

“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?’ ”

“The Guidance and Patronage of Trixie”

Chapter 2

An MLP:FiM fanfiction by Im_not_Sue (aka Lounge_Lizard)

(Characters: Sweetie Belle, Trixie, Applejack, Rarity)

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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 she 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 déjà 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 she'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 pent up emotions.

I know what it's like to feel abandoned, I was kind of the same after dad... went away. Nopony 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 unicorns, 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 unicorns 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... nnngh...!" 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. Owwww...."

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. It's 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 helped 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 nopony. 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."

-To Be Continued-

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