

Subject of Revenge

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Act 1

Chapter 1

The Average and Uninfluential Trixie began her day like every other since the Ponyville incident. That is to say, she woke up fuming.

Though many months had passed, Trixie still held a deep grudge towards Twilight Sparkle and all her friends in that 'wretched and unappreciative' town for her humiliation. Many a pony had called her out on her story in the past, and even more still were quick to accuse her of being a fraud. However, the Great and Powerful Trixie made fast work of non-believers. Her mastery of magic, while nowhere near the skill of that 'prissy purple pony', was still advanced enough to handle the hecklers. She wasn't a fraud; she had never been. She was in show business after all, and a good show takes real talent.

It wasn't the exposure of her lies that upset Trixie so much; rather it was the manner in which it had happened. *I mean really*, Trixie thought. *They brought an actual Ursa into the town, woke me up way past midnight, and expected me to just magically make it disappear on a whim.*

"Morons," she complained.

Trixie yawned as she walked out of her new tent. Her caravan and most of her possessions had been destroyed in the incident. Some salvaged books and tokens, like her hat and cape, had been returned to her in the mail from an anonymous sender marked only as "FS", but that had done nothing to restore Trixie's faith in ponies. She still was driven by hate, and she'd be damned if anypony's moment of kindness was going to take that away from her.

Despite her malevolent goals, Trixie opted for an admirable approach. She travelled fairly far by hoof from Ponyville. She had decided to set up camp in the cool fields beneath the great pegasus city of Cloudsdale where she wouldn't be bothered.

After she finished a quick breakfast of some freshly picked daisies, she jogged down to a lone, dead stump near the bottom of a hill and settled in front of it. With her magic, she pulled a few books from the bag slung over her back, and opened them on the stump.

Oh yes, she thought, setting up her little workstation the same way she had been doing for almost two weeks now. Trixie will have her revenge. Trixie will learn more magic than Twilight can ever hope to achieve. With enough study and practice, Trixie shall once again be known as The Great and Powerful Trixie, and no one will be able to take that away from her.

She chuckled aloud to her thoughts, before clearing her mind and focusing intently on the tomes spread before her.

Her magical prowess had already improved in the short time she had been studying. She could teleport now, instead of simply throwing smoke bombs and galloping away. She found her ability to move objects had progressed, as well. Whereas before she had been quite dexterous with lighter objects such as ropes and fabric, she could now move big stones, and plenty at a time. Every new accomplishment brought with it a surge of momentary joy and a lasting desire for vengeance.

Trixie looked up from her books, turning to a patch of posies gently swaying as a breeze crossed the rolling meadows. With a squint of her eyes and a sudden glow from her blue horn, the posies vanished with a light ‘pop’ and in their place remained a solitary rose. Trixie beamed in surprise at her creation, and stood up quickly in excitement.

“Aha! Look, everypony of the world! I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, have mastered magical enhancement! Watch, in awe, as I turn ordinary posies into- oh,” she stopped with a sigh.

Her rose had turned from a brilliant red to a dry, withered black, and was lying dead on the ground. With a frustrated grunt, Trixie kicked it away in frustration, before settling back in front of her stump.

“Stupid flowers,” she complained, turning the page in her book, and concentrating even harder, “You dare to challenge the Great Trixie’s competence? I’ll show you! Hmmp.”

Trixie settled back into her usual routine, reading great amounts of text before stopping to practice what she had learned. Yells of frustration

and gasps of pleasant surprise peppered the quiet fields, occasionally frightening birds and other small animals unused to hearing the silence shattered. Trixie sat back several hours later to examine her work. Admiring the results, she smiled.

Surrounding her tired, sweaty blue body was a slightly rotten tree stump and several bunches of beautiful and very-much-alive roses. With a look of true ecstasy lighting up her face, she plucked one of the elegant flowers and brought it to her nose, breathing deeply.

It smelled like a posy. Trixie grimaced angrily, dropped it, and stomped on it. She sat on her hindquarters in a huff, momentarily fed up.

"Trixie needs a break," she sighed. She stared up into the great city floating several miles above her. A building on the edge of Cloudsdale floated in front of the sun, covering her for a brief moment of cooling shade. As her eyes focused, she noticed a large group of pegasi in the coliseum, watching some sort of event. Trixie sighed, lost in a brief fantasy.

"One day, I, Trixie, shall have a crowd of fans that adore me as such. Perhaps I'll even be in Cloudsdale, with magic to keep my career and I afloat!" Her eyes glazed over as she imagined a happy life as a famous performer, only to turn back to a dry glare as more thoughts of revenge popped back into her mind. "But first," she commented, "Trixie needs to become that talented."

The blue unicorn turned back to her books, picking and sniffing another rose before impatiently tossing it behind her shoulder. She picked up the manual she had been reading, glanced at the open pages, and slammed it shut in a fit. Clenching her eyes shut, Trixie started focusing.

That's it, Trixie. Concentrate. The only way to improve is to open up new pathways for the energy. So let's see some good old TRIXIE MAGIC! So to start... Picture the rose. Good, there. That was pathetically simple. Details, now. The colour of those soft, ever so delicate petals. How they curve and fold. That long, thorny stem. Those long, spindly, dirty gross roots. Ew. Focus. The thick, green, waxy leaves that stick out gingerly. And last, but definitely not least, the smell. What does a rose smell like? They're ever so sweet... fragrant... the scent of two ponies in love.

Trixie inhaled deeply, her imagination filling her nose with the scent she was envisioning. She held that breath, keeping the smell inside her,

before exhaling as slowly as possible. Her heart skipped a beat, and her horn glowed brightly for a second. Then, she opened her eyes and blinked the brightness away until she readjusted to the daylight. Something astonishing lay in front of her.

Her books and supplies had fallen haphazardly onto the ground, and laid in a scattered mess before her. In the place of the old, rotten tree trunk was a single rose. Trixie leaned in close, and breathed deeply.

“Mmm,” she hummed, satisfied. “I told you I’d show you. Stupid flowers.”

Trixie started to pack up her books, exhausted from the day’s work. She couldn’t help but smile as she stared at the single rose in front of her, pondering all the tricks she could pull off with such simple magic. She stared back up at the sky again, revisiting her fantasy of performing at the Cloudsdale Coliseum.

How odd, she thought absentmindedly. That pony’s wings are more like... a butterfly’s. Perhaps it was a spell. I simply must research and master that one for myself. She turned around and started packing up the last of her things into her bag, humming in triumph over the delicate flower in front of her. As she turned to head back to her camp, Trixie noticed a boulder sitting off to the side.

“Aha, now that... That would be a perfect replacement workstation for she who will soon be the Greater and Even More Powerful Trixie!” She grinned momentarily, before slamming her eyes shut. Her horn started pulsating with light as her magic enveloped the large rock in front of her. She strained, groaning a little in effort. The rock started to shift a little, and Trixie felt it. She pressed harder, giving it the last of bit of the energy she could find, and with a shout she lifted the rock up into the air.

“Nnnngg... That’s.... It! Bow, feeble ponies... ah...” She gasped, her knees shaking as she struggled to keep the boulder in the air. Slowly, she brought it over to where the stump had once been. “Before.... aaaaugh... the amazing... gah... TRIXIE!”

As her name escaped her lips in a mighty shout, her body was suddenly rocked by violent tremors. The boulder vibrated and disintegrated in mid-air as a wave of polychromatic force enveloped and shook Trixie and

the meadows around her. As an eardrum-bursting crack reverberated inside her skull, something strange happened.

“What... What’s happening!? Was... was it me? Did I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, cause... AUGH!” She cut herself short as her body involuntarily snapped up into the air, and a white-hot sensation began to erupt from deep within her. She screamed in fear as her azure coat emanated the brightest blue she had ever seen. Her mind began racing as memories flashed before her eyes with no sense or order. Her eyes rolled back into her head, as confusion and delusions sent her thoughts spinning. Her body snapped again, and a small shell of light shot out around her. Her mind became overloaded with energy and magic, and Trixie could no longer focus on anything around her. A splitting headache started to form quickly, tripling in pain with every vicious jerk of her body.

Small bolts of electricity ran along her body, escaping from her hooves and crawling along her chest, wrapping her momentarily in a cocoon of power. The sparks pulsed brightly for a moment before dissipating, and Trixie was slowly lowered to the ground. In a minute, it was all over.

“Ugh... what just happened? I’m going to *destroy* the pony who thinks they can pull an act like that on *TRIXIE!* ...Ow, *my head...* Show yourself?” Trixie stumbled back on all four hooves, swaying as she shook her pounding head. In front of her was the big hill she had practiced by. A massive rainbow sparkled in the distance, however Trixie’s attention was caught by something else.

The entire hill was covered in an enormous patch of wild roses; it was larger than any Trixie had ever seen before. On the patch of grass where a stump and a rose had been now stood a mighty oak. It reached almost forty feet up into the sky, its dark leaves almost shimmering as the sun behind it struggled to punch through the thick foliage. Trixie could only gape. She looked at her hooves incredulously, and then looked the rest of her body over. Nothing had changed that she could see.

Trixie’s eyes widened and she turned and tried to run towards her tent. Her hooves tripped over each other, and she fell with a painful thump. She rose, trembling with effort, and slowly made her way to her destination. Her vision was blurred and faded, her mind totally burnt out from the experience. She stumbled slightly as she burst in through the flaps of her temporary home, lunging clumsily towards her stacks of recovered texts.

“Encyclopedia of Magic... where is it... *where is it?*” Trixie yelled, tossing books behind her. Knocking several down to the side, she finally found the one she was looking for and opened it up, reading furiously.

