the lid. She heard another pony rush down the stairs.

"Trixie!" Twilight sounded frantic. Trixie looked over, surprised. The purple mare held a hoof to her chest. "Oh thank Celestia. You're alright!"

Trixie frowned. "What? Trixie was yelled at, Twilight, not beaten. Though that might have been more merciful... besides, what do you care?"

"What do I- Trixie, look, Fluttershy said she couldn't find you."

"Fluttershy? Did she go after me?"

"Y-yes. After she..." Twilight swallowed. "Yelled at Applejack."

"Come again?" Trixie could hear the words...they just didn't make sense.

"She yelled at her. I don't mean Fluttershy-yell. I've only seen her angry like that once before. She yelled a dragon into submission... I think this was even worse." she shuddered. "When she was done, she ran after you. She came back and said you weren't at home. She and Rainbow Dash just went back out."

"I...she defended me?"

"She was so furious at Applejack." Twilight said. "I never thought, it, she, it

was worse than a Stare. It was a Glare. She... she made Applejack cry!"

"You're lying." Trixie replied, eyes wide.

Twilight shook her head. "Not to brag, but I've faced dragons, ursa minors, Nightmare Moon...I'll take all of them over Fluttershy angry. You gotta go let her know you're okay!"

"I must? No, no, of course I must!" Trixie got to her feet. All her regrets washed away at the thought of the yellow pegasus "Yes, you're right. Oh, oh my. I'm coming Fluttershy!" she rushed past Twilight. That strange feeling, stranger than nervousness to her, returned like never before. She felt like her heart was going to explode, like it wouldn't stay still in her chest. It infected the rest of her, demanding she move, demanding she not just sit in pity. Trixie rushed up the stairs and out the door, into the cool night. She found herself sure-hoofed as she ran towards Fluttershy's hut. Blood thumped in her ears, and the ground seemed to fly by underneath her. The hut came into view quickly, and moments later she burst through the door.

"Fluttershy!" she called the second she entered the house, her heart ready to leap out her throat. To her dismay, the house was dark and empty.

"Fluttershy?" she tried the kitchen, took a few steps up the staircase

"Fluttershy!" she peeked out the back door. Something colorful against the night sky caught her eye. She looked up, and was equal parts disappointed and relieved to see Rainbow Dash flying towards the house. She ran out to meet her.

"Rainbow Dash! Where's Fluttershy?" she asked. Rainbow cringed.

"She...hey, wait. Where's your feather?"

"What? I took it off, why does that-"

"Where?" Dash was in her face suddenly. "What did you do with it?"

"It's in a chest, in Twilight's house." Trixie said, perplexed and worried. "Where's Fluttershy."

Dash broke eye contact. "She...thought you may have run into the woods again. We started searching but, um...we got separated?"

"She's lost?!"

"Only a little. I came back to get our friends."

"And you're worried over a feather?!"

"I..." Dash paused. Her face grew grim. "So she didn't tell you, huh?"

"W-what? How is this important?!"

"Look, you see a lot of pegasus feathers around?" Dash retorted. When Trixie just gave her a confused look she continued.

"Look, we're not birds. Our feathers grow kinda like hair, so we only molt to lose our baby down. After that, we never lose them, not much. A pegasus only gives up her feathers on purpose for two things. One, if she's gonna die she gives them to her family to remember her. Two...if she thinks she's found her soulmate, they'll trade feathers. And I don't think Fluttershy's gonna die anytime soon."

"Her...soulmate?" the blood drained from Trixie's face. Rainbow Dash nodded, completely serious.

"You don't lose that feather ever, okay?"

"I...I..."

"We need to find her." Dash reminded her. "I'm going to go to Twilight. I'll get your feather too. What are you gonna do?"

"I..." Trixie looked to the Everfree forest. The forest that had almost killed her. The forest that had trapped her like a rat. The forest Fluttershy was now trapped in.

"I'm going after her." she said.

"Uh, if we have to look for two lost ponies...."

"Don't worry." Trixie told her. "This is Trixie we're talking about." she

flashed Dash a smile she didn't feel and headed towards the forest with confidence she didn't have.

At night the forest became almost pitch black, and Trixie was immediately unsure of where she was going. She looked back and there was no exit behind her, no trail even. Trixie swallowed and forced herself on.

"Fluttershy! Fluttershy?" Trixie called. Rainbow's words had nearly stopped her heart, but the urgency had returned to her and blood thumped in her ears. She didn't know where she was going, but something drove her on, an invisible thread tugged at her still. Moonlight pierced the darkness through gaps in the trees, and Trixie caught glimpses of red eyes and slithering bodies. She forced herself to ignore them and continued on.

Through another gap in the trees Trixie caught a landmark - a small rocky mountain forcing its way above the treeline. Trixie remembered that mountain - the one she had dragged herself up, half-dead, to try to avoid the beasts she now passed by. Of course, Fluttershy would think to check back there. Trixie redoubled her pace, trying to keep sight of the mountain.

