

Prologue

“Are you sure about this, Trixie?” the maroon earth pony asked.

“The *Great & Powerful Trixie*,” the azure unicorn corrected. She stood admiring her reflection in the large golden-rimmed mirror, garbed in her usual trademark pointed hat and cloak adorned with stars.

“... Great & Powerful Trixie. I know you’re good with your magic, but embellishing a tale like that? It’s bound to backfire one of these days.”

Trixie waved away her words. “Pshhttt. None will dare to contradict the Great & Powerful Trixie. Trixie has done more than enough to justify this minor addition to her repertoire of villains defeated.” The azure mare didn’t voice out the real reason she added the lie. Her show numbers were down by thirty percent this month alone. She needed something to draw the crowds back. Something flashy. Something that will captivate the crowds. Something like... the Ursa Major.

“But you’ve never even seen an Ursa Major!” her cream-haired companion protested. She flinched when Trixie slammed a hoof down on the table.

“The Great & Powerful Trixie has just about enough of your neighsaying. If you do not want to assist Trixie in achieving greatness, then you are of no more use to Trixie.” Trixie gestured at the door impatiently and continued to fuss with her cloak.

The earth pony stared at Trixie for a good long while, before finally saying, “Fine. I’ll leave. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” The mare turned and left the caravan in a huff.

Trixie: Hero of Equestria

Once there was an azure mare known as the Great and Powerful Trixie. For indeed she was Great and Powerful, being one of the select few who bested the great villain Mordok and saved the town of...

Trixie crumpled the brochure in disgust and threw it aside. Heaving another resigned sigh, she began trotting forward again, her hooves kicking up little puffs of dust as she plodded ahead in the dim afternoon light of Celestia’s sun. The dusty road ahead seemed endless, and the rolling hills around her, silent. Her mind wandered back to the events of the week before, the memories seared into her brain like never before.

Ponyville was supposed to be just another routine stop for her show. One of the faceless towns in which she impressed the townsfolks, and basked in the adoration and awe for her exploits in

Equestria. It also helped that the show paid the bills, and supported her modest lifestyle. So, maybe she tweaked a few details here and there in the name of creative license. Which showpony did not?

The tale of her defeating an Ursa Major was the complete, unadulterated truth. Mostly. Well, maybe it wasn't so much an Ursa Major but an Ursa Minor Minor, but she did defeat the beast. And what a battle it was. She stood firm in the face of an angry celestial bear, with nary a soul helping. Oh, maybe there had been a few guardsponies who did stand around looking useless, but when one got down to it, she did most of the work. After the dust settled, the mayor of Balestein thoughtfully rewarded her with her very own caravan and a big pile of bits for her heroics.

Trixie, being the businessmare she was, capitalised on the unique opportunity offered to her on a golden platter. Why bother with the hard work of besting mythical creatures and villains, when she could just earn just as much fame by displaying her prowess to the public? Certainly there were no shortage of villages and towns begging her to showcase her talents in Equestria. Who was she, the Great & Powerful Trixie, to deny the adoring public the attention they demanded so much?

Then she met Twilight Sparkle.

She seemed so ordinary. So plain. So plebian. She even turned down the challenge that Trixie threw down.

Yet... somehow, somewhere, she managed to conjure up an actual Ursa Major to surprise her in her sleep. Of course Trixie will not be able to best an Ursa Major while unprepared, never mind half-asleep. And then that purple unicorn showed up like a hero and vanquished the said creature, humiliating Trixie in the process in front of all Ponyville. She then had the gall to claim it was only an Ursa Minor. Pffft. What a cad. She knew what an Ursa Minor was like and that was definitely bigger than one. Why if she had another go- *Ouch!*

Trixie hopped around on three legs as she held up her left foreleg which for some reason managed to stumble over the one stone on the road that was sticking out.

"Curse my poor run of luck!" Trixie seethed as she massaged her sore hoof. Her ears flicked up as she heard the sound of galloping hooves behind her.

Now who could be travelling this lonely path this late in the day?

"Miss Trixie?" she heard a voice call from a distance.

The azure mare turned to see two ponies cantering at a steady pace towards her. From afar, she could make out the two were stallions; the larger of the pair an earth pony, sporting a

verdant green coat and bright red mane. His companion, a unicorn, had an alabaster coat with gray mane. They also seemed to be wearing some sort of black uniform... which seemed oddly familiar. Trixie put a hoof to her forehead and squinted. She could just make out the outline of Celestia's Sun, with a stack of coins inside.

Equestria's Tax Collection Bureau. Now why would tax agents be after her?

The pair galloped up to the azure mare and came to a halt several steps in front of the surprised magician. "Good afternoon, Miss Trixie. As you may recognise, we're from the Tax Collection Bureau. We been sent to track you down for about a week now," the green one spoke, dusting off his uniform discreetly. He waved a hoof towards his assistant. "My name is Coin Dust and this is Lemongrass, my assistant."

Trixie decided to be polite. These were officials of the Law, and even the Great & Powerful Trixie did not mess with the Law. Not unless one wished to have a personal tour of Canterlot's dungeons. "Yes, the Great & Powerful Trixie greets you. What business do you have with Trixie?"

"As you're well aware, you're currently behind in tax payment for approximately 13 months." Trixie's brow furrowed at his words. *She owed taxes? Since when...*

Then it dawned on the mage. Since she fired her assistant. Fair Breeze always handled the dreary side of business. Including the mundane chore of paying the required taxes and handling the financial side of business.

"According to your last income statement, that'll total up to roughly..." Coin Dust glanced at his partner, who extracted a piece of paper from the depths of his saddlebags and held it up for him. "... two thousand and three hundred bits."

"What?!" Trixie blurted. How in the hay did she even manage to owe the kingdom that much taxes? Her income were modest at best. Ten thousand bits a year was modest... right? Then, as sanity reasserted itself, she forced her voice into something more passably polite. "Gentlecolts, as you can see, Trixie is not in any position to pay..."

Coin Dust interjected before Trixie could continue, a mixture of indifference and pity in his voice. "Well, that's just too bad. We're going to have to serve you this tax payment notice. By the authority of..."

Just that instant, something clicked in Trixie's mind. A long-forgotten memory of her university days.

“... and so as you can see, the tax code for Equestria is still considered a proud achievement for our kingdom,” Professor Sticks said, finally ending his long-winded lecture.

“Trixie does not need to know such mundane matters.” the azure filly sitting in the front row of the lecture huffed. General law was boring, and the three-hour long lecture on taxes was the worst yet. She yelped as the professor snatched the pad of paper she was writing on and examined it with a close eye.

“Trixie! One of these days, you’ll be grateful to know that one cannot be brought in under the law until they are first served a tax notice. Which you would know had you actually spent the time listening to the lecture, instead of doodling pictures of yourself in a superhero costume.” The professor glowered at the unicorn, as she showcased the contents of the paper for the class to see.

Trixie felt herself blush as the class erupted in laughter. The gall of the professor humiliating her in front of the class. Trixie vowed she’ll repay the favour.

“... authority of Princess Celestia, I hereby...”

“Oh look! It’s Princess Celestia!” Trixie exclaimed, pointing to something behind the two tax collectors.

“What? The princess is here?!” Lemongrass cried in alarm, and the pair turned as one... to find an empty road.

Poof

Suddenly, their vision was clouded with smoke, followed by the rapidly fading sound of galloping hooves. The pair stood there coughing and spluttering helplessly, trying to regain some semblances of their wits. As the smoke cleared, the two agents spotted the fast-disappearing figure down the road.

“After her!” Coin Dust shouted.

Unfortunately that was when they discovered the second unpleasant surprise Trixie left them. Their hooves were firmly glued to the road with some sort of magical pink paste. The earth pony tried to wrench his fore hooves off the ground, to no avail. Coin Dust sighed in resignation. It’d take awhile before the magic wears off, if he were to make an educated guess.

“Well, that’s our... How many runners did we have again this month?” Coin Dust asked Lemongrass.

“That’ll be our thirtieth, sir,” the unicorn answered politely, his face impassive.

Coin Dust let out another long-suffering sigh. It was amazing how many ponies suddenly gained insight of that particular archaic law when their time came to pay taxes. This was a song-and-dance he and his partner knew all too well.

He had hoped Princess Luna would fix things after her miraculous recovery from Nightmare Moon, but by all accounts, it was taking slower than either of the princesses’ wishes. Or the wishes for poor workers out in the field like him for that matter. Celestia knows how many runners are taking advantage of that right now.

