



Guidance and Patronage of Trixie

By Lounge_Lizard

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Chapter 1

Three young fillies, two mares, and one stallion waited near the only train platform in Hoofington. The train sat idle on the track, its many operators checking over the vehicle and preparing it for its regular cross-Equestria journey to the frontier town of Appleoosa. A myriad of other ponies waited for the train to be ready along with the aforementioned six, but they all kept clear of the three rambunctious blank-flanked fillies of the group.

Having thoroughly explored the train station and platform within a few minutes of arrival, the three fillies had dedicated the next two hours to attempting to find their special talents via the most creative havoc possible, much to the dismay of their guardians. The list of talents they had tested had included numerous things ranging from luggage inspectors, train track renovators, roadside shoe-shiners, flagpole operators, flagpole repairponies, and lost change finders. Only the last had yielded any return, in the form of 5 copper bits being exchanged for one bag of barbecue carrot chips at the concessions stand, but to the great disappointment of the three, still no cutie marks.

*“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS!! YAY!!”
“Take that, evil empty chip bag! You will not pollute the ground today with your non-biodegradable foil wrapping!”*

“Excuse me ma’am? Ah’d like to take jus’ a moment of your time this fine afternoon to discuss your carbon hoofprint... what size horseshoes are those anyhow?”

“...I guess this is kind of like a crusade, but this isn’t gonna get me any closer to Rainbow Dash.”

“Okay girls! Ah think it’s ‘bout time y’all got yourselves over here an’ said your goodbyes! Th’ trains about to leave and I think it’s best you be getting you on it, little missy.”

“I told you sis, stop calling me that already! I -am- a big pony!”

"What--? But Rainbow Dash! We haven't tried getting a cutie mark for ticket scalping yet!"

"C'mon pipsqueak, there's gonna be plenty of opportunities for you to earn a REAL cutie mark with me once we get to flight camp okay? And besides, I think Applebloom and Big Mac need those tickets, right big guy?"

"Ee-yup."

"You too Sweetie Belle, say g'bye and the like to your fellow crusaders so they can all get movin' along. We shouldn't keep 'em waitin', you know."

The young unicorn walked forward with her head hung low and ears folded as her two close friends turned back towards her, but she said nothing.

"C'mon Sweetie Belle, don't be like that. I know yah can't come with us... but we need one crusader to stay behind and protect Ponyville. Besides, Appleoosa is like the most borin' place to try to earn your cutie mark in. It's all dirt 'n cactus."

"Yeah, we need you stay behind and tell us if anything cool happened while we were gone! It's too bad Rarity wouldn't tell you how to cast that super radical spell that gives you wings, then you could come to flight camp with me and Rainbow Dash and earn a super awesome cutie mark for being like... the first unicorn to fly!"

"Uh... Scootaloo, if Rarity had wings then she already WOULD be the first unicorn tah fly, ya'know."

"Oh... right."

The young unicorn opened her mouth as if to talk, but still did not respond. She stood there quietly, sniffing as she tried to hold back tears that threatened break free. The toot of the train whistle signaled that their time was coming to an end.

"I just don't want... and without you t-two I'm alone and--"

"Sweetie Belle... when we come back we'll all be crusaders again, ah promise! Even if we somehow get our cutie marks, we'll make it th'

crusader mission to find yours."

"Yeah! And crusaders never break a promise!"

*"*sniffle* ...thanks girls. I'll try my best."*

"APPLEBLOOM!! Git your rump on over here and hop into the caboose with your big brother! Train's a-leavin'!"

The three fillies pulled each other close. hugging into the neck of the next before the friends finally parted. One went to the train, one to her pegasus idol waiting in the sky, and the last waited behind on the platform.

"Big Mac?"

"Yes, AJ?"

"I shouldn't need to warn you like last time. You. Behave. Yourself. You got that?"

"E-... ee-yup."

"And Applebloom? Keep an eye on your big brother for me, make sure he gets into no trouble."

"...yes, sis."

"Good, now get on the train and have fun in Appleoosa, and say howdy to your cousin Braeburn for me."

The young unicorn filly waved one hoof goodbye to her closest friends as they began to grow distant across land and sky, a small stream of tears running off her cheeks as they vanished into the horizon. She was the only one left, alone.

"It'll be okay sugarcube. They'll only be gone for a month, ya'know."

"... I know, Miss Applejack."

"Good. Now dry those tears and let's run on home to Ponyville. Rarity said

she's gonna be busy all night, so I'll take care of dinner for ya. C'mon, I'll make ah nice big apple pie for ya when we get there."

Sweetie Belle sighed, her mind slowly drawing itself back from dreamland as she woke from her nap inside the clubhouse on the edge of Sweet Apple Acres. The unicorn filly sleepily opened her emerald eyes and glanced across her back towards her flank before letting them close again, the pink and purple curls of her mane unmoved in the warm stale air as she lay where she was.

"I guess taking naps every day isn't my special talent either..." she muttered apathetically to herself. She didn't want to wake up, or even open her eyes. She hadn't needed to today or after any of her naps she had taken in the Cutie Mark Crusader clubhouse over the six days that had passed since returning from the Hoofington train station. With the other crusaders gone, Sweetie Belle found the days she had once filled with their adventures to be empty and lonely.

Eventually the stale air and rising heat inside the clubhouse became too much for the young unicorn to rest anymore. With a quiet groan she rose from the tall pile of pillows and cushions she had collected in the corner of clubhouse for just such a function, knocking a few aside onto the bare floor. She blinked away the fuzziness in her eyes as she nudged the door open with her chin and stepped out into the warm late summer air.

It was a bit past noon, and the heat always made it impossible for Sweetie Belle to sleep much later than this on most days. The few other fillies and colts in Sweetie's class usually went right home after school ended in the late morning. Foal-sitting would be a more appropriate term, however, as school was technically out for summer. Many families took the chance to take vacations or send their children off to summer camps, leaving Ponyville much quieter this time of year.

Sweetie Belle carefully hopped down from the ramp that extended the yellow clubhouse before continuing her walk down the slope of the hill to the small creek that ran through this part of the apple orchard. The cool water and breeze made it a much better location than the inside of the clubhouse at this time of day. Finding her usual spot under the shade, Sweetie Belle flopped down hard on the grass with a grunt.

Sweetie Belle sighed as she let herself fall to the side, the grass rustling under her as she rolled onto her back and stared up at the sky through the branches . The young unicorn held up her front hoof, looking past it into the air. The minutes passed as she gestured meaninglessly at clouds passing by. Eventually her leg began to tingle, numbness creeping into the limb held out before her. Sweetie grimaced bitterly, letting her hoof drop limply back to her side.

“I hate you, sis...”

“For the last time, NO! I’m not sending you to Unicorn Camp! You’re far too young!” The white unicorn shouted in frustration. her normally prim and pampered purple curls a disheveled wreck. Carousel Boutique’s interior had been turned into a chaotic and ugly mess, indicative of the nature of the hours-long fight between the two sisters.

“But this isn’t FAIR!! I want to learn how to use magic so I can be like you, sis! I just want to try to help for once, to be somepony important! Why won’t you LET ME!!” The other unicorn shrieked back, anger and frustration coloring her tear-stained cheeks as she stood in the center of the wreckage she had caused. Her breathing grew ragged between her clenched teeth as an angry scream built in her throat. Taking an overturned stool in her teeth, she fully hurled it across the room at her sister with as much strength as her young body could muster. The stool crashed into a glass-windowed cabinet a few feet from Rarity, shattering the fragile barrier and sending its contents spilling out onto the floor to join the rest of the growing swath of destruction. Dye from broken bottles leaked out onto torn fabric bolts, a sewing machine lay smashed on the floor where it had fallen, and dress-forms lay toppled from where the older unicorn had tried and failed to physically restrain the younger from the ongoing tantrum.

The older unicorn flipped her mane back and did her best to ignore the outburst, long since past her earlier shrieking hysterics at the reckless vandalism of her younger sister. “I’m sorry your friends are all leaving for the summer without you, but this isn’t about fairness, Sweetie. I simply cannot let you go if you can’t cast a single spell or even turn a page! You don’t even know what your special talent is, and nopony can hope to teach

you anything if even you don't know yourself what it is you are meant to do with your magic! I'm not going to fight with you any more, dearie. You're just not ready for this, and THAT. IS. FINAL."

The small filly's expression began to change almost instantaneously, the defiance and anger that once colored her face melting into despair and hurt. Her body began to shudder as she broke down, tears streaming from her pleading eyes. "W-why..? It's n-not my fault I can't cast any stupid magic! I just want you to see th-that I'm not s-stupid! Why don't you ever SEE THAT?! I'm n-never going to be good enough for you just b-b- because I don't have-- because... because I don't have my c-cutie mark! I'm not good enough for ANYPONY! Because I-I'm just a STUPID BLANK FLANK!!"

"Sweetie, no! I didn't mean--!"

"I HATE YOU!!"

"Why does it have to be like that..." Sweetie Belle muttered half-heartedly to herself as she reminisced. It was too long ago for her to still feel as hurt as she had been that evening, but Sweetie and Rarity hadn't exchanged more than few words since the fight. There had been no apologies, no sisterly love to make up for the pain, nothing. Just a wall of silence between the two unicorn sisters. Sweetie Belle felt numb, apathetic.

Still, not being able to go to Unicorn Camp like most of the other fillies with their cutie marks had hurt too. Sweetie had tried many times to do something with her magic, but she could never do more than make her horn glow no matter how much she strained. Sweetie Belle's pleading in the weeks leading up to summer vacation had convinced her sister Rarity to ask around for anypony who could possibly teach her sister or find out if something was wrong. Even Twilight Sparkle had tried working with Sweetie Belle, but nothing had helped. Twilight had suggested that if she was having trouble doing even simple magic, like picking up small objects or making a light with her horn, then her special talent was probably something very subtle or different in some way than most ponies... or maybe she was just a slow learner. Going to Unicorn Camp wouldn't help unless she could already show some magical aptitude.

After the fight in the boutique, Rarity had talked to Applejack and asked her to watch over Sweetie Belle for a while so they both had some space apart from each other to calm down. Applejack understood, and after taking the three crusaders to the Hoofington train station she had brought Sweetie back to stay on the farm. Sweetie had asked to stay at the clubhouse on the outskirts of the Apple family orchards instead of in the Apple family home, and Applejack understood and respected that. She came by a few times a day to see how Sweetie was doing, and let her know that if she needed anything she could always come to her. Otherwise she let Sweetie Belle have her privacy while she stayed at the clubhouse.