"Fluttershy, Fluttershy!" Trixie began to call again as she neared the rocky ground. She stopped to catch her breath, straining to hear any response. She forced herself on, nearing the mountain. Then, as she inhaled to call again, she heard something. A long, high-pitched scream, the scream of a mare in great distress. Something inside Trixie broke at the noise.

"No! No, Fluttershy!" she rushed up the mountainside. The stone was riddled with caves, and her eyes darted around in search of the right one. Then another scream ran out and Trixie's head turned to a particularly large cave mouth just higher up than the one she had found. She galloped towards it, finding the cave grew lighter as she ran inside, not darker.

She rounded a bend in the cave and gasped, skidding to a halt. Fluttershy was in the cave, running around a mound of gems. Her mouth was opened wide as she stared up at a giant green dragon between her and Trixie, chasing after the pegasus.

"It's futile, little pest. Get back here!" the dragon roared, backing Fluttershy against a wall. Its back was to Trixie.

"F-Fluttershy!" Trixie called. The dragon turned its head and snorted gray smoke.

"Two pests in one night. At least now I'll have a decent snack."

Trixie snorted and steadied herself, staring down the dragon. "You shall not harm her." she said. The dragon blinked and laughed.

"Oh, and just what are you going to do, little pony?"

"Clearly you don't know who you're dealing with." Trixie replied, mind racing for a plan. "I feel it only fair to give you warning before it's too late." she began to casually trot around the cave edge, careful not look like she was heading somewhere.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie does not fear you, dragon. Why should she? You are hardly the most intimidating creature she has seen. Why, the beasts Trixie has faced eye to eye have had teeth larger than your tail! Perhaps you do not believe Trixie? Trixie understands, not many ponies have laid low ursa majors with such practiced ease as she." She was aware that the dragon's attention was still fully on her. "Even if you do not believe me, dragon, tell me, do you believe it worth the risk? If you so desire we can simply part, neither the worse for wear. So tell me, are dragons as wise as the stories tell?"

The dragon blew smoke through his nostrils. "So much talk. I think I'll take my chance, little pest."

"Well then." Trixie replied, "What you fail to realize is- Fluttershy run now! Run!" Trixie yelled. To her horror the pegasus just locked up in shock and stared up at her, barely shaking her head.

"Oh by Celestia's second horn..." Trixie swore. The dragon swept around in a growl, but saw his prey had remained in place. Trixie took the opportunity to run up to the dragon's tail. She pivoted on her forelegs and gave her best buck, whacking him with some force. The dragon yelped and turned around.

"Oh dear." Trixie tried to run as the dragon roared. She wasn't expecting such a large beast's tail to move with such agility. It flicked up behind her

and clubbed her, sending her flying across the cave. She cried out as she hit one of the piles of jewels, dozens of gems scratching and cutting into her side. She looked up through the pain to realize she had landed near Fluttershy.

"Trixie!" Fluttershy ran over, tears in her eyes. "I, I couldn't..."

Trixie smiled, flinching as her weight caused the gems to shift and scrape her more. "I'm sorry Fluttershy. I left your feather behind."

"My...feather?"

"Rainbow told me." those words made Fluttershy's eyes widen. "I wish I had been able to repay you for everything."

Fluttershy leaned in and nuzzled against Trixie's cheek. "Kindness is its own reward." she whispered. She pulled back and turned around.

"Touching ." The dragon chuckled. Fluttershy stood her ground. Trixie's eyes widened.

"Y-you won't hurt her. Y-you big meanie!" Fluttershy said, putting herself between Trixie and the dragon. Trixie was in awe.

"Fluttershy..." deep inside her, Trixie felt something change. It was almost like magic. Small, yet powerful, Trixie felt something inside her spark to life.

The dragon's claw swept at them. Trixie closed her eyes, her life flashing in front of her. The fighting, the loneliness, the hollow self-assurance and the lies, the anger, the bitterness...and then Fluttershy. She heard a small clink. She wasn't aware death came with a clink. Realizing she hadn't felt anything, Trixie opened her eyes. She looked up to find the dragon blinking at them, confused. His claw swept down again. Trixie kept her eyes open this time, and watched as the dragon's claw hit...something. A transparent bubble flickered around the two of them, the dragon's claw bouncing off harmlessly. Fluttershy glanced back to Trixie.

"Trixie, are you...?" she stared on. Trixie glanced up, realizing she could see light pouring from just out of sight above her. As the realization swept over her she could feel the light as well, or more aptly its source - the magic

pouring freely from her horn.

The dragon raged and swung at them again and again, each time an impenetrable bubble flickering into view as his claws scratched uselessly across it. Trixie stood up, her magic still building, coursing through her body. She felt electrified, every inch of her body alive and tingling. Gemstones lodged in her side fell free as her body healed itself, sealing her wounds closed as if they had never existed. Seeing her stand apparently made the dragon angry, and with a roar he unleashed a torrent of fire upon them. Trixie was ready and gathered her magic before her. She didn't know how she was doing the bubble, but another plan brought forth gems into the shape of a shield, large enough to completely block both of them and then some. The gemstones conducted her magic, creating a truly impenetrable shield, the fire harmlessly flying off around it. Trixie furrowed her brow in concentration and began to push the shield out, push the fire back. The dragon found his fire being pushed aside, the shield nearly reaching his maw before his flame stopped.