“She’ll probably take refuge in the next village. They all do,” the earth pony continued as he studied the magical glue holding them down.

The unicorn shook his head at his partner’s words. “You think they’ll be more creative after the thousands of arrests we made. You know, like running into the Everfree Forest or even to a bordering kingdom. The red tape of dealing with a neighbouring kingdom alone would delay us by deca-” Lemongrass suddenly found a green hoof clasped around his mouth.

“Lemongrass, stop giving them ideas.” Coin Dust warned, shaking his head at the loose mouth of his companion. He sincerely hoped nopony actually heard that. Celestia forbid, one of them would become smart enough to actually dodge taxes.

Trixie chuckled as she galloped away at a steady pace from the two poor fools. Well, they’ll never be able to get Trixie into custody, not if she can help it. A mage of her fame would never live down the shame of being imprisoned. She would find a way to pay those taxes, one way or another. Trixie had never been a criminal, and she didn’t intend to start now. She just needed... a little extra time. Yeah, time.

As she continued forward at full speed, she noticed the first sign of habitations appearing around her. Fields of plowed crops and such could be seen on both side of the road. She must be nearing the village of Ponyton. Perfect. A village for her to disappear and obtain the required bits.. Trixie was confident she’ll be able to raise the bits needed. All she needed was a little bit of magic and of course, her natural prowess in impressing ponies into supporting her finances.

Ahead, the earthen road branched into two, with a simple wooden sign pointing to the path to the left.

“Welcome to Ponyton. Population: 239”

Trixie came to a stop in front of a windmill next to the road, gasping for breath. She hadn't needed to run that hard since... she had to escape from that Ursa Major. Just ahead was the village itself; a small collection of ramshackle wooden buildings by the looks of it.

"Hey there newcomer," a gruff voice greeted her.

Trixie looked up to see an elderly earth pony leaning against a lean-to, chewing on a twig. His slate-gray coat contrasted sharply with blonde mane and tail. The bulging saddle-packs he was carrying half-hid his hammer and sickle cutie mark.

"Don't see many unicorns in these parts. You from Canterlot?"

Trixie snorted and clenched her teeth at the apparent ignorance of this peasant. *Why, how could he never heard of the Great and Powerful Trixie? Was this place so remote that news of her prowess have not reached the village?!*

She forced herself to calm down. Trixie could turn this into her advantage. She could hide amongst these ponies and buy herself more time to earn the bits required. It was just a matter of using your intellect really.

"By the way, I'm Steel Hoof," the elderly stallion continued, apparently unruffled by her lack of manners. Trixie was finally jolted out of her thoughts by the stallion's words. She better play along, lest she betray her presence to these simpletons and by extension, to those tax agents.

"My name is The Gre- you may call me The... Pure... and Honest... Twixie," Trixie nearly facehoofed at her poor choice of name. Twixie? Really? It did have a ring to it though.

"Twixie eh? Welcome to Ponyton then." Steel Hoof politely tilted his head in a gentlecoltly manner.

"The Great- I mean, thank you." Trixie mentally slapped herself. That's no way to go undercover. She should have more finesse than that. She decided to try again, this time choosing her words with care.

"Do you know a place where a pony can... disappear for awhile?" Trixie said, before again dragging a hoof down her face in embarrassment. Great mage she may be, but a liar she certainly wasn't.

"Sure do." The stallion's face remained impassive, though Trixie thought she detected a hint of a smile on the edges of his lips. "If you would be so kind to follow me." He spat out the twig and gestured for the azure mare to follow her. After a moment's pause, Trixie shrugged and followed the stallion. After all, it wasn't like she had a choice.

The village itself seemed subdued. Almost dreary. The general atmosphere was one of resignation, rather than the happy optimism that permeated Ponyville. Even the buildings seemed a little worn, a little faded for their age. Dusty windows half-hid ponies going about their business behind. Disinterested villagers hardly gave the pair a second glance as they made their way through the dusty streets.

The stallion led Trixie to a large squarish building sitting right next to the town square. This one was a little more brightly painted than the rest, and seemed better maintained too. A wooden sign with an empty mug hung just outside the thick wooden door. Trixie surmised from her vast experience that it was a tavern. Also, the sign with the words 'Ponyton Bed and Breakfast' made that pretty obvious as well.

Trixie stood staring at the oaken door for a good long while, debating on the various ways she could crib a free night in the inn while she worked out a way to earn cold hard bits. She felt a nudge on her flank and turned to see Steel Hoof dropping a small bag of coins on the floor. "Yer sure look like you could use these. Tell you what, you can pay me back later when you get a job."

Trixie was at a loss for words. Here she was, a complete stranger to this village and this stallion was not only showing her around but also offering to lend her money.

This could only mean one thing.

"Are you a secret admirer of the Great & Powerful Trixie?" she asked plainly, deciding to chance revealing her identity.

Steel Hoof blinked in confusion. "Who?"

Trixie sighed in frustration. So he was just being a kind and helpful pony. Commendable, but naive. Still, she wasn't one to refuse help when it was given freely. "Never mind, Thank... you for the bits." Trixie had trouble pronouncing the word. It had been so long since she had to thank somepony. Come to think of it, when was the last time she thanked somepony?

"I hope you enjoy your stay here," Steel Hoof called as she entered the inn.

A much-needed shower, hat-and-cloak shopping and some well-deserved rest later, Trixie was on the prowl again in the village, looking for ways to earn bits surreptitiously. The cloak and pointed mage hat wasn't the material she was used to, being made of rough cotton and

coloured entirely in the wrong shade of yellow, but at least she felt more confident with those on. Plus, it would help disguise her when those tax collectors inevitably tracked her to the village.

Her eyes gleamed as she spotted a farmer pulling a heavy load of rocks. Time for the Great & Powerful Trixie to show her magic. Trixie would show Equestria that even without her equipment, she would earn the required bits in no time.

“Greetings plebian farmer, do you require assistance?”

The two tax agents stood in front of the wooden sign pointing towards the small village.

“Ponyton? Huh. Should be easy, there can’t be many places for her to hide in there,” Coin Dust remarked thoughtfully, as he rubbed his chin.

“According to the Bureau, there is a surprising number of tax dodgers disappearing near the village itself,” Lemongrass said, as he held open a file in front of him.

The older stallion snorted with derision. “Bah, those agents are probably incompetent. Let’s go and serve our tax notice to this mare. We should be done in time for that cocktail party Blue Star will be hosting this weekend.”

“... Well, thank you kindly for helping me carry these,” the elderly farmer said, as Trixie struggled into the farm. She collapsed on the front steps of the wooden house, panting heavily.

“N-no.. problem,” she wheezed, as she extracted herself from the reins of the heavy cart.

“Ah, but I must reward you,” the farmer said, rummaging in his saddle pack. Trixie sighed with relief. At least it was a good start, even if less showy than she hoped. Her eyes bulged when she saw what the orange stallion held out.

A mere ten bits.

Trixie felt like choking the life out of the elderly stallion. Ten bits for pulling the cart halfway across town and then some? This wasn’t the way to treat the Great & Powerful Trixie. It was not everyday Trixie would stoop to helping peasants with such menial labour. No, she should be showcasing her naturally magical magicks to these peasants. She forced herself to calm down again, something she has had to do very often lately.

“T-thank you,” she said, through gritted teeth. At least she was getting better at this thank you

thing.

The farmer seemed oblivious to her barely contained rage and nodded affably in reply. "It's the least I could do." A shout in the distance caught the farmer's attention. "Oh, visitors. Looks official."

Official? Trixie eyes drifted towards the open gate, already fearing the worst. She cursed under her breath as two familiar figures trotted up the path leading to the house. Trixie tilted her hat just a little lower, in an attempt to shield her violet eyes and throw off her would-be pursuers.

The pair greeted the farmer genially, before proceeding to ask about the whereabouts of a certain blue mare. The farmer shook his head, not recognising the name. As the green agent continued to question the farmer, the alabaster unicorn noticed the blue mare trying her best to slink into the house. He gave his companion a ribbing and gestured at Trixie.

The pair looked over the azure mare, who wished she could sink into the ground right about now.

The one called Coin Dust spoke. "You there! What's your name?"

"You may refer to me as the Pure and Honest Twixie," the unicorn declared, unintentionally infusing her voice with some of the authoritative flair she always used in her stage persona. The unicorn cringed as she realised her mistake and tilted her hat a little lower still, trying not to look at the pair in the eyes. Dear Celestia, she hoped she didn't give away her own identity just by that.

