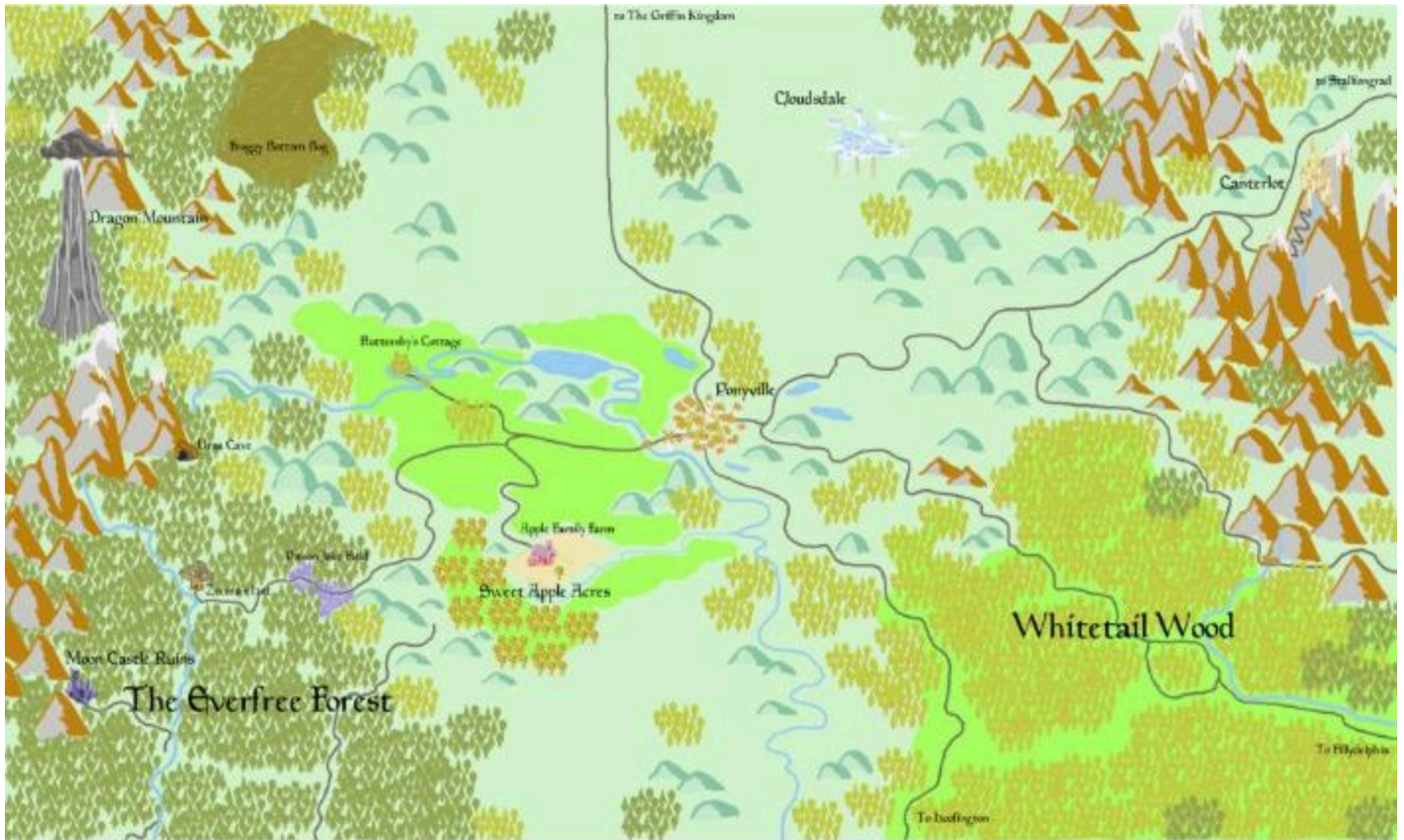


## It's Not Where You Go...



## Index

### V. 1

[Chapter 1: The Dumbest Pony In Equestria](#)

[Chapter 2: A Dark Trot to Trottingham](#)

[Chapter 3: The Not-So-Great and Powerful Trixie](#)

[Chapter 4: Hoofing it to Hoofington](#)

[Chapter 5: The Moment of Truth](#)

[Chapter 6: Calm Before the Storm](#)

[Chapter 7: The Gathering Storm](#)

### V. 2

[Chapter 8: Turning Back](#)

Chapter (final): ...But How You Get There



## Chapter 8: Turning Back

A distinct, faint jingle in the distance roused Snails from his sleep. Although the rain had slowed its relentless assault, a sheet of grey and nearly pitch black darkness limited the colt's view, masking the source of the sound.

Not a moment later a soft light appeared back down the muddy path, hovering and bobbing above the trail. Along with the growing light and now loud piercing jingle, Snails began picking up a faint feminine voice calling out in the night.

"Snails!... Snails!?"

Hearing his name, the colt attempted to rise to his hooves. Despite his struggling, aching muscles, an empty stomach, and sleep deprivation kept him firmly rooted under the tree.

The jingling and shouting began to pierce through the downpour as the light grew stronger. Slowly, the illumination revealed a lone blue mare pulling a large caravan. Next to her head, a small bell shook violently, putting out a tone one would not imagine from such a small instrument.

"Snails!!!"

Albeit the voice undoubtedly belonged to Trixie, it lacked the characteristics the sorceress usually boasted. Instead of being laced with arrogance and callousness, her cries were heavy with worry and urgency.

Trixie soon came fully into view as she approached Snails' resting place. Her hooves and legs were caked with mud and a weary yet concerned gaze searched wildly through the darkened forest.

To any passerby on the path, Snails would be almost invisible due to being covered in mud and blocked by roots. Sure enough, even with her frantic search, Trixie passed over him.

Snails hesitated to call out to her. Would he be proving Trixie right if he revealed himself to her like this? Everything she said in Fillydelphia displayed right in front of her as a muddy failure. Perhaps he should just lay here... silent...

“Snails!!?”

Still, her voice had a newfound sincerity that broke clearly through the forest and rain. Also, Snails realized, Trixie was actually worried for him. It was a simple thought, but Snails still secretly idolized Trixie. To have her concerned for his well-being gave the colt a warm fuzzy feeling he hadn't felt since he first heard Trixie laugh. The soft, joyous sound coming from the usually withdrawn sorceress had been unexpected yet wonderful. It made Snails believe that, beneath her cold-hearted outer shell, Trixie possessed emotions and feelings just like everypony else. There was also the fact that she had traveled all this way just to find him, and-

“Snails!?!...”

Snails suddenly realized how distant Trixie's voice had become. While he had been lost in thought, the sorceress had long passed him by, with the light from her horn fading into the distance behind the caravan.

“Trixie!” Snails shouted with all of his strength. His cry was quickly drowned out by the rain as the caravan pulled farther away down the darkened path.

While Snails' previous attempt to raise himself had failed, a second wind had seized the colt. Slowly rising to his hooves, Snails weakly emerged from his hiding place, shuddering as he sunk into the muddy path and the cold rain once again battered him.

Up ahead, Trixie's cries had ceased and the caravan had become motionless aside from an occasional jerk. Snails slowly trotted to the sorceress, each step wobbly and dangerously unstable. As he approached the caravan's side, his eyes caught site of the deep ruts the wheels had trapped themselves in. Frustrated yelps and curses came from the front as Trixie pulled on the caravan futilely. Snails stopped at Trixie's side, the blue mare still oblivious to his presence.

"N-nice w-weather we're having eh?" Snails asked tiredly. Even though he was happy to see Trixie again, nothing in Equestria could overcome the pure exhaustion he felt.

Trixie spun around in surprise, catching sight of Snails. He was a poor sight, with the majority of his body covered in mud and a dirtied, ruffled mane.

"Snails!" She cried, unhitching herself from the caravan. A look of relief washed over her face as she galloped up to the colt.

