

Sweetie Belle let out another trembling yawn and fell back on her haunches before the front door of *Breezy Family Fan Fixing and Fine Furnishings*. Droplets of water fell from the eaves of the store onto the hood of the filly's yellow poncho. Pressed up against the locked door was her wagon, covered with a green tarp to protect its contents from getting wet.

*I sure hope Mister Breezy comes soon...*

The streets of Ponyville were empty at that early hour, save for the large puddles left from the previous night's downpour. The rain had stopped sometime earlier that morning as Sweetie Belle had made ready to leave the Crusader clubhouse in Sweet Apple Acres, but the thick layer of clouds still blocked out the sun's pre-dawn glow.

Sweetie Belle eased herself down next to her wagon, tucking in her chin and tugging the hood down over her head until only a few strands of her pink and purple mane were visible underneath. Settled as best she could be next to her wagon, Sweetie Belle closed her droopy eyes and waited for the town clocktower to announce the first hour of the morning. The stone stoop was uncomfortably cold even through the insulation of her poncho, but her mind was elsewhere -- on a blue unicorn she had left fast asleep in her bed of pillows.

*I hope Trixie's dad is okay and that it was just a bad dream. She was really upset though. I get really upset too when I have bad dreams like that, but... maybe something actually happened to him. She said she couldn't save him... what if he got hurt in an accident, and she feels like it's her fault? Or maybe he got sick and now he's gone, like what happened to Cheerilee's grandpa last year when she took the day off to go to the funeral. She told the whole class that she missed him a lot. She even cried a little. I really hope he's okay and gets better so Trixie can go see him again. I don't think Trixie's family lives near Ponyville though. She probably misses them. I wonder if she has a big sister just like like I do? Or if she even has a sister at all...*

Sweetie Belle's ears perked up at the sound of approaching hoofsteps. Peeking under the rim of her hood, she watched a yellow earth pony with orange hair trotting slowly down the street, a pair of covered baskets slung over her back. The other pony glanced in her direction as she passed, but kept on walking. Sweetie stared at the travelling mare until she turned at a distant intersection and trotted out of sight, leaving the filly alone once again.

*If Trixie could go see her dad that would be really nice, so she could be sure he's okay. Applejack doesn't let her leave the clubhouse at all though. She probably misses visiting her friends and her mom and dad. I've told her about Applebloom and Scootaloo, but... she never talks about anypony. She hardly talks about anything at all. What if she's like me before I met Scootaloo and Applebloom, and she doesn't have any friends? I had Rarity, but if her dad... if*

*he's... I... I'd hate to not have anypony as my friend...*

Sweetie Belle sat up straight as a shiver tingled down her spine. She took a few deep breaths, the tightness in her stomach dissipating as she let go of that line of thought. She didn't like where it was taking her.

Sweetie's eyes drifted to the cart resting beside the door, its contents still safely hidden under the protective tarp. She nudged the edge back and revealed the crystal nightlight Trixie had made for her a few days before. Sweetie lifted the crystal out with her teeth before slumping against the wall once more, letting the nightlight fall against her chest and into the soft crevice of her forelegs. With a deep sigh Sweetie Belle rested her head on her hooves and closed her eyes.

*I wish I could make her happy again...*

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## **“The Guidance and Patronage of Trixie”**

### Chapter 5

An MLP:FiM fanfiction by Lounge\_Lizard, aka Im\_Not\_Sue  
(Characters: Sweetie Belle, Trixie, Applejack, Rarity)  
(v1.0.0 - 10/29/12)

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“Sweetie Belle? Is that you?”

“Huh... what?” Sweetie mumbled. She lifted her head from the ground and struggled open her heavy eyelids. The pony that loomed over her only partially blocked the bright morning light shining down on her face. Sweetie squinted and raised one hoof in front of her eyes, trying to make out the pony's identity through the glare.

“It is you! I'm so used to seeing your hair in curls I thought you were some other filly.” The pony said, his cheery voice familiar through Sweetie's mental haze. “But why are you sleeping in front of my store? I'm not open on the weekends. Did Rarity send you for something?”

“Oh... hi Mister Breezy. I came to return your fan. I think I fell asleep though. What... what time is it?” Sweetie Belle replied groggily as she pushed herself up from the ground. She rubbed

her eyes with one foreleg to clear the blurriness from her vision. Sure enough, the snappily-dressed pony Sneezy Breezy stood before her in his trademark suit and hat he always wore.

The tan earth pony glanced down the street at the tall clock tower that stood at the edge of town. The weather had cleared up slightly, letting sunlight and blue sky through the holes in the clouds.

“Well, the bells just tolled for the hour so... only a bit after 10 o’clock I think.”

“Ten... ten o’clock?!” Sweetie Belle squeaked. Her eyes flew wide open and she jumped a foot in the air in shock. “Can I return the fan, Mister Breezy? Please, I’ve got to get back to the clubhouse! Applejack is gonna be furious!”

“Well, normally I’d say no since it’s my day off but...” Breezy began, but the sight of the small unicorn filly, now very much awake and adorably bouncing up and down on her hoftips in distress, brought an amused yet sympathetic smile to his face. “Well, I was already coming in to pick up something anyway. I don’t see why I can’t take a return too.”

“Oh thank goodness.” Sweetie Belle said with a relieved sigh. “Scootaloo would never let me forget if I lost even one bit of our deposit. She’s been wanting a new scooter for ages.”

“Well just be sure to return your rentals on time in the future so you don’t risk disappointing your filly friends.” Breezy chuckled as he retrieved a key from his saddlebag and unlocked the door. He nudged the door open with his hoof and gestured inside. “Just leave the wagon and your coat here. I’ll carry the fan inside. Don’t want any mud getting in the store after all.”

Sweetie Belle nodded eagerly in agreement and slipped out of her poncho and rain boots while Breezy hoisted the filly’s fan up onto his back.

The interior of the shop was, as its name suggested, full of fans of various shapes and sizes. From the long wall of run-of-mill pedal-powered standing fans anypony could use, to the dozen crank-and-pulley operated ceiling fans installed in every upper-class Manehattan loft, and even the pricey modern models with new-age style made to be driven by unicorn-enchanted crystal batteries, the Breezy Family store had whatever a pony in need of a cooling draft of air might need. There was even a sign against one wall which read ‘Need industrial-strength? We special order!’ The remaining space in the shop held a modest miscellany of decorative home goods that made up the other half of the store’s namesake.

Once the two ponies reached the back of the shop, Breezy set his cargo on the countertop and

pulled out a clipboard and quill from underneath the register. Sweetie Belle waited patiently as the older pony began to fill out the form attached to the clipboard.

“Alright then... table fan number 14, rented to... Applebloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo. HoneyWings model PWM-3... Alright. Just sign the top part and put the date here. I need to inspect the fan to be sure it's still working and in good condition before I can return your deposit.” Breezy said, setting the clipboard on the counter near Sweetie Belle. He shouldered the fan once more and pushed open the door to the back room.

“Um... okay.” Sweetie replied. She took the clipboard and quill from the counter and quickly signed her name. She heard the older pony jostling around the contents of a toolbox as she placed the clipboard back up on the counter. “Anything else?”