"Twixie...?" Coin Dust repeated suspiciously. He turned to Lemongrass. "Do we have a Twixie on record?"

"Hold on..." Lemongrass took out a bulky file and flicked rapidly through the pages. "Nope. But these records are already five years out of date."

"Stupid records office. Why don't they ever give us updated files?" Coin Dust turned to stare at Trixie, who shrank from the stallion. "You look awfully familiar there miss," he said, narrowing his eyes on the mare.

The elderly farmer stepped forward to interpose himself between Coin Dust and Trixie. "Hey now, I don't quite get what you ponies are talking about, but this mare just helped me carry my weekly haul back." The farmer's tone had an undercurrent of annoyance. "There is no way she could be the criminal you were looking for," he said firmly. Trixie had this uncharacteristic urge to kiss the farmer on his lips. Of course it was only a fleeting moment. The Great & Powerful Trixie would never stoop to such depths of crassness.

Coin Dust seemed taken back by the farmer's aggressive posture. The earth pony quickly

recovered his composure and reassured the farmer with the practice of a car salesman. "Ah, then probably a case of mistaken identity. So many ponies with similar coat and mane colour that it can be hard to tell sometimes," he said, holding up his hooves in apology. The farmer nodded, still watching the two agents with narrowed eyes.

Taking the hint, the pair said their goodbyes and trotted off. Trixie was sure she saw Coin Dust taking one last sharp look at her. She bit down the temptation to gloat.

"The nerve of those tax agents," the farmer said. Trixie could only nod in reply.

"Was it her?" Lemongrass asked.

"Hard to say, the cloak and hat made it difficult to tell for certain. One thing's for sure, she can't escape us for long. Shouldn't take long for her to crack," Coin Dust replied. The pair began making their way towards the village proper.

"This isn't working," Trixie muttered as she nursed a mug of coffee in the town's local coffee shop by the town square. The square was rather quiet in comparison to the other towns she had been. Still, several merchants could be found hawking their goods noisily, amongst the various villagers going about their business.

So far, one day of hard, honest work netted her a grand total of one hundred bits. Her entire body ached in places she didn't even know existed. She wished she could just put a show like she did on Ponyville and rake in the bits. Sadly, she left the stage, equipment and proper audience back in Ponyville. Plus, those tax collectors are still somewhere out there. She cannot afford to slip up and let herself get caught now.

"There has to be some easier way to earn bits." Trixie scanned the activity in the town square. So far, nothing stuck out that needed the magical touch of Trixie. Heck, nothing ever happened in this dreary old village, as far as she could see.

Her idle eyes fell upon a lone earth pony who standing about in front one of the many shops in the square. Even from the distance, Trixie could tell the cream-coloured stallion was agitated, alternating between studying the contents of the shop window, and looking around nervously. Even more curious, he also carried an empty-looking saddlebag.

Now why would somepony carry an empty bag around...

As she watched, the earth pony finally decided to enter the shop, casting one final glance

around.

Aha! It's so obvious!

A crime in progress no doubt. One that she could prevent and claim credit for. With luck and a little of her natural charm, the grateful peasants will shower her with enough bits to pay off her dues once and for all. Pleased with her deductive capabilities, she began making her way across the square.

Just as she approached the shop, the same cream stallion burst out of the door; his saddlebags now laden with weight. Just inside the shop, she could hear somepony yelling, "Stop that thief!"

Without further thought, the azure mare planted herself square in front of the charging stallion, "Stop right there you crimi-" she managed to say, before the thief lowered his head and crashed past the azure mare. Trixie found herself being tossed aside by the momentum of the stallion, and landed in a painful heap on the ground nearby.

Shaking the stars out of her eyes, Trixie sensed that the stallion was rapidly moving out of her reach. In the heat of the situation, Trixie casted the first spell that came off the top of her mind.

Conjure Pies.

Several pies materialised in the air above the magician and flung themselves directly into the fleeing figure of the thief. Most landed harmlessly on the ground, with the exception of one, which hit the stallion square in the side of the face. Startled, the thief lost his sense of direction for a brief moment and ran himself straight into a nearby store. He crashed head first into the glass window of the store, and slumped to the ground. As he lay unconscious, his saddlebags spilled open to reveal their contents.

Trixie smiled as she dusted herself off and trotted over to the now-incapacitated stallion. "Hah, none can escape... the... oh, horseapples." Her voice trailed off as she saw what the stallion was stealing. A bunch of lamps. That were still lit. In a store that was lined with fireworks. Trixie watched in slow motion as flames of the lamps spread and licked the fuse of a particularly big roman candle.

The azure mare barely managed to dive into the relative safety of a nearby shop before the fireworks started going off.

They called it the Great Fire of Ponyton.

Many ponies fled for their lives that day.

It was believed to be caused by a thief who happened to run into a store full of fireworks while stealing gaslamps.

No pony knew what caused such a catastrophic chain reaction to occur.

All blamed the mayor for his lack of fire precautions.

“Okay, that didn’t go so well,” Trixie muttered, as the azure mare sat on her haunches outside where the coffee shop used to be. She sighed as she surveyed the damage caused by the fire. Half of the town buildings in the square were damaged, and at least one was completely razed to the ground. The thief himself was badly burned and was shipped posthaste to Ponyville for treatment.

Her ticket out of this mess, ruined by sheer chance. At least no pony seemed to know how the stallion clumsily stumbled in the first place. Now she found herself wishing for her former assistant to help her out. Good, dependable Fair Breeze always knew what to do in such a situation. Trixie shook her head. No, not after the way she fired her. The Great & Powerful Trixie will find a way to overcome this adversity with or without help. She always had.

“Hey you! Don’t just sit there. Help us with moving all these debris,” a loud voice shouted from the ruined shop. Trixie was jolted from her thoughts and gave the offending pony a dark stare. “The Grea- I mean The Pure & Honest Twixie does not take orders from civilians.”

“Yeah, yeah, you want to live in this village, you gotta work for it,” the orange earth pony replied. “Else you can take a hike.” He jabbed a hoof to the road leading out of the village.

“Why, Tri- Twixie just might-” Trixie abruptly closed her mouth when she spied two familiar figures walking towards the square. She put on her best smile for the orange earth pony.

“On second thought, let Twixie help with that pile over there.” Trixie gestured at a random pile of fallen debris and darted into the ruined coffee shop before the two agents could see her.

Coin Dust trotted slowly through the partially damaged town square. “Great Celestia, what happened here?”

“Looks like a fire, sir,” his companion replied obliviously.

“I know that. I have eyes, you know,” the green earth pony snapped irritably. “What I want to

know is how.... Never mind. It doesn't matter anyway." He shook his head and focused on the task at hand. The tax agent approached a navy-blue earth pony who was busy pulling a cart full of debris.

"Greetings, we're from the Equestria's Tax Collection Bureau. We're looking for a criminal-"

"Criminal!?" the mare exclaimed loudly, startling several of the other villagers within hearing distance. Coin Dust adjusted his uniform nervously when he realised there were now several pairs of eyes staring at them. The earth pony he addressed was staring at him, her green eyes filled with burning questions.

"Yes, criminal on the run. She's curre-"

"Oh, oh, what did she do? Did she kidnap the princess and magically banished her to the moon?" the mare interrupted him with enthusiasm.

"No!" Coin Dust replied hastily, aghast at the very thought.

"Did she murder somepony horribly in a nearby town?" The mare gasped. "Oh Celestia, I need to get in touch with my sister in Ponyville!"

"I assure you, nothing like that-" Coin Dust replied, only to be cut off by the bubbly mare again.

"Oh oh, is she an internationally renowned spy on the run that Celestia is now after because she's holding some great state secret that must never be revealed lest it would doom the kingdom and change the very world we live in?"

The tax agent stared at the navy-blue earth pony for a long while, unable to follow the mare's wild train of thought. He finally spluttered, "... What?! No!"

"Then... what is it?"

"She... owes the kingdom taxes." the earth pony said hesitantly, suddenly struck by how petty her crime seemed to be, especially in comparison to the wild fantasies that the mare apparently harboured.

The excitable mare looked deflated by the revelation. "Oh." she said with considerably less enthusiasm. She began pulling her cart again. "Nope, never seen her."

"But we haven't even told you how she looked like!" Lemongrass protested.

"Sorry, busy now. Can't help ya. Have a good day sirs." The mare plodded ahead, not bothering to look back on the dumbfounded tax agents.

“... The hay is wrong with these ponies?” Coin Dust muttered, more to himself than to his companion.

“No idea sir,” Lemongrass replied obliviously, apparently overhearing his monologue.