"Fluttershy, when I say, you must run for the entrance."

"N-not, not without you."

"No, I promise we shall stay together." Trixie's horn flared brightly. The dragon gathered his breath, trying to stare them into submission.

"Now!" Trixie yelled, sending dozens of gems darting towards the dragon, making it roar in pain. Fluttershy made a break for the exit, and Trixie followed suit, hearing the dragon continue its rage. Even the gems wouldn't wound him much, but they would give him pause. She prepared for the worst and gathered even more gems in the air behind her to create a solid wall. Just in time as flame shot around the gem shield, licking the walls of the cave. Trixie had time to be glad she had no mane or tail to singe. Then she both heard and felt a slam that shook the ground beneath her feet.

"Trixie!" Fluttershy called out. Trixie looked up and saw the dragon had shook loose dozens of sizable rocks that now threatened them. Thinking quickly, Trixie brought the gemstones above them, wincing as boulders rained down. The gems wavered but her spell held as they made it out the cave mouth.

Outside, Trixie forced the gems aside before dumping the spell. She felt like she was beginning to burn up, and the cold night air was welcome.

"I see something!" she heard a shout. She forced herself to her feet and looked up.

"Dash!" she called. The pegasus pony flew through the air towards them.

"Guys, they're over here!" she called over her shoulder. Trixie looked down to see the rest of the gang was running up to them from the forest. Trixie sighed, and began to laugh. They had made it!

The sound of tumbling rock caught Trixie's attention. She turned around, the smile fading from her face. The dragon pushed his way through the small rock slide, his face scratched and bleeding.

"This has gone on long enough!" The dragon roared. Trixie heard gasps and shrieks behind her. She drew herself up and inhaled deeply, sparing a glance at Fluttershy. Eyes so worried, but so hopeful as they stared back at her. Trixie turned to the dragon. She was exhausting herself, her magic was burning her from the inside, and yet the dragon still threatened Fluttershy. Her own life didn't enter into the equation.

"You. Shall. Not. Harm. Her." her voice echoed with the magic that overflowed her body. Her eyes flashed with pure energy, and an aura of blue fire shone around her. The dragon brought up a claw high above his head. Trixie's horn flashed with light and the dragon's claw rocketed to earth. It roared in frustration and brought the other claw up. That too Trixie pinned to the ground. It flared its wings next, threatening to take to the air, or perhaps sweep them off their feet - but again, before it could act, Trixie was ready. The dragon's wing tips went down first, and despite the mighty beast's thrashing it soon found its wings pinned down, surrounded in a blue aura. The dragon roared, but Trixie responded with a flick of her horn and slammed its head into the ground in front of her. The dragon looked at her with wide eyes.

"I would like to ask you again, dragon." Trixie said, approaching it slowly, her magic shimmering wildly. "Do you really want to go through with this, or shall you return to your little cave?"

The dragon just whimpered, its jaw held shut by Trixie's magic. Trixie nodded and released him. The dragon paused, and then backed away. It turned around and headed for its cave. It glanced back, but Trixie was still watching and shot it a look. The dragon sulked away. Happy with that, Trixie nodded and turned around.

The group was all there, staring at her with expressions of pure awe. Only Rainbow Dash wasn't looking on, and she was caring to Fluttershy, who seemed to have gone into shock. Trixie felt the magic around her fade. She slowly came forward to the group.

"Trixie.." Twilight came up to her. "That was amazing!"

"Is she okay? Tell me she's okay?"

"She-"

"Fluttershy's okay." Dash approached them. "Hey. You forgot this." she reached over and took out something she had tucked into her wing. It was a single yellow feather. Twilight and the others looked on in confusion as Trixie lowered her head to let Dash tuck it behind her ear.

"Thank you." Trixie said. "I just want to say...I blub flut-flut."

"Trixie? Trixie!" Trixie heard the voice call, but her world had turned to black. She felt the cool stone against her face and sighed peacefully as unconsciousness overcame her.

Chapter 6

Trixie groaned and stretched as she woke up. Her legs felt like lead. Opening her eyes revealed a familiar ceiling. It was the middle of the night, a half moon providing only just enough light to see by. Trixie wondered if she could go more than a week without passing out anytime soon. She glanced up as if to see her own forehead, and focused for a moment. Sure enough, a pale blue light emanated from her horn.

"Hah hah!" she shouted in excitement. A murmur caught her attention. She looked over and found Fluttershy asleep on her stool, just like a week ago. Trixie smiled and chuckled. She gazed on at Fluttershy for a moment, before a small part of her reminded her of her situation. Her smile turned into a deep frown. She forced herself out of bed on the far side from Fluttershy.

"I've taken enough from you." Trixie whispered. Her horn continued to glow as she enveloped Fluttershy in a magical aura. She gently lifted Fluttershy from her seat and pulled back the covers. She slid Fluttershy into bed, tucking her in.

"I'm sorry Fluttershy. I can't keep you with me." she paused, and then on impulse leaned over the bed. She bent down and kissed Fluttershy's forehead, lingering for a moment. The pegasus mumbled in her sleep and smiled. Trixie leaned back, walked around the bed, and headed out the door.