“Nope! You can just stick around the shop. Shouldn't take more than...” Breezy called back through the door, his voice cutting off mid-sentence as the noise inside suddenly stopped. A moment later the earth pony stuck his head back out, a worried expression coloring his face. “On second thought, maybe you could just come back later, Sweetie. We uh... wouldn't want a repeat of what happened that one time, would we?”

“Mister Breezyyyy! I wasn't even old enough to be in pre-school when that happened!” Sweetie Belle protested. Her face flushed a deep shade of red as she stomped her hooves on the ground. “And besides, I'm not a little foal anymore! I can be responsible!”

“I know, I know. But the missus... she'd kill me if she knew I even let you in the door without Rarity here. You know it's store policy now.” With a sheepish grin on his face Breezy pointed to the large sign on the counter that read ‘*Absolutely No Children Allowed Without Supervision.*’

“I said I won't do anything! I promise! You can trust me!” Sweetie Belle insisted.

“Oh, I don't know if...” Breezy replied uneasily, trying to weigh just how much unintentional devastation one filly was capable of.

*The smoldering wreckage of Breezy Family Fan Fixing and Fine Furnishings had finally been contained. The Ponyville Community Fire Brigade had been quick to respond, and thanks to their diligence only four other nearby buildings had been consumed by the fire and no pony had been hurt. Some ponies might not have called that a true success, but those with experience fighting such disasters knew that they were lucky the whole block wasn't burned to the ground.*

*The newspapers would later report that an investigation had shown the fire was likely accidental, and appeared to have been caused by a freak mishap involving one and a half dozen barrels of lamp oil in the attic of Lanterns and Loufas that had somehow been ignited by large pieces of metal shrapnel. Eyewitnesses reported that the sound of a loud explosion had been heard minutes before, emanating from the vicinity of the Breezy Family property, but due to damage from the fire it is likely the true cause will never be determined...*

Breezy snapped from his nightmarish reverie with a shudder and looked back down at the pink-and-purple haired filly in front of him.

“Well, okay, but just be careful and don’t... don’t touch anything. Please?” Breezy implored.

“I said I won’t!” Sweetie Belle repeated.

“Promise?”

“Mister Breezeeeeeyyyy!!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Breezy said, before finally retreating back into the workshop.

“Ugh... you’d think there’d be somepony in this town that didn’t treat me like a baby!” Sweetie Belle fumed. She turned away from the counter and briefly considered where in Ponyville such a pony might be found, but she already knew that the two fillies most willing to give her a peer’s respect were still far away on their own adventures.

*I wonder how Scootaloo is doing at flight camp. Maybe she’ll even get her cutie mark there. Applebloom didn’t want to spend a whole month in Appleoosa, but maybe she’ll get her mark too. I really miss them... I wish they hadn’t left. I wish I could play board games and draw and go looking for our special talents again. It’s no fun being all by myself.*

Sweetie Belle sighed and leaned against the side of the counter. The smooth sanded wood paneling felt nice against her coat. Sweetie tilted her head and languidly stroked her cheek along the surface as she continued to muse.

*They probably miss me too, but they both have somepony to keep them company. Now that Trixie is here I guess I do too. I wonder if they’ll want to meet Trixie when they come back? Although on second thought, I don’t know if Scootaloo would get along with Trixie very well. Applejack sure doesn’t. Rarity wouldn’t either...*

Sweetie Belle frowned, the urge to escape her unpleasant thoughts rising as she stared out the open door into the drippy, dreary day. She stood up straight and started towards the door, but made it only a few steps before her mind reigned in her hooves. She didn't have anywhere to go. Wandering the town would be no better than staying right where she was, and she couldn't go back to the clubhouse before she was done returning the fan. With a sigh the filly slowed and stopped midway down the aisles. There was nothing to do but wait.

*Applejack said Trixie will have to leave when Scootaloo and Applebloom come back, but Trixie promised she wasn't going to leave. What's going to happen? If only I could ask somepony like Cheerilee or Mister Breezy if there's somepony she could stay with... but... Applejack said I can't tell anypony or they'll get mad because she's not supposed to be in Ponyville.*

Sweetie hung her head and sighed. She began to wander aimlessly through the store aisles, browsing for some distraction, but the flower pots and fancy dishes failed to capture her interest. On a different day with two other fillies by her side, then perhaps she could have found some wondrous treasure or an enticing opportunity to find a cutie mark. Alone, the shop's wares were nothing more than mundane adult things, for grown-up ponies who wanted to decorate their patios and dinner tables.

Sweetie Belle continued to browse until her eyes lighted upon on a tall rotating stand adorned with wind chimes on display at the front of the store. Almost a dozen chimes hung from the stand's thin metal arms for shoppers to peruse. Curious, she ambled closer to examine them. Some were made from lines of dangling shells, others from ceramic tiles or wooden tubes. Some were simple, a few even sported extravagantly etched glass. None of them moved, though; the air inside the shop was too still to stir any of the chimes from their silence.

"I guess stuff like this is kind of nice..." Sweetie Belle muttered to herself. She reached up to sound the closest chime, a circle of thin metal tubes hung from a wooden disc with a dangling ball at the center, but the noise of Breezy's toolwork in the back room froze her hoof an inch from the chime. Sweetie lowered her hoof and looked away, morose and resigned to her inability to sate her curiosity.

*They're going to fight again, I know it. They're going to yell and scream at each other, just like when Applejack found her here. Applejack's going to say she has to leave Ponyville anyway. She doesn't let Trixie go anywhere or do anything, and she's always treating Trixie like she did something bad, and now she's going to make her leave! Why does she have to be so mean to Trixie? She's my friend! If Trixie was a bad pony, she'd... she wouldn't...*

Sweetie Belle closed her eyes tightly shut as a wave of frustration and anger washed over her. Her small body tensed as she held back the urge to scream out her growing frustration.

*She's just like Rarity when she gets mad at me for dumb things when I'm trying to do something nice for her or just help out! Trixie shouldn't have to leave; it's not fair! She's always been nice to me, and she's helping me with magic when nopony else cares! I mean, she gets upset sometimes, but she's never mean! Applejack told me she did bad things before, but Trixie's never been mean to me or Applejack or anypony, never ever! Applejack should be mad at Rarity instead! Rarity doesn't let me do anything and doesn't ever listen to me and left me all alone! She's the mean one! Trixie cares way more about me than my big sister does! And she's my friend, and she shouldn't have to be sad all the time! She made me happy, and I'm trying hard to make her happy too! I don't want her to go away! Why can't Applejack tell Rarity to go away instead? Trixie would... Trixie would be a better big sister than Rarity ever was!*

Sweetie Belle opened her eyes again and glared past the strands of pink and purple hair at the rack of wind chimes hanging mutely in front of her, their mocking stillness just another piece of her life out of her reach to change. Sweetie Belle clenched her jaw and let out a long, frustrated shriek between her teeth. Her cry rose with her anger in both pitch and intensity, building until she could not contain herself any longer.