Sweetie Belle shuffled uncomfortably, her hip growing steadily sore the longer she lay by the bank. With a feminine grunt the filly rolled off her back and slowly stood up on all hooves again, taking a moment to shake out the loose grass that had gathered in her coat. She couldn't stay inactive for that many hours of napping and introspection without becoming restless, even if she had nothing better to do. Stretching the soreness out of each leg, the filly hopped down from the bank into the shallow stream for a quick drink.

She had only just begun to get a mouthful of water before she heard a far off shriek and the sound of splashing coming somewhere farther up the creek. The noise made her jump; Applejack wouldn't have been working on this edge of the orchard without letting Sweetie Belle know, and it wasn't yet time for the apple harvest for there to be any hired help around. She waited to hear if there was any other noise, but after listening for a few moments heard nothing.

"What was that?" Sweetie Belle wondered out loud. "Maybe... somepony is in trouble at the creek? Maybe somepony dropped something important in the water... or doesn't know how to swim and started drowning!" She began to charge off in the direction of the shriek, only to skid to a halt a few seconds later. "Oops, I forgot!" Sweetie Belle said as she turned around and run back into the clubhouse.

Emerging with her signature Cutie Mark Crusader cape tied around her neck, Sweetie struck a pose with her front hoof in the air and a confident heroic smile on her face.

“Cutie Mark Crusaders Apple-family orchard creek-drowning victim rescue tea--! Oh, forget it. It’s just me anyway...” She said, her enthusiasm in announcing the latest Crusader mission lessened by the absence of her two friends.

Sweetie Belle galloped as fast as her little legs could carry her, following the creek in the direction of the cry she had heard just a few moments earlier. At a bend in the creek Sweetie came upon one of the most unusual things had seen, which was saying a lot considering she lived in the same town as Pinkie Pie.

A unicorn mare with an azure coat and light grey-blue mane stood unmoving in the center of the small stream, head submerged into one of the few deep sections of running water. On her flank was a wand with a star at the tip and a swirl of sparkling dust trailing down. Air bubbles surfaced as the other pony made some sort of odd gargling noise under the water.

Sweetie Belle approached carefully, glancing momentarily at the flowing purple cape adorned with a star pattern and wizard’s hat laying discarded on the grass nearby, looking quite worn and dirty as if they hadn’t seen care in a long time. Clearing her throat, Sweetie Belle reared up on her small back legs and struck as tall a pose as she could for a filly of her size and announced herself.

“Have no fear! I am Sweetie Belle of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, and I am here to rescue you!”

The other unicorn did not respond, her head still held under the water, leaving Sweetie Belle to glance around awkwardly. Shaking off the slight wave of embarrassment, Sweetie coughed loudly to draw the other pony’s attention and resumed her pose.

“I said, I am Sweetie Belle! I am here to save... um... ? Miss... ? Are you drowning?”

Suddenly the blue unicorn’s ears twitched and she shot up out of the water, gasping for breath. The sudden motion flung a spray of droplets at Sweetie Belle who barely had time to give a shout of surprise at being splashed before the other unicorn began speaking.

“UGH, finally washed that dis-GUSTING taste out of my mouth! What pony in their--”

“So... you’re not drown--”

“--right mind would operate an apple orchard whose crop is INFESTED with WORMS? Maybe these common rural ponies can stand eating such VILE and polluted produce but those of us raised in more... civilized environs are more discriminating than to just stick ANYTHING in our mouths.” The other unicorn continued with a scowl as if Sweetie Belle didn’t exist at all, purple eyes flashing wildly and face dripping. “Can you imagine ME, the Great and Powerful Trixie, eating a WORM?” the unicorn said, rounding on the young foal suddenly and looming over her with an expectant glare.

“Um... yes?” Sweetie Belle responded, tilting her head quizzically.

“EXACTLY. The owners of this property should be given a HEFTY citation for-- ”

The blue unicorn froze mid-sentence, her front leg raised in midair from her prior indignation and her mouth hanging open as she suddenly recognized that she was in the presence of another pony. She backed away a few steps from the small white filly in front of her, hooves splashing in the water as she glanced around nervously as if worried that others might be nearby. “Wha... h-how long have you been here! The Great and Powerful TRIXIE is not granting autographs at this time! You’ll just have to wait until my next appeara-- I mean... err, Trixie... Trixie isn’t even here! I am *definitely* not--”

“Hi Trixie! My name’s Sweetie Belle, one of the Cutie Mark Crusaders! Did we save you from drowning? Do we need to perform, um, CPR?” Sweetie Belle interrupted excitedly, the purple and pink curls of her mane bouncing as she hopped in place a few times before lifter her back leg up to inspect her flank for the possible appearance of her new cutie mark.

“Drowning? Crusaders...? The Great-- I mean Tri... uh... I was NOT drowning. The Great and Powerful Trixie would never perish in such a boorish and unspectacular manner.” Trixie responded, whipping her still-damp head to the side with a disdainful scowl before snapping it back in

shock. "Wait.. we? Crusaders?? I don't see any other ponies around here... there are no other ponies around, right?"

"Oh... no, it's just me..." Sweetie Belle mumbled back, harshly reigning in her enthusiasm at remembering she didn't have Applebloom and Scootaloo with her this time. *I guess I got carried away again... just like Rarity says I always do...*

"Just you then... hmm..." Trixie rubbed her chin with one hoof thoughtfully, smiling down at Sweetie Belle as she examined the filly before her. "I suppose The Great and Powerful Trixie could entertain just one young adoring admirer, even in her unfortunate exile..."

"The great and what-who?" Sweetie said skeptically, glancing over at the purple cape and hat on the grass then back at Trixie. "...are you a wizard?"

Trixie raised an eyebrow, blinking in amused disbelief at the caped filly in front of her. "You mean to tell me you've never heard of The Great and Powerful Trixie? Renowned for her AMAZING, show-stopping feats of magic? The greatest unicorn in ALL of--"

Sweetie Belle perked up, a little hope creeping back into her eyes as she gazed up at the azure unicorn. "So... you're good at magic? Does that mean you could teach another pony how to use magic?"

Trixie scoffed, her horn emanating a delicate pinkish light as she levitated her ragged cape and hat off the grass and donned them with expert finesse. "There is absolutely NOTHING Trixie cannot do with her endless talents. She is, after all, the greatest Unicorn in all of Equestria!"

Sweetie Belle's mouth widened into an ecstatic smile before bowing down before Trixie, pressing her head to the ground before the newcomer who had suddenly become her Celestia-sent savior. "Then you... you could teach me magic! And maybe help me earn my cutie mark! I'll do anything! Please, please, please teach me!"

Trixie's face took on a worried expression as she slowly backed away from the younger unicorn and began chuckling anxiously. "Me? You want... but... I-I mean, The Great and Powerful Trixie does not have the time to personally entertain every request that comes her way. She has more...

important matters to deal with than a young blank-flanked unicorn filly such as yourself, matters that take her to many faraway places. Now run along and play with your friends, and don't tell anypony you saw me. Trixie needs her privacy." Trixie said, gesturing dismissively at Sweetie Belle as she turned away from the young filly. Dealing with Sweetie Belle was starting to look like more trouble than she had intended.

Sweetie's face had slowly progressed from a hopeful smile into a deep frown as Trixie spoke, frustration building up in her. She could tell what Trixie was trying to do; Rarity had done the same thing many times each time she tried to get her big sister's attention. Bringing up her friends when she was without them had only added insult to injury. "What?? My sis and Twilight said that nopony can teach another pony magic, that it's just impossible! But you said you could! That you were the greatest unicorn in Equestria! I don't believe you! You lied to me!"

"Did you say Twilight? You know Twilight Sparkle? That upstaging, insignificant, smug piece of TRASH!?" Trixie shook her head, clearing the reviled thought of the purple unicorn from her mind before turning around to face Sweetie Belle. Stomping her hooves on the soft ground, Trixie angrily strode up the smaller unicorn, her horn beginning to glow as she tried to control her temper. "You accuse ME of being a liar?! The Great and... Trixie is NOT... I just... Rrrgh!! Who are YOU to talk anyway?! I will be the greatest unicorn in all of Equestria! Anything YOU can do, I can do BETTER! I don't have to listen to a THING you say!" Trixie shouted, thrusting her face directly in front of Sweetie Belle as she verbally lashed out.

Sweetie Belle cringed away at this outburst, Trixie's harsh words stinging deep enough to make her eyes tear up. "Of course you don't have to listen to me. Nopony ever listens to me. I'm just a dumb blank-flank filly. There's no way I could be as good as you..." Sweetie responded bitterly, sniffing as she turned away and tried not to cry, unable to stare down the older unicorn in front of her no more than she could her older sister Rarity. "You're just as mean as my big sis..."

Trixie stood there speechless with mixed indignation and shame at being shown up by the younger unicorn, the threatening glow from her horn fading in an instant. She tried to come up with some response to counter the smaller unicorn but couldn't form the words. Turning away with a

frustrated shriek through her clenched teeth and a flash of her cape, she began inwardly cursing herself for her immaturity. *I got myself worked up over a little filly wanting to be a grown-up, and now I'm screaming at her? What are you even DOING, Trixie? Maybe I wasn't being entirely honest about being good at teaching magic, but that's none of her business! And Twilight... as much as I hate her, it's not this filly's fault... Trixie is many things but she is NOT mean to children! I have to save face somehow... but I don't want to admit I was being boastful either. What do I do?*

Sweetie Belle stared hesitantly at the back of Trixie's cape, waiting for the other unicorn to speak again but dreading it all the same. The once inspiring presence of the azure unicorn felt transformed into one of a more uncaring and hostile creature. *She's just going to yell at me again... but... maybe she won't...maybe...* After waiting for a few moments Trixie still did not shift from her silent, dismissive stance. Lowering her head and sighing, Sweetie Belle turned around and started to walk back towards the clubhouse as she mumbled to herself "At least I'm better at being nice than you are." *...not that anypony ever got a cutie mark for being nice.*

Trixie's eye twitched involuntarily as Sweetie's words reached her ears. *Oh she did NOT... ! Okay, FINE, buck the consequences! What could possibly happen, I get kicked out of Ponyville again? It can't be worse than last time. Being a noble patron of... 'lesser' ponies is an important part of greatness... right? Trixie is a paragon of greatness, and she is not going to let some **filly** tell her otherwise. And maybe I can get a decent meal out of this too, I'm tired of apples.*

Turning back around, Trixie called out to Sweetie Belle's retreating form. "Wait! The Great and Powerful Trixie is NOT lacking in generosity, she just... er... has many concerns she must attend to! And she must carefully balance which concerns... need her personal attention."