She cast herself enough light to see by as she lowered herself down the steps. She was nearly to the door when she saw an all too familiar silhouette on the windowsill. Angel hopped down and towards her. He got between her and the door.

"You know where I'm going, hmm?" Trixie asked. "That was the deal. I'm better now, Angel. Emotional block, heh." she smiled sadly. "I can't just stay here forever. I know how she feels, but how could it be? I have no home here." she lifted the bunny aside magically. Angel flailed about, glaring at her, but it was no use. Trixie had her power back, and that meant she had

no more place for another pony in her life. That was what her memories told her, at least. So she opened the door and walked out into the night.

The walk into Ponyville seemed longer than ever in the night. Trixie found her steps heavy and couldn't keep her pace up. She gazed at the stars. When had the nights gotten so cold?

"Perhaps I am still tired. I should wait until...no, no. It has to be tonight. Oh why did I have to-"

"Trixie? That you?" a voice came out of the darkness. Trixie looked up, and Applejack stepped into the light she was giving off.

"What...what are you doing here?" Trixie asked. Applejack looked away.

"Ah couldn' sleep, not after that. Ah wanted t' make sure you an' Fluttershy were okay. What...you weren't leavin', were you?"

"You said it yourself." Trixie replied. "I cannot keep 'leaning' on Fluttershy. She deserves...better."

"Better? Better?" Applejack looked as if Trixie had just admitted she was Princess Luna's mother or something. She shook her head. "Beggin' yer pardon, but Ah think y' don't have it quite right. Ah would know, after all, if'n there's somethin' Ah've learned after tonight, it's that it can be easier t' lie t' yerself than to others. Ah...Ah was wrong about you."

"I....really? But I still, I mean, no, you were right. I shouldn't have just taken so much..."

"Sugarcube, maybe you missed it, but you've given Fluttershy a whole lot more than you took."

"Huh?"

"Ah ain't never seen her like tonight, not even las' time she faced a dragon. When Ah ran ya out of Sugarcube Corner - which Ah'm mighty sorry for - she blew up like a firework at th' Summer Sun Festival. Ah don' think Ah've ever seen anything like it."

"I..." Trixie had forgotten what Twilight had said earlier. "But that still doesn't-"

"Lissen, ya know why Ah came wi' the others to get the two of you? We hurt each other, but Fluttershy an' I are still friends. Y' don't abandon your friends. That's why she ran into the Everfree forest for ya, an' from the looks of things righ' into th' dragon's maw for ya too. She did that for us too, but only at the las' minute. Ah've never seen her run towards danger, not for anypony. You gave her strength, Trixie, put somethin' fierce inside her. A bit 'f pride too I reckon, but all the same. An' Rainbow kept babblin' about you two bein', well..." Applejack trailed off, and Trixie blushed despite herself. Of course Dash wouldn't keep her mouth shut about that. As she thought about it, Trixie knew why Dash's blurting out of the situation wasn't any surprise. Trixie had grown familiar with the other pony; she had grown familiar with a number of ponies.

"Ah know y' had a life out there, an' Ah can't say Ah blame you for wantin' it back. But, if'n you wanted...there's a life for you here too, Trixie. Y'got friends here, y'know? Y'got... y'got... Ah'm no good at this, Ah'm sorry."

"A life...here." the idea was one Trixie had simply assumed would never be. Without needing to buy a new carriage, her savings alone could last her a couple years, maybe rent herself someplace small. There was always demand for a showmare in whatever town she visited, entertainment hard to come by, and this one was no different. She could work Ponyville as a regular gig, maybe branch out her act. And she had friends here. The insanity that seemed to follow this group, part of her own daily life? The adventure, the excitement, the stories she'd have to tell!

"I..I could stay here."

"We'd love to have ya."

Trixie smiled. "You're right. Thank you, Applejack."

"Ain't no thing." Applejack tipped her hat. "Hey. How come Ah don' hear you callin' yerself yer own name all the time?"

Trixie blinked. "I..." she only then realized she had done just as Applejack said, and hadn't referred to herself by name since the dragon's cave. She

chuckled.

"When I was still a filly." Trixie told Applejack. "I figured if I told myself I was Great and Powerful enough times, it would come true. Silly, isn't it?"

"Not really." Applejack smiled back. "Worked, didn' it?"

"I guess...I guess I'm finally happy with who I am." Trixie said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I should go before I'm missed."

Applejack chuckled. "Good night to ya." with that, they parted ways, each heading back to their home.

Trixie awoke early the next morning. She had been too anxious to sleep, and had only gotten a couple fitful hours rest in the end. She awoke to the rapid clatter of hooves on wood, and raised her head from the couch she had slept on. Fluttershy had run down the stairs, eyes wide, a small brown parcel on her back. She was visibly relieved by the sight of Trixie.

"Trixie, I...I was so worried..."

"Fluttershy...we need to talk." Trixie slid off the couch, but stopped and blinked at the parcel. "What's that?"

"I...I, um, wanted to give you these after the party...I was scared you had left."