*“I HATE STUPID ADULTS!!”*

The young filly lashed out with the full force of her anger at the chimes. Her hooves cascaded through dozens of noise making bits before they smashed into the frame and sent the whole thing spinning in a harsh cacophony of sound. Sweetie Belle winced and let out a sharp cry as stinging pain shot up through her legs. She hopped a few short steps back and cradled her tingling hooves against her chest, the blow shaking her out of her emotional outburst.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Sweetie apprehensively looked back up. The looming beast of metal rods and carved wood teetered back and forth on its tiny legs in front of her, its balance dangerously upset by the filly's attack. Its tinkling voice echoed in the empty shop, harsh and discordant, like a wounded animal crying out in pain before its own inevitable demise. The stand spun in a slow wobbling circle once, twice, fighting gravity...

“Sweetie Belle, is everything alright? I thought I heard something. I'll be right there, let me just get these straps off...”

*Uh oh...*

Sweetie's eyes grew wide as the looming display she had promised not to touch finally began to tip over into the aisle, the stand and all its fragile adornments descending towards the filly with inescapable speed.

“Oh, Cutie marks--”

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*“...nto town to drop it off. I'll be right back okay?”*

*Somepony was whispering. It sounded like a filly's voice, a familiar voice.*

*“Suh... Summer? Where am I?” Trixie mumbled tiredly. Everything around her was dark and murky, and the air was stuffy. She struggled to lift her head, but a heavy weight on her chest held her down, keeping her from sitting up straight. A blurry pale... something, moved at the bottom of her vision. She could feel it shuffling and shifting around on top of the layer of dark shapes covering her. The pressure on her chest grew heavier, making it difficult to breathe, before a small round face peered in through a crack of light. It smiled.*

*“You can go back to sleep, Trixie. I'll be back in time for breakfast.”*

*“Oh... okay.” Trixie mumbled, silhouette of the white pony with the familiar voice slipping away as she let her head fall back. The weight on top of her suddenly vanished, and Trixie sighed in relief and closed her eyes once more. The sounds of rustling fabric, a creaking door, and hoofsteps in the mud outside slowly faded away as Trixie fell back into a peaceful sleep.*

*Hoofsteps. Outside. Coming closer.*

Trixie's eyes shot open, her mind startling out of drowsiness and into panic almost instantly. The rhythmic splashing of hooves trudging through rain puddles drew close, but there were no warning calls from Applejack, no sweet melodies from Sweetie Belle echoing through the trees. The hooves outside belonged to somepony else. Trixie scrambled to push herself out of bed, the pillows spilling aside as she forced herself out from underneath them. She had to hurry before--

The sound of the hoofsteps starting up the wooden stairs made her blood run cold. Trixie gulped, her heart pounding in her chest as she stepped carefully away from the bed on trembling hooves. She expected the door to fly open at any moment, for the pony outside to discover that the hated



villain had returned, and to quickly gather a mob to drive her away... or to punish her like so many had before. At any moment the door could open and she would be discovered. She hoped with all her heart that the stranger outside wouldn't hear the floorboards creaking underneath her over the sound of their own hoofsteps. She crept as fast as she dared past the scattered pillows to the corner of the room.

The hoofsteps paused outside the clubhouse door just as Trixie reached the dubious safety of the corner of the room. Wasting no time, she huddled in as close to the wall as she could, tucked her head down, and stared at a crack in the floor as she began to cast her spell.

*Don't blink. Don't blink. Don't blink. Don't blink.*

The faint glow emanating from the blue unicorn's horn wavered with every trembling exhalation she made. She had performed her Vanishing Spell dozens of times while onstage and more than once used it to save herself from discovery while off, but this time her trademark bravado and smug confidence had quickly evaporated. The pony wouldn't be able to see or hear her, but only as long as she didn't look at the other pony either and didn't close her eyes. Unlike her wagon's stage with its nearby curtains and the convenient placement of her audience, in the tight confines of the clubhouse she had nowhere to escape. She was trapped, and all it would take was an accidental bump from the curious pony, a sneeze she couldn't hold back, or her exhausted eyes screaming at her to blink for the spell to break and bring everything to an end. She would be caught. The pony would run away before Trixie could do anything. Everypony in town would know, and then...

The seconds dragged on as Trixie waited anxiously for the door to open, but nothing happened. The clubhouse was silent, save for the sound of her own ragged, shallow breathing. Sweat she dared not wipe away ran down her snout and dripped onto the floorboards below.

*I couldn't have been hearing things. Somepony was climbing the steps. Did they hear me moving? If they did, then why haven't they come in yet? What are you waiting for? What do you want?! Just go away, I'm not here. No pony's h--*

“Sweetie... are you there?”

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Applejack paused her survey of the mystery novels on the shelf before her and glanced at the purple unicorn quietly reading on the other side of the library.

*This is stupid, AJ. You know what you need to do. This is between you and her. You don't need to bother Twi. But... ugh, consarn it girl, just get it over with.*

Applejack bit her lip and looked down at her hooves. A dust bunny lay at the foot of the shelf. She teased it with her hoof for a few moments before speaking.

“Hey... Twilight.”

The other pony perked her ears at the sound of her name, but her eyes remained intently focused on the open pages of last year's *Semi-Annual Astronomer's Almanac* laying on the floor before her. “Yes, Applejack? Need me to find something?”

“No, I uh... I had a question.” Applejack muttered, her voice growing quiet.

Twilight looked up from her book. Applejack had come by the library on her usual quest for new reading material for Granny Smith, but today the earth pony's casual search had dragged on quite a bit longer than it usually did. The somber tone of Applejack's voice sent up a warning flare in Twilight's mind. The apple farmer always was terrible at hiding her feelings, and something was troubling her. Twilight folded her hooves and nosed her book to the side, tasseled bookmark tucked firmly between its pages.

“Sure thing, Applejack! Ask away. I'm here to help.” Twilight said eagerly, hiding her concern beneath bubbly cheer.

“You remember Trixie, right?” Applejack asked slowly, picking each word carefully. “You know, from the time with the stage and you taking care of the wild Ursa.”

Twilight shifted her left hind leg underneath her, a faint smile forming across her lips. “Of course. How could I forget? It's not everyday you have to take care of a *Minor* problem in Ponyville.”

“What do you think of her?” Applejack asked flatly.

“...what do I think of her?” Twilight echoed quizzically, surprised that Applejack hadn't reacted to her little pun.

“Yeah. About the kind of pony she is, I mean.” Applejack mumbled, shifting about on her feet awkwardly. She kept her back turned on the unicorn across the library.

“It’s... kind of hard to say. I don’t think she’s a bad pony, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Twilight said hesitantly while rubbing her chin with one hoof, her mind spinning in circles trying to guess at her friend’s troubles.

“Why?”

“She’s not the kind of pony who does mean things on purpose.” Twilight responded simply.

“Course not. She just ended up doing them anyway.” Applejack retorted.

Twilight recoiled, more than a bit taken aback by the coldness of her friend’s reply. She stood up and circled around the other pony. From the side she could see the apple farmer’s clenched jaw and stern gaze focused far beyond the works fiction she seemed to be browsing. Applejack glanced behind her and met eyes with Twilight briefly before turning her back to the unicorn again and hiding her face in another bookshelf. Neighriam-Troststers Dictionaries. Something was definitely wrong.

“Applejack, what’s bothering you?” Twilight asked as she circled closer once more, her concern no longer hidden by her earlier pleasant facade.