“SPONTANEOUS CRITICALITY”

Spontaneous Criticality is a rare event discussed mostly in rumours. While it has not been reproduced or recorded in recent times, there are enough cultural references and historic mentions to deserve giving it serious consideration. The event is characterized by a magic-wielding pony, either an Alicorn or a Unicorn, going ‘critical’ (experiencing a burst of raw magical energy). Ancient texts such as *A Study of Magicks* (E. Calibra, F. Fields, et al.) & *Enchanted Phenomena* (T. Fastpace), go into greater detail. Specifically, a magic-wielding pony is generally focusing or concentrating especially hard, when interrupted by an occurrence of great force (Usually an earthquake or other form of natural catastrophe). The interruption, paired with higher-than-normal levels of magic flowing through said pony, triggers the Criticality. The many possible side effects of such a volatile magical reaction are mostly unknown, but the main result is that the pony’s damper on magic is destroyed. Whereas most ponies need to slowly study and exercise their magical abilities, one who has undergone Spontaneous Criticality will supposedly have their entire raw magic ability available to them at any time.

Naturally, such ability would wreak havoc on a pony’s body, and this is considered the reason why the event is probably not recorded in any major scientific study. Any unicorn to have undergone the transition has probably been destroyed as a result of it. It is also theorized that if the Criticality itself could be interrupted, the result would only be a partial increase in access to raw ability. This would result in more powerful magic-wielders with more multi-tasking ability, without the danger of them being disintegrated.

Further reading on the topic see...

Trixie slammed the book shut, slack jawed.

“There’s... no way. Impossible. Trixie may be the best unicorn around, but there’s no way she... Criticality doesn’t exist. I couldn’t have... Trixie. Trixie couldn’t have survived one. But...”

She glanced to the side of the book, onto the small stand it was resting on. There lay a picture of a solitary, purple-coated pony, happily smiling. A sharp stone was embedded in the pony’s face, piercing an inch into the table underneath.

“But... there have been rumours, of another. Hmm. If *Twilight* had an interrupted criticality, that would explain so much! If *Twilight*... *ugh*. If the lowly *Twilight* can hit criticality, then there’s nothing that could prevent the even *more amazing* *TRIXIE* from pulling one off! But perhaps I should perform a test, to make sure. Trixie wouldn’t want any more of those stupid foals trying to make her vanquish an Ursa unless she could *actually* vanquish an Ursa.” She sighed again. “Morons.”

Trixie walked slowly outside, considering everything around her. *What could The Great Trixie do to prove her might? Perhaps, another boulder... No, too simple. Aha, that could do nicely!* She stopped in front of the oak tree, and brought her head all the way up to see the top branches. She gulped.

Trixie looked back down to the base of the tree, considered all the roots, and gave a nervous laugh. This was the moment of truth. She would either have all her fantasies of being the most powerful unicorn in Equestria come true, or be embarrassed, sore, tired, and just as useless as she had felt she was only just a little earlier.

She stared at the tree with no strain in her face. Her horn began to glow, ever so softly. The tree began to shake slightly. Her horn glowed just the lightest touch more, and the oak started to vibrate extravagantly. Birds abandoned their newly-found home and leaves started to fall slowly towards the ground. Trixie’s eyes turned into a barely perceptible squint, and the oak suddenly ripped itself out of the ground, hovering in the air in front of Trixie.

She began to laugh, throwing her head back into the air in ecstasy. The oak tree followed her movement, flinging itself high into the air. When it landed behind her in a mighty crash, the earth trembling beneath her legs, she still laughed.

“Bow, feeble ponies,” she howled to no one in particular, “before the AMAZING TRIXIE!”

Trixie stood in front of the fallen oak, humming in annoyance. Sure, she had easily uprooted it. But that left her with the problem of a giant tree in the middle of the field she had staked out.

“Now, how can The Great and Powerful Trixie clean this up, so she’ll have a wonderful place for an audience to witness her awesome abilities?” She grimaced slightly. Walking up to the tree, she kicked it.

“Ow. Dumb tree. Wait, maybe I... maybe Trixie could get some practice out of this. Aha, yes, what a wonderful idea. Not only is Trixie Great and Powerful, she’s also intelligent!”

She tilted her head a bit, and walked along the length of the tree, wondering. With a spark from her horn, the bark tore off into the air with a great shredding noise, and vanished. Next, the tree started to crack. Large vertical and horizontal ruptures started spreading throughout the timber, evenly and straight, until it was entirely segmented. With a blink from Trixie, the whole tree disassembled itself into a giant stack of two by fours.

“That’s a little easier to work with.”

Trixie started to hum a pointless tune as she manipulated the planks of lumber. A slight blue haze filled the air as she effortlessly grabbed each board with her magic. She started to frown in concentration, organizing and rearranging every board into just the right position, and then...

“Hee-ya!”

All the boards slammed into each other, and formed into one solid object. Sitting in front of Trixie was a brand new, if rather bland, caravan.

“Bah! Only an elaborate and wondrous caravan will suit the Amazing and Clever Trixie!” She spun her head, and with a flash her new home was covered in a brilliant display of colours, a dark navy roof resting on sky blue walls. Bright white trim outlined the sparkling door and dark-tinted windows, and Trixie sighed in contentedness.

“Aha! And now that there is a great and wonderful home for The Great and Powerful Trixie, she shall begin her tour of Equestria! But, first she has to build up a reputation. Now where shall I, Trixie, begin to awe and amaze the ponies of Equestria?”

She grabbed her possessions from the tent, and magically teleported them into the caravan. She walked around inside her new home, admiring her creation. She sat down at her table, and unfurled a map of Equestria on it.

“No... Trixie shall save Ponyville for later. She wants that terrible Twilight to hear of her, and fear her new might! Haha! Cloudsdale will wait until all of Equestria knows my name, too. Hoofington? No, I’m not ready to go- er, Hoofington is not ready for Trixie to go back there... Aha, one place Trixie has never been! ‘Flankstown’. Sounds... ugh. Thrilling. Well, one must start small to build a reputation!”

Trixie rolled up her map, stowing it onto a shelf. She took a quick look around her travelling house, making sure everything was prepped for travel. She walked out and went around to the front. With a burst of energy from her horn, the wheels creaked and began rolling forward. Trixie looked around, taking in the scenery, a genuinely happy smile forming on her muzzle. Good memories of her life passed through her mind, as she thought back to all the travelling she had done over the years. As the carriage slowly bumped and rolled through the fields, she remembered all the successful shows she had performed.

Trixie had always lived on the road. Her parents had had their own show, many years ago, and had raised Trixie while on tour. She had spent her entire life in show business, travelling far across Equestria, first learning from her parents, and continuing on after their deaths in an accident many years ago. By the time she had lost her parents, she had already surpassed them in magical skills, and earned her cutie mark. Sadness overcame her for a moment, but it passed.

“Trixie has made them proud. There’s nothing to be upset about.” She sniffed, and then looked up . “And now... Now I can show the world how great their child has become!”

She smiled again, vividly imagining all of her screaming fans and awe-struck audiences of the past. She had many years of magic under her saddle, and most of her journey had been fun. But now... things had changed. This wasn’t about the thrill of performance, or even the excitement of travelling. Now, this was about vengeance. Twilight had ruined her fantastic life. Everything had been fine until Ponyville, where Twilight had called her out and embarrassed her. Word had spread fast, as it is wont to do, and soon Trixie hadn’t been able to perform in any place of importance. As far as Trixie was concerned, that purple-coated unicorn known as Twilight Sparkle had ruined Trixie’s career and made her appear a failure to her parents.

That was something Trixie couldn’t stand for.

As the sun slowly set on the fields of Equestria, the night blanketing the small wagon in shadows, Trixie began planning. She hadn’t expected to become as potent as she was so soon, and with these new abilities came new possibilities. An evil grin appeared on her face as she directed her home down the long, lonesome road ahead of her to Flankstown.

Chapter 2

Well this place certainly is... adequate? Trixie hesitantly sniffed the air and grimaced. *No matter. A quick show in a place or two like this, and word will spread about Trixie. Soon Trixie will be accepted with open arms- no, demanded! The world will cry out for The Great and Powerful Trixie!*

She smirked, parking her caravan in what was hopefully the town square. Flankstown wasn't much larger than many of the other little towns she used to pass by on her way to better destinations. Even its architecture resembled that of the tiny villages. Instead of the usual brightly coloured and ornate architecture of a city, the houses Trixie had passed were dilapidated and plain.

The area she had parked in was a small opening in the cramped streets of Flankstown. A few enterprising ponies had set up small stands and were bartering for wares, ignoring the wagon in the middle of their town. Many of them, Trixie reasoned, probably thought she was just a random vagrant. *Well, they'll have to be taught a lesson. Trixie is anything but a vagrant.*

Trixie sniffed in disapproval, and immediately coughed after inhaling the awful musk of the uncleanly square. *Maybe Trixie doesn't need to begin her new career in such an... eccentric place.* She looked around at the visibly bored ponies of the town, and sighed.

"A show's a show," Trixie grumbled as she hopped down, pulling a cord from beside the wagon's door. A small stage unfolded from underneath it. Several ponies started to take notice of this odd display, and they turned from their daily routines to investigate. Trixie smiled as the once-familiar feeling of attention returned to her, and she donned her trademark hat and cape.

"FILLIES AND GENTLECOLTS! Gather around to witness, in awe, the magical prowess of The Great and Powerful Trixie! Watch, and be amazed, as she performs the most outstanding acts of mysticism you shall ever set your eyes upon!"

Several more ponies began to walk up to the stage, sitting down as Trixie's display started increasing in bravado.

"Never before has a pony of such power been seen, but today, pleasant -ugh- citizens of Flankstown, I bring you... TRIXIE!" With her name came a wondrous display of fireworks from behind the caravan. Some ponies in the crowd looked disturbed by her attitude, but loud "ooh"s distracted Trixie from worrying about it.

Trixie kept her display up, pulling bouquets of flowers out of the air and tossing them into the crowd. With the last bundle of flowers, she threw them high before lassoing them with a magically controlled rope. The rope flung them back at her, and she jumped and caught the flowers with her mouth. She gave a bow, and the flowers disappeared.

More fireworks, that's it. Make 'em laugh. Like dad used to say, entertainment without humor is a book without words. That grey pony there isn't laughing. Well.