Snails recoiled slightly as it seemed Trixie was going to tackle him in pure joy. Halting just before she would crash into her partner, realization of her ecstatic behavior dawned on the sorceress, and she quickly straightened herself in an attempt to save face.

"It's a miracle you're ok." Trixie lightly scolded Snails. "If I hadn't come to find you, you would have-"

"I would have trotted home to Ponyville the next day." Snails interrupted determinedly. "Why did you come here?"

Flustered at his sudden impertinence, Trixie stammered "To save you of course! No pony could survive a storm like thi-"

"I was doing fine by myself. Whether you came or not had nothing to do with my survival. If that's what you came for, was to 'save' me, then you might as well turn back now."

Trixie was still shocked at Snails' surge of independence. This was NOT the same colt she had dragged along with her from Trottingham. Then again... she wasn't the same mare he had helped before either. These past two weeks traveling together had changed both of them. Although Trixie had been journeying for almost her whole life, her time with Snails had left a great impact on her.

Gathering her courage, Trixie began her confession. "You're the first pony in years I've actually been able to talk to. After having wandered for seven years alone, meeting somepony like you with such determination and kindness has made me finally reevaluate myself again. I know it may not feel like it, but talking and training and performing and just... trotting with you has helped me. A lot."

Snails nodded, surprised but relieved to be hearing Trixie admit his importance to her.

"I came here because I wanted to thank you for staying with me as long as you did. And... I was afraid you'd get hurt in a storm like this on your way back home."

"Thanks." Was all Snails could muster as his last reserves of energy began to fade.

Realizing his critical condition, Trixie ushered Snails into the caravan. While she managed to remove most of the mud as they entered, a few clumps still stuck to the colt's coat. An exhausted Snails collapsed into the silk blankets, welcoming back their warmth.

Trixie laid down beside him, letting out a long sigh. She placed the bell she had been magically carrying with her into the mound of bags that lined the back wall of the caravan.

"Is that the bell the charity mare had?" Snails asked, puzzled.

"It's the bell I tossed into the river." Trixie responded. "I tried to find her and give it back, but the streets had been abandoned as soon as the storm began."

Snails looked back at the pristine bell. "At least you tried..." He said.

"Tomorrow I'll take you back to Ponyville." Trixie said regretfully. "The storm should be over by the time we wake up."

An odd silence soon crept over them. Although she would not express it, Trixie was disappointed. Snails was still wary of her, no matter how hard she tried to appease him. Even so, she couldn't blame him; the mare had been reckless and vehement in her assault on Snails, his friends, his family, and everything he stood for. Why should he suddenly forgive her?

Tomorrow night, she would be alone again, having pushed away the only pony in seven years to give her a chance. More than ever, Trixie realized how wonderful it had been to have somepony like Snails to talk to.

“Snails?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you come find me? Why did you leave Ponyville?” Trixie asked.

Snails shifted his head towards Trixie. “After school that day, and seeing my mother like she was... I needed to get out of Ponyville. I found your poster and left for Trottingham hoping you would let me travel with you and be a part of your show.”

“You had a lot of faith in me.” Trixie said quietly.

“I was taught that everypony had some good in them. I thought you’d be no exception.”

As soon as the conversation had started, it dropped off immediately as Trixie took in Snails’ words. Regretting his slightly caustic remark, Snails attempted to carry on the discussion with a question that had been gnawing at the back of his mind.

“You said earlier you had been wandering for... seven years!? What made you do that? What happened to your... I mean...”

Trixie’s mind gave a sigh of relief as her partner asked the question she had been waiting for ever since Hoofington.

“No no! It’s fine.” Trixie supported. “But still... it’s a long story.”

Snails sat up as his interest piqued. His idol’s past was a topic that had been on his mind when he first saw her in Ponyville. “If you wouldn’t mind telling it, I’d love to hear the whole thing. Everything.”

“Everything?” Trixie questioned.

“Yes. Every detail.”

Trixie took a deep breath. “Where to begin.... hmmmmmm-ah! It was a bright cold day in

April..."

*"Come one! Come all! Everypony in Stalliongrad come and witness the omnipotent magic of the three most powerful unicorns in Equestria!" A deep voice boomed out across the heart of the city, echoing off the grand spires and elegant structures of Stalliongrad.*

*Three identical pale blue mares dressed in silken gowns trotted out onto the stage. As they approached the front of the audience, all three bowed, followed by a blue flash. Where three mares had stood before, only one remained.*

*"Behold! The great illusionist, Ocean Mirage!"*

*The mass of ponies gasped at the mare's trickery, then burst into applause.*

*"And now, the fastest spellcaster the world has ever known iiiiiiiit's...."*

*A large crystal plummeted from the sky, stopping to hover just above the wooden floor of the stage. The second the crystal had stopped, a white flash radiated out from its core and a pitch black, copper-maned stallion instantly appeared beside it.*

*"Spellslinger!"*

*Loud shrieking cheers mixed with a few distinct 'boos' rang out from the crowd. The black stallion refused to bow to the audience, instead deciding to nonchalantly toy with his crystal weapon as the show's intro continued.*

*"And last, but certainly NOT least, it is I!..."*

*A puff of blue smoke erupted in between Mirage and Spellslinger, giving way to a dark blue stallion garbed in a star-wrought robe and wizard hat.*

*"Hoodwink! The greatest conjurer to ever live!"*

*Hoodwink bowed generously to the crowd as it surged with a loud cheer.*

*“Together, we form the strongest team in existence! We are the Mystic Triumverate!”*

*As Hoodwink boasted out their name, a great array of lights, flames, and sparks shot out from the stage and soared across the city.*

*The audience ooh’d and ah’d at the display of power. Spellslinger scoffed, then trotted to Hoodwink’s side at the middle of the stage, his crystal hovering beside him.*

*“Is everypony already entertained!?” He shouted with a hint of disappointment.*

*A massive tide of screaming and shouting rang out.*

*“I love you Spellslinger! Please marry me!” A mare in the front swooned.*

*“What a showoff! Shut up and do something!”*

*“Do that spell you did last time! The one where you teleported REALLY fast!” A colt called out.*

*Satisfied with the reaction, Spellslinger’s horn glowed as his crystal fractured into four pieces. The black stallion nodded towards Hoodwink as he stepped to the side, the four crystal pieces floating around him.*

*Returning the nod, Hoodwink began conjuring a variety of objects, ranging from balls of water to fruit and even household accessories.*

*As soon as an object finished being conjured, Hoodwink fired it like a projectile at Spellslinger.*

*Acting quickly, Spellslinger arranged two of his crystal fragments to surround the incoming projectiles. The second the fragments found their mark, a beam of light shot out between them, instantly vaporizing an apple. Nearby, a ball of water homed in on the black stallion. Utilizing his other two fragments, Spellslinger annihilated the liquid before it could reach him.*

*Hoodwink continued his assault, increasing the size and number of the projectiles. Spellslinger easily kept pace, showing no signs of struggle as he shot down his targets.*

*Finally, Hoodwink concentrated intensely. Out of the massive blue cloud he had*



*summoned, a crude statue of Celestia stood. Giving a wry smile, the blue stallion turned to the audience.*

*“Who wants to see Spellslinger fry the princess?!” He joked.*

*The audience laughed and cheered at the blasphemy, begging him to desecrate the statue.*

*Hoodwink returned his gaze to Spellslinger, giving the black stallion a nod. “Catch this!”*

*The statue flew into the air, the mass of stone threatening to crush Spellslinger below. Returning the crystal fragments to his side, Spellslinger reformed the crystal and began charging a powerful spell. The audience shielded their eyes in horror as the statue was mere moments away from destroying the stallion.*

*Right before the statue would kill him, Spellslinger let out a triumphant shout as a bright stream of light fired from the crystal. Uncovering their eyes, the mass of ponies burst into applause and shrieks as Spellslinger casually blew off the smoke wisps rising from his crystal.*

*Returning to the audience, Hoodwink raised his hooves.*

*“Truly there is not a faster nor stronger unicorn in all of...”*

*The blue stallion ceased his announcing as he noticed the crowd beginning to retreat, a look of sheer horror across their faces.*