“No. It’s nothing. I-I just... I have...” Applejack started, her voice cracking midway through. She shook her head as if to clear it and took a deep breath before continuing. “I know a unicorn. And she’s done some bad things before, but now... I don’t know what to think about her.”

“You didn’t see Trixie recently, did you? Or, no...” Twilight chewed her lip thoughtfully as she pieced together the connections in her mind. “...this is about Rarity and Sweetie Belle, isn’t it.”

Twilight knew right away she’d made a mistake. Applejack tensed up, her legs and shoulders going completely stiff. Twilight took a few steps back from the earth pony and waited apprehensively, hoping she was just misinterpreting the signals. Applejack did not respond.

“Sorry... I shouldn’t be prying,” Twilight said after a few moments. The other pony still did not break from her impassive, stone-faced stance. Twilight lifted one hoof to rub at her chin, realizing she would have to pick her words carefully if she wanted to be of help. “Um... well, about Trixie, I don’t think she was trying to be mean because she... she... I don’t know. She wasn’t trying to hurt anypony.”

“How can you **believe** that even after she came and attacked you?” The earth pony’s voice was low but harsh and bitter, and her words were spat out through clenched teeth. “The Ursa

might've wrecked the town or hurt some ponies, but you could've actually DIED Twilight! I could've lost one of my best friends because of her."

"I know, but I understand why she... tried to hurt me. It wasn't because she wanted to be mean, it's... it's..." Twilight sighed and looked away before continuing quietly. "I'm not going to say how I know, but she hasn't had the best life, Applejack. She's been hurt a lot and she's had to suffer a lot more than anypony should."

"So that just makes everything okay? That excuses what she did?" Applejack replied cynically, shaking her head.

"I don't know, but I don't blame her."

Twilight sat down on her haunches and waited again as the earth pony stared silently down at her hooves.

"Right. I'm headin' off. Need to check up on Sweetie Belle." Applejack said as she raised her head back up, regaining her stolid composure in a snap. She turned and began to walk toward the front door.

"Applejack, wait! I want to say one more thing." Twilight called after her.

The earth pony paused at the door and waited.

"I think things could have been a lot different if Trixie..." Twilight paused, a wistful frown coming over her face. "...if she had somepony who could have helped her out. Somepony to be her friend, to be there for her when she really needed it. She might not have ended up like... like she is now."

"...alright." Applejack muttered weakly, her voice drained of all the venom it held just moments before. With a nudge of her hoof she opened the front door of the library and walked out into the morning light.

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Sweetie Belle stood in front of the white-and-purple entrance to Carousel Boutique, yellow poncho draped over her head. It was almost noon, and yet the building was silent, and no lights were on inside.

The filly's stomach growled in protest of the lack of food the filly had eaten that day, but still she didn't move. She stood on the stoop, her eyes fixed to the ground, struggling to collect the words buried under the turmoil of emotions inside her. An open cardboard box lay in the wagon behind her, its precious contents concealed by a layer of white tissue paper.

“Rarity... I can... I...”

*Sweetie Belle opened her eyes.*

*The fallen stand lay in the aisle inches from the small filly it had almost struck. Its thin metal arms were bent from the impact with the ground, the fragile chimes that once hung from those arms now destroyed. Shards of broken ceramic and slivers of broken glass were scattered everywhere. The small filly that had created the terrible mess was unharmed, but none of the chimes on the display had managed to avoid destruction.*

*Save one.*

*Sweetie Belle stared up in awe. Floating in the air above her was the simple dangling-rods windchime that she had refrained from touching just moments earlier, now caught and held in an almost perfect stillness by a muted pink glow of magic. Her magic.*

*“I did it...” Sweetie Belle whispered, shivering as the words left her mouth.*

*The windchime stirred as if moved by the filly's voice. The small wooden ball dangling in the center of the metal rods swayed, and gently struck three of them.*

*Sweetie Belle reeled as a deluge of sound overwhelmed her senses. The chime made only the faintest noise in the air of the shop, and yet she could feel the power of the notes resonating clean and pure from her horn. Sweetie quickly felt her face grow numb and tingly, and began to wobble as her sense of balance slipped. The resonation cascaded through her head and down through her body, diminishing in intensity as it spread out to the tips of her hooves and echoed back up through her legs. She could feel each of the notes inside her, streaming back and forth and overlapping and blending and--*

*Sweetie's gaze spun wildly around the room that somehow felt a thousand miles away in every direction. She couldn't feel her own body; the sound was drowning out everything. The filly teetered dangerously in the center of the minefield of sharp fragments, spots of light and color clouding her vision as she stared down at her feet. Some sort of tension began to grow inside her chest, somehow breaking through the maelstrom of sound and*

*growing ever more insistent... until she realized it was her body telling her she needed to breathe. Now. NOW!*

*Expending all her strength, Sweetie forced her mouth open and gasped for air. In that instant the notes of the chime vanished, washed away by the rush of air into her lungs. The feeling of occupying her own body rushed back to her as all the world suddenly snapped back into place. A sudden wave of dizziness and nausea followed her reclaimed senses, far too much for the small filly to bear. Her shaky legs gave out underneath her and she fell to the ground with a moan. The shimmering glow holding the chime in place began to fade away, and the delicate treasure drifted slowly down to the ground to rest beside the filly.*

*The workroom door at the back of the shop flew open as Breezy tumbled through it, falling against the counter in a tangled mess of limbs and toolbelts. With a few kicks of his hind legs he shucked most of the entangling straps and stood up to scan the room.*

*“Sweetie, is everything--” Breezy’s eyes grew wide as they alighted on the destruction the filly had wrought. “Oh sweet Celestia, not again! My wife is going to kill me!”*

*Sweetie Belle coughed and sputtered weakly on the floor but managed to lift her head up a few inches to glance back across her body, desperate hope rising above all the other feelings inside her.*

*Still blank.*

“I can’t do it...”

Sweetie Belle let her hoof fall soundless against the door, her body trembling as it slid along the wood and back to the ground. The filly let out a single snuffle, and lifted her hoof from the door to wipe at her wet eyes. The tension in her gut settled to a dull ache as she turned away from Carousel Boutique and slipped back into the loop of the tow rope attached to her wagon. With her head hung low, the dejected filly began the long walk back through town to the clubhouse at Sweet Apple Acres.

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“I know, but today was the last day to return it. You weren’t home and I didn’t know what else to do. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be gone that long.” Sweetie Belle mumbled meekly as she walked beside the larger earth pony, ears folded back against her head.

“It’s alright sugarcube, but next time you need to go out you need to let me know! It’s hard enough keeping my eye on you on the farm as is.” Applejack said with an exasperated sigh. The concerned frown on her face had not lessened since she had found the filly on the road back to the farm. “If you got something that’s gonna be a problem like this, you just leave it for me to handle. I could’ve talked to Mr. Breezy for you.”

“Okay...”

The two ponies continued the rest of their walk down the country road in silence, accompanied by the squeaking axle of Sweetie Belle’s wagon as it rolled along behind the orange earth pony. As they came to the front gate of Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack stopped and turned to face Sweetie Belle.

“Why’d we stop?” Sweetie Belle asked, looking up at Applejack.