Trixie shook her head. "No. What...?" Fluttershy placed the parcel before her. She undid it magically, taking care with whatever Fluttershy had found so important. The brown paper came undone and Trixie gasped. There, folded neatly, were her hat and cape. She almost didn't recognize them - they were pristine, vivid purple, and the stars sparkled like gemstones.

"I had Rarity fix them, I hope you like it...I'm sorry they weren't there before..." Fluttershy smiled. Trixie felt her eyes water.

"Fluttershy, I...oh Fluttershy!" Trixie leaped forward, wrapping Fluttershy in a hug, pressing her lips against the other mare's. She didn't even realize

what she was doing until she began to slip her tongue past Fluttershy's lips. She stopped herself in an instant and drew away, face hot and flushed.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Sssh." Fluttershy responded it gently. Trixie stopped, eyes widening.

"Fluttershy?"

"Ssh." the pegasus repeated, brushing her cheek. She leaned in, her warm breath on Trixie's face. Trixie looked into her eyes, those eyes that had always told her so much. Now they told her an entire story, the story of her own future. It promised to be exciting, even a little frightening, but full of joy. A future full of adventure and drama, where every day would be a story in itself. A future they could share together. Trixie's lips parted readily and she let Fluttershy kiss her. Fluttershy was soft, but not too timid. There was surprising passion in the mare, once one dug deep enough. What had Applejack told Trixie? That she had given Fluttershy strength? Apparently so, as Fluttershy began to put more force into the kiss, becoming more adventurous. Trixie was chuckling on the inside. The pegasus was adventurous to be sure, but inexperienced, much less so compared to Trixie herself. She decided now was as good a time as any to start repaying Fluttershy for her kindness, giving instead of taking.

Fluttershy was startled but open to french kissing, and Trixie eventually moved on to show her the sensitive spots behind a pony's ears, and down her neck - all first-hoof of course. She managed to get Fluttershy on the couch, where they were free to embrace one another without having to balance on their back legs. Trixie couldn't remember how much time passed, how much they did, but every second was bliss, and when they were finished both ponies were exhausted. Trixie found herself on top of Fluttershy as both rested on the couch, cuddling one another despite the heat between them. Trixie still felt vaguely giddy from it all.

"I see what you meant now." Trixie told Fluttershy with a grin. Fluttershy gave her a questioning blink.

"This is kindness's reward, isn't it?"

Fluttershy giggled. "Oh, not usually."

Trixie laughed in return, nuzzling against Fluttershy. "I-" she was interrupted by a knock on the front door. Trixie blinked and reluctantly slid off of Fluttershy. She got the door for her, and was met by an explosion of streamers. She reared back as a certain pink pony followed the explosion of colored paper that showered Trixie.

"Where are you guys? Come on, the party's about to start."

"Party? We just-"

"The party last night got interrupted by grumpy mcgrumpypants and saddymcsadpants. Hehe, that makes you sound like cousins! Boy, I wish I had cousins, but-"

Trixie just stared at her. "What are you going on about?"

"So we're having an emergency party-replacement party! I broke out the emergency streamers, the emergency cake, the emergency party favors, but not the emergency kit Mrs. Cake has, even though the bandages are so much fun! So many colors and they stick to my nose and make me as colorful as a pinata! Ohmygosh I need an emergency pinata!" she was all over the place, bouncing between overly sugary-sweet and dead serious. Trixie could just watch her.

"Hey! Why are you guys so sweaty?" Pinkie asked, making both ponies jump.

"A party sounds lovely, thank you. Why don't you go ahead and let the others know we'll be right along." Trixie said quickly, getting behind Pinkie Pie and shooing her away.

"Oh, okay. You sure you guys are okay-"

"Fine, fine." Trixie told her, forcing the persistent pink pest out the door. She sighed and wiped her brow as Pinkie Pie took her oh-so-subtle hint and bounced off. Trixie turned back to Fluttershy and smiled.

"Shall we?"

"Are you okay, after..."

"Come now, we're talking about the Great and Powerful..." Trixie chuckled.

"Sorry. Old habits."

"It's okay. I think..." Fluttershy blushed. "I think it's...cute."

"Cute? Cute? You think I'm...cute." Trixie laughed. "I shall show you cute, dear Fluttershy." she gathered her magic, and Fluttershy blinked as she was swept off her hooves. Trixie brought the pegasus to her, reaching up to brush Fluttershy's hair back and kiss her nose. Fluttershy giggled, curling up like a small child as she floated weightless.

"Shall I carry you like this to the Sugarcube?" she asked, teasing gently. Fluttershy giggled again, shaking her head. Trixie smiled and let Fluttershy down gently.

"I, um, forgot to ask...your magic?"

"I..." Trixie looked away. "Twilight was right. I didn't want it."

"Why?"

"At first? I imagine I felt I didn't deserve it. Then...I didn't want to leave you."

"Trixie....I, um..."

"That is something to discuss another time." Trixie responded, feeling about as eager as Fluttershy was to engage this topic. "Now come, before Pinkie Pie comes back to drag us there herself!" And with that, the two mares headed for the door.