Sweetie Belle looked back over her shoulder with furrowed eyebrows at Trixie, still skeptical of the other unicorn's claims and unsure if she should risk trusting her again after the outburst she had just been subject to. "So? What do you want with me then?"

"Well... it just so happens that The Great and Powerful Trixie is in need of a reprieve from her usual duties. Some of the ponies at her last performance

were not... satisfied with the result. Despite Trixie's superior judgement about how it should have been handled, she decided to remove herself from the public eye for the time being so that--"

"Is that why you're out here stealing apples?" Sweetie interrupted bluntly. "You shouldn't eat the ones with the holes in them. Those have worms and caterpillars, you know."

"Trixie DOES N--" Trixie retorted furiously before catching herself, taking a few deep breaths to calm down before continuing. "The Great and Powerful Trixie will accept your request to become her student during her brief respite here in Ponyville, but only on a few conditions."

Sweetie Belle turned around completely, sitting her rump down on the grass next to the stream facing Trixie as she listened, wanting to hear what Trixie had to say but still not entirely trusting of the older unicorn. "Okay... like what?"

Trixie glanced upward, rubbing her chin with one hoof thoughtfully. "Well... I will need someplace comfortable and secluded to stay as well as regular meals, and as my student you must fulfill any other need I might have. And in return I will teach you a fraction of the infinite, amazing skill and talent that Trixie possesses." *This won't be too hard, right? Just get her to levitate a few rocks, maybe show her the really simple tricks and let her struggle with them while I relax... yeah...*

Sweetie Belle nodded, hope rising again inside her. "I can get food from Applejack... and I guess you can stay in the clubhouse. But... you'll really teach me magic?"

Trixie thumped one hoof on her chest, her face becoming stern. "The Great and Powerful Trixie NEVER breaks a promise. *NEVER*. Such things are a matter of honor. And speaking of promises, under no circumstances are you to EVER tell anypony that The Great and Powerful Trixie is in Ponyville, understood?"

"But why n--"

"PROMISE!"

“I promise, I promise!”

Trixie smiled and nodded her head in satisfaction, her eyes starting to glaze over as she became lost in thought. “Good. Now let’s inspect Trixie’s new dwelling and get settled in. Trixie is tired after her long and arduous travels, and a long hot water bath would be most appealing... then perhaps a nice dinner of fresh seasoned greens and pear wine... followed by a long sleep on cozy satin sheets...”

Sweetie Belle started wondering if maybe the other unicorn was going to be more of a hassle than she was worth as she led the way back to the clubhouse. “Um...hot water? Applejack said not to play with fire on the farm after the last time we...” Sweetie let her voice trail off as Trixie continued talking over her. *This is gonna be a long month without you, sis...*

Chapter 2

“There ya go Sweetie, a nice toasty fritter with plenty of glaze an’ some applesauce to cool you down later.” Applejack said as she stepped out from the Apple family kitchen and placed a basket into Sweetie Belle’s wagon. The sun hadn’t yet risen above the hills behind Ponyville, but Applejack was already awake to cook breakfast for the Apple family as she always did. “It’s always nice to see ya bright and early. Are ya sure ya won’t come by for lunch this afternoon with me n’ Granny?”

Sweetie Belle shifted nervously at the question, attaching the the hook of the simple rope harness around her flank to the handle of the wagon holding her breakfast. “Sorry Miss Applejack, I’m not feeling like it today either. Thank you for the food, though.”

Applejack sighed, a worried frown forming on her face. “Sweetie Belle, I’m real worried about ‘cha. When you’re out at the clubhouse day after day all by yourself, I...”

The wheels of the wagon squeaked as Sweetie took a few steps away from the door, hoping to slowly break away before Applejack got the chance to question her too much. Every time Applejack tried to talk to her about her fight with Rarity, she always had to struggle to keep her feelings inside. “I’ll be okay. Miss Applejack. There’s nothing out there to get me in trouble or hurt or anything. You don’t have to worry about me.” she said in a dull tone, avoiding eye contact with the amber earth pony.

“That’s not what I mean, sugarcube...” Applejack said, folding her ears and following after Sweetie Belle in the dim light. “I know I’m not your big sis but... I just want ta help. I don’t like seein’ you like this, no more than I would if you were my little Applebloom... I don’t like seein’ anypony having to suffer hurt all alone.”

Sweetie Belle hung her head, trying to ignore the pangs of guilt in her heart Applejack’s words had caused. “I’m sorry Miss Applejack... I don’t want to talk about it yet.”

Applejack watched helplessly as Sweetie Belle walked away towards the clubhouse, staring at the young filly's back as she tried to think of what she could possibly do or say. "Well... alrighty then. If you need anythin' I... I'm always here if you need me Sweetie. Yup. Right here..." she called after Sweetie, sitting back on her rump in somber defeat.

"Um... well actually..." Sweetie said, stopping and looking back at the wagon thoughtfully. *Trixie has been complaining about that... maybe I should...*

"Yes, sugarcube?"

"Could I get another fritter, maybe? And do you have any other food that's... well... not apples?" Sweetie asked, making the best innocent smile she could.

Applejack blinked. "...whaddya mean 'not apples?' "

Sweetie Belle approached the clubhouse on the edge of Sweet Apple Acres that had been her home for the past nine days, and Trixie's for three. The summer sun was just beginning to shine over the horizon and a light breeze was keeping the morning air cool, much to Sweetie's satisfaction. Raising her head up and taking a deep breath, she slowed as she came near the clubhouse ramp and tried to make as little noise as possible.

Slipping free of the harness, Sweetie circled around and lifted the covered basket of food from Applejack's kitchen in her mouth, still warm from the heat of two freshly baked apple fritters and a small stack of apple-free cinnamon flapjacks. Sweetie Belle glanced down at the small ceramic bowl of applesauce that still remained in the wagon and then back up at the clubhouse, knowing she couldn't take all the food up in one trip.

"Maybe if I could just..." Sweetie Belle mumbled to herself around the handle of the basket, closing her eyes and concentrating on the mental image of the bowl in her head, just as Trixie had told her. The unicorn's small horn began to faintly glow with a warm pink light as she increased her focus, willing the small container to rise with all her might. "Please..."

Trixie made a noise that could have expressed nothing other than disgust as she sat back from the table, shoving the small plate of barely-eaten apple and almond muffins away from her. "The Great and... whatever. This sickens Trixie. She refuses to eat this... garbage." she grumbled in annoyance, hair in disarray and deep bags under her eyes attesting to the restless sleep she had woken from.

"What? Why? You said they were okay yesterday, I thought--"

Trixie stood up from her stool, turning her back and walking over to the pile of pillows and cushions that had once belonged to Sweetie Belle, cape fluttering behind her. Wordlessly, she flopped down on the makeshift bed and with a glow of her horn, levitated her hat off the corner of the pile and over her face, the wide brim shielding her eyes from the morning light.

"But... what about today? You said you'd teach me--"

The blue unicorn snorted, dismissively flicking her tail at Sweetie Belle.

"I'm sorry..."

Sweetie Belle sighed, letting her focus slip away with the memory from the previous morning. Turning away from the wagon, she hefted the food basket in her mouth as she trotted up the ramp to the clubhouse. She didn't need to look to know the bowl hadn't moved from its location in the small wagon.

With a brush of her front hoof, Sweetie opened the door. The inside of the clubhouse was dark and quiet, the only sounds coming from the fabric of the window drapes rustling in the breeze and the slow, deep breathing of the sleeping unicorn nestled in the pile of cushions against the wall. Taking care not to make any noise, Sweetie Belle lifted the basket up onto the table near the open window, nudging open a corner of the cloth cover with her snout to let the food inside cool. The warm scents of cinnamon-sugar, sweet apples, and fresh dough made Sweetie's stomach churn

uneasily. Leaving the food in the basket, the unicorn filly stepped silently out of the clubhouse and shut the door.

Walking back down the ramp to the wagon, Sweetie Belle grasped the bowl of applesauce in her teeth as she continued down the slope of the hill to the creek, flopping down in her usual spot in the grass under the trees. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she leaned her head down into the bowl and began to reluctantly lap up the applesauce with her small tongue. The simple mush did much better at not upsetting her stomach, and despite her lack of appetite she forced herself to eat all of it, licking every last inch of the bowl clean.

Sweetie Belle lay there for awhile longer, listening to the babbling of the creek and the morning breeze whispering through the leaves. The meaningless noise was a small comfort, enough that she could let her mind drift empty and calm. She could remember a time from when she was still just a foal where she had felt the same as this.

Back before the Carousel Boutique had earned the minor fame it now carried, Rarity would occasionally close the shop and put an old record on the phonograph while she isolated herself in the boutique to work on new designs. Sweetie Belle had long since learned that when Rarity put on music that it meant she wanted silence, a strange habit for a pony who usually talked to herself while she worked. Sweetie Belle remembered spending many evenings after school on a cushion in the corner of her sister's room watching her big sister silently sketch, snip, and sew together new designs while the mellow piano chords and voices of long-retired mares sang from the cone of the record player.

Sweetie Belle was never particularly rambunctious as a child, always content to just watch what others were doing. Rarity would give her winks and little waves every now and then to let her know she was still there for her, and when Sweetie Belle began to learn to hum along with the songs Rarity would often stop just to listen, never discouraging her younger sister. When the time came for sleep, she would pick up the young foal and carry her off to bed on her back. She could still remember the fragrant scent of the mane shampoo Rarity used back then, as well as the steady sound of her big sister's heart beating in her chest as she fell asleep, held tightly between Rarity's forelegs.

Those days never came anymore though. Sweetie Belle had grown old enough that Rarity no longer let her sleep in the same bed with her, and Rarity was always too busy overworking herself to spend much time with sister anymore. That happiness Sweetie used to find with her big sister she now found with Applebloom and Scootaloo. It wasn't exactly the same since the three were always getting into trouble and going on adventures, but the closeness was there. The other two members of the Cutie Mark Crusaders had always been there for her when she needed it.

"Almost always..." Sweetie muttered as she turned to look back up the hill. She could hear the sounds of movement in the clubhouse, Trixie likely now awake and eating her breakfast.

Trixie stands, but she isn't anywhere.

It is dark. Trixie looks down, holding up one hoof in front of her face, but she cannot see it. She can feel grass at her feet, but it isn't alive. A breeze moves past her, but the air it brings is the same as what drifted away. It's colder, but it isn't different. It's the same. Stale.