“Sweetie, I’ve been thinking...” Applejack began, a concerned frown still on her face. She shimmied out of the wagon’s harness and sat down on her haunches in the damp grass next to the filly. “I’ve been talking to Rarity, and... well, she misses you, darlin’. I know you’re mad at her but she loves you dearly, even if she ain’t the best at expressing it. Not only that, she’s your only family. You need to give her a chance, sugarcube.”

“I know...” Sweetie Belle said, head hung low and face turned in a guilty frown.

“Would you be okay spending some time with Rarity, then?” Applejack said. She reached down with one hoof and stroked Sweetie Belle’s back encouragingly, easing the filly into sitting down beside her.

Sweetie looked from the older pony back to the ground again, chewing her lip nervously. She took a deep breath and gathered the courage to tell Applejack the entirety of what had transpired at the Breezy Family store.

“I tried to visit... w-what??” The small filly stopped before she had barely begun, her eyes wide in panic as they locked on the last thing she wanted to see. Sweetie shot to her hooves and scrambled away from Applejack. She shook her head in desperate protest as she shrunk back against her wagon. “No! This isn’t fair, Applejack! I don’t want to right now! I don’t want to!”

“Sweetie Belle, what in tarnation--” Applejack said, standing up in surprise at Sweetie’s reaction. The sound of dainty hoofsteps in the yard behind her and the hesitant yet graceful voice that

accompanied them left no doubt as to the cause of Sweetie's panic. Applejack glanced over her shoulder, a grimace already forming on her face.

Sure enough, Rarity walked through the open gate on tentative hooves toward the two ponies. She wore a gem-trimmed raincoat with the hood pulled down over her face, but the puffiness around her eyes and her less-than-prim mane betrayed her fatigue. Seeing that her approach had been noticed, Rarity smiled meekly and bowed her head.

"Ah... hello Applejack, Sweetie Belle. How are you both doing?"

"I don't want to..." Sweetie Belle pleaded quietly, staring up at Applejack with terror-filled eyes.

"I know sugarcube, just wait a moment." Applejack whispered back to Sweetie before turning to address the frightened filly's older sister. She raised a suspicious eyebrow at the empty saddlebags hanging from the unicorn's side, but nonetheless smiled and tried to force her usual chipper attitude back into her reply. "Morning Rarity, what brings you by?"

"I was... I was thinking about what you said, Applejack and you were right. I shouldn't have left everything to you. So I thought... I was thinking I'd try come by and..." Rarity began to explain timidly. Her voice drifted off at the sight of Sweetie Belle cowering behind her small wagon, clinging to its tarp-covered contents as her only protection from her older sister. Rarity winced and looked away from the unpleasant sight, tightness coursing through her chest.

Applejack slapped a hoof against her forehead and groaned. "I thought I said to wait until *after* I got the chance to talk to Sweetie Belle about it before you came by, Rarity."

"I know, but I thought... I didn't know you and Sweetie would be here! I..." Rarity stammered, becoming flustered by the unexpected reaction. "It... it just occurred to me that Sweetie Belle might be running low on her beauty products! I put a little basket together this morning and stopped at the house first like you said, but you weren't there! I was just going to leave them, but it seemed like it would be kind of a waste. I thought since it would only be for a second or two that it would be okay, so I went by the clubhouse and--"

"You did WHAT?!" Applejack roared, lunging a few feet toward her unicorn friend in anger and disbelief.

Rarity startled backwards at Applejack's sudden outburst, her rear hooves splashing in a puddle by the open gate. "W-what? I didn't do anything! I just left Sweetie's shampoos and things by the clubhouse! I was just on my way back now when I ran into you both here."



Applejack glared back at the posh unicorn absently scraping mud off her hind-hoof, the conversation lapsing into a momentary awkward silence as the earth pony tried to think up a response to cover her outburst.

*Consarn it, I can't believe she came this close to finding out! I thought I did enough to make her stay away! What if she noticed something? She couldn't have seen Trixie there or she'd be screaming her lungs out at me, but now I can't back down now after I blew my top or she'll suspect something for sure. If didn't see anything then maybe... no, I can't even risk it. I gotta distract her.*

Applejack took a deep breath, her panic-stricken heart pounding in her chest as she grit her teeth and prepared for the worst.

“Have you spit your bit, Rarity? I told you to not go to the clubhouse or try to visit Sweetie without telling me first, and I meant FIRST!” Applejack shouted, leaning in to point an accusing hoof.

Rarity huffed as she raised one foreleg in front of herself defensively. “You told me I needed to do better and that’s what I’m trying to do! I don’t see what I did wrong! And you shouting isn’t helping any!”

“Well maybe you need to get your ears checked since you certainly didn’t pay attention to what I said NOT to do! You’re not making it any easier for me to take care of Sweetie!” Applejack said with a scornful tilt of her head.

“For *you* to take care of Sweetie Belle? She is *my* sister and I’m supposed to be raising her! If I choose to visit her that is my prerogative!” Rarity replied, sticking her nose up in the air.

*Dagnabbit, this isn't working. I gotta make it worse. I really wish I didn't have to do this. I'm sorry, Rarity...*

“I don’t care Rarity, I don’t need you making a mess of things with Sweetie again, and I don’t need you violating her private space when she ain’t ready to talk either! She doesn’t need another month of this pig-slop parenting from you, and you should know better!” Applejack retorted with added vehemence, forcing anger to overcome the shakiness creeping into her voice.

Rarity winced; her friend’s comment had stung. “Make a mess? Pig-slop? I wasn’t going to do anything malevolent! I would have at most asked if she was doing alright, and she wasn’t even

there! I can't believe you would think of me as some heartless nag of a mare to torment my own sister!"

"Sure, of course you wouldn't! You would've done just great! Just like the fine job you've done taking care of Sweetie up until now, what with abandoning her to be all alone. I wonder whose side of the family you take after with your parenting style? Sure is loads better than what I learned from my Granny Smith, but I guess she ain't even dead yet!" Even before the words left her mouth Applejack felt the stab in her gut, feelings of disgust and shame for allowing herself to ever say those words churning painfully inside her. She struggled to keep her eyes locked with Rarity, but as she watched the unicorn's expression turn from shocked to betrayed she could no longer bear to look. Applejack tore her eyes away and stared at the muddy ground by the front gate as she waited for her friend's reply.

Rarity's brows furrowed and her lip raised into a snarl, her voice seething with more utter revulsion and hate than Applejack had ever heard escape the lips of the white unicorn.

"You... how... how **dare you!!** My parents were nothing like that! After what you and I have been through, I... I thought you were my friend, Applejack! I respected you! And now you... you... I should **never** have listened to you about Sweetie Belle!!"

Applejack screwed her eyes tightly closed, letting the horrible guilt and regret she had so rightly earned wash over her. Her stomach heaved, and she fought down the urge to puke even as she made ready her retort.

*I wish I kept a bucket by that gate, 'cause I could really use five minutes alone right now. That and a good buck in the gut. I'm sure Granny would be happy to do it if she overheard the disrespect I just gave Rarity... I'm sorry, ma, pa. I know you said it's wrong, but I'm just trying to do the right thing.*

"How dare I nothin'! Everything up 'til now has been your own damn fault! You shouldn't have let this happen in the first place, and you've got nopony to blame but yourself! If you'd--"

"Stop it! Just STOP!!"