"Oh, wait!" Trixie turned back and looked around the room. Some time during their intimacy she had felt it fall loose.

"Where'd it-oh hello." Trixie saw Angel off to the side, tapping his foot impatiently.

"Erm...you saw all that, didn't you?" Trixie asked. She wasn't sure why she

cared what a rabbit thought, but it was Angel after all, and that was different somehow. The bunny rolled his eyes at her and held up something from behind his back. It was the feather.

"Oh, thank you." Trixie said, slightly awkward. She lifted the feather, and took her hat and cape out from the paper where she had left them. She put them on and felt like a piece of her had been restored. Then, lifting the feather up, she stuck it through her hat, using magic to bind it to the weave, never to fall out. There; now, finally, she was complete. She turned back to the door, seeing Fluttershy waiting, smiling both literally and with her eyes. With those eyes, no words were needed. Trixie got back to her and they headed towards the waiting party.

"There's the mare of th' hour!" Applejack greeted Trixie as she walked into Sugarcube corner. She gave Trixie what was probably meant to be a friendly slap on the back; Trixie was pretty sure her spine was rearranged by the hit. She tried to grin at the earth pony.

"Yes, well, thank you." she moved away slightly from Applejack. She looked to Fluttershy on her other side and quickly rolled her eyes, which got her a stifled giggle from the pegasus.

"So...how are th' two of you?"

"Oh, fine, fine." Trixie said. Applejack gave her a look, but Trixie kept up a coy smile and walked into the party. She spied Twilight and headed for her, wishing to discuss magic with the other unicorn after last night. It occurred to Trixie she had one up on the mare now, what with that dragon ordeal behind her. It was amazing how little that mattered to her.

Unfortunately, Trixie found herself intercepted before she got to Twilight. Pinkie Pie was babbling to her before she even registered the party pony's presence.

"-and I made a whole new thing of punch before they even knew! But her mane never did grow back." Pinkie Pie looked to her. Trixie blinked.

"Excuse me?"

"What do you think of the party?" Pinkie asked. Trixie looked around. Dozens of ponies chatting, dancing to the music, sharing punch and treats, and-

"It's quite...is that a stage?" Trixie's eyes widened. A rickety wooden platform was set up against the wall, a lamp hanging from above, pointed down like a spotlight.

"Oh, I just set that up in case anypony felt like karaoke, or telling a story, or putting on a show..."

"Really?" Trixie gave her a look.

"I think that sounds...nice." Fluttershy said from behind. Trixie turned and saw her smile.

"You want me to...?" she looked around. Twilight had noticed them and approached, and Rainbow Dash came over as well.

"Don't you guys wanna see Trixie tell a story?" Pinkie Pie asked. Twilight's eyes lit up.

"That sounds like a great idea!"

"Yeah!" Dash piped in. "That last story was awesome!"

"You all want me to...?"

"Is Trixie going to tell another story?" It was the orange filly from last time pushing through the legs of the others. "Your stories are always cool! Like Rainbow Dash cool!"

"Cool it kiddo." Dash chuckled. "But that Ursa Minor story made Twilight sound cool. Twilight!"

"Thanks." Twilight quipped. Rarity and Applejack had spotted their bundle of friends and came over. Trixie found herself surrounded by smiling faces.

"What's up everypony?" Applejack asked.

"Trixie's gonna tell another story!" Pinkie Pie said, making Trixie's mind up for her. Trixie flinched and glanced to Applejack.

"Well, now don't that sound like a right nice idea." she tipped her hat. Trixie smiled and nodded.

"Alright, alright. I know just the story." Trixie walked towards the stage. Ponies saw her, glanced to the stage, and she found them parting before her. By the time she got up onto the wooden platform and turned around, she found everypony's eyes on her. Trixie smiled. This was where she belonged. Her eyes searched for Fluttershy, near the back, before she got started.

"Let me tell you the story of the.... of the Maiden and the Mage." she told the crowd, pacing slowly. Her horn began to glow, and a fog began to collect from nowhere. The stage creaked underfoot, shifting, growing, becoming sturdier and more proper with every step of her hooves. The fog began so spread over the stage, refusing to disperse into the crowd, hiding Trixie from them. Trixie hid the glow of her horn by tipping her hat forward and collected the fog into a solid wall. On it, she painted scenes of light, simple but beautiful, like the pictures in a story book.

"In a delicate, forested land..." Trixie narrated, showing what she told against the fog. "There lived a maiden, as wise as Celestia herself, charged with protection of a small hamlet." she painted the scene of a small castle and tiny thatched-roof town, placing in the foreground a pegasus mare with a long, flowing mane. "The maiden watched over all in her lands, from ponies to creatures both greater and lesser. She brought peace to all she passed, and kept a court of the wisest and strongest ponies in all Equestria"

"Then, one day, a wandering mage came to the maiden's lands." she depicted a blue unicorn in a cloak, throwing a staff on the mare's back to add to the fantasy. She had the mare walk towards the castle.