Trixie tilts her head up. The sky is black. She can see the stars, but they aren't stars. She can only see the ones daddy put in the sky, so they can't be stars. The moon is full, but there is no light. It stings her eyes to look up at the sky for so long, so she looks away. The horizon glows with the orange color of twilight from every direction, silhouetting trees that exist an infinite distance away. The light grows ever closer as time passes, but it is hard to tell. It is the only light Trixie can see.

"Trixie!"

Something is wrong. It hurts to be here. Her chest feels tighter every second, like she can't breathe, like there isn't air for her to breathe at all. Trixie doesn't want to be here anymore, but there is nowhere to run. Trixie lifts her foreleg and tries to take a step, but she can't move. She feels something brush her side. The touch is paralyzing. It scares her, makes her doubt herself, doubt if she can really do it.

Why? What am I afraid of? What am I going to do?

Trixie turns to see what it is. A pair of green eyes looks up at her. The eyes are innocent, but they seem afraid. When they close to blink, Trixie's heart lurches in her chest because she might not see them ever open again. This isn't right. None of this is right. The eyes are supposed to be yellow. She is supposed to look up at them, not the other way around. She knows these eyes, though. They are Trixie's eyes.

But... they can't be my eyes. My eyes aren't green...

It's getting so hard to breathe. There's not much time left, she has to hurry. That's not right either. She's supposed to feel safe, not terrified. The orange light in the sky is getting closer.

The pony with the green eyes brushes her side again, insistently. Its eyes are filled with so much fear, so much pleading. The pony says something to her, but it's Trixie's voice that speaks.

"Please don't leave me alone."

Trixie can't breathe at all anymore. Her body panics as she starts choking. The ground suddenly begins to crumble away beneath her. Trixie loses her footing, scattering all sense of balance as she plummets headfirst into an abyss. Grey chains attached to manacles on her hooves and neck stream down with her into the darkness as she falls, the only tether to the vanishing world above. She can see the orange glow consume it like fire, each star in the sky melting as they are devoured by the hideous light.

She has been torn away from the green eyes. It feels like her heart has been torn out of her chest instead. Trixie tries to scream, it hurts so much.

Black bleeds into lavender, ocean, sky, pure white--

Trixie's eyes shot open, her mind springing out the nightmare a fraction of a second before her falling body struck the wooden floor of the clubhouse. Landing hard on her side, Trixie groaned out a few choice curses, kicking her hind legs to push herself away from the hill of cushions she had toppled from as well as the dream visions she had seen while

resting there.

Lifting herself up from the floor, Trixie glanced around groggily as she rubbed her sore ribs with one hoof. "Okay... **that** ending was different. Why am I always dreaming that stupid dream though... ugh... And where's my hat..." The unicorn muttered to herself.

She had spent the first two days since meeting Sweetie Belle in the clubhouse sleeping, having not had a proper home of her own to sleep in the two months that had passed after the Ursa Minor incident. Word had quickly spread since that mishap that Trixie's reputation was a complete fabrication, and that the Ursa's attack had caused major damage and threatened the lives of many ponies. Every town she had tried to visit between Ponyville and the outskirts of Manehattan had made it clear that she was not welcome. Sleeping in the wilderness between towns for so long had made Trixie an uneasy sleeper, and it had taken some time to re-adapt.

A little anxiety began to stir in her upon finding her signature headpiece slightly crumpled from her fall -- She must have landed on top of it. Lifting the purple wizard's hat with her magic, Trixie furrowed her eyes in concentration and began to smooth out the creases and wrinkles. Satisfied, Trixie tilted the hat and peered inside. Tucked into the inner rim at the front was a rectangle of glossy paper, the sepia-tone photo worn at the top corner where months of rubbing from a unicorn's horn had erased all color. Trixie sighed a little relief at finding the photograph undamaged, taking a moment to gently slip it out of its hideaway.

On the photograph were two unicorns, a middle-aged stallion with three comets adorning his flank and a very young filly still without her cutie mark. Both father and daughter smiled happily as they posed on a hilltop for the photographer. Trixie always tried to remember that day, but somehow it was one that had never made it into her precious trove of memories. She couldn't even remember where it was.

"Dad..." Trixie whispered to herself as stared at the photo for a long moment. Her father had always been there when she was woken by nightmares, or monsters under the bed, or anything her little filly mind had feared in their Manehattan apartment those many years ago. She felt safe, tucked between his strong forelegs in his bed when the shadows made it

too scary to return to her room. When he whispered in her tiny ears that he would protect her, nothing could have convinced her otherwise. He was her hero, and nopony in the world was greater than he was.

Trixie tried to choke back a sob as she tucked the photograph back into its safe place inside her hat. Taking a deep breath, she lifted one hoof to her cheek as she wiped the tears from her eyes and tried to force a happy smile on her face. *Those were happy times, Trixie. He made you happy. Happy ponies don't cry... and neither does the Great and Powerful Trixie. She'll be the greatest unicorn in Equestria. Just like you, dad.*

Levitating the hat back onto her head, Trixie took a moment to compose herself before trotting over to the table near the window. Small tendrils of steam rose from the basket resting there, the smell of apples and dough intensifying as Trixie brushed the cloth aside. Two apple fritters and a stack of four flapjacks rested inside -- too much food for one pony. A careful inspection of the flapjacks by the discerning mare identified them as apple-free

"Because of yesterday, huh..." Trixie said, tapping her lips thoughtfully with one hoof, her frown turning into a smug smile. *Maybe I let my morning moodiness go a little far but hey, I got what I wanted right? Three whole days of rest, regular meals, maybe the sponge bath was mediocre but at least it was bath. All for just giving that foal some little magic-training exercises you did in your first year and sending her off to practice on her own. You really outdid yourself this time Trixie. Anyway...*

A few minutes later Trixie flopped back on the bed of cushions with a satisfied sigh and a full stomach. She had devoured most of both fritters and the entire stack of flapjacks, gluttony winning over her aversion to the continued consumption of apples. Satiation felt wonderful. Good food was one of the things Trixie missed about her short stint of fame. Before it ended, before Twilight Sparkle had...

Trixie sat forward again, her mood instantly dampened by the thought. *Always Twilight, ruining everything. My fame, my reputation... my life. Even my breakfast. Twilight, twilight... why is that familiar? Oh yeah, the dream... was that pony her? Or... maybe me? Twilight's eyes aren't green either though, not that I could ever forget her face. Then who? Was it even the same dream? It felt so different. Dad wasn't even there...*

The unicorn's lavender eyes drifted to the table and the scattered crumbs from her morning meal. Too much food for one pony. *Where is Sweetie Belle...? She had every meal with me the last three days, except yesterday when I... Trixie winced as a spasm of guilt lanced through her. She probably can't even figure out that exercise I gave her if she can't cast magic yet... and meanwhile I make her my slave and brush her off when she comes begging for help. I might've done it on my third try, but I had way more talent at that age than she does. Way to go Trixie, showing off how great you are by abusing a kid. I should've at least tried. Dad would be ashamed. He **never** gave up on me...*

Closing her eyes with a sigh, Trixie's horn began to glow as she focused on the mental image of the room in front of her. A brush levitated from the saddlebag of vanities Sweetie had fetched for her on the second day and began to run its teeth through the unicorn's hair. The remaining half of the apple fritter lifted itself back into the basket with the used dishes. The windows slid fully open to catch the end of the cool morning breeze before the temperature rose. Finally, the bed of cushions sorted itself back into an orderly stack... with a few more floating over to the opposite corner of the room to join the two small cushions that had been Sweetie Belle's new sleeping spot after Trixie had taken her old one.

Her work complete, Trixie strode confidently to the door, scooping up the basket in her mouth along the way. *Okay Trixie, lets just play this confidently. No need to apologize or anything. You're the Great and Powerful Trixie. You promised you'd help her so it's time to pony up, but you're still the one in control. Just walk out there and... teach her some magic. And try not to intimidate her too much. Dear Celestia, please make this easy...*

Sweetie Belle watched intently as Trixie stepped out from the clubhouse and walked down the slope of the hill toward her resting place by the creek, the blue unicorn's expression devoid of anything resembling happiness. She shifted uneasily in the grass, a knot forming in her stomach as she waited for Trixie to reach her. *Did I wake her up? Is she angry because of the food? What did I do wrong? Please don't be mad again, I'm trying...*

Trixie sat down on her haunches a few feet to Sweetie Bell's side, dropping the basket between them and looking straight ahead across the creek. Sweetie waited for the older unicorn to speak, worried of what she might say. She said nothing. A minute passed quietly.

"Are you... mad at me?" Sweetie asked meekly, unable to endure the continued silence. "Did I do something wrong?"

The older unicorn slid the basket with the remaining food across the grass towards Sweetie Belle. "Eat."

Sweetie blinked in confusion. "But... what?"

"You can't expect the Great and Powerful Trixie to have enough patience to teach you anything if you're going to waste her time being distracted by hunger. So eat up."

"O-okay..." Sweetie Belle responded, reaching into the basket with her mouth and scarfing down the rest of the half-eaten fritter inside. *She's not mad? She's actually going to teach me something today?*

Trixie shook her hat off onto the grass as stood up and walked down to the creek, returning a few seconds later with wet hooves and a few stones in her mouth. Sweetie Belle sat up in surprise as the older unicorn dropped the stones on the ground in front of her.

"What are these for? I thought you were supposed--"

"Have you been practicing those exercises I taught you?" Trixie said sternly, giving the filly an expectant glare.

Sweetie Belle winced. "I... I've tried but--"

"Show me. Lift the rock." Trixie sat down and brushed one of the smooth stones in front of Sweetie with her hoof.

The unicorn filly backed away from the rock slowly, panic filling her at the thought of disappointing the pony that held her hopes. "I can't..."

Trixie stamped on hoof on the soft ground insistently, her voice stern as she reprimanded the younger unicorn. "If you refuse to show what you have learned then Trixie can teach you nothing. Either do as Trixie says or stop wasting her time."

Sweetie nodded nervously, looking down at the rock in front of her, the small thing so intimidating it might as well have been Mount Celestia itself. Closing her eyes, Sweetie pictured the rock lying in the grass in front of her, focusing intently on the image in her mind as Trixie had instructed her on the first day. She had said that it was an exercise most unicorn learned early on to improve their focus, but...

"Sweetie, you are trying my patience. You are coming with me out of this rain and we are going home, NOW!"

"NO! I'm running away, and you can't stop me! I don't need you sis, I don't need ANYPONY! I'll pr--"

The summer thunderstorm muffled the sound of the older unicorn slapping her sister across the face.

