

A hoof slapped Rarity across the face, leaving her mouth hanging wide open and her eyes rolling around in her head. Applejack was still knocked out, it seemed. The unicorn looked around with a grimace as her vision came back into focus, spots dancing in her eyes. She and Applejack were tied to trees with strong vines—she couldn't move a muscle in her upper body.

“Uhn...where am I?” she groaned. “What is going on here?” She looked forward and gasped at the sight of a collection of fillies and colts standing around her, their fetlocks unshorn and their manes in tangles, falling messily around their eyes as they glared at her. A unicorn filly, slightly taller than the rest, walked forward and bopped Rarity on the head with her hoof.

“Shut your mouth!” she cried. “Ponies not talk to us! We talk to ponies!” The filly turned away and waved at the other ponies. She seemed much thicker than a normal pony all over—heavier flanks, wild mane, bigger bones and a relatively chubby middle. She turned back to Rarity as her companions ran off into the woods, looking down her wide nose at the unicorn. White locks of hair covered parts of her face and ran down past her withers.

“You pretty unicorn—why you around here?” Her tongue darted across her teeth.

Rarity paused, searching for the right words. “Um, well, my friend and I were teleported out here by another friend of ours—I'm afraid she was casting a spell for us as practice and happened to lose control of her magic. We would very much appreciate it if—” The filly stuck her hoof in Rarity's mouth—it tasted like dirt.

“Mmn. Yes. I see.” The filly's words were slow and deliberate. “You ponies make mistakes all the time. Especially the unicorns.” She reached up and tapped Rarity's horn a few times. “Not know how to use magic like me. Not good at it like I am.”

Rarity's blood was rising, but she raised an eyebrow, trying to keep her voice even. “But, if you don't mind me asking, what exactly are you? I have never seen fillies and colts like you.”

The filly's eyes widened and she stamped a hoof in the dirt, grinding it back and forth. “Not ponies like you!” she cried. “Not ponies at all! And not children!” She panted for a few moments, and then said more calmly, “For a unicorn, you pretty stupid.”

Rarity gaped. “How dare you!?” she cried. “I am Rarity of Ponyville! I am a mare of extreme class, grace and civility! My ensembles have been spoken of throughout Equestria, even as far as Canterlot, as being some of the best designs ever created! Do not speak to me that way!”

Up came the hoof again—this time it left a red mark on Rarity's cheek. “Shut up,” the mare said. “Not matter who you are. Not matter that you Rarity. Not matter that you

famous. Not matter as long as you tied up here.” She grinned. “Not matter as long as your pony friends not around.”

Leaving Rarity shocked at her reaction, the mare turned to Applejack and slapped her as well, waking her up. The introductions went about as well for her as they had for Rarity.

“What in tarnation?” she asked incredulously. “Why am I tied up?”

“You tied up because I tie you up,” the mare said. “Why you think?”

Applejack snorted. “What I’m thinking is that you’re pretty dang rude for such a small pony.”

The mare’s eyes flared. “You not talk to me like that! You ponies tied up, make fun of one who tie you up!?” She shook her head. “Not know ponies so stubborn.”

Rarity chimed in. “We are most certainly *not* stubborn! We’re just rather upset because you knocked us out and tied us up!”

“No, you ponies stubborn,” the mare said, “more than I thought. And stupid. Real stupid.” She laughed. “Many unicorns in your villages. Bad. Dangerous. Stupid.” She turned away from them, her dew-covered fetlocks glinting in the sunlight breaking through the canopy. “Only one unicorn in each village here. Most powerful. More powerful than your common unicorns.” She turned back and shifted her frizzy hair aside, showing off her gnarled horn. “That me. I am Glow Star.”

Applejack was getting more steamed by the second. “Well, Star, sorry to tell ya, but there’s a unicorn in Equestria that I’m betting could whip you.”

Glow Star shrugged. “I not know that. They not here.” She laughed. “Not matter how powerful they are if they not here. Guess we never know.”

Applejack gritted her teeth, but fell silent.

“Now you two, I ask again, what you do here? I know you look for home. But you get lost here. You ponies stupid. Real stupid. But I not want to hurt you. Not shown me that you dangerous.”