*“We’re going to be crushed!” A mare screamed.*

*“A-a-a tidal wave! The nearby dam must have broken!” A stallion cried out.*

*Hoodwink spun around, coming face to face with a massive wall of water that towered above the stage. Before he could brace himself for the torrent of water, the blue behemoth collapsed upon him.*

*To his surprise, instead of a massive force of liquid sweeping him from his feet, the only thing that accompanied the great wave was a small, tranquil breeze.*

*Hoodwink smirked as he looked over to his wife. While she attempted to appear*

*innocent, her bright eyes and wide grin gave her trick away.*

*“An illusion, fillies and gentlecolts, by the greatest deceiver in the land! It appears you have all been fooled!” Hoodwink shouted.*

*Spellslinger angrily stomped over to his partner as the audience excitedly regrouped.*

*“That wasn’t part of the show!” He growled.*

*Before Hoodwink could respond, two images of Mirage faded into view on either side of Spellslinger.*

*“Dear dear Spellslinger.” They both chided. “The best performers are those who can alter their acts on a whim! I trust YOU are competent and open-minded enough to follow along, no?”*

*Spellslinger hesitated. “I... I can do anything! It’s not ME I’m worried about, it’s those mindless drones out there! Scaring them away and making them afraid of us isn’t going to get us any money!”*

*The two images frowned, then disappeared. Spellslinger shifted his gaze from the now empty space back to Hoodwink. The blue stallion was giving him a curious look.*

*“Fear, my dear Spellslinger...” Hoodwink said with a light, feminine voice. Slowly, the stallion’s toned legs and firm features phased out, being replaced by the soft curves and slender legs of a mare. “leads to respect. Respect leads to power! Fame! Grandeur!”*

*Spellslinger gazed past the doppelganger illusionist and spotted the real Hoodwink at the front of the stage, reassuring the audience of their safety.*

*“I told you when we started this show-business that I just wanted the money.” He said to Mirage, gritting his teeth. “You may have delusions of grandeur, but as for me, I prefer to keep my hopes and dreams grounded!”*

*“...And remember, our viewers are our highest priority! We can promise with utmost certainty nopony, besides us, will be harmed during the performance. Now... on with the show!” Hoodwink shouted.*

*Mirage adjusted her silk gown. “Money is temporary, while power is forever. But*

*whatever! Suit yourself! I've got a show to put on."*

*The black stallion attempted to argue, but Mirage had already begun trotting to the front of the stage. Spellslinger scowled then retreated to the back of the terrace along with Hoodwink, giving a small snort as he stood next to his partner.*

*"That mare of yours is nothing but trouble!" He growled.*

*Hoodwink merely chuckled in response. "That's why I love her."*

*While the two stallions conversed, Mirage weaved visions of great monsters, massive wars, and beautiful kingdoms. The awestruck audience remained completely enthralled as the pale blue mare worked her magic with a devious grin on her face.*

*"Pssst! Daddy! Spellslinger!" A squeaky voice piped up from behind them.*

*Both stallions turned around to see the head of a small blue filly poking out from between the curtains. Her horn exuded a soft flickering light while two cups of water wobbled as they precariously levitated in mid-air.*

*"I got you both a glass of water in case you were thirsty..." The filly whispered loudly as the crowd gasped at the sight of a manticore letting loose a ferocious roar.*

*Hoodwink gave her a warm smile. "That's very thoughtful of you Trixie. Here let me take those off your horn-"*

*"No!" She said, concentrating on keeping the cups of water levitating. "I can do this!"*

*The first cup floated slowly but surely to Spellslinger, who received it with his own magic, giving Trixie a nod.*

*"Thanks kiddo." He said, beginning to chug down the water.*

*"And one for you daddy!"*

*Just as the cup reached Hoodwink, the glow of Trixie's horn disappeared and the cup dropped from the air. Hoodwink caught it right before it would impact the stage.*

*"Oh drat! I messed up again! Sorry dad..." Trixie said, drooping in despair.*

*Her father placed his hoof under her chin and raised her head so that her eyes met his. "Trixie, when I was your age, I couldn't even USE magic. You are hooves-down the most powerful unicorn in your class as well."*

*Her father's reassuring words and kind face quickly rejuvenated the young filly as she straightened herself and puffed her chest.*

*"It's good to expect great things from yourself! But sometimes... you just need to take a step back and appreciate where you are and how far you've come. Remember, it's not where you go, but how you get there! Now, promise not to be so hard on yourself?"*

*"I promise dad!" Trixie said happily.*

*A great applause arose from the audience and the dazzling images that had graced the stage disappeared, signalling the end of Mirage's act.*

*"Oh! Looks like it's time for my act!" Hoodwink said. The magician quickly gulped down the water, then kissed Trixie on the head. "Wish me luck!"*

*Hoodwink trotted out to the front of the stage, a sea of ponies that stretched across the town square awaiting his next move with bated breath. To anypony else, it would have been an impressive sight, but to him, it was just the usual monthly crowd.*

*"Fillies and gentlecolts, it is my pleasure to perform for you on this fine spring day! I'm sure you thoroughly enjoyed the sheer display of power and skill from my partners! To start off, I require a volunteer!"*

*Nearly everypony in the audience shot their hooves into the air as a loud surge of "me!"s echoed through the town square.*

*"Hm-m-m-m so many choices so many choices... ah! You there!" Hoodwink exclaimed, pointing his hoof at a green earth pony at the foot of the stage.*

*"M-m-me!?" He squealed.*

*"Yes! You! It's your lucky day!"*

*The green stallion excitedly scurried on to the stage with a giddy smile.*

*“For my first act...” Hoodwink began, turning back towards the audience. “I shall make this stallion DISAPPEAR!”*

*The glee dropped from the earth pony’s face, being replaced with a look of worry. “Disappear?? That means your going to make me invisible right?”*

*Hoodwink threw out his cape in response, which grew immensely in size, blocking the earth pony from the view of the audience. As the magician pulled his cape back and returned it to it’s normal state, the crowd of ponies gasped. The green stallion was nowhere to be seen.*

*“Ok! Now, I need another volunteer!” Hoodwink called out.*

*While almost all of the audience had struggled to participate in the show before, only a small number of brave ponies dared to raise their hooves after witnessing the fate of the green stallion.*

*Hoodwink’s eye caught the raised hoof of a young orange unicorn mare. Upon her back, an unamused cat cleaned itself from the safety of it’s owners saddlepurse.*

*“Young mare with the feline! Step right up!”*

*The unicorn boldly trotted onto the stage, trying her best to look unafraid and nonchalant.*

*“That’s a cute cat you got there!” Hoodwink exclaimed as she stood before him.*

*“Oh thank you! Madeline’s a purebred that was born from an award-winning Chartreux! I make sure to feed her kitty-deluxe brand only, and take her to-AAAAAH”*

*The orange mare screeched as Hoodwink’s wizard hat jumped to life and began barking like a dog. A clearly disturbed Madeline hissed at the anomaly, then sprang from the saddlepurse in fear. Hoodwink’s hat leaped down from it’s owner’s head and began wildly chasing the frightened feline across the stage. The audience erupted into laughter and applause at the strange sight.*

*“Oh my goodness!” The distraught mare cried. “Madeline! Madeline! Come to mommy! Sir, please, make it stop!”*

*Hoodwink gave the mare his best look of honest worry. "I'm so sorry ma'am! He just cant contain himself when he sees a cat! Bow wow stop chasing that cute cat! Bow w-"*

*The audience ceased their laughter and gasped in horror as the animated hat caught up to the feline and pounced upon it, devouring the yowling furball under it's brim. Content that it had caught it's prey, the hat gave one final burp then fell limp and returned to its natural state.*

*"Uh oh" Hoodwink said guiltily.*

*"No! Wha-Oh my-But-uuuuuuuh" the orange mare stammered, then passed out and fell to the stage floor.*