"The mage was strong and well-spoken, and earned an audience with the maiden." she shifted the scene to a throne room, putting the maiden on the throne and surrounding her with five other mares. "But the mage was haughty, and challenged the maiden's court. The maiden's most trusted

landowner, a farmer known for her hard work and simple wisdom, stepped forward to rise to the challenge, but the mage turned her tools against her and swept her aside." she wrapped up the earth pony and had the unicorn advance forward. "Next the maiden's bravest and most loyal knight stepped forward, but the maiden summoned a storm to combat her, refusing to truly engage the knight." for effect, Trixie blew a wind through the cloud, keeping care to hold the fog she was using in place. "The maiden's seamstress was next to admonish her - many would consider it a lowly profession, but the maiden knew of the seamstress's impeccable eye and valued her attention to detail and art. But the haughty mage tore down the seamstress's pride, ruining her prized work. It looked as if the mage was as powerful as she claimed."

"All the while," Trixie lowered her voice, just enough to make ponies lean in and pay closer attention. "Another of the maiden's advisors watched on. A wise sage, young of heart but with a wisdom far beyond her years. She allowed the mage to talk herself up, refusing to engage in such a prideful and foalish display as the mage was calling for. So the mage left the maiden's court, assured of her superiority, her victory."

"What the mage wasn't aware of was that while the maiden's lands were peaceful, they bordered a dark woods that ponies dared not venture into. This dark woods was sensitive to the evils that lurked in a pony's heart. The mage's power and pride did not go unnoticed, and the forest sent a beast forth to challenge her, to steal her power. The beast was all teeth and claws, coming in the night, rampaging across the maiden's lands. The mage rose to the challenge, planning to prove that she could offer better protection to the land than the maiden ever could." Trixie painted a dark scene, keeping the beast mostly unseen, just a giant toothy jaw with red eyes. Ponies' imagination could always scare them far better than she could "But the beast was prepared for a mage, and the mare's spells fell uselessly into the darkness surrounding the beast. The beast crept further and further, and the mage's tirade of spells did nothing to diminish its hunger for the mage's power."

"And then..." Trixie brought her voice down to a whisper. She extinguished every light in the room, let her scene fade, and put the crowd into total darkness. Next, she removed her hat, allowing the bluish glow to grow brighter and brighter, cutting through the fog, the crowd drawing a collective gasp of awe.

"Out stepped the sage." Trixie said, allowing the words a moment to stand on their own. A quite entrance could inspire awe where a loud one would only startle. She drew two red eyes behind her on the fog, giving the impression the beast was staring the crowd down. She placed between them and the eyes a single unicorn with a mane like the night sky,

"The sage stepped by the mage, ignoring her cries that magic was useless." Trixie brought the blue unicorn into scene, making her mime calling out to the sage. "The mage could only look on in awe as the sage summoned the winds to do her bidding, distracting the beast from its prey, addling it. Resident and beast alike gave tribute to the sage to try and slake the beast's hunger.." She magically shook the planks of the stage, adding a rumble as if they were in the midst of the storm or stampede. "The beast fought back, refusing to be distracted by the sage's attempts, raging against her forces. Her hoof forced, the sage was not concerned in the least, and in a grand feat of magic to rival the raising of the sun itself the sage lifted the beast and flung it back to the dark forest from whence it came, never to return!" she stamped her hooves, playing up the echo, and let the red eyes behind her wink out. She gazed over the crowd. Every last jaw hung slack, every pony leaned in to capture her next word.

"The mage, incensed and embarrassed, refused the sage's help after the fact. She had never seen such power, and then the sage, having defeated such a mighty beast, turned to the town it had ravaged and got to work clearing and aiding its ponies, alongside the rest of the maiden's court and the maiden herself. She required nor requested praise for such an act, despite doing more than the mage had ever imagined. The mage fled the town, shamed to find her power so useless, her words so empty."

"But our story does not end there." Trixie assured the crowd. "The mage had meant to run into the wooded glade of the maiden's land, where she could rest and recuperate. In her blind anger, however, she ran until she found the very dark woods that had tried to capture her." Trixie flashed up pictures of trees like hooked claws, lighting up dozens of red eyes to blink at the crowd. She decided to go direct here, and began to play the role of the mage as she narrated her own ordeals.

"The forest fought to claim it's prize, clawing at the mage at every turn!" Trixie leaped to the side as she brought down the shadow of a tree "The

mage was still feisty, but the forest had her trapped at every turn." she brought a coil of dark smoke around her that she pretended to rear up to avoid. "The mage fought for night after night, refusing the forest. If it could not have her in life, the forest would have her death, and the mage found hopes of escape vanishing with every passing night." she swept shadows across her, making sure to flinch at every one. She got onto her knees, and allowed a large shadow to dart over her before collapsing on her front.

"The mage was done for." she whispered from the ground, closing her eyes. "Her magic exhausted, her body more so. The forest had won. She lay herself down and prepared for death. Coldness and darkness swept over her..." once more she hid her horn, plunging the crowd into darkness. She waited, counting the seconds in her head, and then sprung up.

"And then came the maiden!" she cried out, her horn glowing brightly enough to be seen through her hat. She swept the fog around her, disappearing from view, and the light became muted. She brought more lights up for the crowd, but kept the brightest in front of them, drawing on it the maiden with the flowing mane descending to where a broken unicorn lay prostrate on a dark ground.