Finally managing to extract herself from the dreary work of shifting building materials around town with a rather flimsy excuse of stomach pains, she made her way slowly to the local inn. Since when the Great & Powerful Trixie had sunk to such depths as to resort to menial tasks to hide from law enforcement authorities? Had she truly lost her shine after that debacle with Twilight Sparkle?

Perhaps... there is another way. A more unsavoury way. Trixie had never been one to resort to actual crime before. Sure, her shows contained an element of untruth to it, but that was mostly to impress the onlookers. Trixie sighed as she pondered her situation.

She was desperate.

She was on the run from the Law.

She needed bits.

Hard work wasn't going to help her now.

She couldn't put on her usual show.

Yes... crime was suddenly looking more and more favourable. Just... just this once. Trixie promised herself. Even the Great & Powerful Trixie could not stand against the most unfavourable circumstances.

Hopefully she could put her plan into motion the next week, when the situation in the village was more settled. For the meantime, she'll need to plan on how to subsist on plain hay for one week...

“Come one, come all! Witness the amazing sleight of hooves performed by the Pure & Honest Twixie!”

The azure mare decided on a simple game, easy to manipulate, simple to perform. She laid out five empty cups on a makeshift plastic table, along with a dice. A few curious ponies were already staring at the stall, trying to discern her purpose. Trixie knew all too well she needed to get the ball rolling with some fanfare. She pointed to a beige pegasus who walked past.

“You! You seemed like a fine pea- a fine pony. Why don't you try your hand at this simple game?”

Just guess which cup holds the dice and you win!”

The pegasus looked confused at the sudden attention. “I... I guess I can,” he stammered. The villager walked closer and threw a few bits to the bowl laid in front.

Trixie smiled, and lined up the cups in a neat row. She then placed the die in the middle cup, careful to show her every move to the villager, lest they get suspicious. The azure mare then used her telekinesis to rapidly shuffle the cups around. Her smile got wider as she saw the pegasus’ eyes darted back and forth, in a futile attempt to keep track of her movement. Finally stopping, she arranged the cups again in a neat row, and gestured for the villager to pick a cup.

The beige pegasus thought for a moment, then picked the middle one. Trixie knew it wasn’t the right one, but she needed to build the pony’s confidence. As she began to lift the cup, she silently began to cast a simple spell.

The pegasus face broke into a smile as he saw the dice under the cup.

“Looks like you win!” Trixie announced in her best stage voice.

The pegasus whooped loudly, and cheered. His antics attracted the attention of passer-bys, just as planned. She gave the pegasus a sweet smile and handed him his reward. Trixie took note of the additional ponies wandering over to her stall, and her smile widened further.

“Would you like to try again?”

“Heck yeah!”

Lemongrass glanced at his companion worriedly as they went on their daily walk around the village.

One week they have waited. One week with no sign of hide or hair of the detestable mare. The villagers weren’t helpful either. Most either defended the mare, or feigned disinterest.

It didn’t help Coin Dust’s mood gradually darkened as the week passed. They already missed three great cocktail parties while they were mucking around in a village in the middle of nowhere, chasing down an exceptionally elusive suspect. The unicorn half-suspected their colleagues back in Canterlot made a mad scramble to celebrate their absence.

As they made their way past the town square, he noticed a gathering crowd around one of the stalls. And one suspiciously familiar blue mare running it. He nudged Coin Dust and pointed.

“Interesting,” Coin Dust replied, perking up for the first time in days.

By the middle of the afternoon, a large crowd crowded the makeshift stall. The azure mare already collected close to a thousand bits, though she was careful to keep it hidden away so that the villagers did not know how much she actually was making. She kept the game carefully controlled. Handing out the occasional win, but still making sure that ultimately, she was raking in the money.

Trixie revelled in the attention she had gotten, despite the very real risk of discovery. She didn't much care. This was the thrill of the show she was familiar with, despite the very different setting this time around. This was why she loved show business.

“Who's next?” she called cheerfully, her good mood finally returning after nearly a week of constant anguish.

“That'll be me,” a familiar voice answered.

Steel Hoof.

“Good afternoon, Steel Hoof,” Trixie greeted, frowning slightly at the serious expression on his face.

“Quite an impressive setup you got there,” he continued, in a rather even tone. The elderly stallion tossed a hundred bit coin onto the bowl. “Let's see if I can beat the odds. By my reckoning, only eight so far have guessed correctly.” Something in his tone set off warning bells in Trixie's mind. Was he suspecting foul play?

“Not everypony can get lucky,” Trixie answered cautiously. She began the routine of placing the dice and shuffling the cups. The azure mare noticed Steel Hoof following her moves steadily. She had a feeling he knew exactly where the dice was.

Finished with her shuffling, she held out her hoof to invite Steel Hoof to pick the correct cup. The elderly stallion immediately picked the outer leftmost one... the correct one. Trixie chewed her lower lips in indecision. Should she let him win? She'd need to pay double, meaning she'd be set back by two hundred bits. At least one hour worth of work undone.

The unicorn levitated the indicated cup up... to reveal nothing. Steel Hoof narrowed his eyes at the azure magician. “Trixie, I had believed you to be an honest character, not a lying cheat,” he said in a low voice. Trixie gave a nervous smile.

“Trixie does not know what are you talking about,” she stammered.

The elderly earth pony sighed. "I had hoped I didn't need to do this." He waved a hoof around under the floating cup. The crowd gasped as the air shimmered and distorted, the tell-tale mark of an illusion. The earth pony then scooped the apparently empty space... to produce a dice. The crowd let out another gasp and began to murmur amongst themselves.

"Trixie... can explain all this..." the azure mare began, but her feeble protestations was drowned out by shouts.

"Fraud!"

"Liar!"

"You no-good mule!"

Trixie's eyes widened as the crowd steadily became more and more agitated, closing in steadily. She sensed a mob was about to form. Looks like she'd have to use her signature escape move again. Without even bothering for a parting shot at the crowd, she stomped her hooves on the ground, conjuring a massive smoke of cloud. The crowd immediately coughed and spluttered as the smoke enveloped the area.

Just several paces away, the two tax agents watched the unfolding scene with great interest. When the all-too familiar smoke cloud appeared, they knew they nailed their target.

"Looks like our friend Trixie is finally making an escape."

Sure enough, the azure mare appeared from the sea of smoke and galloped off towards the forest bordering the village.

"And she had to run into Mossy Fringe Forest," Lemongrass dryly remarked.

"Come on now, let's serve this notice and bring her in. It's already one week overdue."

Blast and damnation, Trixie swore. Her plan was going so well, until that no-good stallion decided to ruin her act. Trixie definitely underestimated that earth pony. She had him pegged for a naive peasant who just happened to help her. Blast her poor run of luck. Why couldn't everything go her way for once?! Now she was on the run from the Law and penniless to boot. Well, not exactly penniless, she still had the money saved from her brief stint as a menial labourer #240 in the village. But that definitely would not be enough to sustain her for long.

Trixie looked around her unfamiliar surroundings. Oh, now where had she gotten herself into?

She wasn't really looking when she ran away. Understandable really, she had been most anxious to put as much distance as possible between her and the crowd before they could lynch her or do something even worse. Still, spending time in a forest was far preferable to being lynched. Even if Trixie had little or no experience of mucking about in a forest before.

The ancient trees rose up around her, the low branches hanging overhead menacingly. Trixie grimaced as she stepped into a puddle of mud, while trying to navigate her way around the increasingly bumpy path. The gnarled roots and trunks seemed to close in on her, and the azure mare shivered. There was something unsettling about the forest around her.

She mentally slapped herself. This wasn't the Everfree. All she had to do was to follow the path and she'd come out on the other side safe and sound. Right?

The hours slowly ticked past, as Trixie continued to plod along the uneven path, now reduced to a mere dirt track as it led deeper into the forest. The afternoon sun was slowly sinking into the horizon. Trixie had a nasty feeling Celestia was going to drop the sun soon. She fervently hoped she would out of the forest soon. Nothing more unpleasant than spending a night in an unfamiliar forest. Filled with wild creatures. On a bed of uneven, filthy ground. Her ears perked up as she picked up the faint sounds of the bubbling of a stream. Good, she was getting thirsty anyhow.

The azure mare came up towards a small-ish stream of clear water running across the dirt path. The water was shallow enough for a pony to cross over, which was probably why the original builders of this path neglected to build a bridge across. Still, Trixie appreciated the chance to freshen up and slake her thirst before continuing on. She began splashing her face with water when she felt that feeling of unease returning.