Applejack flinched in shock and looked up, Sweetie's voice slicing right through the words she was about to speak. The filly lay on all fours behind the wagon with only the back of her head visible over the tarp, her forelegs pressed tightly against her ears to block out the painful words being flung around her.

“Just stop... I want to go back to the clubhouse...” Sweetie pleaded, her voice trembling as her head slowly sunk back down, disappearing behind the wagon once more with a muffled sob.

Applejack gulped as she turned her head to face Rarity, the sound of her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. Rarity stared back, her mouth hanging open slightly but no words escaped her lips. The tightness in Applejack’s gut evaporated, leaving behind only the feelings of self-loathing that had been so tangled moments before. With a slow shuffle of her hooves she turned her back on the purple-haired unicorn, her mind sinking in dismay at what she had just done.

“That’s enough. I’m done. We’re done. Just... go home.” Applejack muttered as she shook her head, her voice hollow and tired.

Rarity blinked, the apple farmer’s words sinking in and rousing her from her reverie.

“Wh-- No! We are not done! I am taking my sister back, and I will not--”

“Rarity, I said something I should never, ever have said, and I’m sorry. But right now, for Sweetie’s sake, I need you to get off my property or I will buck you out.” Applejack said, her back still turned. She brought one hoof up to her forehead and rubbed it over her eyes.

*Boy you messed everything up bad, didn't you Applejack? Right from the start when Trixie showed up and all the way to now, and you should've known better. Just like what mom always used to say. Why do you never listen...*

Rarity reluctantly closed her still-open mouth, and nodded her head. With deliberate steps she circled past the menacing earth pony, snout upturned and eyes averted in silent and angry scorn. As she passed the small wagon she turned her gaze towards the pony behind it.

Sweetie Belle lay shivering on the damp grass, her head now resting on the ground between her forelegs. The filly looked up to meet her sister’s gaze, the filly’s fear-filled eyes wet with tears.

Rarity’s hooves scraped along the muddy road as her gait faltered. Her angry sneer faded to a despondent, regretful frown as the two stared quietly at each other for a long moment.

“Sweetie, I--”

Applejack stomped one rear hoof into the ground with a powerful thud. “Out. **Now.**”

Rarity sighed and looked away from her sister. The mare took a few seconds to shift her raincoat

back into its proper place and brush the hair from her eyes. Her head reassumed its composed yet disdainful upward tilt, but the regretful frown lingered. Finally, with eyes squarely fixed to the road in front of her, she began the walk down the country lane and back to her home in Ponyville.

Applejack sat down in the grass beside Sweetie Belle. The small filly lay shivering in the cold grass, her gaze following her older sister as she passed down the road, through the rows of trees and curves of the hills, and finally out of sight. After giving Sweetie a few minutes in silence, Applejack leaned down and gently nuzzled the back of the filly's head.

“You gonna be okay, Sweetie?”

The filly did not answer. Her lip trembled and she kept her eyes fixed on the ground, but she nodded her head silently.

“I’m real sorry about that, sugarcube.” Applejack mumbled softly as she stood up. She stepped over to the wagon and shrugged the tow rope back over her shoulders, letting her characteristic determination creep back in to dull the terrible pain in her gut.

*Just keep going Applejack. Even if you insult one of your best friends right in front of her little sister and make a shame of yourself and your family, you just keep on going . You know how to do that, right? Yeah, of course you do...*

Applejack sighed regretfully and looked back at Sweetie Belle. She hadn't moved at all from her spot in the grass. Applejack walked back to the filly, wagon in tow.

“I’ll... go talk to her tomorrow, and apologize. I promise.” Applejack said, leaning down and tugging the hood of the filly's raincoat back over her head.

“Okay...” Sweetie Belle croaked back.

“C’mon, let’s get you some food and then take you back to the clubhouse. Tomorrow you can come by the house and fix up your hair with some of the stuff Rarity brought, okay?” Applejack said before nudging her nose under the filly's shoulder and lifting her up from the ground.

Sweetie Belle stood up with the help of the older mare and shuffled numbly over to the wagon. With one hoof she rubbed away the dryness in her eyes and sniffled, before nodding meekly to Applejack once more.

“Good. Let’s go back before it starts raining again.”

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“Hello! Is anypony out there?” Applejack called out through the apple trees as she and Sweetie Belle breached the treeline of the back orchard and approached the remote hideaway of the Crusader clubhouse.

The clearing was quiet and still, but nonetheless Applejack glanced around suspiciously. The door of the clubhouse was shut tightly and the windows shuttered. A small wicker basket containing a bouquet of tiny multi-hued bottles rested at the top of the ramp. Many puddles and muddy patches still remained from the previous night’s downpour. Aside from the two sets of tracks already accounted for, one with a small wagon in tow and the other weaving meticulously wove around the worst of the muddy patches, no errant hoofprints marked the ground.

“You can come out now, Trixie.” Applejack said, satisfied they were alone.

The door of the clubhouse slowly creaked open as the blue unicorn mare stepped out onto the balcony of the clubhouse. Dark circles lined her eyes, and her unbrushed hair spilled out from underneath her star-speckled hat.

“There was a visitor. Trixie was not discovered.”

“I know. I took care of it.” Applejack replied sardonically. She nudged Sweetie Belle on ahead and pulled the wagon safely under the clubhouse herself.

Trixie smiled and whispered a quiet ‘hi’ down to her little apprentice. Sweetie Belle smiled back half-heartedly, but waited at the foot of the ramp. Applejack soon appeared with two boxes wrapped in checkered blankets in her teeth and the folded tarp from the wagon across her back. She set the packages next to the filly and turned to scrape the mud off her hooves on the trunk of the tree.

“Tarp got a little dirty so I’ll take it back to the barn to clean later. You take these up, it’s almost noon and I’ve got work to do.” Applejack called over her shoulder, keeping her words short and to the point. “You’re free to come by tomorrow with Sweetie before say nine o’clock if you want a hot bath. Granny’s got a chi-ro-practic appointment and I got farmer’s market. You miss it, well tough luck.”

Trixie nodded back and levitated the two boxes up to the clubhouse door. Sweetie Belle

followed up the ramp and began to push the two boxes into the clubhouse while Trixie held the door open for her. When Trixie looked back, she caught the apple farmer glaring out of the corner of her eye. The contact lasted for only a second before Applejack's eyes quickly returned to inspecting her mud-encrusted front hoof. Trixie coughed politely to get the other pony's attention.

"Trixie would like a word with--"

"Right then. I'm off. Stay out of trouble." Applejack said, curtly cutting off the unicorn as she lowered her hoof and turned to go.

Trixie's eyebrow shot up angrily at the snub. She let go of the open door and strode to the balcony, her hooves striking heavily on the wooden boards.

"Trixie *said* she would like a word with you."

"And I ain't in the mood to talk to Trixie right now." Applejack snipped. She heard Trixie's hooves follow her down the ramp and onto the grass. Applejack ignored the unicorn and continued to walk away. When the hoofsteps stopped she fully expected the stage magician to hurl some disrespectful taunt or snarky insistence at her back, but no insult came. Applejack stopped, feeling the itch of Trixie's gaze upon her back. The cowpony growled in frustration and turned around.