She was hovering high in the air, juggling bowling balls over the heads of the crowd. With a quick clap of her hooves, the particular grey earth pony was shocked as Trixie enveloped him in magic. He looked around frantically, his dark red mane and tail whipping those beside him as he struggled against the aura.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie sees that somepony isn't enjoying the show," she announced loudly. "Trixie thinks you should *lighten up*." With that, to the great amusement of the crowd, she lifted the grey pony high into the air, bringing him face to face with her. Still effortlessly juggling the heavy spheres, she spoke to him, never dropping her persona.

"Hello."

"W-wh-what are you doing!?" The grey pony panicked. Trixie laughed loudly, enjoying his reaction.

"Relax! You're perfectly safe in the hooves of the Great and Powerful Trixie! In fact, you'd be safer *in* the hooves of Trixie!" She giggled again, and set one of the bowling balls down on her stage while moving the grey earth pony to where the ball had just been. The crowd below roared in hilarity. As she juggled the confused pony, she talked to him.

"What's your name?"

“Wh- my name? It’s...” Trixie tossed him in the air.

“Hold on, Trixie can’t hear you! Okay, go!”

“My name is...” She threw him high again. “...ter. Put me down!”

“Trixie didn’t catch that. Your name first! You wish to be respected by Trixie, you must first respect her!”

“It’s Strater! Strater Hooves! Let me go, please!” The absurdity of the situation had gotten to the grey pony, and despite his pleading he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t be such a grump, Strater. These ponies here, you see them? They’re just here for a show, and only the Amazing Trixie can deliver for them! Give me something, Strater. Let’s put on a show for these ponies. Celestia knows, in a place like Flankstown ... -ew-... something actually happening is a rare treat!”

Some of the audience looked taken aback, insulted by the comments directed at their hometown. The rest just chuckled. Sadly, they thought, she was right.

“Okay, fine,” Strater sighed dejectedly. “Just stop juggling me!”

“Deal,” Trixie laughed sadistically. She felt on top of the world.

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s your cutie mark for? Really, a protractor over a map? What’s that mean?”

“I’m a tactician. I’m perfect at organizing and anticipating.”

“Bet you sure didn’t anticipate... This!” Trixie made him vanish suddenly, and he appeared on the stage below her. She slowly drifted down and landed next to him. “So tell me, Strater, let the whole audience know. What is the Great and Wonderful Trixie about to do next? What should *you* do?”

Strater glared playfully for a second, considering the arrogant blue unicorn in front of him.

“Firewo-” he began, only to be cut off by a dazzling display of lights behind him. An echoing “ahh” came from the crowd, and Trixie pouted for half a second.

“A lucky guess! But how many can you get in a r-”

“Rope tricks!” Strater jumped three feet to the side as several snakes of animated cord missed their marks and collided with each other where he had just stood.

“Oh, pony wants to play! No problem. The Great and Powerful Trixie enjoys a challenge!” Trixie reared, bringing her legs down powerfully onto the wooden stage, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Strater curiously picked his way around the stage, and the whole audience fell quiet in suspense, waiting for what would come next.

Strater paused, suddenly, and then dove out of the way. A bucket of water appeared over the stage and poured onto the vacant floor. Strater skipped to the centre of the platform, and waited. His proud smile slowly faded into confusion, as what he had been expecting failed to happen.

Strater jumped to the side and rolled, deftly avoiding... nothing. He stared wildly at the audience as the ponies started to chuckle at him. He rolled to get up, and suddenly found himself splashing into a trough that, moments before, had not existed. A condescending giggle echoed from an indiscernible direction. Climbing out and shaking himself off, he started to run to the other end of the stage. Strater stopped quickly before the edge, holding dead still, and a door appeared inches in front of his muzzle. He reached forward and opened it, and waved hello to the fuming pony waiting behind.

“It all comes down to predictability! What are others most likely to do based on my actions?” He laughed at her. “I walked slowly enough to convince you to try to douse me. Then, when I was moving fast enough, it presented a good opportunity for you to try to make me look like an idiot by hitting something. That trough was a nice touch, though. That aside; constantly reviewing your own actions. I’ve been practicing that for years!”

He beamed to the crowd, giving a slight bow.

“You think you’re *better* than the Great and Powerful Trixie? You think you can beat me at my own game? You haven’t seen my true might!”

“Well, until you give me something to work with, yes, I do think I’m better than you!” He winked slyly, and several ponies in the crowd called out Strater’s name in support.

“RRRRRRRGHH!” Trixie growled and bent low, challenging the grey stallion in front of her. Her horn suddenly began to emanate energy, shining brighter than it had in weeks. The ground started to shake, and to the shock and dismay of the ponies in the crowd giant shards of granite erupted around them, capturing them in a circle of rock. With a flick of her neck, black clouds started forming around the circle, swirling into a thunderous maelstrom. A great wind spun the clouds until a small funnel cloud poked out from the center. It reached down towards Strater, who was frozen with fear and could only cringe as the whirlwind engulfed him. The cloud reached back up into itself, and with a massive crack of lightning, the thunderhead dissipated. Strater, however, was nowhere to be seen. The ponies of Flankstown looked up in awe as the granite cage receded back into the ground. Some were shaking. Others were crying.

Then there was a stomp. And another. Trixie still stood defensively, facing the crowd and panting heavily as her rage subsided. She blinked several times, before relaxing. The stomping noises started to come faster and louder, and cheers began to erupt from her audience. Trixie bowed to the applause, and with a twirl of her cape and a final burst of fireworks, she teleported from the stage.

“So,” Trixie spoke to her still-startled guest, smirking as the grey pony struggled against the ropes binding his legs together. She removed her hat and cape as she walked around her home, and set them on a counter. “If I take the gag out of your mouth, you promise to be quiet and let Trixie explain her proposition?”

Strater rolled his eyes, taking in the details of the caravan. He tugged his legs again, the taut ropes refusing to yield. There was only one door leading out of the caravan, and his captor was standing in front of it. Defeated, Strater sighed and nodded. With a flash of blue light, the gag left his mouth and settled on a table.

"I get tossing me in here for the show, but this is going a little far, you know?"

"Hush. Trixie only keeps those useful to her around. Now, the proposition. How would-"

"That whole talking in third-person thing is really annoying, too."

Trixie started to move the gag back to Strater's mouth, and he started tugging at his binds again.

"No! No! It's okay! I'll listen! Sorry! Not the gag!"

"Good. As I was trying to say; The Great and Powerful Trixie does more than entertain. She strives for excellence, and Trixie only gets excellence by constantly improving herself and her show. You saw how powerful Trixie really is, didn't you?"

"Sure did. Scared the manure out of me. I've never seen magic like that before, except at the Summer Sun Celebration."

Trixie noted that fact in her mind, and continued. "You're good. Really good. You could help Trixie become better. Now, let Trixie do a little guesswork of her own here. Flankstown really has very little use for a tactician. You are often incredibly bored, and only get excited on the rare occasions you get to play fantasy games that require a lot of planning. Today was probably the most eventful day of your life, right?"

"... Son of a shed, you're dead on with that. So how can I help Tri- er, you?"

"Join Trixie, and you get to have an exciting life on the road. You can teach her how to be less predictable, and The Great Trixie will show you what it's like to actually experience adventure. Deal?"

Strater was quiet for a moment, contemplating. Trixie waited impatiently, examining her hooves and pouting.

"Okay. I've made up my mind."

"About time. What do you say?"

"It's hard to shake on a deal when my legs are tied."

“Smartass.” The ropes unknotted themselves and settled onto the floor, and Strater rolled onto his hooves. With an excited smile, he extended a foreleg, and they shook.

“It’ll be a pleasure working with you,” he chided with a sarcastic wink.

“If it’s not, and you make Trixie look bad...” she trailed, and the caravan lurched, throwing Strater onto his side. “You’ll end up on the side of the road before even *you* know it.”

Chapter 3

“Okay, so, what do you do, anyways? I saw one show of yours, and so far it looks like you’re just trying to humiliate everyone while doing fancy gimmicks.”

The question made Trixie stop in her tracks, her front leg freezing in mid-reach for her cape. A brush was floating casually in the air, tidying up her mane as she prepared for her next show. Trixie questioningly turned to the red haired stallion, one eyebrow cocked.

“You wait until we get to the next town to ask what it is The Great and Powerful Trixie does? You decided to come along for a job, and you hardly have an idea of what you’ll be doing. Seriously.”

“I like to live in the moment, thank you. Whatever the hay you do seemed more interesting than Flankstown.”

“That’s another thing. You didn’t even try to say goodbye to anyone. Is there something Trixie should know about you? You didn’t kick a filly or anything, did you?” She looked at Strater, her eyes enquiring in a menacing way.

Strater scoffed at the idea. “Celestia no! No, that town was just... ugh. I moved there a year ago. Figured maybe I’d be able to find some sort of job relating to my talent. Fillydelphia didn’t have anything, really. Why do you think the townsponies were so quick to laugh at me being juggled?”

“Oh, great, another pony who has trouble making friends. We’re just peas in a pod, aren’t we?”

“Actually I think my problem is more of a situational thing whereas you’re just a bi-”

“Well, would you look at that! Ponies are starting to gather around the stage. Trixie thinks you should go introduce her, and round up some more customers.”

“...Alrighty then. How much do we charge, by the way? You gave a free show in Flankstown.”

“Yes, free, right. Except for those cretins who are too cheap to tip.”

“...I don't follow.”

“The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't just awe and amaze for good will.”

“Well I can see that, but I fail to-”

“So she understandably levees a hidden fee.”

“Wow, you really *are* a bi-”

“Seriously. Get outside and start getting customers, now. If you're quick about it, Trixie will even give you a part where she doesn't throw you into a barrel of water.”

Strater frowned, before shaking his head and walking out of the door. Trixie heard a few muffled comments come from the crowd before the door closed. She smiled, turning her attention back to grooming herself for her show.