The azure mare looked around. Bushes of various kind straddled the stream, with trees towering behind. The afternoon sun filtered through the tree tops faintly, illuminating everything with soft golden light and casting long shadows on the ground.

Then it struck her. The forest was deathly silent. The singing of crickets in the background was absent. Birds that had chirped merrily on her long trek were now ominously silent. Even the occasional rustling of the undergrowth by what Trixie presumed to be small animals was gone.

Trixie felt a primal fear creeping up on her heart. It was unnatural for a forest to be this silent; even a city mare like her knew as much.

Hissssssssssss!

Trixie whirled around, plucking a hefty stick from the side of the stream and waving it about in the air.

“T-th-the Great and Powerful Trixie do- does not f-f-fear you!” she shouted, her voice breaking up a little.

Hissss!

She felt her skin prickling as the sound continued to close in. Then she saw it. A cluster of bushes to her left shaking wildly as the unknown beast stomped through the bushes. Trixie could almost visualise the sharp pointy teeth of whatever wild beast that was stalking her.

Finally losing her nerve, Trixie gave a frightened yelp and dove into the bushes headlong, running as fast as she could from whatever it was that was bearing down on her.

“Whelp, she definitely went into the forest path,” Coin Dust said, whistling.

“Are you sure? She may be just using the path to throw us off track and then circle around through the forest to go in the opposite direction. Besides, we don’t know anything about trekking through a forest...”

“Lemongrass, stop giving them ideas!” the earth pony cried, glancing around to make sure no pony heard that. “Now let’s get moving.”

The pair nearly jumped off their hooves when a discreet cough sounded behind the pair. The two agents whirled around, hooves at the ready. Their expression turned to one of surprise as they realised it was an elderly earth pony who was addressing them.

“Who-who are you?”

“Name’s Steel Hoof. I believe you’re looking for a certain mare?” the earth pony said calmly, chewing on a twig.

Coin Dust felt himself relaxing at his words. “Yes, we are looking for the so-called Great & Powerful Trixie.”

“Allow me to assist you. I know the ways of the forest, which you two, pardon me, city folks, obviously do not.”

Coin Dust narrowed his eyes at his words. “What’s in it for you?”

“Rectifying a mistake,” the slate-gray earth pony replied simply, before spitting out his twig. Coin Dust considered his words. A guide would be handy indeed. While Mossy Fringe was no Everfree, dangerous creatures still inhabited the woods, some still managing to escape the

notice of the princesses. Why just last month, they heard reports of a hydra in Froggy Bottom Bog...

"That... sounds as good a reason as any," the verdant tax agent cautiously said. He glanced at the hammer and sickle cutie mark and wondered what exactly was his special talent. He knew most ponies' cutie marks were pretty straightforward; like how his, a stack of gold coins, reflected his job as a tax collector. But there were those cutie marks which defied definition and had an oblique meaning to them. Like this one.

"Shall we be off?" the villager called from ahead, a hint of impatience in his voice.

Coin Dust blinked. When did the earth pony slip past them? He quickly pushed the questions out of his mind and cantered up to catch up with Steel Hoof.

The trio trekked down the same dirt path in good time, with Steel Hoof helpfully pointing out the various shortcuts and obstacles that littered the track.

The two agent stared at the forest with wary eyes, uncomfortable with the strange new environment they found themselves. Even as field workers, they never really did have to apprehend a suspect right in the middle of a forest. Most usually stuck to towns or villages. Trixie, by all accounts, was an anomaly, though.

Coin Dust also found the strange earth pony guiding their steps was quite unsettling. He had shown a remarkable aptitude for the ways of the forest... almost as if he had lived in one all his life. Coupled with the silent way he guided them, Steel Hoof made him nervous.

"So, why do you work as a tax collector?" Steel Hoof's voice jolted Coin Dust out from his morbid thoughts.

"It's... it's what I'm good at." Coin Dust replied, falling back to the standard line that every foal memorised since grade school.

Steel Hoof shot him a 'You-can-do-better-than-that' look.

"Hey look, I don't have to explain myself to you," Coin Dust replied, a little annoyed by the probing.

"Well, I like the game ponies play when they try to escape. It's like a puzzle. Trying to figure out what they might do, and so on," Lemongrass replied, an airy look pasted on his face.

Coin Dust sighed. "If only half your theories were correct, or that ponies were even half as

intelligent as you seem to credit them for, then you might actually be useful.” He winced as he remembered how Lemongrass led them on a wild goose chase around Canterlot. The unicorn was eminently convinced the tax dodger they were chasing had a hideout in the middle of Canterlot’s sewers, bristling with pie weaponry and traps. In reality, the suspect had been hiding in his attic. Which the pair only found several hours later; at Coin Dust’s insistence that they sweep the suspect’s house more thoroughly after their futile searches in the sewers. By then, they probably had already mapped the sewers and then some.

“Interesting,” Steel Hoof commented. He made no further attempts to talk after that, despite Lemongrass trying to probing the earth pony with inane questions concerning the forest. Coin Dust for one, was content with the earth pony’s silence. His questions made him uncomfortable.

For the next hour, they walked on in silence, broken only by Lemongrass’ occasional quips and attempted conversation with either his companion or Steel Hoof. Neither returned the gesture, and Lemongrass was soon reduced to admiring the scenery and narrating the view.

So absorbed Coin Dust was in his own thoughts, that he nearly bumped into the hind end of Steel Hoof when the earth pony abruptly stopped in his tracks. He disentangled himself from the tail of the stallion and looked at the villager curiously.

“Something’s wrong.”

“What is?” Coin Dust asked, immediately eyeing the surrounding trees suspiciously. His untrained senses didn’t tell him anything was out of the ordinary, but he wasn’t about to dismiss an experienced pony’s intuition like that.

“It’s too quiet,” the elderly stallion hissed back. “Something’s out there.”

“Huh, so that’s why the birds went silent. And I was beginning to enjoy their song too.” Lemongrass replied, apparently unaware of the subtle warning in the stallions words.

rustle

“You hear that?” Coin Dust whispered, shaking slightly with fear.

“Yes. Whatever it is, it’s close,” Steel Hoof replied, his body tensing for action. Lemongrass just looked at his surroundings with wide-eyed curiosity.

rustle-rustle

Coin Dust noticed the leaves swaying on his left. He turned towards the noise, brandishing a wooden stick he picked up from the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Steel Hoof doing the same. Lemongrass though, was still staring at the undergrowth with fascination.

“Lemongrass, don’t just stand there. Pick up something!” Coin Dust hissed.

“Oh, right sir,” the unicorn replied, picking up a few stones with his magic.

A blue blur appeared from the bushes and crashed headlong into Coin Dust, sending them both stumbling into the ground. Coin Dust somehow managed to end up on top of the blue creature, stars spinning in front of his eyes.

“You oaf! Let go of the Great & Powerful Trixie this instant!” the creature yelled frantically, as it tried to pry itself from the heavy weight of the stallion.

Coin Dust blinked as he realised just who stumbled literally into his lap. He felt his headache instantly clearing and turned towards the mare, who was still pinned beneath his body. “Trixie, by the order of-”

“ARE YOU INSANE? WE GOT BIGGER PROBLEMS NOW!” Trixie shouted, trying in vain to push Coin Dust off.

Hisssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!

“Basilisk? You disturbed a basilisk?!” Steel Hoof thundered, alarm evident in his voice.

“Trixie does not know what it is, nor does she care. Trixie suggests we leave this area immediately before the beast chances upon us.” The azure mare finally remembered to use her magic and pushed the stallion off with one big burst of telekinesis. She quickly stood up and glared at the agent.

“You foalish idiot, the basilisk will be upon us in less than a minute, judging from the hiss.” The elderly earth pony looked towards the gentle swaying of the trees in the distance, then back at the trio. The unseen beast let out another long hiss, the ground shuddering slightly with its stomping.

“Go. Now. Flee while you can.”

“What?”

“I’ll delay the creature.”

“We can’t leave you here.” Coin Dust cried, very much aware of how cliché he sounded.

“Just go! We all won’t survive if you dawdle.” The earth pony turned without waiting for a response. Coin Dust stared at the earth pony with a mixture of regret and fear, before his

self-preservation instinct kicked in.

“Right, let’s go, Trixie... Trixie?” The sound of galloping hooves down the dirt track told him the answer. Coin Dust sighed. He figured the mare would be the first to run.