*Hoodwink levitated his hat back into his hooves and reached inside of it. "I'm sure she's somewhere in here! Let's see.... ah! I think I got her!"*

*The magician lifted his hoof from the bag, a small white rabbit in his grasp. "Oh dear that's not it. Here, just let me see if I can..."*

*As Hoodwink continued to rummage through the hat, dozens of small animals ranging from birds to mice poured out from it and scattered through the town square. While a few audience members became frightened, almost everypony were in hysterics.*

*Finally, Hoodwink ceased his frantic search, looking through the audience as if in desperation.*

*"You! Noble pegasus!" He called out to a pink mare.*

*The pegasus shied away, afraid she may suffer the same fate as the two attendants before her. "Y-yes?"*

*"Would you kindly retrieve me a cloud? A rather bulky one will do!"*

*The pink pegasus hesitated, then darted into the sky. Luckily, the town weather team had created a particularly cloudy day, so the mare returned a few moments later dragging along a chunky cloud.*

*"Alright, now stand back!"*

*Hoodwink threw out his cape once more, blocking the cloud from the audience's view. When Hoodwink pulled his cape back, crowd of ponies gasped, then burst into applause. Where the cloud had once lazily drifted, the green stallion who had happily volunteered before stood in a dazed state along with a frightened Madeline. The orange unicorn leapt from the stage floor and embraced her pet. Giving the feline a second look, she scowled at it's ruffled fur and raced off, grooming it's coat with a magical brush as she fled.*

*The green earth pony stumbled off the stage, shaking his head. "Insane... just insane... you wouldn't believe what I saw!"*

*After waiting for the audience to die down, Hoodwink raised his hooves in the air. "Fillies and gentlecolts, I would like to thank you all for coming today! I hope you enjoyed the show and the unique display of power from me and my partners. Before you leave today, a present!"*

*Hoodwink began conjuring bouquets of roses, throwing them out to the audience. Small struggles to capture a falling bouquet would break out, only to resolve peacefully a moment later.*

*Concentrating intensely, Hoodwink conjured an exceptionally stunning bouquet, grabbing the attention of the audience.*

*"And now, one for my lovely wife!" He shouted, turning around. Hoodwink was taken aback as he spotted his wife. All 20 of her. "So this is how it's going to be, huh...."*

*Behind him, the audience was playing their own guessing game.*

*"It's third from the right Hoodwink! I can tell because the blue gem around her neck is shinier than the rest!" A colt called out.*

*"What!? No way you idiot! They're all equally shiny!" The colt's friend scolded. "It's OBVIOUSLY the one on the far left!"*

*Although Hoodwink had been momentarily stunned by the sudden challenge, he quickly recollected himself and glanced through the mass of images. Being a master illusionist, distinguishing the real Mirage from her many images would have been difficult for any other pony. For Hoodwink, there was always one small detail he could take advantage of*

*when his wife tried to trick him.*

*Trotting slowly to the Mirage a few paces to his right, Hoodwink extended the bouquet to her.*

*“For you, love. You have a hard time hiding that cute blush of yours.”*

*The mass of images faded away, leaving a smiling Mirage standing in front of her husband. As she took the bouquet from him, Mirage stepped forward and locked the couple into a tender kiss, causing a cheer to rush through the audience.*

*“Ew...” Trixie said as she watched from between the curtains.*

*“Ah shut it kid.” Spellslinger chuckled. “I’ve had to watch this for eight years now.”*

*The two lovers finally broke their kiss, Hoodwink’s face now as red as his wife’s. Giving her a wink, he turned back to the audience.*

*“Once again, thank you all for coming to the show, and I hope you all-”*

*“Duel!” A small colt shouted from the front of the audience.*

*Hoodwink hesitated as the word rang through the town square. “Ha! Not today boy, but you CAN catch me dueling tomorrow at the Iron Hoof at-”*

*“Duel!” Another shout came forth, this time from a stallion in the back.*

*Soon, the audience took up the demand and began a steady chant. “Duel! Duel! Duel!”*

*Spellslinger trotted to Hoodwink’s side with a smirk on his face. “Give the ponies what they want, right?”*

*Hoodwink ignored his friend, raising his hooves to quiet the audience. “If it’s a duel you want...” He said, removing his hat and throwing it to the back of the stage. “Then it’s a duel you’ll get!”*

*A powerful roar that dwarfed any cheer they had mustered before erupted from the crowd as Hoodwink retreated, beckoning to Spellslinger. The two stallions converged with Mirage at the center of the terrace.*



*“Ugh” Hoodwink scowled, shaking his head. “I am NOT ready for a duel.”*

*“Of course not! You’re never ready for a duel against me!” Spellslinger gloated.*

*Mirage placed a hoof on her husband’s shoulder as she gave him a look of concern. “I can duel if you aren’t feeling well.”*

*“No offense Mirage, but the audience is rearing for a duel between Hoodwink and I. We wouldn’t want to upset them now would we?”*

*Before Mirage could respond, Hoodwink shook her hoof from his shoulder. “He’s right. We’ve already come this far, might as well go all the way. I’ll duel.”*

*Mirage gave her husband a solemn nod as she trotted to her daughter’s side, disappearing behind the curtains.*

*Hoodwink faced Spellslinger, locking hooves and eyes with his new opponent. The same steely yet mocking gaze the black stallion possessed every time the two friends dueled greeted him once more. While Hoodwink was an excellent duelist and a powerful magician, Spellslinger was unmatched in both speed and power. Still, Hoodwink never entered a duel believing he would lose. Despite his tired state, this time was no different.*

*“Spellslinger.” The black stallion said in a slightly amused tone. The old tradition of shaking hooves and trading names with an opponent was childish to him.*

*“Hoodwink.” He replied with a sincere voice, giving Spellslinger a nod of respect.*

*Breaking hooves, the two stallions trotted to their respective sides of the stage. An excited audience began falling into chaos as they shouted out bets and cheered for their favorite duelist.*

*Hoodwink gave a deep sigh and closed his eyes, giving a few steady breaths to relax himself. Satisfied, he turned around and peered across the stage at a restless Spellslinger. Although he never compromised his golden rule of giving his opponent the first move, he really had no choice when dueling this particular foe.*

*In the blink of an eye, Spellslinger fractured his crystal and held them in a rectangular pattern stretching across the width of the stage. Magic sparked from each crystal,*

*generating a wall of pure energy that began hurtling towards Hoodwink.*

*Instead of attempting to dodge the massive spell, Hoodwink charged directly at it. Right as the wall would impact him, the magician disappeared in a puff of blue smoke, reappearing directly in front of Spellslinger.*

*Hoodwink quickly conjured a small cloud of sand, blasting it into his opponent's eyes. Spellslinger cursed as he stumbled backward, his crystal fragments floating wildly about as they fired energy between themselves in a vain attempt to hit their opponent.*

*Taking advantage of the sudden confusion, Hoodwink seized two of the energy charged crystals and placed them on either side of their master.*

*Spellslinger cried out as his own magic leaped between the fragments and singed his coat. The audience roared in approval over the combat.*

*While Hoodwink struggled to hold the wild crystals in place, Spellslinger escaped his own magic by teleporting to a fragment he had moved to the other side of the stage.*

*Both opponents wheeled around to face each other once again, the battle coming to almost a full reset. A dangerous look of rage pierced Hoodwink as Spellslinger recovered and regathered his crystal. Despite his nearly perfect start, the magician was perhaps even further away from winning than he was when the fight began. Spellslinger's rage was a sight to behold, and if there was one thing that drove the black stallion into rage, it was being outsmarted.*

*"Nice start Hoodwink! You should have seen the look on his face when you blasted him with sand!" A red stallion near the front of the stage shouted*

*"Come on Spellslinger! Don't let him beat you like that!" A colt cried out.*

*A now fully recovered Spellslinger charged his crystals with energy then fired them off individually at his enemy. Taking note of the incoming projectiles, Hoodwink swiftly removed his cape, casting it out in front of him. Instead of ripping the soft cloth to ribbons, the fragments impacted the cape as if it were a steel shield, halting them in their tracks.*