Stableton was a larger village than Flankstown, and much to Trixie's pleasure, didn't smell as bad. The buildings were more colorful and spread out, creating an atmosphere that was less “county prison” and more “small hometown”, and this meant better business for Trixie. An open, welcoming town was more likely to get excited over an event such as hers, and word would spread. It was even possible, due to the small town phenomenon, that she would have a larger crowd here than a town the size of Ponyville would bring. Such was the power of gossip when everypony knows one another.

In the distance she heard Strater giving an elaborate presentation. His voice, while not deep or forceful, was charismatic and controlled. It rang throughout the town, echoing in the evening air. A quick look out her window showed Trixie that the small square they had parked in was completely packed. Strater looked back, and saw Trixie in the window. They exchanged nods, and Strater walked up onto the stage, settling in a corner. He cleared his throat.

“Fillies and Gentlecolts! Come one, come all, to the most exquisite of magic shows, the most astounding of unicorns, and the most amazing pony, THE GREAT, AND POWERFUL...” As he spoke, he reared up, giving a dramatic flair with his front hooves. “... *TRIXIE!*”

With a small explosion of lights and noise, the azure unicorn appeared on stage, her legs in a wide stance, her head held up, nose pointed high in the air. Her very stance commanded attention, and one of those oh-so-familiar 'ooh's floated throughout the audience. She giggled, and then started her display.

"Great ponies of Stableton, tonight the Great and Powerful Trixie shall be performing for you! Gaze upon her in awe, as she demonstrates the most unbelievable and astounding acts of magic ever seen before in all of Eque-"

"I REMEMBER YOU!"

"Stri-what?" She flinched at the mysterious accusation.

"I remember you! You performed in Ponyville, once, I was there." A pink pegasus mare had flew up to the stage, landing with a thump. She turned to the audience and extended a wing, pointing at Trixie. "She tried to con everypony there, too! She's a fraud!"

The town gasped, shocked. The pink pegasus seemed to relish the attention, and continued her dramatics as she complained.

"This... this hoax of a mare, almost destroyed the whole town with her lies! She claimed she could vanquish an Ursa Major. She convinced two colts to go get one, even!"

"That's a horrible lie! You *dare* challenge-"

"And another thing! She claims to be the best in all of Equestria, yet she can't even stand up to danger. The colts brought back an Ursa Minor, and Trixie ran in fright! Thankfully, Twilight Sparkle was there to save the day, but Trixie could have ruined us!"

The accusation had enraged Trixie. The audience, which had begun booing her, intensified her fury. The mention of her most-hated enemy's name had caused her to snap.

"How... DARE YOU!"

Again, like in Flankstown, the ground began to shake, and black clouds started to swirl in the sky. Ponies in the audience began to shout and fall. The pegasus started looking around in bewilderment, unaware of what was causing the commotion.

Strater jumped up to Trixie, nudging her shoulder with his hoof. She had taken up her wide, foreboding stance again, and shouted through clenched teeth.

“What do you want?!”

“Stop, for a second. Think about how your actions can affect everything. Don’t hurt that pegasus.” He spoke in a loud whisper, audible enough to only be heard by Trixie.

Trixie vibrated, building up power for her spell. She spoke in a constrained, but quiet, voice. “Trixie doesn’t have time for your philosophical policies. And she isn’t going to hurt that pegasus, she’s going to *destroy* this town!”

“No, no, see, that’s also bad. Rise above this. You have a prime opportunity here.”

“Yes. To destroy this town.”

“Right. True. You could totally destroy this town, and cement yourself as a horrible pony in Equestria’s history. Perhaps ponies would look up to you in fear, but wouldn’t love be a better way?”

Trixie’s eyes were shining cyan now, and an aura three feet in diameter surrounded her horn. “Love, shmove. What could a group of ponies who love Trixie do? Isn’t it... *-augh-*” she gasped as one of her front knees buckled. The conversation had caused her focus to stray, and she had paid for that momentary lapse in judgement. “Isn’t it better to demand respect?”

“I’d say it’s easier to have the respect earned.”

She fell silent for a moment, considering Strater’s advice. By now, the town centre was in havoc. Ponies were running around, climbing over one another trying to be the first ones to leave. Cries and shouts of pain pierced the night air. The pink pegasus had, in a shock of terror, flown into another pony, and was on the ground by the stage, clutching a clearly damaged wing.

Trixie sighed, and released her magic.

A sky blue shell of energy exploded from her, enveloping the entire village. The panicking ponies collectively froze, unsure of how to react.

Pulses of white magic blinded them, becoming brighter and brighter with every beat. Soon, the entire town was a glowing white sphere, a beacon in the dark Equestrian night.

And then the light faded, and all that could be seen was Trixie, standing tall, panting slightly but hardly even tired.

A moment of confusion passed through the village as ponies examined themselves and their neighbours, searching for what exactly the rampaging magician had done. There was a shout.

“She... she... she healed me.”

The pink pegasus, who only moments earlier had a broken wing, was flying.

“She healed me, and... it’s not even sore. It’s... better than it was before. The feathers are even shinier.”

A group of other ponies who had been hurt in the chaos suddenly realised that they, too, were perfectly fine. Even more came up, commenting on their vanished ailments.

“I’ve had a sore knee for years, and it’s fine now!”

“I can breathe easier than I’ve ever been able to!”

“That pain in my chest has gone away!”

Trixie started blinking uncontrollably, as more and more ponies walked up to the stage with true ecstasy in their eyes. By the time she had regained her composure, dozens of townspoonies were in front of her. Strater, sensing a perfect opportunity, hopped forward beside his bewildered boss.

“Fillies and Gentlecolts; I give you... Trixie.”

Her jaw dropped as the ponies bowed. Even as they rose again, she stood still on the stage, shocked. Strater tapped her shoulder.

“Well, c’mon Trixie. Show must go on and all that rot.”

She blinked one last time, and shook herself. Smiling her wicked little smile, she began her routine.

Trixie yawned loudly as she woke up. Her head was sore from the long night she had had.

"Ugh," she muttered. "If Trixie has to do one more miracle healing or one more silly rope trick today, she's going to flip." She slid off her bed slowly as her eyes focused, and stepped onto something soft.

"Gaaack!"

Trixie jumped back on to her bed in shock. She stared down to find a grey earth pony, clutching his stomach in pain.

"And just *what* are you doing sleeping next to Trixie's bed!"

Strater coughed one last time and answered. "It was the only spot with carpet. A solid oak table is only comfortable for so long, you know. It couldn't hurt to add like, something for me to sleep on, maybe? Even buy a sleeping bag or something." He stood up and stretched long, his back popping in various places.

"Trixie is not stopping you from getting one."

"Right, so you're either going to have to pay me for my work, or buy me one yourself."

"Well, then get cleaned up, we'll go shopping before we leave."

"Buck. Well, I tried." Strater turned around and sat next to the door, watching Trixie as she grabbed a brush with her magic and tidied her mane. She glanced annoyingly at him.

"... What?"

"Earth pony. Unless you have one of those fancy machines that gives me a brush and a wash, I'm gonna be unkempt."

"Celestia, you're like a little foal." Trixie sighed and shot a burst of magic at Strater. After a brief, blue moment, Strater inspected himself. His

mane was clean and free of knots, and his fur almost glistened. He looked up at Trixie and smiled.

“Aw, now, see, you’re not all bad. This looks pretty good! It’s been ages since I’ve been this clean.”

“Well, Trixie figured she couldn’t be seen in public with such a greasy mess. Right?”

Strater’s grin dropped as his attempt to elicit generosity from Trixie failed. He frowned at her. She winked, suddenly, and started laughing.

“Oh, come now, Trixie isn’t that much of a heartless mare. Her parents did teach her a few things about manners, after all.” Her smug-yet-friendly grin faltered for a second, but returned. She gave Strater a light smack on the side of his belly, before opening the door. “Now let’s get going, Trixie has fans to present to and shows to go to.” Strater gasped a little from the hit, but then chuckled and followed Trixie out the door into Stableton.

Celestia’s sun was warm, and for a moment Trixie genuinely smiled as she examined the bright square in detail. *Oh, how nice. It doesn’t smell like a diamond dog here. And none of the roofs are threatening to collapse on top of Trixie.* She looked up and admired some of the building’s designs, before turning and heading towards the closest merchant in the street. As she got closer, the pegasus running the stand perked up.

“The Great Trixie! By Luna’s moon, what do I owe the honour of you browsing my wares?”

Trixie started to look quizzical at the pony, but Strater caught up to her and elbowed her haunch. She shook herself and replied.

“Ouch. Ah, Trixie happened to notice you in the crowd last night! And when she, um, recognised you, she thought it would be great to see what it is you’re selling.”

Strater winked at Trixie as the merchant pony’s face lit up in joy. He started talking rapidly, walking around his stand and ushering on Trixie with a wing.

“Oh, well you don’t want anything that I have to offer you; these are just crackers and trinkets reserved for simple tourists! No, let me give you a tour of Stableton, please. No, really, I insist!”

Trixie looked behind herself, frowning at Strater. He chuckled.

“Oh why not, Trixie? Let’s see some of the places we visit. Maybe you’ll find something cool for your show.”

She sighed. “Oh, why not. Alright, Mr...?”

“It’s Graham, Miss Trixie.”

“Alright, Graham. Let’s see what Stableton has to offer. Trixie’s looking for a sleeping bag for her companion here, by the way.”

“Ah, then the best place for that would be Dreamy’s Sleep Emporium. It’s on the other end of town.”

“Excellent,” Strater pitched in. “An actual store. I may even be able to get something that won’t itch or whatever.” He looked questionably at Trixie, doubt showing in his face. “You’d be willing to get me something nice, right? I’d love to help you, but if you’re just going to keep treating me like a slave, I’ll probably walk back to Flankstown right now.”

“Trixie *supposes* she could do that,” Trixie sighed sarcastically, with a devilish grin. “If she really *has* too.”

“So tell me, O Great and Magnificent Trixie,” Graham started as he led the two ponies past rows of tiny shacks and tables with varieties of food and items stacked to the point of overflowing, “What brings a pony with the power you possess to simple little Stableton?”