Trixie stood at the bottom of the ramp, staring at Applejack with the same expression of solemn determination on her face as when the two ponies had met for the second time only a few weeks ago. Applejack shifted uneasily and scowled, the unicorn's visage wedging as uncomfortably in her conscience now as it had then.

"Trixie, Applejack made some breakfast. Do you want to eat? I want to tell you about my..." Sweetie Belle called as she pushed open the door to the clubhouse, her voice drifting off once she saw the two ponies staring mutely at each other.

"Sweetie, Trixie and I need to talk for a little while. Go wait inside. She'll be right with you." Applejack said firmly.

Sweetie Belle didn't move.

"Sweetie? Trixie and I need some privacy. Go on inside." Applejack repeated.

“No! I... I don't want you to fight again!”

Applejack looked up. Sweetie Belle stood stiffly with her head held high and legs spread in echo of the defiant pose Rarity always adopted when arguments between the farmer and the fashionista became heated. Sweetie was not nearly so headstrong as her older sister; once Applejack's stern gaze fell upon her she visibly flinched and shrank back.

Applejack sighed and softened her expression to a more gentle, reassuring smile. “No more fights today, sugarcube. I promise.”

Sweetie glanced down at Trixie, her eyes lingered desperately on the unicorn's back before darting back up to Applejack. She bit her lip, doubt clearly written on her face. After a few moments of further defiance the filly reluctantly nodded her head.

“Okay...” Sweetie muttered, shrinking down pathetically as she turned and retreated inside the clubhouse.

Applejack waited until Sweetie Belle had closed the door behind her before turning her attention back to Trixie. Not trusting that the filly might still be listening, Applejack gestured back towards the apple orchard with her head. Trixie nodded, and followed the earth pony out of the clearing and away from the clubhouse.

Applejack led Trixie back along the dirt path until the two emerged at the edge of the east apple orchard. The earth pony took another cautionary look around the orchard's blooming trees, and then as an afterthought scanned the sky above her. The gaps in the overcast had begun to close again thanks to the efforts of some local pegasus weather team readying another bout of rain. The skies above Sweet Apple Acres were pegasi free for the moment, of the lazy blue variety or otherwise.

“Alright, I'm listening.” Applejack said as she turned her stony gaze away from the clouds and towards the pony pacing uneasily behind her.

“Why did you tell her I had to leave?” Trixie said, her words flat. It was more statement than question.

“Because you don't belong here.” Applejack replied, emphasizing her cold words with a nod. Her voice held neither contempt nor compassion for the unicorn in front of her. “Never have. Never will.”

Trixie's eyebrows furrowed as she glared back at the other pony, recalling many times past when she had heard those unpleasant words spoken by other, less forgiving ponies. Trixie swallowed, pushing down the resentment and bitterness from those times that had begun to rise in her throat.

"You don't like me."

Applejack let out an ironic snort and turned her head away. "You're darn right. I don't."

"So... why let me stay at all?" Trixie asked, the question that had been plaguing her mind since the beginning finally spoken out loud. When the other pony remained silent, Trixie's heart began to race anxiously.

*You're too honest for it to be false pity, and it's not revenge either. You could've turned me in whenever you wanted, and never asked me to do anything. You could've found anypony else to take care of Sweetie Belle; you don't need me. So what is it? Why won't you just tell me?*

Applejack reached up with one hoof and slid her cowpony hat from the top of her head. She examined it for a moment, her eyes moistening as they traced around the wide inner brim. The material there was worn and sweat-stained from many years of use shading ponies' heads from the sun. Applejack tilted her wrist and let the old stetson fall to the grass at her feet.

Trixie shifted uncomfortably as she watched the earth pony's musings, becoming acutely aware of her own sentimental attachments. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly through her nose.

*You don't want to think about that right now, Trixie. Just ignore it.*

"That I had to think about a lot myself." Applejack said slow. She eased down onto her haunches, her eyes firmly affixed to the hat at her feet. "And I think... it's because I pity Sweetie Belle."

Trixie thought for a second. "...because of her sister?"

Applejack nodded solemnly. "Children shouldn't be made to suffer because of their parents. They... parents are supposed to be there for them. To teach them right from wrong. To make sure they grow up happy. To make 'em ready for... when they aren't gonna be around any more. They're supposed to do the right thing." Applejack tilted her head and flicked her hoof limply at the stetson lying in the grass. "Not hurt them."



Trixie shuddered and faltered in her nervous pacing. She could feel her jaw trembling involuntarily as she opened her mouth to speak, forcing her to concentrate and regain her focus.

*No. She doesn't understand. I'm the only one that understands. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Her life is nothing like mine. She didn't have to go through what I did. No pony has had to suffer like I have. No pony.*

“So you let me stay because I’m making her happy.”

Applejack nodded once more. “With you around, even if just for a little while and even if I don’t like it... Sweetie Belle is hurting a little less. And that’s...”

“...and that’s what?” Trixie prompted when the earth pony did not continue.

*She doesn't understand. She's nothing like you.*

Applejack scooped the fallen stetson off the damp grass and set it firmly back in place on her head.

“...and that’s more than some children get to have.”

Trixie reached up and adjusted her own starred headwear, shielding her eyes for a moment as she took another shuddering breath. She took a moment to collect herself, and gulped down the lump in her throat to get her words out.

“And yet you say I have to leave, even though I make her happy. Even though I’m doing the right thing.”

Applejack turned to face Trixie again, the earth pony’s earlier melancholy now replaced with the cold stoicism Trixie had come to expect.

“I admit, you did do something good. Sweetie seems like she isn’t so sad. She even told me today that she did magic for the first time, thanks to you. She was worried ‘cause it was something she wanted to share with her big sis first, but I could tell she was really happy about it and wanted to share it with you. I’m no unicorn. That’s something I can’t do for her, and you can.” Applejack said, bowing her head slightly in acknowledgement.

Trixie grimaced and furrowed her eyebrows as she waited for the inevitable continuation, her heart heavy with dread.

“But.”

“But this is not your place, Trixie. You don’t belong here. It should be Rarity there sharing these moments with Sweetie. Not you.”

Trixie stomped her hoof on the ground and loomed in towards Applejack, anger creeping into her voice. “But you said I’m making her happy! I’m her friend just as much as anypony else! And if her sister isn’t--”

Applejack immediately cut Trixie off with a swipe of her hoof, raising her voice to drown out Trixie’s spluttered protests.

“Rarity ain’t some horrible mother like that, and even if she was you ain’t the pony to replace her! She doesn’t always do the best, but Rarity loves Sweetie Belle to the bottom of her heart. She would rather die than hurt Sweetie, and them being apart like this is harder on her than you’ll ever know! I don’t care what you think of your friendship with her, but you won’t *ever* replace Rarity. Right now, you just happened to be at the right place at the right time to make Sweetie’s life a little brighter, and *that*, Trixie is why you are still here.”