Star stared at them hard for a few moments, chewing her lip. “Why you come through here? Why not take free path? No trees there. You have map, yes? You look, see this road no good for you.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Why would we know anything at all? We were transported to this area magically! We had no idea about the geography or the ponies living here, aside from Derby. All we had to go on was a worn-out map.”

Star shook her head and sighed. “Really not know much. Not know much at all.” She paused. “I know Derby. Good village, but ruled by unicorn. She very vain—when trade pass through here we protect because of last ruler, nice griffon.”

Rarity spoke up. “I apologize if you’d rather not say, Glow Star, but what species of pony *are* you, exactly? I have never seen anything quite like you.”

Star nodded. “We Shetlands. We from...not here. Not matter where we from. I said I Glow Star, not tell you what I am.” Her hoof swept through the air grandiosely. “I village elder here in Mire Woods. Most powerful mare for miles. Old. Very old.”

Applejack’s jaw dropped. “A Shetland? But when I was younger, they told me y’all didn’t exist!” She bit her lip. “Then again, they also told me things like Discord didn’t exist.”

Star nodded. “You told wrong. Like I say, ponies dumb.” She laughed. “I not speak right and you ones sounding dumb. Something wrong with that.” She crossed her hooves in front of her. “Anyway, yes, we Shetlands. We live in Mire Woods for generations, know it like back of hoof. I know much magic. Much, much magic passed down through other unicorns to me.” A smile crossed her face. “Very proud.”

Rarity wanted to rebut her, tell her that she was wrong and that Twilight could beat her any day, but she stayed quiet—getting her feathers ruffled hadn’t done them any good thus far. She did have a burning question, however.

“Pardon me for asking,” she said, “but if you know so much magic, why not use it to clean this place up a little? All this brown and dark green does nothing for me, dear.”

Star shook her head. “No. Not change nature. Cannot change nature like you ponies—it is a wrong thing to do. It was always a wrong thing to do. Changing nature? Why not go and declare yourself a Princess?” She snorted. “My magic for helping with tasks. Saving ponies in trouble. Not used for stupid things.”

Rarity blinked. “Well, if your magic is so useful, then why don’t you teach it to other ponies passing through here? I’m sure a mare as old and powerful as yourself would have to know some very powerful magic.”

Star glared. “Ask too many questions. You not seem like bad ponies, now I talk to you, untie you.” She snapped her head back and called out. “Let them go. They go free.” She turned back as two ponies emerged from the undergrowth and untied their bonds. “You two look useful, maybe. Help out around village some, then maybe I consider teaching fussy unicorn a thing or two. You show me you not dangerous—now show me I can trust you. Or you leave, like others.”

Rarity opened her mouth to protest being called fussy, but Applejack stuffed a hoof in it. They didn't need to make Star any sourer than she was.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. We'll be glad to help you out some, if you'll tell us what we need to do."

Star nodded. "You get one spell each day. I decide which, not you. Today we just resting, so you help me with something slow." She turned and started walking without any command to follow. After a few moments, Applejack and Rarity started to follow, looking around awkwardly at the Shetlands staring at them.

The village Star presided over was relatively small—ponies milled about in the area. They were chatting, laughing, foals running around and playing games. None of them seemed to mind it when Star berated them for being too loud or for bumping into her—then again, they were probably used to it.

The houses were all smallish and made primarily of sticks and mud, with long, supple leaves from the trees used as binding to secure the structures. There didn't appear to be any flooring inside, nor was there any furniture to speak of—the most either pony could see was a little cot.

The Shetlands, on the outside, looked disorganized. Their hair was all terribly unkempt, and some of them had sticks and leaves erupting from beneath their dull-colored tangles. Their coats weren't much better—all the same dull colors as their hair, but with patches of crusted mud and grass stains. Their hair seemed to collect everything they walked across. In the distance, ponies were busily working fields and making tools.

"Rarity," Applejack said, "you sure you can even *learn* magic that ain't about your special talent? What if the magic Star teaches you ain't even something you can use?"

"Applejack, unicorns would be awfully useless if we couldn't learn all different types of magic—it only takes concerted study and practice, not to mention honing of magical ability. My passion may be fashion, and everything related to it, but I've learned other magic—especially with Twilight around."