"No, no, no, please--!" Sweetie Belle whimpered as the memory invaded her thoughts. Her eyes shot open, the soft pink glow of magic on her horn and the rock flickering and fading and she lost hold on her concentration. Panic built inside her again as she looked up at the unicorn looming over her. *She's going to tell me I should give up, that I'm too young, that I'm not meant to do magic. And then she'll leave because I'm not important to her either. She'll leave and I'll be alone again. Not again, please not again!*

Trixie had been watching intently from start to finish, an unmistakable feeling of deja vu creeping over her. She felt the hum of Sweetie Belle's magic in her horn as the rock glowed and felt it fade when the filly lost her focus. When Sweetie's gaze met her own, Trixie recoiled in shock. *Wait... why is... her eye color, it's... why didn't I see it before? And that fear, she's terrified... of me? It's just like my dream. I was dreaming about her?*

Sweetie Belle took this as a sign of rejection, and could no longer contain herself. She began to cry, tears running down her cheeks as she sunk to the ground, eyes still locked on her teacher. "I-I-I'm sorry... every t-time I try I get these h-h-horrible thoughts and they w-won't go away... j-just please, don't go... I w-wa-wanna learn, it's just so hard... please d-don't leave me alone!"

Trixie blushed, stunned and unsure of why Sweetie Belle had reacted so strongly, but feeling guilt for being focus of the filly's distress all the same. "Wh-what? I'm not going anywhere. I... why would you even think that?"

"B-because everypony does! No pony thinks I-I'm important, so they all leave! Mom and dad, my big sis, even my... even my f-friends! I hate being alone, I hate it so much! E-every time I try to use m-magic, it's all I can think about. I hate it...." Sweetie stuttered between sobs, her head sinking into the grass as she lost her voice to her crying.

"But I never said I was going to leave..." Trixie objected, extending one hoof. The distressed filly continued crying, oblivious to her mentor's protests. Glancing at her wizard's hat where it lay on the grass, Trixie's mind drifted to the photo inside. *I remember her mentioning her sister before, but her parents... was she abandoned? Did she run away? Either way she's alone out here. She must really care what I think of her, and now he's clinging to me because she doesn't have anypony else. I promised to help her, and she's terrified I'm going to abandon her because she failed just now. I have to do something...*

Trixie stepped uncertainly through the grass and sat down in front of Sweetie Belle, startling her as she wrapped her neck behind the small filly in a gentle embrace. Sweetie could do little more than stammer a few syllables of an objection before Trixie shushed her to silence, stroking the terrified filly's mane with her chin. Sweetie Belle burst out into fresh tears, clinging to the older unicorn as she let out her her pent up emotions.

I know what it's like to feel abandoned, I was kind of the same after dad... went away. No pony should have to suffer that kind of loneliness.

Gradually Sweetie's sobbing slowed as she began to calm down. Without

lifting her head free from stroking Sweetie's mane, Trixie began to speak softly. "Trixie has-- No, I have a story I think you should hear. It's a story my father told me when I was about as old as you are now. Would you like to listen?"

Sweetie Belle nodded, shivering and wiping her tears on Trixie's neck.

"The story begins like this..."

Once upon a time there were two unicorn, a father and his daughter. The mother had passed away when the filly was born, leaving the two ponies very sad. They both felt very alone, but they knew they still had each other. So the two unicorn decided that they would strive to be the best unicorn that ever lived, so they would always be together. The father worked hard every day to take care of his daughter. He was strong, proud, and brave. No matter what, he always knew how to make her happy. When she cried or was afraid, he was there for her. They didn't have the nicest house or fancy food, but his daughter didn't care. To her, he became the best unicorn in all of Equestria.

The little filly worked hard every day too, learning in school and trying so hard to grow up as fast as she could. But no matter what she did, she always wasn't good enough. Her letters and numbers were poor and she couldn't make any friends. She couldn't use magic very well, even though she had her cutie mark. More than anything this little filly wanted to become good at using her magic so she could make her dad smile. She looked around and saw that every other pony was better than she was, and that hurt her more than anything. She began to cry because she felt like she would never be able to keep her promise to her dad and become the best just like he was.

The father saw his daughter and asked her, 'Sweetheart, why are you crying?'

'Because,' she said, 'No matter what, I always fail. Nothing I do is good enough, everypony is better than me. I'll never be able to be the best for you.'

The father hugged his daughter and whispered in her ear, 'It doesn't matter if everypony else is better at letters or numbers, or has more friends, or even that they are better at magic. What matters is that what you do is important to someone special, no matter how big or small. You are the only thing that is truly special to me, and that is why you will always be the best unicorn in the world. Because you are my daughter, and I love you.'

"...and that's the end." Trixie whispered. She held the small filly against her as a few minutes passed in silence. *I wonder if this is what you felt like every time you comforted me in your arms and told me that story. It's been years since I felt that way... I hope I told it right, dad.*

"I understand, I think." Sweetie Belle said, quietly. She had stopped shaking and her crying had diminished to only the occasional snuffle, but she still clung to the older unicorn tightly. "But I don't know if--"

"I said I was going to teach you how to use magic, and I will. I'm not going to abandon you. When Trixie makes a promise, she always keeps it. No matter what. Okay?" Trixie said, her voice kind yet determined as she released Sweetie from the hug.

"Okay." Sweetie responded, rubbing her eyes with one hoof. She took a shuddering breath and looked up at the other unicorn, a small smile breaking through the sadness. "Thank you... Trixie."

"D-don't mention it. Trixie would do the same for anypony." Trixie replied, shifting uncomfortably and looking away. "Now, Trixie would like to see you try your magic again. Don't worry about lifting the rock this time, just try 'holding' it as long as you can. If your concentration stays then you can try, but it doesn't matter if you succeed or not, just... show me. I'll use my magic to see if I can help."

"I don't think I'll do any better but okay. I will." Sweetie said, a little spirit returning to her eyes. "Just do the same as last time?"

Trixie nodded, moving the rock into to place once again. "Yes, just as last time."

“Okay... here goes.” Sweetie closed her eyes and tried to bring forth her magic for the third time that day. Small lines formed on her face as she frowned in concentration, imagining holding the rock still like hold a pencil in her mouth, her horn beginning to glow with magic. “O-okay, I’m holding it. I think.”

Trixie nodded wordlessly and leaned her head down, her horn hovering inches above the pink glow surrounding the rock. Closing her eyes, she reached out with her own magical senses. *Okay, gently Trixie. Let’s not startle her or make her nervous. Hmm... well, this feels right. Her magic is all over this rock even if it’s not very strong, so it’s not that she can’t use magic. It feels like... still water.*

“Trixie... I can’t see, y-your horn is in the way.” Sweetie Belle grunted, her hooves shuffling in the grass as steadied herself and struggled to concentrate.

“What do you mean? Trixie thought she told you to keep your eyes closed, you shouldn’t be able to see--” Trixie said, looking up. They were closed. “Sweetie, I’m going to try some things. Just keep concentrating on the rock as normal. Don’t say anything back, just focus.” Sweetie grunted in response.

Taking her hoof, Trixie nudged the rock as if to roll it over. Her hoof made almost no noise as the two came in contact, and the rock barely moved at all. *It’s like the rock doesn’t **want** to move. She’s definitely doing some sort of magic here, but what kind of magic is it? It’s obvious that levitation is not in her repertoire, but even then holding an object still could be one of hundreds of kinds of magic. I can see why most don’t even try to teach magic to unicorn this young... what am I going to do?*

“I’m losing it again... nnnnggh...!” Sweetie Belle said with a grunt as the magic glow faded. Reaching up with her front hooves, Sweetie winced as she prodded at her horn and temples. “Ow, ow, ow. My horn hurts, my whole head hurts. It’s like Scootaloo crashed into my face with her scooter. Owww....”

Trixie giggled a little at the filly’s condition, despite herself. “I assume you haven’t usually done this much magic in one day? It’s normal to feel that way when unicorn over-exert themselves casting magic. I’m not surprised,

you are still a filly after all.”

Sweetie Belle shook her head slowly, trying not to give herself more of a headache. “I always failed whenever I tried so I usually gave up. I tried once this morning too. Wait... magic? But the rock didn’t move, I didn’t use any--”

“But you did,” Trixie interrupted, smiling confidently down at the hope-filled filly. “I cannot tell what kind, but you were definitely using magic. Whatever your talent is, using your magic to move things isn’t part of it, at least not easily.”

“You mean it? I really was-- Applejack!” Sweetie Belle’s body stiffened like a board, her eyes wide as she looked past Trixie’s shoulder. Standing at the top of the slope leading to the clubhouse stood the orange-tan earth pony, not more than few yards behind Trixie.

“I don’t know what the hay you think yer doin’ back in Ponyville, but you’d best step away from Sweetie Belle. If you’ve even touched a hair on her head, I will buck you outta here so hard you’ll regret you ever crawled outta whatever snake-hole you’ve been hidin’ in.”

Trixie’s heart froze in dread. It was bad enough that she had been discovered, but for it to be the one pony who cared for her the least of any Trixie had ever met did not bode well.

Sweetie Belle walked forward, the earth pony’s reaction to Trixie’s presence frightening her. “Applejack, I-I can explain! This is my new friend, Trixie! She was just--”

“And you, little missy, I don’t want to hear a word of it!” Applejack snapped as she turned to Sweetie Belle, her face conflicting between anger and disappointment. “I thought I could trust you and you’ve been hidin’ things from me! Cheerilee says you haven’t shown up to summer daycare for three days and then I have to hear it from your sister, who thinks I’ve gone an’ left you starving in a ditch somewhere! Then I come ‘round to see what yer up to and SHE is here?”

“Why, is that a problem?” Trixie snapped derisively as she spun around. “The Great and Powerful Trixie is allowed to go where she

pleases. She has not broken any laws of trespass, nor is she in the town proper, so--"

"That's a load of horseapples. You're not allowed'ta be in Ponyville anymore, and you know it! And sure as I am a citizen of this town you'cn believe that means my property as well. You better git before I exercise my lawful rights to remove you from it by force. And I said not a word from you, Sweetie!" Applejack interrupted before the filly could speak, point down at Sweetie with one hoof. "You're staying with me at the house from now on an' I am not lettin' you outta my sight! No buts!"

"...as if some peon like you could make Trixie do anything." Trixie muttered under her breath as she sneered, turning her back on the earth pony again disdainfully. Sweetie Belle was looking up at her, clearly distressed by the direction the confrontation was going.