*Attempting to start up his own offense, Hoodwink magically lifted the strengthened cape and hurled it at Spellslinger. His rival dived from the missile's path, then renewed his*

*assault on Hoodwink with charged fragments. Hoodwink instantly regretted parting ways with his cape as the crystals now assaulted him freely.*

*The duel soon became an act of frustration for Hoodwink as he attempted to close the distance on his opponent. Teleporting next to Spellslinger only caused his rival to copy his move and teleport to the other side of the stage, while trying to fight him at a range was nearly impossible with the crystal fragments having free reign over him.*

*After being repeatedly struck by the crystal's burning energy and a handful of fruitless teleports, exhaustion began to overtake Hoodwink. Either he ended this soon, or Spellslinger would wear him down until he collapsed.*

*Seizing his discarded hat from the back of the stage, Hoodwink avoided the crystals while filling the headwear with the last remnants of his energy. Satisfied that his coup de grace was prepared, he threw the magic-filled hat across the terrace at Spellslinger.*

*A great blue explosion rocked the ground where Spellslinger stood, causing screams of fright from the crowd. Hoodwink now lay exhausted on the ground, looking towards the other side of the stage for any signs of his opponent. While most of the audience may have been worried for Spellslinger's well being, Hoodwink knew better than anyone else that the black stallion had come unscathed from much worse.*

*As the blue smoke cleared away, the audience gasped as nothing but thin air remained where Spellslinger had once been. Before panic could spread through the audience, a fully reformed crystal floated down from above the stage, landing next to Hoodwink. After a bright flash, Spellslinger appeared at its side, untouched but for a few barely noticeable singe marks on his black coat.*

*"Give up?" Spellslinger said snidely, waving to the audience as they cheered for him.*

*Hoodwink struggled to stand, then gave an exhausted sigh and stretched his lowered hooves out towards Spellslinger in defeat. The applause of the crowd surged as Spellslinger raised his hooves in victory.*

*Once he was done showing off, Spellslinger helped his friend to his hooves. Hoodwink limped to the front of the stage and slowly rose a hoof to quiet the audience.*

*".... Well!?"*

*The mass of ponies erupted in cheer in response, causing Hoodwink to have to raise his hoof again to quiet them.*

*“Thank you all for coming today! If you enjoyed the show, please come to the front of the stage and toss a few bits into the bottomless bag! Don’t forget, we’ll be here next month, same time, with an all new act! See you then!”*

*Mirage trotted forward with the bottomless bag, holding it out to the crowd while Hoodwink and Spellslinger retreated.*

*“You pulled a fast one on me there at the beginning!” Spellslinger snorted.*

*Hoodwink laughed. “Not like it mattered in the end anyway. You still won by a wide margin.”*

*An excited Trixie bursts out from the curtains and embraced her father. “That was SO cool! I want to duel!”*

*“When you’re older Trixie!” Hoodwink said, patting his daughter on the head. The blue stallion looked back towards his wife and a mass of ponies eagerly donating their bits in appreciation. “Well, it looks like a big pot today! What do you say we stop by the Iron Hoof after the crowd dies out for a victory dinner Spellslinger? Maybe even catch some rookie duelists and have a good laugh?”*

*Spellslinger hesitated then, waved his hoof to turn down the offer. “I uh... already have plans for tonight.” He said simply.*

*Hoodwink opened his mouth to argue, then quickly shut it and turned to his daughter with a smile. “Why don’t you go check up with your mother on getting your allowance for the week?”*

*Trixie’s eyes brightened as she broke away from her father and dashed to Mirage’s side.*

*With his daughter out of hearing range, Hoodwink turned back to Spellslinger with a worried expression. “These ‘plans’ wouldn’t happen to have something to do with those Black Mane crooks would they?”*

*“Uh... well... what does it matter to you!?” Spellslinger snapped back.*

*Hoodwink shook his head as his friend confirmed his fears. "I just don't think you should be hanging out with those scum. Everywhere they trot, trouble follows with them. I don't want you getting into anything over your head."*

*"Since when has 'Hoodwink the Great' ever cared about law? You've done some questionable things in your life too! Well... up until you got that little runt that is."*

*"See, that's what I'm talking about!" Hoodwink flared up at Spellslinger's words. "Ever since you began your little get-togethers with the Black Mane you've been acting more openly hostile. You could sell all the poison joke or rob all of the stores you wanted, but calling my daughter a runt is NOT something the Spellslinger a few months ago would have said!"*

*Spellslinger snorted then pushed Hoodwink aside as he trotted to Mirage. The audience had nearly disappeared when the blue mare placed the bag onto the stage, a smile on her face.*

*"438 bits! Not our biggest pot ever, but I'd be lying if I said it was a disappointing amount!"*

*"I'll be taking my third of the bits and leaving." Spellslinger said rudely.*

*Mirage hesitated at his abruptness, then silently extracted her partner's bits. Spellslinger snagged them from the air, placed them in his satchel, then trotted off without saying a word.*

*Mirage approached her husband with a look of worry on her face. "Did I do something to upset Spellslinger again? I can never get along with him very well, even if he is your friend."*

*Hoodwink sighed, then gave a small laugh. "No, it's not you this time honey. He's just upset about something I said. Don't worry, he'll be back tomorrow and won't remember a darn thing! Now, I say we enjoy ourselves tonight! Where do you two want to eat?"*

*"Ooh! Ooh! The Iron Hoof! Let's eat at the Iron Hoof daddy! I want to watch some duels!" Trixie squealed, hopping up and down.*

*"That's my girl!" Hoodwink praised her.*

*After receiving the nod of approval from Mirage, Hoodwink lead his family deeper into Stalliongrad to celebrate their recent success.*

“And for the rest of the night we ate at the Iron Hoof. It was some of the most carefree times of my life. Everything was simple and we had a large sum of money without being completely rich. I was, like I mentioned before, the top of my class in spell casting as well. At the time I was thinking it wouldn’t be long until I joined my parents and Spellslinger in their shows.”

Trixie took a quick break as she drank from the water container and caught her breath. Meanwhile, Snails had sat silently throughout the whole story, listening intently with wonder while forming questions of his own.

“How did your parents meet each other? Did you have your cutie mark yet? What was school like in Stalliongrad? Where did Spellslinger get that crystal?”

Trixie waved her hoof in dismissal. “If I told you about how my parents met and what school was like, we would be here for the next couple of days! No, I did not have my cutie mark yet, and I have no idea where Spellslinger’s crystal came from. I asked my father once, and even he didn’t have a clue. It must be some secret.”

Snails nodded in understanding, then looked back towards Trixie with expectant eyes.

The blue mare placed the container back down, then took a deep breath. “I would say a few months after the show I just mentioned, my mother came down with a terrible sickness. She began to grow tired very easily and rarely ever ate. My father took her to the Stalliongrad Central Hospital. The news... wasn’t good....”