“It’s a hay of a lot better than Flankstown, I’ll tell you right now,” Strater cut in. All three ponies grimaced at the name of the other village.

“Hush Strater. Well, Trixie believes that all ponies should be graced by her magic, not just those who are privileged and high-status. Trixie is here for all of Equestria, not the highest bidder!”

Strater coughed something that sounded vaguely like “horse manure”, and Trixie kicked a leg out behind herself, catching his shin.

“And you, good sir,” Graham turned to the red-maned pony. You must be an extraordinary individual to have the privilege to work with this outstanding and beautiful unicorn. What’s your story, if I may ask?”

Trixie and Strater both stopped mid-step, and started laughing uproariously. Graham looked at them curiously, confusion wrinkling his face.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no,” Strater spoke in between gasps of air. “It’s nothing.” He turned to Trixie and spoke under his breath. “Extraordinary individual?”

“Well, he got the outstanding and beautiful part correct!” She chuckled again and playfully pushed Strater, before following Graham again. She opened her mouth to talk, but Strater cut her off.

“So enough about us,” he winked at a visibly annoyed Trixie, “and let’s have that tour. Tell me about Stableton. What’re some of the best merchant’s wares? Any pony have a specialty we should know of?”

“I am very glad you asked! Stableton is a small town, yes, but we’ve got a great community. If you look over to the east there, you’ll see the small amusement park we set up when the Summer Sun Celebration was held here last decade. The town used to be really run-down, but we all pitched in and cleaned it up for that festival. We’ve kept it clean ever since, too. It’s helped us grow.”

“That’s neat.”

“See, over here, that large copper-adorned building? That’s our town hall. Next to it is the community centre. Every two weeks we get together for a potluck. It’s really fun. Ah! Here, you’ve got to try this pony’s stuff.” Graham pointed to a sales stand with a large line. “It’s a bit of a wait, but totally worth it.”

As they got closer, some of the ponies in the line looked back and gasped. There was an audible whisper as Trixie and Strater settled behind Graham in the line, and suddenly the ponies moved aside. Trixie and Strater flinched in confusion.

“It’s the Powerful Trixie!”

“Can you believe it? Trixie? Here?”

“Please, Trixie, go ahead of me!”

As the comments of awe ended, the ponies to the left and right of Trixie suddenly dropped into a bow, becoming her to go ahead. Trixie looked around herself for a moment, shrugged, and walked forward regally. Strater blinked, and then followed.

“Ah, Great and Powerful Trixie! Welcome to Sweet Daisy’s Candy Flowers. Ever flower is lightly heated to caramelize the natural sugar content. Please, have a sample, on the house.” The white and yellow pony running the stand handed Trixie and Strater each a plate, and they both eagerly ate the hardened flower petals.

“Oh Celestia, that’s delicious. Trixie should leave you behind,” she joked to Strater, “And take Sweet Daisy here with her.”

The salesmare’s ears perked up at that comment, and she squinted in thought. Slowly, she spoke to the sudden guests of honor. “Glad... you enjoyed them. They are my specialty.”

Graham looked at her. “Sweets? You okay?”

She nodded slowly, and then pulled Graham aside and spoke softly to him. His eyes widened as she spoke, but soon he was nodding in comprehension, thinking deeply himself.

“... Guys? Hello? Can we get going?” Strater asked.

“Of course. Let’s... Let’s go, right.”

As the trio began walking away, Graham regained his composure and started talking proudly of his hometown again. Trixie glanced behind herself as he spoke, and happened to notice that Sweet Daisy had shut down her stand and, along with several other ponies, was following them. Trixie shrugged. *They must just want autographs or something. Well, they can wait. Trixie almost just wants to get Strater’s stuff and leave.*

They spent the next half hour stopping at various stalls, and the treatment they received was repeated every time. As they finally approached Dreamy’s Sleep Emporium, there was a noticeable group of ponies following them. They stayed outside as the trio entered the store.

“That’s a bit of a relief. Trixie is only used to crowds when she’s acting.”

“Well, you are kind of a celebrity around here, apparently. Better get used to it,” Strater spoke absentmindedly as he inspected the selection of sleeping bags and beds giddily.

A dark mare with a pillow for a cutie mark hopped out from behind the counter. “Well hello, and welcome to Dreamy’s Sleep Emporium, where everything is soft, comfy, and affordable! What’re you looking for, hon?”

“Ooh! This is so exciting. I need a comfy sleeping bag. We’re travelling, and I just need something so I don’t have to sleep on a table.”

“Oh, so you’re travelling in a carriage of some kind! Well, I’ve got just the thing. You don’t need a sleeping bag, honestly. That’s best for when you’re gonna be on the ground, and walking everywhere. But if you follow me, sir, let me show you...”

Dreamy trailed and beckoned Trixie and Strater to follow her to the other side of the room. Trixie followed, bored, but Strater was almost ecstatic, latched onto Dreamy’s words like a fish on a line. They stopped in front of a small cot.

“This here model is my favorite for travellers. It folds right up, like so,” he demonstrated as he spoke, snapping a switch, making the thin bed collapse into tiny package. “And just pops right back out when you’re ready to sleep.” He grabbed two handles which protruded from the condensed cot, and it easily unfolded. Strater walked forward, and flopped onto the cot.

“Sweet elements of awesome, this bed is comfy!” He turned to face Trixie. “Can we can we please please please?”

Trixie couldn’t help but smile at his joy. “Oh, alright. How much?”

“Ninety bits.”

Trixie twitched.

“... Please, Trixie?”

“That’s an awful lot, Strater,” she glared at him.

“Think of how many times you won’t wake up to step on me.”

“Trixie’ll take it.”

Dreamy outstretched a hoof for payment as Strater stood up and collapsed the bed. "Have a nice day," he called, as they left the building.

For the dozenth time that day, Strater and Trixie stopped dead in their tracks as the door to the store closed behind them. Eagerly watching them from across the street was a large group of ponies. They gasped at the sight of Trixie, and stared unblinkingly. For several minutes, neither Trixie, Strater, or any of the ponies in the crowd moved.

"Strater," Trixie broke the unending silence.

"... Yes?"

"Trixie thinks it's time we got the hay outta Stableton."

Act 2

Chapter 4

The earth pony was leaning unnaturally against the counter on the side of the caravan, staring out the window. A carrot stuck out from his mouth, moving in slow circles as he absentmindedly chewed. After a minute, he twisted uncomfortably, flipping onto all his hooves, and walked up to the window, looking down outside.

“Are they still there?” Trixie lifted her head off the bed as she asked Strater her question. Her eyes were slitted in annoyance, her voice irritable. Strater looked at her without turning his head, and sighed. “Yup.”

“Urgh. Trixie helps a couple ponies, and suddenly they camp around her home. This is why she never considered being compassionate before.”

“Yeah, I know right? You magically heal an entire town, and ponies think you’re amazing for it. Life sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Absolutely.” Trixie rolled off of her bed and walked around the table to where Strater was standing. “What do they even want, anyways? Can’t they understand The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn’t care for them?”

“No, see, you’re doing it again. Celestia, no wonder you were touring places like Flankstown despite the magic you have. You give no consideration to bettering yourself.”

“That’s not true. Trixie is always looking for ways she can improve. It’s just very difficult when you’re already as magnificent as Trixie is.”

“... Right. Okay, fine, whatever, just... listen to me. That’s what you hired me for.”

“Hired?”

“Moving on. You’ve got honest-to-goodness real live fans out there, and not just the ones you think you have in your inflated head. Physical ponies who adore you. While most of the town enjoyed the show and

moved on, there are five tents set up beside your caravan. There are currently two,” He paused his rant for a moment to glance out the window. “Sorry, there are currently three ponies actually sitting in front of your door. These are ponies that are waiting to see you again. You ever had a childhood hero?”

The question struck Trixie and she lowered her head to a regular height. “Yeah. My parents.”

“Touching. These ponies see you as you saw your parents. You’re a real life miracle to them. Now get the hay out there and reinforce that image. Become what they think you are.”

“Are you a strategist, or a publicist?”

“In this case, they’re practically the same. You have no idea how good it feels to do what you’re best at after a long dry spell.”

“Actually,” Trixie spoke haughtily as she reached for the door, “Trixie knows all about that.” She cracked the door open and was immediately greeted with a loud cheer. The ponies outside practically yanked her into their legs. She stood on the doorstep, struggling to smile professionally as she greeted her fans. There were several in front of her now, and a unicorn stallion walked up from them and bowed.

“Oh Great and Powerful Trixie! The powers you demonstrated last night were greater than any of us have ever seen before!” The group whooped in agreement. “Not even the advanced healers of Canterlot have been able to help us as much as you did yesterday.”

“Oh, you are most welcome, my dearest ponies! The wonders of Trixie are indeed endless.” Trixie looked back to Strater through the window, gagging at the false air of politeness she spoke with. He spun a hoof as if to say ‘Go on’. She frowned at him, and turned back to the group. They all looked up to her, eager for more. “But enough about what Trixie can do. Why don’t we move on to what Trixie can do for you?” She forced a grin and shuddered visibly. Strater slapped his face with a hoof, but none of the other ponies noticed.

“You’ve done enough for now, O Great Trixie. We could never ask too much of you, no.” The group nodded in agreement. “We’re here because we want to follow you!”

“Buh?” Trixie stared blankly.

“The powers you have... they rival those of the Alicorns. All of us here, we’ve been considering... And we wish to follow you. We wish to witness firsthand the wonders you’ll perform in the future. Perhaps even the unicorns among us could learn from you.”

“I, er, uhm. Ah... Trixie. Wait. What?”

“Will you allow us to travel with your wagon, to see the world and watch you at every show, to perhaps even learn the art of magic as you have so amazingly mastered?”

“... A great and powerful magician never reveals her secrets! Trixie thinks... Hmm.” She paused. “Trixie needs a moment.” She turned around and scrambled back into the caravan, slamming the door behind her. She grabbed Strater by the shoulders and shook him slightly.