Applejack stomped her hoof on the ground and lowered her head menacingly at the challenge, but then began to smirk. "Oh yeah? Well maybe I should jus' call Twilight over and she can take care of you jus' like the last time you decided to come back. And fer what, a silly hat an' cape? I wasn't there but I heard you got flank whipped pretty darn badly in that fight. It's too bad, I'dve liked to see you get yer comeuppance."

Trixie looked ready to burst from anger, and only Sweetie Belle's intervening hooves on her chest prevented her from charging Applejack right then and there. "Twilight? TWILIGHT?! Is that all you can do, hide behind her like a coward? She had things of mine that she had NO right to look at! I was getting back what was mine, but she decided that wasn't good enough! She dug up my life like it was some plaything for her to toy with and study! And then she presumed to lecture ME on the 'kind of mare I had grown up to be' and tell ME how I should live my life! I'll never forgive her for as long as I live!"

"I'm sure whatever the spat with her was about, she had the right thing in mind. Unlike SOME ponies, we can actually trust 'er when she expects us to believe somethin'! If Twi wasn't around when you were spinnin' your tales about the Ursa, we mighta not even had a Ponyville to kick ya out of the second time. It's liars like you that get ponies hurt, not that lyin' had anythin' to do with the mess you made then." Applejack taunted, continuing the verbal antagonism.

Sweetie Belle could sense the rage peaking inside of Trixie as she struggled to hold the older unicorn back. "Please, Applejack, stop! She's not here to do anything mean, I promise! She's going to teach me magic! She's ahead--"

"Sweetie, you listen here, I--" Applejack began.

Sweetie Belle's horn began to flare brightly with magic, her words piercing as she shrieked at Applejack. The sound of her voice reverberated through the area louder than would ever be possible for a filly her size, making the other ponies wince back in surprise and pain. "No! You listen! Trixie never did anything to hurt me, and I won't let you hurt her either! So just... stop... just STOP IT! She's my friend, and I... I..."

Sweetie Belle stumbled dizzily for moment. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she lost her balance and collapsed, the glow on her horn winking out as quickly as it had appeared. Trixie caught the filly with her front legs and carefully lowered her down onto the grass.

Applejack galloped down the slope, glaring venomously at Trixie. "If this is yer doin' or if she's hurt any way else I swear I'll... just..."

"She just fainted. She'll be fine when she wakes up." Trixie said, brushing the hair from Sweetie's eyes. "She's had a tiring morning, physically and emotionally. I don't think our fighting helped."

"And when she started shoutin', did you--"

"I have no idea, I certainly didn't teach her that. I don't care if you believe me or not, she wasn't lying about me teaching her. I never did anything to hurt her. I swear it." Trixie responded, staring Applejack dead in the eye.

Applejack recoiled slightly at Trixie's glare. "E-even if that's true, what she said about you two bein' friends... I've never seen Sweetie act so defensive like that before. She can't really think of you as her..." Applejack looked away and sighed in frustration, all the vitriol of the earlier fight gone from her voice. "Why are'ya even here, Trixie?"

"I was-- I... I don't know! I was just passing through, but I met this little

filly. I was just going to use her to get some shelter at first but she wanted my help and I... I... didn't like how she seemed alone. I just wanted to help her." Trixie said as looking down at the sleeping Sweetie Belle, her voice fading. *I'm standing here worrying about some filly I barely know. Is she really why I'm still here now? Not because I'm still bitter over everything? Because I want revenge on these ponies, on Twilight? I thought that's what I wanted, more than anything... why am I not so sure anymore?*

"You wanted... ta help her?" Applejack said, her mouth hanging open slightly in disbelief. "But why? That's not like you at all. You're the 'Great and Powerful Trixie,' best unicorn in all of Equestria an' all that. You don't care about anypony but yerself."

"I-I just... I care about her." Trixie stammered, her voice choking up as she looked up at Applejack. *...because she reminds me of myself when I was her age. I haven't cared about anypony but myself in a long time. But Sweetie Belle, she makes me feel... different. I shouldn't care, it would be easier not to care. But when she looks at me like that... my heart just can't take it. I don't want to remember feeling alone like that again.*

Applejack turned her head away and sighed, closing her eyes as she spoke. "Yeah... ah know. I overheard the story... the one ya said yer dad told. I knew Sweetie wasn't lyin' either. I jus'... had to hear you say it, that's all."

Trixie looked up at the earth pony in surprise. "Story? You were watching when--?"

"Yes... I saw enough of it anyway. I didn't want'ta believe that you could be kind. Sweetie Belle wouldn't ever open up ta me like that no matter how much I tried. She was always jus' cold as a stone." Applejack paused, finding it her own turn to hang her head in shame. "I just wanted you to be the storybook villain I thought of you as. The one who didn't care about how her lyin' hurt other ponies, and who got in a fight with Twilight because she's just a mean 'ol mare who hates good ponies like us, and would only make friends with Sweetie Belle to hurt her so ya could get back at us somehow. But you weren't lyin' when you were comfortin' Sweetie, and honest to apples I can tell you haven't been lyin' to me now. I wanted to ignore it. I tried but... I can't. I'm not the kind of pony that can do that,

much as it would be a mite convenient.”

Trixie stared wordlessly back at Applejack, then down at Sweetie Belle's sleeping form, her chest slowly rising and falling with each breath. *But... aren't I just like that? My whole life since I lost dad, I didn't care about what I did to anypony else. I had to be the best even if I lied or hurt other ponies. But with Sweetie Belle... I can't do it. Why not? I've done it all my life, but now it just feels wrong. Everything feels wrong...*

“Look, I-- ugh.” Applejack grimaced, falling back on her hind legs. “Why did you have to come back Trixie? You’ve made it all a big ol’ mess again like you always do. I could care less what somepony decides to do with their life, you most of all. Sure, maybe yer turnin’ over a new leaf in your life. I don’t know, even with this you’ve done a lot of bad things that I have a hard time forgivin’. Twi always said we should’a given you another chance, that you weren’t the pony we thought you were. Maybe Sweetie Belle's willin' to give you that chance, but she ain't the best judge of character, and she's young besides. She just wants a friend, and I'm afraid to see what happens when she finds out what kinda friend you might turn out'ta can be. She doesn't deserve that kinda pain.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come back.” Trixie said softly, her voice distant as if was replying to someone other than Applejack. Her mane fell over her eyes as she hung her head. *She's right. Why am I bringing Sweetie Belle into this? I can't decide if I want revenge or if everything has been a mistake. I don't want to just abandon her either now, I can't. She's the only pony other than dad that's ever made me feel like... like I was actually important to somepony. When I saw her in my dream and then this morning, it felt like she really needed me. But-- No, she's not my dad, she'll never be my dad. Its not the same. All I'm doing is teaching her magic. Is this all because of a stupid dream? Dear Celestia, I don't even know what I'm doing anymore...*

Applejack blinked in surprise at Trixie's unexpected reaction. Biting her lip, Applejack thought for a moment and then continued. “But at the same time... horsefeathers, I can’t believe I’m even sayin’ this... if somepony’d told me a week ago that I’d find The Great and Powerful Trixie squattin’ on my property, bonding with my friend’s sister, apologizin’ to me and carin’ about anypony other than herself... I’dda told her she was the worst fortune-teller in Equestria. But plain as day, here I am.”

“Trixie, I don’t know if I can trust you just yet. You did a lot of bad things before. But Sweetie Belle... it seems like you help her when other ponies can’t, and I can’t ignore that. I don’t care if ya plan on teachin’ her magic or just bein’ her friend or whatever, just promise me one thing.” Applejack said, looking Trixie dead in the eye. “Promise that no matter what, you will not break Sweetie Belle’s heart with this. I don’t care if you hate me or Twilight or any of the rest of us ponyfolk. Just don’t make Sweetie Belle suffer for whatever you’re goin’ through. No pony deserves to be hurt just ‘cause some other pony is trying to escape from what they’ve made of their own life... her least of all.” Applejack paused, looking to the side as if the thought reminded her of someone else before turning back to Trixie. “Promise me that.”

Trixie was still unsure of what to make of the confusion in her head, but nodded with solemn honesty. “I swear... I won’t.”

Applejack nodded back. Straightening her hat with one hoof, she turned and started walking back up the hill. “Alrighty then. Ah don’t know what I’m gonna tell Miss Cheerilee or Rarity, but I’ll think’a somethin’. And I’ll be back every now and then to keep ‘an eye on you. Don’t think I’m not watchin’.”

“Applejack?”

“Yes?” Applejack stopped and looked back.

“Is Rarity...?”

Applejack nodded. “Sweetie Belle’s older sister, the one whose hair you fussed up when you first came here. She practically Sweetie’s mom but they... had a fight, so I’m watchin’ her fer now. They haven’t talked in a while. Any other questions ‘fore I go?”

Trixie turned away from Applejack as she spoke. “Just one more thing. If you could, please don’t say... her name anymore. I don’t like what it reminds me of.”

“Alrighty, I understand. And I won’t tell her yer here neither. As long as you show me I can trust you, I won’t tell no pony. I need some time to think

this through 'fore I decide.”

“Thank you...”

“Take care of Sweetie Belle. If she wakes up in time, you both are free to come by for supper.”

“I will. I promise”

Chapter 3

"I'll move my royal guard here, capturing your other pegasus. And um... checkmate."

"When did... this isn't possible! The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't lose this many times in a row, especially not to a kid!" Trixie groaned, bringing her hoof down on the game board, shaking the pieces and knocking some into the grass by the stream.

"So..." Sweetie Belle said expectantly.

"Fine. Here, just have them all. I've lost enough already." Trixie sighed as she rubbed her head with one hoof, levitating the bowl of wrapped apple candies Applejack had given the two and upending it into Sweetie's matching bowl in defeat.

"And later tonight you'll...?"

"Yes, I'll brush and comb your mane as I promised."

"And I can...?"

"Yes, yes, alright! You can have all the pillows you want from my bed tonight, and the blankets too.. Just don't rub it in anymore."

"Yes! Sweetie Belle is once again the chess playing champion of Ponyville! Undefeated of the east orchard! Master of the-- " Sweetie froze mid-sentence, turning to see Trixie giving her a very unamused stare. Taking a moment to glance at her flank but finding no new cutie mark for her success, she smiled back sheepishly at the older unicorn. "Um... sorry."

Trixie rolled her eyes, resting her chin glumly on the tree stump between the two ponies as she levitated the game pieces back into their box, followed by the board, and finally sealing it with the lid before setting it to the side with a stack of other boxes. "I do believe that exhausts all our

boardgames to defeat Trixie at? It would appear that they are not your special talent either, although she finds your skill uncanny.”