Applejack pursed her lips in thought. "Is that why Twi has such powerful magic? Because she studied and whatever? Pardon me for not knowing too much about unicorns."

Rarity smiled. "Not at all, Applejack. And as for Twilight, her special talent *is* magic, but she's been studying the craft since she was a filly. It's what she enjoys doing. I'm sure with a little practice, whatever Star teaches me won't be out of my reach."

Star stopped suddenly and whirled around in front of a much larger hut than the others. Bits of dust flew from her mane. "We here," she said. "This my home. Where all

knowledge of Shetlands is stored.”

Rarity blinked. “Star, does that make you the bookkeeper of this village or something along those lines?”

Star nodded. “Librarian, matron, on and on. I *am* village.” She smiled suddenly, revealing yellowed teeth. “Very proud. Great ponies we are. Not known by many—privilege for you. Come in, much work.”

Rarity and Applejack looked at each other, then entered. The inside of the hut was expansive, with thickly cut grass serving for carpeting and several mats made of softened bark scattered along the floor. On the second floor was a large bed crafted from birch and padded with hay. The whole place smelled like earth, and Applejack closed her eyes a moment, a good feeling running from her hooves to her ear-tips.

“Nice place,” she said, “who keeps it for you?”

Star snorted. “I keep house. I soften bark, weave grass. All me. Other ponies too busy.”

Applejack was shocked. “*You* keep this place looking like this? If you’re the matron of this here village, how’s that possible?”

Star chuckled. “I work hard. Sometimes harder. Not always easy.” She levitated a book from a shelf on the second floor. “This why I need your help.” She opened the book, revealing blank pages.

Rarity looked up, raising an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“You confused,” Star said. “Make sense.” She turned away from them. “New unicorn was born recently. Very recently. Bad news for me. Good news for village, perhaps. I am old, but that obvious. Not sure I live long enough to pass knowledge down to this new unicorn. She not even of age yet.”

Rarity spoke up. “Star, I know there are odd cases here and there, but didn’t you have any children of your own? From what I’ve seen, everypony else in this village is an earth pony. And aren’t they able to read and write in order to help you with this undertaking?”

Star shook her head. “Unicorn birth is foretold. Sometimes come late, sometimes early. No pony knows why. All Shetland unicorns born without ability to make more Shetland unicorns.” She chuckled and looked out the window. “And for reading, writing, well, no other pony know how besides me. Not important for them. They know speech, know work, not much else. Unicorns village elders, need this knowledge. Not so important for others.”

Rarity paused. “And about everypony being an earth pony...?”

Star smirked mockingly. “You see Shetlands. Why you think no pegasi?” She wiggled her rather heavily-built body back and forth to illustrate the point.

Applejack, mostly silent until now, said, “Glow Star, pardon me for saying this, but I’m only decent at reading and writing. My special talent’s got more to do with farm work than with books.”

Star nodded. “Right, not much for schooling, like I say.” She waved a hoof dismissively. “Then you go. Help with farming, help with other things. Unicorn stays.”

It stung a little to be shucked so easily, but Applejack turned and left, making for the fields. Before she could get out the door, however, Star stopped her.

“You help Earthfruit. He good stallion, take my word for it. You know him by color—very red.” With that, she ceased speaking and let Applejack leave.
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Star turned and looked out the window, addressing Rarity. “Now I, of course, not trust you with our magic. Not tell you that part. Teach you one or two spells for work, not much else. Not matter if you know my life. Mistakes, not-mistakes. Not matter much to you. Magic already archived by other unicorns, history too.”

The unicorn sighed and turned back towards Rarity. “Not take much effort, sad as it makes me to say.” She smiled. “Life not interesting. Important lessons, but not big book material.”

Rarity blinked. “Star, excuse me for asking, but you’re sure you want to trust me with this information? I imagine some of it must be quite sensitive.”

Star nodded. “Sensitive, yes, but these not scabbed wounds—these scars. Scars not open back up. Not matter. Trust me.” Star twiddled her hooves. “I born. I learn magic. I go through ritual to sharpen horn. I gain Shetlands. Lose Shetlands. I take ponies in when they lost, send them on their way. Get betrayed once. Not exciting.”

Rarity wanted to follow up on that, but Star spoke up, stopping that idea dead.

“Right. We get started.”