*Hoodwink paced about the waiting room, a look of worry and depression across his face. Trixie sat on one of the many chairs, anxiously watching her father. The whole ordeal was so surreal to Trixie, who was still only five years old. Unbeknown to the filly, her father was just as confused, worried, and scared as she was.*

*'For Celestia's sake!' Hoodwink thought. 'Stuff like this is meant for the aged couples who have lived the majority of their whole lives together! I'm only 25! Mirage and I still have the rest of our lives together! Romantic nights, maybe a few more foals, a cabin out in the country to grow old in... not... this...'*

*Hoodwink snapped out of his morbid thinking. No. The doctor would come out with a smile, informing him that it was a mild disease that would pass with a week's treatment. Everything would be fine.*

*The entrance doors burst open as Spellslinger galloped in. Slowing to a trot, he approached his friend and gave him a quick embrace, placing his hoof on Hoodwink's shoulder.*

*"How is she?"*

*"They're doing the final check ups on her. With any luck, they'll identify the disease and have a cure for it."*

*The door leading into the inner workings of the hospital cracked open, a brown mare in a white coat standing in the archway. Catching sight of the blue stallion, the doctor beckoned him. "Sir, would you like to talk to me in private in my office?"*

*Hoodwink nodded, then turned back towards his friend.*

*"I'll be right here, whatever happens." Spellslinger said in support.*

*"Thank you. Trixie, come with me." Hoodwink said, motioning to his daughter.*

*The doctor hesitated at the sight of the young filly, then ushered them through the door. The halls of the hospital were disturbingly clean, trying their best to distract visitors and patients from the strange smell that permeated the entire medical area.*

*After traveling through what seemed a maze of branching rooms and corridors, the white-clad stallion finally guided them into a small office-space with a desk that nearly split the room in two.*

*Instead of taking his place behind the desk, the doctor solemnly turned towards Hoodwink, taking a deep breath.*

*“The final results have come in... your wife is afflicted with a rare disease called ‘Miasmatic Wasting’. We currently have no known cure for it despite our hardest efforts to-”*

*“Will she live?!” Hoodwink interrupted.*

*The doctor shied away, then straightened himself as he recovered. “My colleagues and I have given her an estimate of three days.”*

*Hoodwink recoiled violently, fighting back tears in front of his daughter. Trixie became frightened at the sudden vulnerability that had overtaken her father. She had never seen him act this way before. Sure, she had hurt herself sometimes and cried afterwards, but Trixie had seen her father get badly hurt from Spellslinger and not shed a tear. Why was he so sad now? What did the doctor mean when he said three days?*

*“I know it must be hard for you, being so young. You have my deepest condolences. If there is anything we can do...”*

*Hoodwink wiped away the tears from his eyes and turned back to the doctor. “C-can we see her?” He stammered.*

*“Of course. The disease is not contagious, so both of you will be able to meet her directly. Follow me.”*

*Their second trip through the inner workings of the hospital was completely different to the devastated Hoodwink. The once clean, white walls had turned a rancid yellow, and the strange smell that had lurked before was now a horrible stench that overcame all of his senses. It was as if he was in a world of nightmares come true, and he was being led to the heart of the fear itself.*

*Just as Hoodwink was about to vomit from the disgusting aura, the doctor opened a door and stepped aside, revealing his sleeping wife. Despite her withered look and malnourished body, Mirage was still beautiful to him.*

*Trembling, Hoodwink cautiously approached the bed with a still-confused Trixie at his side. Mirage slowly opened her eyes and weakly turned her head toward them, as if she had known they were there all along.*

*A moment of dread silence hung between the couple. It was an instant of knowing the*



*inevitable future that lied ahead of them, and an overpowering desire to repress it.*

*“Oh good, you’re here. I was starting to get bored.” Mirage joked, shattering the tension.*

*Hoodwink gave a small smile, which quickly faded away. “How are you feeling?”*

*Mirage only slowly shook her head towards her husband, then looked down at her daughter. “Hey sweetie! You’ve been doing your best at school?”*

*“Still best of the class in the only category that matters! Magic!” She cheered.*

*“Oh Trixie... you’re going to grow up to be the most powerful unicorn in Equestria! ‘The Great and Powerful Trixie’.... that’s what they’ll call you.” Mirage looked back towards her husband. As soon as their eyes met, Hoodwink understood what she wanted him to do.*

*Without the use of magic, Hoodwink tenderly lifted his daughter from the floor and into her mother’s lap. Although she temporarily fought against him, she soon snuggled up to Mirage’s side. Hoodwink quietly backed away, aware that this could be the last time he saw his daughter and wife together again. The realization quickly swallowed him, causing another fit of emotions and brimming tears.*

*“Trixie, there’s something very important I need to tell you.” Mirage began.*

*“What is it mommy?” Trixie asked curiously.*

*Mirage cringed at the innocence that rang from her voice, soon to be erased. “In a few days... mommy’s going to go into a deep sleep, and you won’t see me ever again.”*

*“Wh-what?” Trixie asked, horribly confused. “You’re leaving... forever???”*

*Mirage pulled her daughter closer. “Yes... and no. I’ll always be there with you. Wherever you go. You just... won’t be able to see me, that’s all.”*

*A new pain overcame Trixie, one that she had never felt before. More than any bruise, scrape, or scratch, the thought of losing her mother stung and tore at her heart.*

*“D-do you ha-have to go to sleep?” Trixie asked, sobbing.*

*“Yes.” Her mother answered sadly. “I’m sorry.”*

*Trixie didn’t respond, burrowing into her mother’s side as she began to sob loudly. At the side of the bed, Hoodwink had struggled to remain silent. Despite his resolve and determination to remain emotionless in front of his family, the soft, sad smile his wife gave him as she looked up from their daughter caused him to break down into tears. Mirage reached out and extended her hooves around Hoodwink’s neck, bringing the whole family into a tight embrace.*

*Although the powerful disease had withered Mirage’s body, she was the strongest force in Equestria as she silently held her weeping family.*

*Trixie sat silently on the floor of her room as she rolled a horse-drawn-carriage toy slowly back and forth along the carpet. Quickly growing bored of the small figure, she rolled it away to join the dozens of other toys that were scattered around the filly. There was a time when these pieces of plastic meant the world to her. Now, they couldn’t hold her attention for more than a few seconds.*

*Rising to her hooves, Trixie left her room and stepped into the adjoining hallway. The once lively corridors and living room were now cast in shallow darkness, as if it would begin to rain inside the house at any moment. At the center of the living room, Hoodwink sat at a wooden table, studying the twists and knots that had worked themselves through the construct.*

*“Hey daddy,” Trixie said bluntly, trotting to her father’s side.*

*Hoodwink roused himself from his deep concentration and turned to his daughter with a small smile. “Hey. How’s the best sorceress in Equestria doing today?”*

*“Good. Just a little bored.”*

*“Oh. Well... how about we go to the Iron Hoof? Maybe?”*

*Trixie lingered on the option, the good memories of eating and watching duels with her father and mother rushing through her head. Her mother....*

*“Eh, nah. It’s cool daddy. I think I’ll just go play with my toys.”*

*“Alright.” Hoodwink said, running a hoof through his daughter’s hair. “Come get me if you need anything.”*

*After giving a nuzzle of affection to her father, Trixie wandered back into her room and sat back down on the floor. Usually, she would be crying after such a flood of memories, but she was simply too emotionally exhausted after the chaos of the past two weeks. Taking one last glance at the toys around her, Trixie scooted over to her toybox and carefully reached inside, pulling out a light blue diary. Before her mother’s death, the little diary had been updated perhaps once a month if she was in the mood. In the past two weeks, it had been updated almost everyday. Writing down how she felt helped to temporarily relieve the stress that constantly weighed on her mind. Magically grabbing a pen from her desk across the room, Trixie began jostling down her current thoughts.*

*Hoodwink disappointingly ate away at his bowl of cereal, the same dinner he had been eating for the past couple of weeks. Phoenix Burst. A cereal aptly named because the puffs of cereal would come back alive in your mouth as you crunched down on them. While the cereal was quick and easy to prepare, Hoodwink missed the grand meals that would be laid out every night they happened to not be at the Iron Hoof, steaming with an intoxicating aroma. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to cook, its just that he didn’t really have the energy or drive to do so anymore. So cereal it was. Every night.*

*Slurping down the last bit of milk, Hoodwink deposited the bowl into the growing pile of dishes in the sink. On his way back to the table, something sharp prodded the bottom of his hoof. Taking a step back, Hoodwink looked down to see a puzzle cube lying on the floor. It was a toy Hoodwink had bought Trixie a year ago, only for her to finish it the day she got it and toss it aside. Still, it looked as if it had recently been used.*

*Hoodwink magically picked up the cube and trotted to Trixie’s room. The door was slightly cracked open, with no light coming from inside. Peeking into the room, he discovered Trixie already asleep in her bed, with toys strewn about the bedroom floor.*