“There’s a pony in my class at school named Snails who I used to play with a lot. He’s really good at them ‘cause he takes a long time to think about his moves. I almost never win against him... although he forgets which color he’s playing sometimes.” Sweetie Belle replied. “But we still had fun, right? It looked like you were having fun!”

Trixie shifted uncomfortably in the grass, looking away from Sweetie Belle with an upturned snout. “Trixie... may enjoy these mental diversions from time to time, and assisting you in finding your special talent is not without its merits as well. But enough of this, we have been playing all morning and it is time for your practice.”

Sweetie Belle’s expectant smile faded, quickly replaced by a pout. “Can’t you teach me something more magical instead of making me practice all the time? I’m tired of just ‘holding’ rocks or whatever you say I’m doing. It doesn’t even feel like magic!”

“Practice is what separates the masters of unicorn magic, such as The Great and Powerful Trixie, from the dabblers and braggarts! Trixie became as good as she is now only through unwavering devotion to her skills.” Trixie said, waving her hoof for emphasis. “There has not been a single day in her life that she did not strive for the greatness she now possesses. Understandably not every pony can be as great as Trixie, but if you wish to be the student of such a brilliant unicorn you should show some modicum of devotion yourself.”

“Okaaaay.” Sweetie responded with disappointment. Standing up, she trotted back up to the clubhouse to retrieve the bucket of small rocks, marbles, and other objects Trixie had designated for practice. Pausing midway, she turned and looked back at the other unicorn, chewing at her lip in hesitation before speaking. “Um... Trixie?”

“Yes?” Trixie responded, looked up from the tree stump.

“I’m glad you’re my friend.” Sweetie Belle said, smiling softly.

“I... I’m glad too.”

A knock came at the door of Ponyville's fashion-famous Carousel Boutique one day at the end of summer. A heavy overcast had begun to fill the sky, the weather patrol having brought together many clouds to increase the chance of rain and begin the seasonal change to cooler weather. It was just past noon, but the sign in the dimly lit window of the boutique had already been turned over to show the words 'Please come again' in elegant cursive script. Sounds of music echoing out of a record player could be heard inside, notes of a lone piano echoing elegant and melancholy inside.

Seconds passed as the request from the front door of boutique went unanswered, the whole of the building quiet aside from the music. In the back room of the shop Rarity stood in front of her worktable, unmoving and silent, her mouth hanging open in a small but sad frown. Front hooves rested limply upon a half-stitched cut of fabric as it in front of her, the cloth frozen in its journey through the sewing machine. Her eyes stared off into space past her work to a small worn pillow resting on the floor under the window, the few early afternoon sunbeams cast through the glass giving it a delicate beauty. It had been by no means been Rarity's finest creation, but the pony that had received it had loved it all the same. The pillow was empty now, though, and had been for a long time.

The knock came again, a little stronger this time, accompanied by some murmur that sounded familiar. Rarity looked down at the sewing machine in front of her and blinked slowly, her eyes stinging from dryness. Reaching up with a hoof to rub at her tired eyes, she found a small damp trail running down her cheek, making her pause. What have I been doing ? Was I... crying?

Her mind began to slowly wake back up as the knock came for a third time, startling her off her worktable. Shaking her head to clear the mental fog she trotted over to the inner door separating the front and back rooms of the boutique, holding it open for her to call though. "I'm sorry, we're closed," Rarity responded to the visitor at her door, her voice croaking as she broke into a dry, rattling cough. "The new hours are on the sign or by appointment only, please come back tomorrow!"

“Rarity, its me AJ, open up! We need’ta talk about Sweetie Belle.” The brown earth pony’s voice was muffled as she continued to pound on the door with her hoof.

“A... Applejack? I’m sort of busy right now dearie, can’t this wait till some other day? I... I’m sure whatever it is can wait till then. How about tomorrow at...” The white unicorn nervously glanced over her shoulder and into the workroom to the shelf where her scheduler lay open to the current month. Every single entry on the page had been scribbled out, erased, or canceled. “...ten-thirty in the morning? I’m just too busy to do it any other time with all my orders and appointments. Its my only opening and you have to catch me right before I close or I’ll --”

Appearing at one of the windows that peered into the back of the shop, Applejack pressed her face against the glass, smudging it as she glared inside at the unsuspecting unicorn. “Nuh-uh, missy. Right here, right now.”

Rarity jumped in surprise, turning to face the pony that had appeared behind her with one hoof tucked against her chest. She blinked hard and squinted, her eyes heavy and swollen from lack of sleep. “Applejack! Don’t you know better than to peep in on a... lady...” Rarity said, her voice trailing off as her gaze fell to the pillow resting below the window, her thoughts drifting back to her earlier reminiscence.

“Now, Rarity! I’ll buck down your door if I have to!” Applejack shouted back through the glass, clenching her jaw impatiently. Her heavy breathing began fogging up the window. Raising an eyebrow in alarm at Applejack’s threat, the other pony cantered off to unlock the front door.

Rarity could feel the animosity radiating from the cowpony as she walked past into the boutique. Furrowing her brows in anticipation, she shut the door with her hoof before turning to face her visitor with a courteous smile. “What brings you visit today, Applejack? Do you need me to re-size that dress I gave you for Sweetie Belle’s school festival? Or did she forget something else here that she needs at the clubhouse? I thought I sent her with enough mane-wash but after you said she needed more last week I started worrying if I sent her with enough beauty supplies.”

Applejack tensed, the corners of her mouth turned down in a scowl as she

turned around to face her unicorn friend. “Ya know exactly why I’m here Rarity, so stop actin’ like ya don’t! You’ve been avoidin’ this talk with me since Sweetie started missin’ school. I’m not hearin’ another excuse of ‘urgent order this’ or ‘emergency adjustment that’, you are gonna tell me now -- Why is Sweetie Belle still on my farm?”

“Oh, I... I see. I am terribly sorry to have inconvenienced you, Applejack.” Rarity apologized meekly. “If Sweetie Belle is being a burden, I’m certain I can find some other foalsitter for her. Fluttershy would probably be able to accommodate for a little while while I find someone, I’m sure. I could probably hire Roseluck or Daisy, they still owe me a fair number of bits for their last festival dresses.”

Applejack’s face immediately contorted into an mixture of anger and disbelief. Lifting one leg up, she slammed her hoof down on the floor of the boutique. “What in the hay is wrong with you, Rarity?! How long are ya gonna leave your little sis sufferin’ out on my farm while you twiddle yer horn in here makin’ fru-fru dresses to impress rich ponies! Its been just over two weeks since I took her in, and you haven’t even so much as tried to talk to her once! Two weeks, Rarity! I took her in so you two could cool off, not so you could ignore her!”

Rarity’s face flushed red with shame from the stinging accusation “Well excuse me for not being the model ‘big sister’ you are to Applebloom. Some ponies don’t have the luxury of raising our sisters with a Granny Smith, a Big Macintosh, and a ballroom of other relatives to help out. I don’t have a business that keeps food on the table year round and is needed by everypony. I don’t have a convenient answer for every problem like you do!”

“That’s not the point Rarity! Yer makin’ excuses! If you needed help with Sweetie Belle you coulda asked me or Twilight or any of us! And its not like the farm hasn’t fallen on hard times some years!” Applejack shouted as she advanced on Rarity, making the unicorn shrink away. “And saying ‘you don’t have all the answers’ doesn’t excuse you none either! Spike was kind enough to inform me you haven’t left the boutique at all this last week, sendin’ customers away an’ limitin’ yer hours, an that’cha even missed yer weekly appointment with Fluttershy at the spa. You have no right to jus’ lock yerself away in here at Sweetie’s expense! She needs

you!”

“I’m trying, Applejack! This isn’t as easy for me as you think!” Rarity yelled back, her voice lacking conviction. Tears were forming at the corner of her eyes as she retreated from her friend’s menacing words.

“You jus’ don’t get it do you? Tryin’ ain’t good enough, and Sweetie Belle ain’t just some problem you can try to ignore ‘till she goes away!” Applejack continued, looming over the cowering unicorn.

“No! You don’t get it! I’m trying to take care of her, and I can’t even do that! It’s ME! I’M THE ONE WHO’S THE PROBLEM!” Rarity screamed suddenly, her face twisting up in emotional agony as she lunged forward.

Applejack stumbled back in surprise at the outburst, bumping into the small table that held the record player. The building was cast into sudden silence as the needle jumped from its track, dislodged by the jolt. “Rarity, wait a minute! I--”

“It wasn’t supposed to be me! Mom and dad were supposed to take care of us both! You had the rest of your whole family to take care of you and Applebloom, but after **my** parents died I was the one left all alone! I was the one who had to suffer!” Rarity shrieked, jabbing at herself with one hoof as tears welled in her eyes. “I didn’t have our mother, but at least Sweetie Belle had me! But it’s not good enough, nothing I do is ever good enough! I’m trying to protect Sweetie Belle and do what’s best for her but it just keeps getting worse! Everything I do makes it worse!”

“Rarity, calm down! I didn’t mean it like that!” Applejack said in alarm, her friend’s behavior distressing her more with every word.

“She was barely two months old, Applejack! I wasn’t old enough to know how to raise a foal, but I had to do it anyway! I’ve given up my life so that she didn’t have to suffer alone like I did! Everything I’ve ever done was for her!” Rarity continued, her voice cracking from her hysteria. “I thought if I worked hard enough, my creations would become famous and I could sell the boutique and my designer’s rights, and then Sweetie and I would never need to worry again! Or if that stuck-up nephew of the Princess had been anything but a horror then she could have been adopted into the royal family! I don’t care about money or being married to some prince! I’ve

never cared about anything more than her! I'd sacrifice everything if it meant she could be happy!"

"Please, stop! I just wanted'ta help Sweetie Belle, I said didn't mean anythin' like this!" Applejack shouted back, desperate at seeing her words not reaching through to the other pony at all.

"I want to be her big sister, to make her laugh and listen to her dreams and wishes and be the one pony who will always be her friend! The one pony she can always trust to make her happy! But I'm supposed to take care of her, Applejack! I don't get what I want! I don't get to be loved by my little sister!" Rarity cried in pained despair, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I have to be the one to make her angry when I say no, and make her sad when I can't play with her! I'm the one who has to make her cry herself to sleep when I say she's too old to stay in my bed every time she has nightmares! And I have to because I have to replace the mother she doesn't have anymore! Every day I try I have to stop being her big sister a little more, and every day, she hates me a little more!"

"Rarity, Sweetie doesn't hate you! She loves you!" The orange earth pony pleaded as she reached out to put one hoof on Rarity's shoulder.. "Please, jus' calm down!"