“What the HAY does Trixie do now? What should Trixie think? You’re the expert!”

“I don’t know, I have no idea! I wasn’t expecting this! This one’s up to you! And stop shaking me!”

Trixie snarled and tossed Strater to the side, before pacing in front of the door.

“Oh, whatever. Trixie’s made her decision. And if it doesn’t work out, she’s blaming you.”

Strater picked himself off of the floor, and replaced the few books he had knocked off the shelf he bumped into. “Do I get the credit if it works out?”

“Of course not.”

Strater chuckled. “Well, it was worth a shot. Good luck.”

Trixie took a moment to compose herself, sticking her nose high in the air and adjusting her cape, before walking outside again. None of the other ponies had moved while she was inside.

“Trixie has made her decision. You may all follow her. Trixie will not provide lessons. She will not provide money, or food, or accommodations. There will be a charge for any miracles done that aren’t part of the show.

Understand?" *There. No sane pony would accept those terms. Trixie looks... ugh, nice, and she gets to stay undisturbed. Perfect.*

There was some discussion among the would-be followers. After several minutes, the stallion from before walked up to Trixie.

"We accept the terms! We'll be ready to leave as soon as you are."

Trixie turned back into the caravan, magically packing up the stage and preparing the caravan for the road. She sighed as she walked into her house. "Oh, buck everything. We leave in an hour."

"C'mon, Showtime, you've gotta trust me on this one."

Strater stood in a small office, coughing slightly in the haze of cigar smoke. The smog wafted from a unicorn relaxing behind a cluttered desk. Strater stared at the faded newspaper clippings that filled the gaps between various awards and plaques on the yellowing wallpaper, and shuffled awkwardly on his hooves.

The unicorn's body was a silver-blue that almost glittered in the cheap lighting, accented by a fire-orange mane. His flank boasted a cutie mark of sunglasses over a five pointed star. He leaned forward towards Strater, staring over the top of his shades at the earth pony.

"I dunno, Strates. I haven't seen you in over a year, and suddenly you just burst into my office demanding a stage for a week for some unicorn who I haven't even heard of. Do you have any idea how busy *The Mareiam Theatre* is? We're the number-one theater in Fillydelphia."

"I know, I know, Showtime. But you've really gotta listen to me on this one. She's absolutely astounding! She's got enough magic to match an Alicorn, for Celestia's sake! I mean, take this for example." Strater walked closer to Showtime, speaking a little quieter. "Ever since we did this show in Stableton, she's been getting followers. Not just fans, Showtime. Followers. Honest-to-Luna 'we'll go wherever you go' devotees. And we get more every show. We just did a gig over in Trottawa, and we gained easily another twenty ponies. There's practically a tent city built around our caravan on the edge of town."

"So you've been hounded by a bunch of vagrants, big whoop. Strater, Strater, baby, I'd love to help you out, but I just can't swing it! Who cares

about some egotistical unicorn? We've got this one pegasus lined up for the main stage. You would not BE-LIEVE what that filly can do!" Showtime slammed his hoof on his desk for emphasis, and leaned back into his chair. He drew long on his cigar before exhaling a thick cloud of pungent smoke to the side. "You've got to give me more than some group of admirers."

"She healed an entire village with one spell."

"Fancy. Did she shoot lasers and do backflips at the same time?"

"... No."

"Then you've still got nothing."

"Did I mention the couple hundred fans?"

"Yup. Still nothing. C'mon, Strates, I love yah baby, but you're wasting my time."

"Did I mention the couple hundred paying fans?"

"Okay, now we're talking. I'll tell you what... Probie! Get in here!"

A young earth stallion stuck his head in the room, worry easily visible across his face. "Y-yes, Mr. Showtime? More coffee?"

"No, you twit. Did you get all those copies of the schedules done?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Showtime. Three hundred copies, each highlighted and properly filed."

"Tear them up, there may be a time slot change. I need you to clear my appointments for this afternoon, and set me up Studio B instead, for a private show."

"T-tear them up? It took me four hours to-"

"I didn't ask for a sob story. I need Studio B for the afternoon. Work around it. And more coffee!" Showtime grabbed his cigar with his magic and moved it across the room, throwing the smoke into the intern's muzzle. The intern coughed violently as he closed the door.

Strater watched the whole scene with fascination. "That seems a little harsh, doesn't it?"

"It's our process of weeding out the weak. This is a small, competitive industry, Strates."

"I suppose. So, what happens now?"

"Have your 'Great and Powerful Trickster' meet me in Studio B. You know where you first came in?"

"Yeah?"

"Down the hall on your right, third stage. Bring any props you need for a show. Have her there after lunch, and I'll see if she's worth delaying that pegasus. Oh boy, you have GOT to see that little filly! She's just nuts. But nevermind that yet. If this Trixie does a good job, you got yourselves a gig."

"Sounds like a plan." Strater extended a hoof, and Showtime stood up from his desk to shake.

Showtime stretched in the empty auditorium, yawning and checking a clock on the far wall. He was in the middle of the seating, five rows back from the tiny stage, with his rear legs resting on the chair in front of him. Sighing impatiently, he checked his sunglasses for any errant specks of dust or dirt. Although the dim light of the theatre room hardly necessitated them, he tossed the shades into the air and ducked his head down, letting the glasses fall perfectly onto his face.

"Boo-yah."

He looked to the door, and it opened almost as if on cue. Trixie walked in with her nose held high in the air, cracking her trademark sly grin. Behind her, Strater shuffled in, dragging a third pony with him.

"Hey, hey, Strates. What's going on, buddy? I said private show. Why is my intern here?"

"You said we could bring a prop."

The intern tried to walk by himself, limping badly as he entered the room. "This flankhole tripped me! I think I sprained my ankle!"

"Oh, stop spreading lies," Strater winked at Showtime, and ushered Trixie onto the stage.

“Fine. Probie, stop whining, I’m trying to concentrate. Alright, Ms. ‘Great and Powerful Trixie.’ You have twenty minutes to win my respect. Go.”

Trixie glared at Strater. “When you said you could get Trixie an actual stage, you didn’t mention anything about her having to deal with ponies that *clearly* don’t understand who’s boss.”

“Give your ego a rest for a moment. He’ll understand soon enough.”

“I don’t appreciate these words, Strates.”

“Okay, sorry,” Strater apologised, then turned to Trixie. “Just... humor him, okay? This could be your big chance.” Strater walked over and sat down next to Showtime.

Trixie growled lightly, and then cleared her throat. “Fillies and Gentlecolts! Experience the grandeur of the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

She jumped in the air, flipping head over hooves backwards, as her horn started to glow brightly. Long lines of red light rapidly beamed outwards from the azure unicorn, until a pure white flash pulsed from Trixie to the clearly upset intern. She settled down into her proud pose as the other ponies regained their vision.

“H-hey,” the intern awkwardly spoke. “She fixed my ankle! It’s... It’s fine now!”

“You’ll also notice, Showtime,” Strater elbowed his old friend, “She did it while shooting lasers and doing backflips.”

Showtime was silent for a moment, thinking to himself. He lowered his legs from the chair, straightening his body as he turned serious. After a brief pause, he lowered his sunglasses and looked directly at Trixie. “You have my attention. You’re powerful, that’s for sure. But are you entertaining?”

“Aha! Trixie was hoping you’d be looking for something from a good show. For her next act,” she trailed as an evil smile crossed her face, “I’ll need my helpful assistant, Strater.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Then Trixie is doing her job!” She giggled, and then looked at Showtime. “Trixie’s next show of amazement shall be to cut Strater in half...”

“Pffft,” Showtime interrupted, waving a hoof in dismissal. “That trick’s been done a million times by every ‘up-and-coming’ unicorn magician-”

“Lengthwise.”

Showtime’s sunglasses fell from his face as Strater made an odd suffocating noise. He started pleading.

“Now, now, Trixie, I know you’re still upset over the cost of the bed, but this is taking it a little far, right? Right?”

“It’s just an illusion.” Trixie’s eyes almost sparkled in glee as she focused on the empty space in front of her. With a light ‘pop’, a large wooden box about the size of Strater appeared and opened up on the floor. Trixie turned to her grey friend. “After you.”

Strater stared at her for a long moment. Trixie’s expression didn’t change, brightly grinning at the flustered earth pony. They stared at each other for several seconds before Strater finally dropped his head in resignation, and settled into the box. Trixie closed it with her magic, and then ducked her head, squeezing her eyes shut in concentration. Showtime moved onto the edge of his seat, entranced by curiosity. Even the intern had stopped mid-crouch to watch, limply holding Showtime’s glasses in his hoof as he stared, dumbfounded.

A solid beam of energy extended several feet from Trixie’s horn, resonating deep tones as more and more magic built into it. Trixie shouted and reared, planting her front hooves on the top edge of the box, and then brought her head around with a grunt. The energy beam sliced through the middle of the box, cutting it cleanly in half. Trixie’s magic subsided, and she took a deep breath before sliding the two halves slightly apart.

“Well come now, Strater, give Showtime a wave.”

A single hoof came from one half of the crate, and shook slightly in the air.

“Both arms, please.”

“This is so weird,” a voice spoke from both sides of the box. A second grey hoof came from the other half, and it too waved weakly in the air.

Trixie reached over the halves and gently pushed Strater’s arms back into the chest. She slid the crate back together, and closed her eyes in concentration again. Her hooves began to glow, causing her blue coat to shine like neon. She reared once again, slamming her legs down onto the division. The whole chest shone with blinding intensity and solidified back together.

For a moment, nothing happened. Trixie simply stepped to the side and resumed her proud stance. Showtime’s mouth was wide open, almost in fear. The intern quivered. The seconds dragged on. After a minute, Trixie glanced at the chest with annoyance, and thumped it with her leg.

“Whoops, sorry.”

The crate opened up wide and Strater stood up, examining himself. He was perfectly fine. He looked up at Trixie and laughed.