*‘Weird...’ Hoodwink thought. ‘It was usually a struggle to get her into bed before 10. Now she’s going to sleep on her own by 8.’*

*The blue stallion crept into his daughter’s room, silently trotting over to the filly’s*

*toolbox. Gently, he lowered the cube into the box, gazing at the cubed anomaly as it rested at the bottom. Before he could turn away, the only other object inside the toy box caught his attention. A simple diary her mother had given to her when she was in the learning stages of her writing skills. Hoodwink lifted the diary up to his face, and flipped through the pages. She seemed to write at random, jumping from month to month. Eventually, he landed on the date of Mirage's death, two weeks ago.*

*'I shouldn't be reading this...' He thought, almost dropping the light-blue diary. 'But.... it would be helpful for me as a father to know how she is faring.'*

*Hoodwink slipped from the bedroom, returning to the living room table. Cracking open the diary and returning to the date of his wife's death, he began scanning through his daughter's writings.*

*July 18th, 985AE*

*Today mommy 'died'. That's what uncle Spellslinger told me what happened when I asked him why mommy had to sleep. Even though I asked the daddy real nice if I could see her sleeping, he just shook his head and cried. I cried too. I never thought daddy could cry, but now he does it all the time. I hope we both get better.*

*July 19th, 985AE*

*Even though we had been crying about mommy sleeping for a long time now, we had to go to something called a 'funeral' to cry even more. We don't really have a big family in the city, but a lot of fans from mommy and daddy's show came as well. That was real nice of them.*

*July 26th, 985AE*

*I really miss mommy, and I can tell daddy does too. All he ever does anymore is sit at the living room table. Sometimes he'll cry a bit, but most of the time he just stares at the table with a blank face. We don't go out to eat or watch duels anymore, and I don't really want to anyways. Sometimes I just want to leave the city and go exploring, but I doubt daddy wants to, and I don't want to run away because he's cried so much already.*

*August 1st, 985AE*

*When I was REALLY bored I went sneaking into my parent's bedroom. A lot of mommy's stuff was still sitting around, and I found a really cool map on daddy's cupboard. I never knew Equestria was so big! Or that the Griffons had their own kingdom! Someday, I*

*hope I get to visit places far outside of Stalliongrad. School is going to start up again soon. I don't want to go back...*

*Hoodwink closed the diary and rubbed his eyes as he tried to process the torrent of information and ideas that his daughter had written down. She seemed highly interested in leaving Stalliongrad altogether to explore other cities and even kingdoms! How ambitious and reckless for one so young! Even so, what did she have left here? She had more enemies than friends in school, and was apprehensive of returning this year. Ever since her mother's death, Trixie had even strayed away from her favorite restaurant and dueling area, The Iron Hoof!*

*Heck, what did HE have left here? His job at the Iron Hoof? He destroyed every other duelist he faced. His matches were novelty unless he was fighting Spellslinger. The show? With his wife's death, the 'Mystic Triumvirate' was broken, an empty shell. That, and it was nearly the same crowd and same location every month. What he would give for some variety! In Stalliongrad, he was heralded as a highly skilled magician and duelist. What if he took his show on the road, gaining recognition from all of Equestria! No, The world! He could become famous while exploring! Perhaps even perform for the princess herself! Then EVERYONE would know his name! Of course, he would train Trixie along the way to be as powerful as him. Eventually, she would even be able to join his shows...*

*Hoodwink crept back into Trixie's room and replaced the diary, then excitedly began writing down ideas of his own. Supplies... travel routes.... performances...*

*Trixie awoke to the smell of cooked food wafting through the house, a pleasant scent she had not smelled for weeks. Leaping from her bed, she quickly trotted into the living room to find an impressive breakfast ranging from pancakes to steamed egg salad. Her father was sitting at his usual place on the table, a chair and full plate prepared just for her on the other end.*

*"Hungry?" her father asked with a smile.*

*Trixie eagerly leaped into the chair with a watering mouth. "Sure am! Thanks daddy!"*

*The cold feeling the house had once retained dissipated as the warmth of the baked food gave off a joyous aura. Once the two were finished, Hoodwink pushed his plate aside and looked towards his daughter.*

*"You're starting school again in a week aren't you?" he asked nonchalantly.*

*Trixie gave a deep sigh. "Yeah."*

*"Do you... want to go?"*

*The question threw Trixie completely off-guard. "Uh, well... no. I mean, it's not like I learn anything important outside of magic, and their magic lessons are WAY too easy and really boring!"*

*"To be honest myself, I'm not looking forward to work in a couple of days either. It's almost the same old thing every day."*

*Trixie merely gave her father a look of confusion, wondering where he was going with his odd questions. Hoodwink realized he was only distorting the situation the more he tried to beat around the bush, so he cut to the chase.*

*"Trixie, I read your diary."*

*His daughter gasped, then crossed her hooves with a pout. "You promised you would never read it!"*

*"I know, and I'm sorry. I was just worried about you after... after your mother died."*

*Trixie uncrossed her hooves, letting her tension dissipate. "It's ok... don't worry about any of that stupid stuff I wrote in the diary. I... I was just bored is all." She lied.*

*"Really?" Hoodwink shrugged. "Because I was thinking, maybe we could buy ourselves a nice caravan and leave in a few days."*

*"Wh-WHAT?!" Trixie shot up in surprise. "Are you serious!?"*

*"Well, we can either sit around here being bored, or do something. What do you say?"*

*Trixie leaped up from her chair and galloped to her father, nuzzling his side. "Yes yes*

*yes! Oh thank you daddy!*

*“Even though you’re going to be out of school, I’m still going to tutor you a bit, and you need to be on your BEST behavior, Ok?”*

*“I’ll be the best daughter ever!”*

*“Then it’s settled!” Hoodwink said, breaking away from his daughter. “Although we’ll have a caravan, make sure to bring only your favorite toys and clothes; I’d prefer to travel lightly.”*

*“Sure thing daddy! I’ll start getting packed right away!”*

*“Perfect! While you’re packing up your stuff and getting ready, I’m going to see if I can find Spellslinger and tell him what we’re up to.”*

*Hoodwink opened the door to the Iron Hoof, taking in the familiar musk that permeated the restaurant. It was a huge circular building with an elevated square platform in the center which held regular dueling sessions for the diners. Being so early in the day, there was a lull in customers and the dueling ring was empty. Against the back wall of the restaurant, a bar curved along the side, taking up a whole quarter of the circle. Hoodwink trotted to the dark-red stallion who manned the bar, giving him a small wave.*

*“Now what would a young stallion like you be doing here on a day off?” The red pony jested as Hoodwink approached.*

*“Just looking for old man Rumsy and Spellslinger. Got any idea where they might be?”*

*The bartender lifted a hoof to a nearby door that read ‘EMPLOYEES ONLY’. “You’re in luck! Both Rumsy and Spellslinger are in the lunchroom playing a round of cards with those Black Mane folks.”*

*“Black Mane?” Hoodwink asked, slightly startled.*

*“Hey, don’t look at me! I didn’t invite them in here!” The red stallion said in defense.*

*Hoodwink didn't respond as he turned away and trotted through the employee door. A long, dimly lit hallway stretched in front of him which branched off into smaller rooms all the way to the end. Although there were an intimidating number of doors, Hoodwink had traversed this hall so often he knew it by the back of his hoof. About halfway through the corridor, he opened a door to his right, lingering in the doorway. Inside the lunchroom, he could see Spellslinger, Rumsy, and five other ponies he had met with only once before. Spellslinger had introduced Hoodwink to them, and he quickly grew suspect. Their eyes were always shifty, they stole despite their already stable finances, and were even rumored to be the source of a few cases of missing ponies. He had sworn that he would never affiliate himself with them from that day forward.*

*"Hoodwink?" Rumsy called out as he finally noticed Hoodwink at the door.*

*The blue stallion said nothing as he fully entered the room, gazing at the Black Mane members with disapproval.*