“Figures. Come on Lemongrass... Lemongrass?” The verdant stallion facehoofed as he realised his companion was gone as well. He began following his erstwhile companions, only stopping a moment to glance back at Steel Hoof. The earth pony briefly considered going back to help him, before shaking his head and continuing on.

Trixie galloped down the path in record speed. Her mind was only focused on one thing. Escape. Trixie vowed she would not perish in some forgotten forest just beside an equally forgettable village. No, she would not fade away in the history books with such an ignoble death.

“Hey.”

Trixie whipped her head around to see Lemongrass galloping beside her, keeping up easily.

“What... what are you doing here?”

“The nice earth pony told us to run. So I did. Said he’ll fend off the creature.”

“He what?” Trixie felt herself feeling concerned for the earth pony. What idiocy possessed him to stay back against a Bas... Bal... whatever it is, alone?

“He told us to run,” Lemongrass repeated, slightly puzzled.

“The fool,” Trixie muttered under her breath. She had no idea why she suddenly felt guilty for leaving him behind. Is it because he helped her without question? The only one who trusted her? And despite exposing her shenanigans in the town earlier, he seemed genuinely disappointed?

Trixie came to a stop, the questions in her mind suddenly all springing forth.

Who was she really?

The greatest most magical unicorn in Equestria?

How Great & Powerful can she be if she ran away from a mere beast in the forest?

This wasn’t the Great & Powerful behaviour she came to expect from herself. The Great &

Powerful Trixie would stand up to the beast, and kick its flank back to where it belongs. Neigh, the Great & Powerful Trixie would obliterate the beast. Just like she did in Balestein. She may not have bested an Ursa Major, but she certainly could whip this creature into shape. Besides, Trixie still owed this pony a favour. The Great & Powerful Trixie does not leave favours unpaid.

The azure mare made an about-turn and galloped back the way she came, hoping fervently she wasn't too late to help Steel Hoof.

Steel Hoof hadn't expected himself to be facing off a Basilisk at the end of his storied life. Not that he expected a peaceful end, but he really had hoped he could have passed away quietly.

He had done a lot of questionable things in the past; all in the name of the Princess of course, but facing down a wild beast of this nature on his own has just topped his list right there. Still, it probably only ranked #15 in the list of stupidest thing he had done in his life.

I suppose there are worse ways to go than being turned into stone. At least they will have my perfectly preserved corpse for burial, he thought to himself morbidly, as he stood firm in front of the rattling undergrowth, stick in mouth.

The bushes in front of parted, and the basilisk's head peeped out from the undergrowth. It's yellow scales contrasted sharply with its jet black beady eyes and pointed teeth that jutted out from its jaws. Steel Hoof sensed the creature was out for blood, its eyes gleaming with malice. Before the creature could do more than hiss of him, the earth pony brought down his makeshift weapon on the creature, stunning it momentarily. He bucked the basilisk in its ugly face for good measure then took off, before the lizard could recover.

As he crashed through the tangled undergrowth, he heard the basilisk let out an angry roar. Well, he definitely got the attention of the beast. *Good, at least I can lead it away from the rest.* The earth pony felt the trees around him swaying as the beast started to chase him ponderously. He knew it was only a matter of time before the beast caught him. Despite its size and lumbering appearance, a basilisk could be surprisingly fast, enough to catch unsuspecting prey unawares. In addition Steel Hoof wasn't exactly at the prime of his life, being on the wrong side of fifty. He found himself wheezing for breath after only a few minutes of running.

Then his luck took a turn for the worse.

He tripped over an outstretched root hidden under all the bushes

Steel Hoof tumbled, landing awkwardly on the ground. As he tried to pull himself up, he felt a searing pain shoot up his hind legs. He looked back and saw his left hind leg twisted at an angle not meant for pony legs. *Great, a sprained ankle.*

To be fair, he wasn't exactly looking to escape, but he did hope he could prolong the chase at least for a few more minutes while the other ponies escaped. He closed his eyes as he awaited his inevitable petrification, his mind calmly accepted his end.

It's been a good life.

The rumbling drew closer.

"Stop right there you beast! The Great & Powerful Trixie commands you."

Trixie's heart hammered as she took in the beast in its full majesty. A full twenty-feet long, the dirty yellow scales shined dully in the fading light of the afternoon sun. Unlike most forest creatures, this one sported six short stumpy legs, which seemed almost inadequate to support the huge bulk. Massive teeth jutted out of the slightly protruding jaw, glinting menacingly.

It was at that moment she realised she knew next to nothing about this creature. Not even a faint clue on what it could do or how to defeat it.

You foolish idiot Trixie. Even in show business you always do your research before going on stage.

"Idiot, don't let the creature unleash its petrification stare at you!" she heard Steel Hoof shout. The idiot, he was alive. Trixie felt a wave of relief wash over her. It wasn't in vain after all.

His warning came just in time too, as the azure mare saw the beast turn its gaze on her unerringly, its jet black eyes shimmering with magic. Hazzarding that the stare works on line of sight, the magician unleashed her smoke screen, covering the area in thick black smoke.

Coughing slightly as the smoke enveloped her, Trixie tried to think of a spell to upstage this creature. Her violet eyes spotted a vine hanging low on a nearby tree.

Aha!

She quickly snapped the vine off the tree and twirled it into a makeshift rope. Amidst the smoke, she saw the beast turning its head in confusion, apparently not used to being defied openly. Trixie sent the vine rope over and sent it coiling around one set of legs. She pulled the bonds tight with her telekinesis, sending the beast stumbling.

Undeterred, the basilisk roared, and snapped the fragile bindings on its leg. It slowly got up, apparently still disorientated, but determined nonetheless. Trixie began to feel the first sign of

panic all over again, not unlike her time with the Ursa Major. *Calm down Trixie. You will not run away from this fight.*

“Blind the beast! That’ll cripple it!” Steel Hoof shouted again.

Blind the...

A crazy idea began to form in her head.

That might just work.

“Lemongrass! Where’s the suspect?” Coin Dust shouted as he finally caught up with the unicorn who, for some reason, was standing about at the path.

“She went back to help Steel Hoof,” Lemongrass replied calmly, seemingly unperturbed. Then he tilted his head at the earth pony. “Sir, we should help her.”

“What?! And risk our own lives? We’re tax agents, not soldiers!”

“Sir, we won’t be able to complete our task if she gets herself killed. I would rather not have that black mark on our record,” Lemongrass continued, his monotone voice betraying a hint of desperation. He began shuffling his hooves.

“Lemongrass, I can’t believe-” Coin Dust bit off the rest of his words when spied Lemongrass unusual behaviour. Lemongrass, calm and air-headed at the same time, nervous? Then it dawned. “Wait, you’re just rationalising aren’t you?”

“Maybe...” Lemongrass looked away guiltily. “Sir, we shouldn’t leave them hanging like that.”

Coin Dust stared disbelievingly at his companion. Of all the time for him to develop a conscience. Then he shook his head and sighed resignedly. He did feel guilty leaving the old pony alone to handle a creature like that alone. Cursed conscience.

“Fine. Let’s see if we can help them out. Though for the life of me, I can’t believe I’m actually running back to face a monster.”

“At least they’re more of a challenge than tax dodgers yes?” Lemongrass replied, a smirk forming on his face, already turning about and galloping back.

“At least,” Coin Dust answered dryly, keeping pace.

Okay, this might not work.

Trixie was playing a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse with the basillisk.

Three times she attempted to close the distance, only for the creature to move away from the protective smoke screen, or she found the dangerous eyes flicking in her direction. Three times she had to retreat and try again to circle behind the beast.

She hazarded it was unlikely hurt the beast directly, at least not with her repertoire of spells. Oh, she probably could zap it with her lightning cloud or maybe experiment with one of the small fireball spells she picked up in Canterlot. But that would be a risky strategy that would leave her vulnerable to its petrification stare, since she needed a brief moment of preparation to cast it. Trixie wasn't sure if it would do more than stun the beast briefly.

The azure magician cast yet another smoke bomb, again filling the forest with smoke and causing her to wheeze. She was going to have one hay of a cough the next morning. She knew she was going to have to get closer if she wanted to blind the creature with her special sticky paste. It irked her to find of all the spells she knew, this had to be one of the few that had extremely limited range. She would have to get within a few feet and then some just to attempt to cast the spell.

The roar of basilisk interrupted her chain of thoughts. That sounded closer than before. Very close, in fact. She saw the undergrowth rattling to her left and quickly galloped on, trying to put some distance between herself and the creature.

The azure mare burst through the bushes to find herself back on the stream she had crossed earlier.