“If... if you EVER do that again,” Strater started to threaten, “You’ll- “

“You’ll have the hottest show in the *country*, baby! That was utterly brilliant!” Showtime was out of his chair, stamping his feet on the ground in applause. “Forget Fillydelphia. We don’t have a stage large enough to accommodate you and the customers you’ll have. I’ve got a contact in Mounte Colto. You have enough tricks to keep a whole casino entertained for hours?”

“Trixie has enough ‘tricks’,” she snubbed, slightly insulted, “to keep everypony on the planet entertained for a century.”

“Excellent. Strater, I don’t know where you found this one, but by Celestia, you’ve done a fantastic job. You two are going to go places.” Showtime finished his adulation, before turning to the intern next to him. “Get me a quill and parchment, Probie! I need them five minutes ago!”

“Eep! Yes, Mr. Showtime. Here are your glasses, Mr. Showtime.”

“Careful with those,” Showtime snapped, wide-eyed. “Those aren’t just shades, those are Oatleys! Celestia’s sakes. And where’s that quill and parchment?”

The intern squeaked again and galloped out of the room, tripping on the edge of a musty chair. Trixie watched with intent until the pony was gone, and then turned to Showtime.

“Trixie likes your style.”

“Baby, / like my style.” Showtime winked before flipping his sunglasses onto his face again.

“So what now, Showtime?” Strater questioned his old friend as he examined himself incredulously. “You just send a letter, we hang out for a bit, and then get flown to some big stage?”

“Hah! You’re a riot, Strates. No, you’ve still got work to do.”

“More people who don’t understand who’s boss?” Trixie snickered.

“See, she gets it. No, how it’s gonna work is like this; those hot-shots in Mounte Colto will travel down here- on my dime I might add, so you’ll owe me- and enjoy a viewing like we just did here. The show will be public, mind you, so no breaking my interns this time round. If you do really well, you’ll pay off the travel fees and impress the agents. Then they’ll probably toss you on the first balloon to the city, and set you up a schedule. That is, of course, providing you have a good show.” Showtime sat back down, grabbing a cigar out of a bag resting on an old chair and catching it in his mouth. He looked at Trixie, cocking an eyebrow.

“... And just what are you expecting the Great and Powerful Trixie to do now, Mr. Showtime?”

“A light. Yah mind?”

Trixie rolled her eyes and winked at Showtime, and his cigar burst into flames. “You shouldn’t smoke, you know. It’s not good for you.” Trixie turned to Strater and started pushing him out the door. “C’mom now, it’s time for you to earn your pay. Trixie wants to make sure she doesn’t leave this next show to chance.”

“Pay? Nice, about time.”

“Did Trixie say that? Her bad.”

“On the subject of you never paying me,” Strater spoke as he and Trixie passed the first tent on the way to their caravan, “It was a fun joke, but I’m started to get annoyed.”

“Who said it was a joke? Trixie never offered you payment. She offered you adventure, remember?” Trixie skirted past various fans that noticed the duo walk by, skipping and hopping skillfully over tent pegs and bags.

The vast collection of tents stretched long into the distance outside of Fillydelphia. Several of the locals, concerned and curious about the sudden encampment, had ventured inside the hamlet to investigate. The result was essentially an impromptu festival, and it was this that Strater and Trixie were now fighting through to get to the wagon. The sky was hazy with dust as they travelled over the crispy badlands that led out of the city.

“Girls! It’s her! It’s the Great and Powerful Trixie! Trixie, do some tricks for us, please!”

Trixie hardly glanced at the group of ponies rushing towards her before grasping them with magic and levitating them out of her way. “No miracles without money, you all agreed to the rules.”

Strater was quiet in thought for a minute, helping Trixie push smaller groups of followers out of the way, before continuing where he left off. “And, trust me, it’s a lot of adventure. But I think you should consider payment. I did, after all, get you the gig with Showtime. And honestly, without me, you wouldn’t have a bucking town built around you every time you stop moving.” Strater was visibly nervous and irritated, and he spoke with less of his charismatic sarcasm and with a more demanding tone. Trixie paused, and Strater followed suit.

“Is that-”

“TRIXIE!”

“Would somepony just give Trixie a MOMENT?” The blue unicorn shouted, and a solid sphere of energy burst from her, blowing a dozen fans back to the ground. The followers merely flipped back up and watched in joy, but to Trixie’s relief, they held their ground. She turned back to Strater.

“Is that what you think, then? You’re the main cause for Trixie’s publicity?”

“No. Your magic is. But I’ve made you famous instead of infamous. In fact, I’ve actually prepared an honest-to-Luna lesson to teach you today, before your big show in a couple days.”

“A lesson about what?”

“You’ll find out when I get my salary.”

Trixie glared at Strater, before turning around and kicking a rock into the closest canvas wall she could find. “You’re damn lucky Trixie likes you... for now, at least. How much do you want, then?”

“Traditionally negotiations start with you offering me, and then we barter.”

“Twenty bits a day.”

Strater cocked an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. Right. Thirty five a day.”

“That’s outrageous! Twenty a day.”

“Thirty bits a day?”

“You’re mad. I told you. Twenty a day.”

“Thirty, Trixie.”

“Twenty you said? Twenty it is.”

“Trixie. I will walk away immediately. You’re fun to hang around but this is insulting. You asked me to teach you how to become a better pony. If you’re going to treat me like this, I obviously have been wasting my time.”

Trixie considered Strater’s argument for a moment, before grimacing.

“Fine. Twenty eight a day.”

“Deal. The lesson is in improvisation and humility.”

“Trixie should have stuck with twenty,” she sighed.

Strater playfully kicked some dust towards Trixie, and she shot him an evil grin before clenching her eyes shut. In an instant, Strater and Trixie’s positions were swapped, and the dust cloud caught Strater right in the muzzle. He started coughing and laughing.

“Okay,” he hacked, “That was pretty fast, I’ll admit.” They chuckled lightly and returned to brushing off as many fans as they could in quiet. Finally, after several more pleas for autographs and constant flattery, the two reached the sky blue trailer.

“I’m only slightly concerned that mare wanted you to sign her foal.”

“You Fillydelphians are all messed up, just so you know.”

“I’ve known that for years, thank you. So, okay. The lessons. Let’s get ready and head out. I *could* teach you in your caravan, but it’s a little cramped. We’ll need to go to some place open and, hopefully, deserted. I’m not so much concerned about anypony being hurt accidentally, but rather, you not paying attention to... anything I... say. Trixie. Focus.” Strater reached out and tapped Trixie, who had by now sat down on her haunches and reached her muzzle to the heavens, clicking her tongue dismissively at anypony that walked past her. She shook herself, and looked back at Strater.

“Right. We have to leave, some place secluded. Trixie is ready whenever you are.”

“I know a place on the east side of Fillydelphia that we should be able to use to our advantage. It’s about an hour’s walk from here.”

“An hour? Trixie does not walk anywhere for an hour. And besides, any place in Fillydelphia won’t work. All these nutjobs would follow us.”

In the distance, a pegasus shouted praise at the two.

“Trixie loves you too, anonymous nutjob! Where were we? No, Trixie has a better idea.”

“You make a good point, but where in Equestria can we get away from all of these ponies, teach you a lesson, and then travel back in time to make the big show? We’ll just have to deal with-”

Strater was interrupted by the ground falling away from his feet, and an intense feeling of disorientation. For a second that seemed like an eternity, he couldn’t breathe or see. He was surrounded by a crushing blackness.

“-it. What the HELL just happened?” He looked down, and briefly noticed he was standing on cool grass. Looking up, he saw Trixie collapsed

on the ground, shivering violently. "Trixie! Trixie, what happened? What's going on?"

Trixie rolled onto her hooves, and slowly stood up. She breathed in and out deeply, and slowly shook her head to dislodge whatever confusion she was stuck with. Finally, she turned to Strater.

"We needed some place secluded. Trixie knew a place. So, she teleported us here. Ugh..." she faltered slightly, and stumbled over to a nearby tree to lie down. "Let Trixie tell you, Strater, teleportation is one hell of a difficult trick. Moving a few feet away, or swapping places with a nearby pony is easy. But moving two ponies hundreds of miles away is extremely draining. She'll probably only be able to do that one more time today."

"Wow, Celestia, Trixie. This is astounding. Absolutely astounding. Where are we?" Strater glanced around him, examining the scenery for clues. His head stopped when he looked straight up. "Is that... is that *Cloudsdale*? Son of a shed. I can't get over this." Strater turned around, taking in his surroundings. They were right at the bottom of a large hill that happened to be covered in massive roses.

Trixie stood up and walked up to the flowers, breathing deeply as she nestled her muzzle into them. She stretched slowly and cracked her back, and then sat in front of Strater.

"Alright," she spoke, determined and partly recovered from the transportation, "What do you have for me?"

Strater straightened up and stood tall on his hooves, raising his usually slumped shoulders to a position that commanded power. The change was very subtle, but it struck Trixie. With just the slightest change in posture, he had transformed from punching bag to royal guard.

"Lesson one," he began. "Did you catch that?"

"... Yes. Wow."

"Explain it to me."

"Posture is everything."

"You're damn right it is. I've watched you sit and snub your nose at everypony. I've seen you shudder in disgust at compassion, and sit bored

when admirers talk to you. Don't ever forget your outward appearance. Those common ponies may forgive your attitude for a good show, but if you keep that up, you'll piss off everypony who matters. It doesn't mean a thing if you're as powerful as Celestia if you can't be as humble as her. So, lesson one. Posture. Sit down."

Trixie did as told, her back arching in as her head tilted high.

"Head down. Look at me at eye level, not over your nose. Straighten your back. Don't slouch, but don't bend backwards either. Now, how do you feel?"

Trixie remained frozen in her new position, looking at Strater as an equal, and keeping her back solid. "Less... powerful."

"But are you?"

"Of course not."

"Then does it matter?"

Trixie blinked. "Ohhh..."