"The forest was sensitive to the evils of a pony's heart. And for that reason it could not touch the maiden, no matter how hard it tried, for hers was a heart as pure as the sun is bright. The maiden may not have had the power of her sage or her knights, but she held within her a light that could guide a pony back from the realm of the dead itself! The mage was not there yet, but ever so close, as the maiden picked her up and carried her back herself. She would not risk another pony in the dark forest, and she refused to let the mage die. She was charged with the protection of all ponies under her land, and when she had learned of the mage's mistake in escape she could not let it be. She returned the mage to her home, and began to heal her. For anypony else, the mage was already dead, yet the maiden could touch the poor pony's heart and remind her she was alive when she herself forgot. The maiden, with all her duties and all she cared for, found time to spend by the mage's side, refusing to see any fall under her care, even one most wicked as the mage had been."

" 'Why?' The mage asked her once. The maiden smiled and told her, 'Because it is right.' Refusing this, the mage asked again, 'Why?' 'Because it is right,' the maiden responded. And once more the mage refused. A third

time she asked, 'Why? Why aid me, me who has brought such terror to your lands? Why care for me, even after you have returned me from death's door? Why do you care?' And once more, the maiden smiled, and with the tenderness of a mother she told the mage 'Because it is right.'

"The mage grew healthy again under the maiden's guiding hoof. She was not loved by the court, but in time they grew to know her, and she them. There was strength in each of them; the knight's intense loyalty to her maiden nearly got the mage killed." Trixie stopped herself from giving a dry chuckle, trying not to kill the mood. "The seamstress, with her detailed eye, even saw something growing inside the mage. Something that the maiden had brought out of her, though she knew it not."

"But before the mage could discover this, the dark forest struck again. It could not touch the maiden, but it found one who could, a dragon greedy and terrible. One night the dragon came to the maiden's castle, and stole her from the court as they slept. Only the mage was awake, kept by the maiden's side as she healed. The mage panicked and spied the dragon heading for the forest. She called for a messenger to alert the court, but could not wait! Into the woods she ran, guided by a force more powerful than magic, a force more ancient than the forest itself!" Trixie allowed the performance to lighten a little more, throwing contrast on the shadowy trees that dominated her scene.

"The mage found the dragon in his cave, preparing to feast on the maiden. She did not hesitate, and stormed into the cave, demanding the maiden's release. She offered herself, body and soul, in replace for the maiden's life. The forest compelled the dragon to accept, for the mage's life would serve its nefarious deeds far better than the maiden's death. The mage submitted, but to her surprise the maiden did not."

"'Not without you' the maiden said, refusing to leave the dragon. 'I cannot leave without you.'"

" 'Why?' The mage asked, fearing the dragon would take them both. She looked into the maiden's eyes, and realized why. The maiden knew that if she stayed, she would fail all the citizens under her care. But the mage, as she had healed and learned the wisdom of the maiden's court, had taken something from the maiden. Something she never meant to take, but would never abandon. She had taken the maiden's heart."

"The mage understood. She understood why the maiden cared, why the sage was so powerful, why she stood now against a dragon. A force more powerful than magic guided them both, a force more ancient than the trees. Love, my ponies. The maiden had taught the mage to love."

"The love inside her fueled the mage's magic, and she broke free of the dragon, defending the maiden. The dragon's fire could not burn them, nor could its claws touch them." She depicted the fire almost too realistically, sending the audience leaning away as she drew two ponies facing down the terrible dragon. "And the two of them fled the forest, the forest that now could not touch the mage, not with the love in her heart. They fled, and returned safely to the maiden's court."

"There is one last part to the tale, my friends. For her service, the maiden offered the mage new robes, the finest crafted, to bring jealousy to Celestia herself. But that greedy, selfish mage, who had stolen the maiden's heart, she wanted something more. She stood before the maiden and said," Trixie got up on two hooves, and created a spotlight she pointed into the crowd. The crowd was shocked and all turned to face the center of the spotlight - Fluttershy. Fluttershy herself simply looked on, incredulous.

"Maiden, oh my dear maiden!" Trixie cried, real tears in her eyes. She stretched out a hoof to Fluttershy, who timidly began to approach her. "I pledge myself to you, my fair maiden. I will be yours until my coat grows white and my magic fades, and then I shall be yours still. Tell me you will have me, tell me I have a home in which to hang my cape and to rest this weary heart!" Fluttershy reached up, and Trixie helped her onto the stage. Fluttershy held herself steady by resting her hooves on Trixie's shoulders. Trixie searched her face, and smiled at what she saw.

"And to that the maiden said.." she prompted. Fluttershy swallowed.

"Yes. P-please, stay with me, be a p-part of my life. P-protect me, and I will try and do the same. I...I never want to lose you a-again."

"And the maiden and the mage looked into one another's eyes." Trixie said, not even aware of the crowd. She let her magic fade, returning them to the normal room. "And they both knew that as long as they had each other, no

evil will touch them..." she whispered, "and they shall never be alone." She leaned in and kissed Fluttershy, deaf to the roar of the cheering crowd.