Oh no, this is open ground. And water limits my smoke spell. Blast.

Behind her, the bushes rattled nosily as the beast closed in. Trixie bit her lips and began to wade as fast as she could across the knee-deep water, praying the basillisk wouldn't catch her in the middle.

No such luck. The basilisk burst onto the bank of the stream, its head turning to and fro, before its beady black eyes spotted the azure mare clambering onto the opposite shore. Immediately the basilisk focused on the magician, the air beginning to shimmer with magic.

Trixie whirled around in panic when she heard the basilisk rumble onto the side of the stream. Already she felt her limbs going heavy, as if she was being weighed down in lead. Trixie found herself unable to move from the spot. Desperate, the azure magician gambled with another

shower of smoke, only to find her forelegs too heavy to complete the casting.

She stared at the basilisk fearfully as she felt her limbs hardening, her entire body feeling more and more numb by the second. Her senses began to dull, her vision fading. That jetblack eyes seemed to peer right into her soul. The mare closed her eyes.

This is it. The end of the Great & Powerful Trixie.

Maybe they'll erect a memorial in her honour. That'll be the best memorial ever. Her. The most magical unicorn in Equestria. Forever immortalised in stone.

Just as she completed that thought, she felt the unnatural numbness in her legs fading.

What?

Her ears perked up as the sounds of the forest began to register in her ear again. She heard... scuffling? Her eyes shot open, to the sight of two extremely unlikely ponies apparently wrestling with the beast.

The tax agents? What were they doing here?

The one known as Coin Dust was apparently bucking the basilisk in the flank, only to be swiped aside by the powerful tail. He sailed away into the bushes, landing with a loud crash. Lemongrass stood further back, hurling pebbles and the sort. Those seemed to only mildly annoy the beast.

Nevertheless Trixie quickly took advantage of the new-found distraction to close the distance, her horn already readying to cast the spell she had in mind. She waded as fast as she could past the stream, all the while silently hoping Lemongrass could keep the beast occupied for a little longer.

She clambered hurriedly on the bank, just as the beast roared at the pale yellow unicorn. Lemongrass gave a frightened yelp and dove into the bushes. Apparently the roar was enough to convince him that facing a mythical beast probably wasn't the best for his health. It was however, just enough for Trixie to get within the required distance. Her horn flashed with brilliant blue light and the basilisk suddenly found its entire face covered with sticky paste.

The beast roared and used its front legs to try to claw off the substance, only for it to get its claws comically stuck to its face. The basilisk stumbled here and there, now blinded and and literally flailing around for something to get the paste off its face. Letting out a furious roar, it swept its tail around in an arc, in a clumsy attempt to retaliate. It missed Trixie entirely, unbalancing the creature. The giant lizard fell on its back, its remaining four hind legs flailing wildly.

Trixie took the opportunity to unhook more of the vines from the nearby trees and wrap the basilisk up in more secure bindings. By the time she was done with it, the creature was literally wrapped up like a mummy, with only its snout remaining uncovered.

“Ow... my head...” she heard Coin Dust moan from the bushes to her right. Trixie considered briefly to leave the tax agent there and make her escape. But before she could do more than take a step away, the mare heard another voice call her from behind.

“Ah, Trixie. I see you have settled things amicably.”

Steel Hoof.

She whirled around to face the earth pony, who was slowly dragging his injured leg along the dirt. His ankle seemed to be twisted at an unnatural angle. Steel Hoof glanced at the now-bound basilisk, and nodded approvingly.

“I see the confidence my employers had in you wasn’t misplaced. I’ll admit, the sight of you resorting to cheap dirty con-pony tricks back in Ponyton shook my belief in you.”

“Who-? What?” Trixie spluttered, not comprehending.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Steel Hoof, in the employ of Her Majesty’s Secret Service.” He bowed formally, despite the awkward posture he held with his injured leg.

“As you know, we’re always on the lookout for potential recruits. Ponies do not apply for the Secret Service. They get recruited instead. No exceptions,” Steel Hoof stated. Trixie stared at the earth pony with her jaw hanging slack. A secret agent?

“You have always been a source of fascination for our scouts. Many in our ranks believed you had tremendous potential. Unfortunately, you all but threw it away when you went into show business. We have tried many times in the past to probe your true abilities, but those either failed to sufficiently draw out your potential, or plain bad luck just took care of the test itself.” Trixie thought back to all those hecklers of her show... were they actually paid to do so?

“Ponyville was supposed to be your proving ground, but even we did not expect the two colts we paid to bring back an Ursa Minor.”

“What?!” Trixie half-shouted in disbelief. This... this pony... was to blame for the wreck of her caravan? Why did she turn back to rescue him again?

The earth pony did not seem to notice her expression of disbelief. “So, our employer decided to give you one last chance. I was sent to assess you this time. Admittedly, I was still struggling to come up with a plan to test your skills when you first showed up. And the two tax agents

complicated things.”

Just then, a rustling from behind Trixie interrupted the impromptu exposition. A moment later, Lemongrass appeared, dragging what appeared to be the tail of Coin Dust behind him.

“I see you survived,” Steel Hoof remarked, rather calmly. “You would do better to heed my words next time.”

“Well, we can’t very well leave you two alone,” Lemongrass replied with a faint air of smugness. Almost as if he was proud of his achievement.

The gray earth pony expression hardened. “The basilisk isn’t a beast to be toyed with. At best I could have drawn it away and eventually lost it in the thick undergrowth, possibly with a little help from favourable terrain and a generous helping of luck,” Steel Hoof said in a serious tone.

“More likely though, I would have been petrified and left for dead. Had you two stuck around, you’d be hunted down one at a time.” Steel Hoof tapped his muzzle to indicate how the basilisk tracked its prey.

“Fortunately, our resident magician here seemed competent enough to tackle the beast, although I must say I question the choices of your spells. Did you not learn any offensive spell at all?”

“I- uh- Trixie never had the need to...” Trixie stammered as she searched for a plausible reason.

“Still, impressive work, improvising those stage-magic spells like that. I look forward to you actually wielding spells of note.”

“Trixie has this question for you, mister secret agent.”

“Mister what?” Coin Dust managed to croak, apparently managing to catch some snatches of her conversation even in his injured state.

“Go ahead.”

“If the Secret Service wanted powerful mages so badly, why not recruit the detestable Twilight Sparkle? You should have known how she... upstaged me in Ponyville.” She grimaced as she recalled the humiliating incident yet again.

“Ah, but the Princess laid down specific orders not to recruit her. She *is* the princess’ personal student after all.”

“The... what?!” Trixie blurted. “That... that... foal, is a student of the princess...” Trixie stumbled a

little, suddenly feeling dizzy. "Trixie... needs to sit for a while... to process this information..."

"You didn't know?" A surprised look crossed his face briefly, before resuming its neutral expression. "I suppose you wouldn't know... You two didn't meet at the best of circumstances." Trixie knew he was understating things quite a bit.

"...uhhhh...Lemongras...take her... into custody..." Coin Dust moaned, as he lay on the ground. His eyes still spun around unhealthily. Lemongrass glanced at the earth pony briefly, before nodding, and started moving towards Trixie.

"By the authority of Princess Celestia, I hereby serve you-"

"Ah, gentlecolts, I would strongly suggest you make an exception in this case," Steel Hoof politely interjected.

Lemongrass shook his head obstinately. "No, sir. We have a job to do. She must be brought to a court of law." The alabaster unicorn didn't look like he was going to back down.

"Perhaps... we could work out a compromise gentlecolts," Steel Hoof said in a mild tone and put a hoof to his chin thoughtfully.

"Your companion here seems to be injured. And because of your run-in with the creature here, you lost track of Miss Trixie here. Unfortunately your companion's injury precludes you from taking up the chase momentarily and forced you to return to the village."

Lemongrass looked confused. "I... ah... don't understand, sir. Miss Trixie is right here."

Steel Hoof shook his head. "You never saw me. You never met Miss Trixie here. *This whole incident did not take place.*" His eyes glinted dangerously.

Lemongrass stared at the earth pony for a long while, before nodding with understanding. "I... yes. We just happened to have had bad luck while chasing Miss Trixie here," he repeated, clearly not happy with the situation. The agent turned to Trixie and bowed formally. "I wish you luck in your future endeavours. Just so you know, this was nothing personal. We bear you no ill-will. Perhaps we will meet again in better circumstances."

The alabaster unicorn nudged his companion to a standing position and began to lead him slowly to the dirt path ahead. Coin Dust didn't protest as he was led away from the pair. He still seemed dazed and stumbled a little as the unicorn nudged him gently forward. The two soon disappeared from view into the dense undergrowth.