*"Hey, how's your wife doing?" one of them shouted with a sarcastic tone. The other four stallions erupted into laughter, with Spellslinger hiding a small chuckle. Rumsy remained silent.*

*Despite his overwhelming desire to throw all five of the Black Mane members across the room and back again, Hoodwink remained calm, turning to Rumsy. "What are they doing here? I thought we both agreed we'd never let such.. 'pests' into the restaurant, much less the employee section!"*

*"Pests!?" The stallion who had joked before scowled, rising from his chair.*

*"Ah come on Hoodwink!" Spellslinger said, trying to cool down the situation. "It was just a little joke!"*

*The Black Mane stallion ignored him, a bright light beginning to emit from his horn. As Hoodwink waited for his opponent's spell, a loud, powerful ringing erupted in his head, threatening to burst his eardrums. Acting quickly, Hoodwink levitated the Black Mane member's chair and slammed it into the side of its head. The stallion was sent sprawling to the ground and the ringing in his head dissipated.*

*All four of the stallion's comrades leaped from their chairs, ready to cut Hoodwink down.*

*"STOP!" Rumsy roared, pounding his hoof against the table. Although his purple coat*



*was beginning to fade and his mane and mustache were turning white, the old stallion's hoarse voice echoed across the lunchroom, causing everyone to freeze. "If I see another spell casted, I'm kicking ALL of you out! ALL of you!"*

*The Black Mane ponies grumbled as they obliged, sitting back down in their seats. Spellslinger remained unmoving, only casting a few quick glances between Hoodwink and the Black Mane.*

*"Now, is there something you wanted, Hoodwink?" Rumsy asked, returning to his chair.*

*Hoodwink gave one last glare to the gang of ponies, then turned to his boss. "Yes. I'm quitting my job."*

*As quickly as he had sat down, Rumsy shot back up again. "What?! Why?"*

*"What about the show??" Spellslinger asked in shock.*

*Hoodwink raised a hoof to try and calm the two stallions. "Trixie and I have both agreed Stalliongrad just.... isn't the place for us anymore. We're leaving."*

*Rumsy trotted next to Hoodwink, putting a hoof on his shoulder. "I know things have been rough ever since Mirage passed. If there's anything I can do...."*

*Hoodwink shook the hoof off. "Look, Rumsy. Thanks for being supportive after everything that happened, but there's nothing you can do. I've already prepared."*

*"Then good luck, colt, and be careful. There are some crazy things out there, ponies included."*

*"And the show?" Spellslinger asked, trotting up to Hoodwink. "You're just... abandoning it? It makes up almost half my income!"*

*"Well, I plan on performing while I travel! It'll keep me in shape, teach Trixie a few things, and also provide a stable income. Who knows, maybe I'll learn a few things myself!"*

*Spellslinger simply gave an aggravated snort.*

*"Hey, if you want to come, just tell me." Hoodwink offered.*

*Spellslinger hesitated, glancing back towards the Black Mane members who were watching them intently. "Hell no!" Spellslinger said loudly. "I'm not the type of stallion who gets pulled into stupid fantasies by small fillies."*

*Hoodwink began to flare up in anger. Before he could say anything, Rumsy put himself between the two stallions. "Look, Clef was clearly winning, Spellslinger and I need to get ready for the duels to start. You five get out of the employee's section, and Hoodwink, thanks for all the hard work."*

*Hoodwink nodded to Rumsy, then left without looking back at Spellslinger. Giving one last farewell to the bartender, he left the Iron Hoof for the last time. Taking a deep breath, he started to make his way back home.*

*"Hey!" Came a shout from behind him. Hoodwink look over his shoulder, spotting all five of the Black Mane trotting towards him. The thought of running came to mind, but he quickly brushed it away. They wouldn't attack him out on the streets.*

*Hoodwink turned to meet the group, giving them a curious eye. "Can I help you?"*

*"Yeah. When are you leaving?" The pony who had attacked him before who he now knew as 'Clef' asked. While they conversed, the rest of the Black Mane formed a semi-circle around Hoodwink.*

*"What business is it to you?" Hoodwink questioned.*

*Clef narrowed his eyes, then gave an evil grin. "If I were you, I would leave tonight."*

*"I'll leave whenever I see fit!" Hoodwink said, beginning to trot away.*

*"Just a warning, friend!" The stallion called out.*

*Hoodwink did his best to visibly ignore him, but in truth, his thoughts were racing. Although he could easily take out one, probably two of them with ease, they were a gang of five. If the Black Mane came in the night, he would be at even greater disadvantage. Not to mention, he had no idea how far their moral code extended, if they had one at all. Would they hurt Trixie? The blue stallion picked up his pace, nearly galloping on his way home.*

*After zipping through crowds of ponies, Hoodwink threw open the door to his home. At*

*the center of the living room, Trixie was busy ferrying items from her room into an organized pile on the floor. Noticing her father, Trixie galloped to his side and nuzzled him.*

*“Trixie, there’s been a change of plans.” Hoodwink said simply, trying his best to keep his daughter ignorant of the danger they were in. “We’re leaving tonight.”*

“Since I was so young I just assumed he wanted to leave as soon as possible due to pure excitement. Now, I think we left that night because of more... sinister reasons.”

Trixie began to continue her story once more before she was interrupted by a tremendous yawn. The lull in her speech had made her realize just how tired she was. Looking Snails over, the poor colt was struggling to prevent himself from nodding off to sleep.

“Look, I can’t finish the rest being this tired. I’ll save the rest for tomorrow. It’ll give us something to talk about while I... while I walk you home.”

Snails snapped back to attention, stirred by Trixie’s words. He opened his mouth, then closed it again when he was unsure of what he wanted to say in the first place.

“Oh! Before I forget...” Trixie began, rummaging through the back of the caravan. Eventually, she pulled out a small item which Snails could’nt make out due to the dark. “Remember how I promised I would get you a watch if we performed well in Fillydelphia? Well... I think you earned it.”

Snails gratefully received the item, eyeing it with wonder. “Wow... thanks!” The only time he had ever received a gift like this was on his birthday! Rolling the blue hoofwatch around in his hooves, Snails soaked in every detail. To his disappointment, the hands of the watch were nearly invisible due to the darkness.

As if detecting his dissatisfaction, Trixie pointed a hoof towards the watch. “If you need a bit of light and don’t have the energy or extra few seconds to cast a light spell, I enchanted it before I got here. Just give the watch a spark of magic, and it will stay lit for a good minute.”

Snails followed her instructions, infusing the hoofwatch with a bit of magic. A soft blue glow overcame the entire band, illuminating the hands and numbers. 1:30. It was already the next morning. No wonder he felt so tired.

“Anyways...” Trixie said, lying down upon the blankets. “I’ll finish the story tomorrow. Good night.”

Before drifting off to sleep, Snails continued to gaze at the watch. Just as he was sure he had gone over the entire watch twice over, something on the backside of the face caught his attention. Squinting his eyes, Snails could barely read out a hoof-full of words engraved into the watch.

*From: Trixie*

*To: Snails, the only other pony to ever give me a chance*

“Hey Trixie?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could come with you to Stalliongrad?”

Trixie’s head shot up, turning to Snails. “Of course! But... it’s a dangerous place nowadays. Are you sure you want to go?”

In his mind, Snails brushed the warning off. He had braved the Everfree Forest, fought off starvation, and made it to Trottingham by himself. What danger could a couple of law-breakers be compared to those feats?

“I’m sure.”

“Then tomorrow we’ll cut back through Fillydelphia to re-supply and get on the right path. I needed to return that bell anyways.”

Snails latched the hoofwatch onto his hoof, then succumbed to his exhaustion. Although Trixie’s cold heart had thawed a little, there was still the possibility that she could turn again at any second. He just hoped he wouldn’t regret this decision.

Just as sleep began to envelope him, a soft whisper came from the other side of the caravan.

“Thanks Snails...”