"She even tried to run away from me Applejack! And you know what I did? I hit her! I HIT HER!!" Rarity wailed, sinking down onto the floor and holding her head between her hooves, covering her face. Her whole body shook as she tried to hold back in front of the other pony.

"You hit... But..." Applejack let go of the cowering unicorn as she sunk to the ground in front of her, stunned disbelief coloring her voice. "Why... why would you... jus' because she tried to run doesn't mean she don't love--"

"I wish I had died instead of mom and dad." Rarity sobbed from behind her hooves. "I wish it could've been me..."

"No, Rarity please! Don't ever say that! Sweetie--"

"Leave me alone, Applejack."

Applejack stood there with her mouth hanging open, not wanting to give up

but feeling powerless to fix what had unfolded in front of her.

“Please, go away. Just... go away.”

“Rarity, can I jus’... can I come back, later tonight or somethin’, jus’ to be sure you’re okay? Please... it don’t feel right, leaving you like this.”

Rarity nodded her assent without looking up.

Applejack walked quietly to the door, opening and shutting it behind her as she stepped out into the humid air with a sigh. “ ‘Just go talk to Rarity and give her a piece of my mind,’ huh? Nothin’s ever that simple, Applejack.” The earth pony muttered half-heartedly to herself, the sound of Rarity’s mournful wailing becoming more and more distant as she walked back toward the farm. A few sparse raindrops pattered against Applejack’s face from the dark clouds above.

She was in the mood for rain.

- - - - -

“I guess the rest of my afternoon practice will have to wait, huh.” Sweetie Belle said, looking out the window of the clubhouse at the bucket of practice knick-knacks Trixie had picked out, slowly filling with rainwater from the ongoing downpour. It had been forgotten in the rush to bring in the items more likely to be damaged by the rain, such as the many board games now stacked tall in the corner of the room next to the the crates containing each of the Crusader’s personal possessions.

“In light of current events Trixie is willing to grant you this reprieve from your studies. She has no desire to go out in that cold torrent again this evening.” Trixie grumbled from the doorway, her mane and coat sopping wet from doing the bulk of the game-rescuing work with her magic. Her cape and hat had been evacuated inside first, leaving the pony to run about in the rain un-protected. “It boggles me that one child needs all these toys and games.”

“They’re not all mine! Scootaloo got at a lot ‘em from Pinkie Pie, but she isn’t very good. My big sis got me the chess set a long time ago but... you know.” Sweetie Belle’s voice drifted off as her head sank down, her curls

shadowing her face in the dim candlelight.

Trixie could tell the direction of the younger unicorn's thoughts, and quickly changed the subject. "Perhaps Trixie can... er.... teach you something new to do with magic, if this rain continues tomorrow. Or why not right after dinner! I wonder what delicious things Applejack brought for us. And where is that towel..."

"Applejack never showed up today. She's always come by to watch us in the morning since she met you. I wonder what happened." Sweetie mused, lowering her front hooves from the windowsill.. "But... I don't think I want to learn any more magic today. Trixie."

Trixie raised her eyebrows, a bit taken aback by the filly's lack of enthusiasm. *She's not usually like this. I didn't do something to upset her again, did I? I don't think I did... No, she probably just misses Applejack's company, or she's down from thinking about her sister, or perhaps she just doesn't like the rain. Maybe I can cheer her up, though.*

"Well... we have leftovers from lunch right? Lets eat those and then I can brush your mane as promised. Doesn't that sound fun?" Trixie offered, smiling as she dried herself off.

"Okay." Sweetie Belle responded gloomily, walking over to the door and picking up the basket of food, a few slices of apple torte and daisy-and-olive sandwiches still left from lunch.

The two unicorns ate in silence, the rain against the roof and windows of the clubhouse continuing unabated. A few minutes later, Trixie stared through her damp mane at an uneaten olive about on her plate, frowning as she rolled it around with one hoof and waited anxiously for the smaller pony to finish her meal. *Something's bothering her and she's not telling me. Why not? How am I supposed to help her if I don't know what's wrong? And what if it's my fault.? I'm no good at this!*

Trixie looked up at Sweetie Belle. She was still busy making a crumbly mess of her torte. Another bat of the blue hoof, and the olive wobbled around the rim of the plate again. *This is stupid. The Trixie from before wouldn't be like this. She wouldn't care. Let her take care of their own problems. She'll get over it. Besides, its not like I'm obligated to help her or*

anything. I don't even have a clue what's wrong or how to fix it, how am I supposed to make things better?

The olive was interrupted in its tiny path around the world of the dinner plate as Trixie's hoof stopped it, the pressure from her hoof slowly increasing as her frown grew deeper.

*That **would** be just like me. Some pony I grew up to be. What made me think I could be anything like dad...*

"Trixie? Are you... playing with your food?" Sweetie said, raising an eyebrow.

The blue unicorn blinked as she stared down at the plate, then looked up at Sweetie Belle standing across the room, and then back down to her plate. Lifting her hoof, she found the remains of the olive, smashed into an oily paste on her plate. Quickly retrieving her napkin with her magic, she waved her other hoof dismissively, forcing a smile onto her face. "No, no! Trixie is fine, just fine. She just... doesn't like olives."

"Oh... well save them for me next time!" Sweetie Belle said, before turning nudging the basket of brushes and combs away from the wall with her snout. "Is it okay if we brush my mane now?"

"Sure." Trixie said, relieved she had not tipped off Sweetie Belle to her negative thoughts.. "Get a few pillows for us, okay? The floor's getting a little chilly."

Sweetie went over to the pile of cushions that was Trixie's bed and pulled a few down. Using her front hooves, she kicked the cushions in front of her as she crossed the room back to Trixie, who was sorting out a few brushes. A small vanity mirror was set on the floor a short distance away.

"Just put them here and sit down in front of the mirror, okay?" Trixie said, standing and gesturing at the ground in front of her. "I'll do your tail first. We'll have to put curlers in some other time too, the only bath you could get right now would be a cold drench in the rain."

After positioning a pillow for Trixie and two between her, Sweetie eased down on her side onto the pillows facing away from the older

unicorn. Glancing down, she flicked her tail out to straighten it. "Is this okay?"

Trixie concentrated briefly, adjusting the mirror with her magic till she could see Sweetie's face reflected in it. Levitating a broad-tooth comb, Trixie began to brush it through the hair of the filly's tail, freeing loose bits of leaves and burrs that had accumulated in its curls.

Trixie continued for several minutes, making broad strokes through the pony's fine hair, working her way up to the base and back down again until the tail lay straight and smooth. The filly's chest rose and fell as Sweetie took a deep breath and let it out. Glancing in the mirror, she could see Sweetie's eyes were closed. *I closed my eyes too, when dad brushed me before bed. It felt good. I wonder if...*

Trixie cleared her throat nervously, setting aside the comb and slipping a broad, flat coat-brush over her hoof. Her heart pounded in her chest as she smoothed the short pale hair of Sweetie's coat, slowly trying to build up courage.

"Okay, other side now." she said, tapping the filly gently on the side with her hoof. Sweetie Belle obediently rolled onto her stomach and turned around to lay down again on her other side. As Trixie worked the teeth of the brush across Sweetie Belle's body she began to hum softly, her voice wavering on each note.

Sweetie Belle's ear flicked up as it caught the sounds of Trixie's voice, but she remained still. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and glanced at Trixie in the mirror. "Is that a song?"

Trixie's brush-holding hoof paused over the filly's shoulder, her foreleg shaking. "Y-yes..."

"Would you sing it for me?"

Trixie swallowed, trying to clear the tightness in her throat. "I-I... I'm not very..."

"Please?"

“Okay.... I’ll try.”

Trixie took a few deep breath, her whole body shuddering as she tried to let her anxiety dissipate. Gradually, she felt her heartbeat slow and her shaking ceased. Putting her right hoof back on the smaller unicorn’s coat, she closed her eyes, letting her sense of touch guide the brush as she sang, her voice quiet and delicate.

*Down from my night sky, bright stars shine
They shine on my face through a hole in the roof
Behind the dark clouds here, there’s a moon
And when I sing to them, I close my eyes.*

*Inside my room here, I catch the stars
And inside a jar I keep them for you
Safe in your bed, fall asleep
And when I sing, my stars will shine
Just for you.*

*Down from my night sky, bright stars shine
They shine on my face through a hole in the roof
Behind the dark clouds here, there’s a moon
And when I sing for you, tonight,
I close my eyes.*

Trixie’s voice trailed off, the unicorn falling silent and looking down at the filly laying at her feet. Sweetie did not speak, her chest continued to rise and fall slowly and steadily. Trixie lifted her hoof and continued to groom the young filly.

Sweetie lay there patiently until she felt the brush lift from her coat. When it did not return, she opened her eyes and looked in the mirror again to see Trixie holding her hoof to her face, eyes closed and frowning sadly. Pushing her small legs out, she lifted herself off the cushions.

As Sweetie sat up, Trixie quickly opened her eyes and turned to the side,

her face hidden behind her hair while she slipped the flat brush off her hoof and levitated a fine tooth comb over to her. "Your mane will have to be straight for awhile until we can curl it again." she said, using her hooves to pull Sweetie Belle right in front of her.

"Are you leaving, Trixie?" Sweetie asked quietly.

The brush dropped from the air, clattering on the ground next to the two ponies.

"I...why... why would you think that?" Trixie responded.

"Applejack said you had done bad things a long time ago, and that when my friends came back that you probably wouldn't be able to stay here anymore."

"When?"

"At the end of the month."

Trixie sat wordlessly behind Sweetie Belle, a few minutes passing with only the sound of rain falling on the clubhouse.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie wouldn't... she wouldn't abandon her student. Of course she is staying."

"But... what if you do have to leave? I don't... I don't want..." Sweetie Belle did not need to finish her sentence. *I don't want you to go away.*

"Trixie will do everything in her power to stay. She promised, and Trixie always keeps her promises." Her voice was flat and emotionless.

"Are you sure?"

Trixie levitated the hairbrush back up to the mane in front of her and resumed her work, the pink and purple curls slowly unraveling as the teeth of the brush passed through them. "Of course."

"Okay." Sweetie said, her voice sounding a little more spirited as she looked away from the mirror and closed her eyes, focusing on the feeling of

the brush through her hair. All she could see were her own legs anyway. “I liked your song. And... I’m really glad I met you Trixie.”

Sweetie Belle did not see the older unicorn clench her jaw and close her eyes tight to keep herself from crying, nor sense the tightness in her chest that made it so difficult to reply.

“...I am too.”