Steel Hoof turned towards Trixie and fixed her with an interrogative stare. "Now then. Let us get to someplace safer where we can discuss things more thoroughly." He winced as he dragged

his leg over. "Also, I need help in getting this fixed..."

Trixie looked at the earth pony's expression. Then at his injured leg. Then back at his stern countenance. She wasn't going to be able to weasel out of this one. "Very well, Trixie will help." the unicorn said reluctantly. She moved closer to his injured ankle and made to grab it with her telekinesis. Steel Hoof winced a little, but his voice showed no sign of pain.

"Good, now set it back in place..." Steel Hoof raised an eyebrow at Trixie. "You do know how right?"

Trixie gave him a black look. "Are you doubting my abilities?"

The earth pony shrugged. "Whenever you're ready then." Steel Hoof bit his lips in anticipation of the pain.

Trixie steadied her hold on the injured ankle, then twisted it hard.

Crack!

A loud cry of anguish pierced the silent forest a moment later, startling whatever birds that remained.

They made the slow, ponderous journey back to town in sullen silence. Despite repeated attempts to apologise, Trixie found herself being rebuffed coldly. She harrumphed and pouted. If this earth pony did not wish her help, he only had to mention it. It wasn't her fault that she twisted it too far in her first attempt. Or the second. Maybe she should have stopped at the third. Then again, Trixie never did anything in halves.

By the time they reached the village, the moon was glowing brightly in the sky. Trixie decided to discard her now worn cloak and hat, on Steel Hoof's advice, to better obfuscate her identity. Under the cover of darkness, they made it through the village without so much a pony raising a whimper. Funny how much the loss of a hat and cloak could obscure the identity of a pony so much. Perhaps she had a hidden gift for subterfuge. Natural really, for a pony which such talent like her. The pair approached a discreet small house at the edge of the village, which Trixie assumed to be the lodgings of Steel Hoof.

Trixie spent the next hour admiring the dust on his fireplace, as the earth pony attempted to bandage his leg more thoroughly. He adamantly refused any help from Trixie, claiming she made a worse nurse than even Dr. Strangelove, whoever that may be. The azure unicorn was nearly asleep when Steel Hoof was finally done.

He bade her to make herself comfortable next to table and made to sit at the opposite side. Steel Hoof settled onto the floor slowly, wincing a little as he carefully laid his injured leg down and locked onto Trixie with a steely gaze.

“Miss Trixie. I shall only offer this once. If you do not wish to listen, you are free to walk away from this house. You will not discuss the details of today’s incident with anypony else, on the pain of banishment.”

Trixie nodded rapidly, not wishing for a grand tour on the moon.

The slate gray earth pony cleared his throat, before reciting a clearly rehearsed speech. “You are cordially invited to join Her Majesty’s Secret Service. If you accept this offer, you will be bound by oath to uphold any and all state secrets that you may be privy to. In addition, you may not disclose your identity to anypony, except to those explicitly authorised by us. You will be deployed to various locations around Equestria to put down any trouble that may arise. You’re allowed to use your own discretion; but be warned, we are monitoring every move you make.” Steel Hoof gave her a questioning look. “Any questions?”

“What if I refuse?”

“Then.... well, we forget this ever happened. We go our separate ways and you will never hear from us again. Of course your tax troubles would remain unresolved...”

“Enough. Trixie understands the... delicate situation. Trixie does not need you to point out the obvious.” The azure mare frowned as she thought over his words. “What is the pay?”

“A token salary, though the agency will cover any cost you may incur.”

“What? Trixie is supposed to do all this work for *free*?” Trixie exclaimed.

Steel Hoof eyed the azure mare critically. “Are you expecting financial rewards? This is a service to the nation, not some business for profit,” he said, a faint trace of incredulity in his voice.

“But... but, how is Trixie supposed to survive on this pittance?”

“Be creative. With your history, I’m sure you can think of something,” Steel Hoof shrugged and held out his hooves helplessly. “We do not object to any side-income you may earn, detestable as it may be.”

“You mean, Trixie can accept rewards for her deeds... like a proper hero should?” Trixie suggested.

“Certainly.” Steel Hoof frowned for a moment. “Claiming to be a mercenary might useful for

obfuscating your actual line of work... yes... this might work.” He seemed deep in thought now. “No pony would suspect a connection between you and the agency if you play your cards right.”

Trixie mulled the idea over. Trixie, the Hero of Equestria... that had a nice ring to it. The Hero of Equestria, riding in from the horizon to save the day from the dastardly villain of the week. With luck she might be able to wing it and save the day without much work on her part. She would have minions to do her bidding... right?

She began running through a mini checklist in her mind.

She was broke.

She had no job.

She was still technically on the run from the Law.

Her street cred was totally gone after the fiasco in both Ponyville and Ponyton.

The very fact the top secret agency in Equestria approached Trixie for help spoke volumes on how they valued her.

The job sounded like a hoof in the door to more fame and fortune.

She could totally put outrageous demands to the agency once she felt her way around.

“Very well. Trixie accepts this job,” she replied after a moment.

“Excellent. I know you would put the interests of Equestria above your own.” Steel Hoof replied, apparently pleased with her acceptance. He took out a letter from a pouch next to him and neatly threw it across towards Trixie. The unicorn caught it in midair with her magic and opened it. Her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Your official letter of acceptance,” Steel Hoof said, grinning. “Congratulations, you’re now part of Her Majesty’s Secret Service.”

Trixie was... flattered. In all her life, she never expected to be part of one of Equestria’s most secretive governmental agency. Of course, it took them quite some time to appreciate just the talent she had. She would have to remedy such sloppiness on their part.

“If there are no further questions, you may leave. The envelope also contains the your next instructions. I suggest following them to the letter.” Trixie nodded and gathered her saddlebags. As she turned to leave, the unicorn paused.

“One more thing Steel Hoof,” Trixie said, a hint of mirth in her voice.

“What is it?”

“Here.” Trixie levitated over a small bag. Steel Hoof caught it with his mouth as it floated over. The bag jiggled with bits. The earth pony raised an eyebrow.

“The loan you gave me earlier. Trixie never leaves a debt unpaid,” Trixie stated smugly. She gave her silver mane a dignified shake, and strutted out of the small shack, seemingly without a care in the world.

Steel Hoof watched as the azure mage disappeared down the dusty streets.

“Great & Powerful Trixie, I hope you do not disappoint,” he said softly, before moving to close the door.

Coin Dust found himself lying on a bed as he awoke. He must have passed out again on the way back to the village. Turning his head to one side, he spied his companion waiting patiently at his side. “Lemongrass... Good to see you,” he greeted weakly.

“You too, sir. I’m glad you finally woke up.”

He tried searching his memories, but the hours after he was knocked to the ground was a blur of pain, green and the indistinct sound of Lemongrass’ voice. “What happened out there? I... my memory is still fuzzy...”

“We lost her, sir. I had to drag you back after the basilisk knocked you out.”

The verdant earth pony frowned as fragments of indistinct conversation surfaced. “I remember... something about a secret agent?”

Lemongrass shook his head. “No sir, you were... hallucinating.”

“Oh...” Coin Dust groaned in pain as he tried to sit up. “I guess we’ll have to try again next time. She can’t have gotten far...” The earth pony frowned as another thought struck him. “Come to think of it, where was Steel Hoof?”

“He took care of the basilisk, sir...”

“I knew it. That stallion seemed quite fishy to me. Probably some sort of retired soldier or something.”

“Looks like it sir.” Lemongrass replied simply.

“You know, I never did find out what his cutie mark meant...”

“Are they trying to pull a prank on the Great & Powerful Trixie?” the azure mare seethed, as she stood alone in the empty town square. It was in the dead of the night, and most ponies were sound asleep. Except her.

She had followed the instructions to the letter; even going so far to dye her mane a shocking purple as detailed. Electric purple it even specified; not a shade lighter or darker. Trixie suspected it was some form of joke that was slipped in by those who never expected her to be accepted.

“Hold your horses, Trixie. You never were one to be patient.”

Wait, she knew that voice. She knew it all too well. That condescending tone. Subtle jabs veiled behind every word.

Fair Breeze.

“You?!” the azure mare spat.

“Yes, Trixie. Me. I suppose I have to take care of you. Again. Just like old times.”

Even in the gloom, Fair Breeze could see Trixie’s face turning an unhealthy shade of red. She smiled. Just like old days.