“So... nothing I’ve done matters? My feelings don’t matter? What about me?” Trixie snarled, her words dripping with resentment as she jabbed at her own chest with one hoof. “Just because I don’t replace her doesn’t mean I don’t exist! I’m not some nanny to be let go when you don’t need me anymore! *I care about her!*”

“You shut your mouth, Trixie! You may be a boon to Sweetie Belle right now but you are as self-centered as you ever were! You can’t stay in Ponyville and you always knew that! It doesn’t change just because you don’t like it anymore!” Applejack shouted, and spat on the ground between them in utter disgust. “Did you ever stop to think what would happen if Rarity found out about you like she almost did today? If Rarity did anything to take you away Sweetie would never forgive her! It would drive them apart forever, and I will not let that happen! So no, you don’t get to live in some fantasy world where everything revolves around you and you get to make a mess of everypony’s lives for your own fun again!”

“*NO!* I’m not like that! You told me you didn’t think of me that way! I didn’t... I wouldn’t be here if I only cared about myself!” Trixie yelled back in desperate defiance. “You made me promise not to break her heart! I’m not the one doing this, you are! I don’t care what you want! I don’t care what any of you want! I promised her I wasn’t going to leave, and I won’t let you make me !”

“That’s right, I did make you promise. But you made the choice a long time ago; when you lied and brought the Ursa on us, and when you tried to kill one of my best friends, and nothing you say will make that any different. If you’d acted differently back then, then maybe you could have stayed now, but I will not let your feelings come before Sweetie Belle, and you will see me burn down every last tree on my orchard before I *ever* let you hurt her with your stupid selfishness. You will never belong here in Ponyville, Trixie. *Never.*” Applejack said remorselessly, her voice carrying a grim finality as she gazed down at the unicorn with merciless eyes. “At the end of the month Sweetie’s friends are gonna be back, and I won’t be able to keep you a secret anymore. Sweetie will have to return home eventually, once Rarity remembers what being family actually means. After that, there’s no place for you in Ponyville, and it would be best for everypony if you were to just disappear forever.”

“No... I won’t... I...” Trixie stammered, her resolve melting away. She wanted to scream back, to decry the harsh condemnation just like she had done to every other pony who cursed her name, but she couldn’t; she knew the other pony was right, and there was nothing she could do.

*Why? Why does it have to be this way? I wanted her to be happy, more than anything! I didn’t want to hurt her. But... I tried every night, and I couldn’t find an answer. I tried, so hard... I always told myself I would find a way, but... I... its my fault. I’m going to lose everything again. I don’t want this to happen. I don’t want to disappear. I don’t want her to disappear! I don’t want this!*

Trixie let out a long, tortured shriek into the open air, her voice echoing from the far through the orchard. Her head sunk down low as her voice slowly faded away and died, her heart aching painfully in her chest as she gave in to tortured sobbing. She heard Applejack’s hooves moving through in the grass moving past her, the sound of the earth pony walking away so casually making her clench her jaw in anger.

“So thats just it? Everypony gets their happy ending but me?!”

Applejack’s stride faltered.

“Yeah, I guess that’s right.” The earth pony replied softly.

“I... I won’t let you take her away from me!” Trixie screeched hysterically after the earth pony behind her, her voice cracking in despair. “If you do I’ll... I’ll just...”

“You’ll do what? Run away with her? Take her away from me, her sister, her two filly friends,

from everyone she ever knew and loved in Ponyville.” Applejack finished for the other pony, her words void of all their earlier animosity and cynicism. “That would be just like you, wouldn’t it. Destroy a dozen ponies’ lives, just to make yourself happy. Just like you almost did both times before.”

“No!! I didn’t! I...” Trixie cried back. Trixie squeezed her eyes tightly shut and bent over, tears leaking down her cheeks even as she struggled desperately to hold back her anguish and anger. “Just... don’t... don’t take her away from me! It’s not fair!”

Applejack sighed and shook her head as she began to walk away once more. Her voice was calm yet sad, as if the words were ones she had known for a long time that she would have to eventually speak.

“Pain is the only reward you get for lying, Trixie. I would think you of all ponies would understand that by now.”

“And what about *you*!? You lied for me so I could stay here, and you hate me!” Trixie shrieked at the ground in front of her. “You’ll all get to go on with your happy lives and I’m the only one who suffers! Where’s your pain? You’re nothing but a hypocrite!!”

“You think its all smiles for me knowing I’m going to break somepony’s heart when I tell her that her friend is leaving forever.” Applejack called back, her voice growing distant. “Grow up, Trixie.”

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Sweetie Belle chewed thoughtfully on the pencil between her teeth and squinted at the list on the floor in front of her.

*Maybe... crème brûlée? It’s one of my favorites, so Trixie maybe Trixie will like it too. Applejack probably doesn’t know how to make it though...*

Sweetie’s ears perked up as she heard hooves climbing the ramp outside. The filly scrambled to her feet and made for the door, but pulled back and skidded to a halt just before she reached it.

“Oh shoot! I--” Sweetie Belle began. The pencil fell from her mouth at the first word and clattered on the floor. The filly chased the errant writing implement across the room, but it rolled into a crack between two of the floorboards and became stuck. The filly frowned and pawed at it ineffectively with one hoof, but the continuing hoofsteps outside quickly returned her focus.

“Um... Just wait, please! Don’t come in yet! I uh...”

Sweetie Belle darted back over to the center of the room and scooped the sheet of paper off the ground with her mouth as she passed by on her way to the hoard of board games stacked in the corner of the clubhouse. Once at the cardboard mountain, she nosed up the lid of one of the boxes and slipped the sheet inside.

Heaving a sigh of relief Sweetie trotted over the door and pushed it open to greet the blue unicorn waiting--

The ramp and the yard in front of her was empty.

“Hello? Anyone there? Trixie...?” Sweetie called hesitantly as she peeked her head out. The filly blinked in surprise as a drop of water landed on her nose, causing her to look up. The cloudcover had closed up and raindrops had begun to fall from the sky again, sprinkling the ground below.

“Here...”

Standing to the filly’s right on the balcony was Trixie, staring down into the orchard at a tree stump and a small bucket of rocks.

“Trixie, you’re back! Did your talk with Applejack go alright? Do you want to have some lunch?” Sweetie asked, a little tinge of excitement creeping back into her voice. She circled around the unicorn and looked up.

Trixie’s face was wet.

“Trixie? Are you okay?” Sweetie Belle asked. “Did... did Applejack say something mean again?”

“I...” Trixie murmured, her lip quivering.

*Pain is the only reward you get for lying, Trixie. I would think you of all ponies would understand that by now...*

Sweetie Belle frowned and looked out into the yard, her eyes alighting on the bucket for a moment before looking back to her mentor. She reached up with one hoof and tugged at the unicorn’s rain-speckled cape.

“Trixie, c’mon inside, you’re gonna get wet.”

Trixie finally looked back at the small filly by her side and forced a smile onto her face.

“Sorry. Just thinking about silly things. Lets go.”

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[Tumblr](#), [DeviantArt](#), [FiM Fiction](#), [GoogleDocs](#), [Fanfiction.net](#), and [FurAffinity](#).

Special thanks to [BrokenHero](#) once again, for letting me guilt trip him into helping out.  
[RTStephens](#) from FiMFiction for proofreading. Its realy a pain to do it by yourself!  
And you for sitting on the edge of your seat for nine months without falling off. I don’t know how you still are interested, but thanks for caring enough to keep reading. It means a lot.