"Exactly. Lesson two. I was going to touch on how you speak, but I gave it some consideration and I decided I still like talking without the gag." He chuckled, and Trixie laughed too. "Your tone of voice and word choice still needs to be watched just as much as your posture," he continued. "Again, common ponies won't mind, because it's part of a show. But professionals and high class ponies will find you offensive. It's all well and good to lord over yourself when you're actually acting, but outside of a show you need to practice some humility. Now, repeat after me; 'Trixie couldn't have done it without you.'"

The azure unicorn started convulsing slightly.

"Say it, Trixie."

"Trixie... couldn't have done it... without... you."

"Fantastic. Now, again, but this time without a pretend stick up your rump."

"Trixie couldn't have done it without you."

“One more time, now. Add some compassion into it. You’ve got nothing if your words are just a recording.”

“Oh, thank you, Strater, but really. Trixie couldn’t have done any of it without you.”

“Excellent. Again.”

Trixie sighed, and repeated the line.

“Again.”

Trixie and Strater went back and forth, each time Trixie adding more emotion and sincerity to the phrases she was forced to repeat. After half an hour, Strater finally stopped.

“Fantastic work, Trixie. Just wonderful. See, being nice doesn’t hurt as much after you do it for a while.”

“Trixie supposes... What next, Strater? How to kiss foals and sign autographs for a million ponies? Perhaps a lesson in doing volunteer and charity work.”

“Hush, you. Those are great ideas. If we strike it big I’ll sign you up for a charity concert.”

“Wait, Trixie was being sarc-”

“Lesson three. Improvisation. You’re fairly okay at this, but you can use some improvement. Irrationality is excellent, and you’re great with thinking irrationally on the fly. The problem is, your randomness is predictable. Ever played word disassociation?”

“Of course. Pinecone.”

“Branch.”

“Tree.”

“Meadows.”

“Roses. What’s the point?”

“What your mind is doing there is improvising, but in a rather predictable way. Each of those words were easily connected to the others.

Let's try again, but don't let logic choose your words. Let the feelings the words convey sway your thoughts. Orange."

"Sunrise."

"Better. Hoof."

"Wind."

"Good. Breakfast."

"Fulfillment. "

"There you go. See, when you go with instinct and not logic, you unearth unpredictability. In your act, examine your surroundings. Consider every use for anything that catches your eye. Don't discount the most surreal thoughts, either, because if you have enough of them you may find they all fit together like some sort of four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle."

"Okay, Strater, you've lost Trixie."

"Sorry. What I'm saying is, sometimes weird ideas sound bad by themselves, but when paired with other weird ideas they become brilliant. So don't forget the odd thoughts. In every show, instead of doing canned tricks, use something from where you're acting in a new way, every time. Your act will never go stale, and people who've seen you do "that one trick she did that one time" a hundred times will never get tired of it because there's always some new flair added to it. Phew. Understand all that?"

"Yes. Basically, Trixie needs to act on fast ideas instead of planning everything."

"Exactly. You're smart enough not to do the dumb ideas, so if something sounds good after a second thought, do it without a third."

"Right. So, now what?"

"Well, I think we could probably head back. It's getting late, and you should be rested up if you're going to practice your act tomorrow."

"Didn't you just say that I had to be more impulsive?"

"That doesn't mean don't be prepared."

"True. Alright, you ready?"

“I guess. That teleportation spell is just as weird as being cut in half.”

There was a bright flash, and suddenly Strater found himself standing in the fields beneath Cloudsdale with Trixie nowhere to be seen.

“... Oh well for buck’s sakes. You have GOT to be kidding me,” Strater swore incredulously.

“I was,” Trixie started howling in laughter as she walked out from behind a tree. Before Strater could make a complaint however, she slammed her eyes shut and popped the two ponies both out of existence. The roses swayed gently in the wind as emptiness filled the meadows once again.

Chapter 5

Trixie lay on her side in bed, staring across the dark trailer. From the dim light of the window, she could see the faint outline of Strater stretched out lazily on his cot. The stallion was dead asleep, breathing slowly as Luna's moon reached its zenith. Occasionally a snore would pass through his muzzle, breaking the silence of the night. Trixie rolled onto her back and glared at the ceiling.

She couldn't sleep. Bits of conversation from the day before had continuously poked at her mind, bringing forth odd and uneasy thoughts. Trixie couldn't clear her head. With a groan, she slid off the side of her bed and sat down at her table. Slowly, so as not to disturb Strater, she pulled a few heavy books and scrap parchment off the shelf with her magic and lit a candle in the centre of the table.

Strater groaned as the soft light hit his face, and Trixie froze and stared at the grey pony. Strater flipped over in his bed, facing the wall, and snored loudly again. Trixie waited a second longer before turning back to her task. She stifled a yawn as she opened up a thick tome and started reading.

As the night wore on, Trixie vented her mind onto the scraps of parchment, jotting down notes and small sketches between bouts of research. Her candle burning at half its starting height, she stood up and walked away from the table for a break. She walked up to the small window beside Strater's cot and looked at the scene outside.

The mass of tents had grown larger, and with the help of the moon's light Trixie could see the canvas homes of hundreds of her fans stretch to the barely visible edge of Fillydelphia. A good two hundred feet from the caravan was a clearing, and Trixie could see several dozen ponies sitting around a large campfire, all talking quietly as the night wore on. They were laughing and smiling in the cool midnight air.

What is it with these ponies? So many of them have left behind friends and family to follow me, and they're not just okay with that... they're genuinely happy. I don't understand it.

“Nervous about tomorrow?”

Trixie jumped, her heart racing. She turned and looked over at Strater. He was watching her, his head propped up on a hoof.

“How long have you been looking at Trixie?”

“Not long. But the way you’re staring out that window intrigued me. You don’t seem like the type that gets lost in thought much.”

Trixie looked at Strater, unimpressed. “You’re lucky Trixie’s too tired to feel insulted. But yes, you’re right. Trixie is a little nervous. But she doesn’t know why. Trixie has near-ultimate power. How can she mess this up?”

Strater quietly stood up from his cot and settled next to Trixie. He looked out the window as he spoke, staring at the campfire outside.

“You’re just remembering that you don’t own your power. Your power owns you. You’ve figured this out yourself, haven’t you? That’s the real reason you’re nervous; you just don’t want to accept it. Right?”

Trixie looked away from Strater, and the both of them watched a group of fans stand up and start singing quietly to the dark sky.

“... Yes, Trixie has. But Trixie can control her power. That’s all that counts.”

Strater nodded. “Exactly. Focus on that, then.”

They were quiet for a long time, watching the group.

“What do you suppose they’re singing?”

“Why don’t we go and find out? You were watching them pretty intensely there, earlier. What’s your problem with them?”

“It’s not so much a problem, but rather... Trixie doesn’t understand what it is. Why are they following her? What exactly is it that Trixie’s doing right? Or, is it even anything to do with her?”

“Best way to find out is to ask them straight. I’m sure any one of those ponies will happily answer. You’ve become more than an idol to them, you’re practically a goddess. These ponies love you.”

“Enough with the coaching, Strater, it’s nearly two in the morning.”

“Right, sorry. But why don’t we go out there anyways? No magic tricks. No formalities. Sit with your fans, share a cider with them, and sing a song or two. Then we can come back in and rest up for our practise tomorrow.”

Trixie nodded silently and turned towards the door. She reached for her cape but paused, thought for a moment, and let it be. “C’mon, Strates,” she chided softly as she stepped outside the caravan.

“Don’t call me that. Seriously, don’t call me that. That irks me to the core when I hear it.”

“You seemed pretty okay with Showtime calling you it.”

“That’s because it’s Showtime who was saying it. We’ve known each other for a lot of years. He’s one hay of a character, but you learn to love his attitude.”

“And what an attitude he has.”

“I’m a pretty forgiving guy. I learn to look past a person’s downfalls to see who they really are underneath.”

“So what’re Trixie’s downfalls, then?” the unicorn asked, the clapping of her hooves echoing between the vast rows of tents. None of the ponies by the campfire had noticed them yet.

“Oh, wow. Okay. Um. You’re arrogant, egotistical, and socially irresponsible.”

“I’ve heard that before. So who is Trixie, underneath?”

“You’re arrogant, egotistical, socially irresponsible, but you have a huge heart.”

“Touching.”

“You asked. To be honest, I’m surprised at how well you’re taking this. I like the midnight Trixie. She’s much more indifferent.”

“Trixie’ll probably be more insulted tomorrow, but there’s a lot on her mind right now. All she wants is a nice, relaxing night.”

“What’s eating you?”

“... Nothing important.”

Strater glanced at Trixie, but let the topic be. It was too late at night to force a discussion that nopony wanted to have.

As they walked into the light of the fire, they examined the bunch of fans with quiet intrigue. A unicorn was laying down, plucking gently with his magic on a wooden guitar, while a young colt nestled close to him. Four ponies stood close to one another, singing and swaying--due to the music or the cider, Trixie couldn’t tell--next to the musician. On the other side of the circle, a large group of ponies chatted softly, sipping from mugs of cocoa and bottles of apple cider. A few of the talking ponies looked up, and one called out.

“Could it be? Our presence is graced by the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

Before Trixie could say anything, Strater leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“You sure?” she whispered back. Strater gave a curt nod, and she replied. “For tonight, friends, just call me Trixie.”

“Are... Are you sure? We wouldn’t want to insult the most amazing pony that ever lived with such trifle small ta-”

“Just ‘Trixie’ is fine,” Trixie interrupted the ranting pony with a contained sigh. “Trixie’s actually looking for some ‘trifle’ small talk. After all, she still is just a pony, like everyone else here.”

“If that’s what you wish,” the pony replied, “then we shall treat you as an equal.”

“It is, yes.”

The rest of the group immediately let out a collective sigh--the mares at having being called an equal to Trixie, the stallions at being able to release the guts they had been hiding. Trixie couldn’t help but giggle as bottles of cider were passed around from hiding places. Soon enough, everypony settled back down and resumed their conversation.

“Now,” Strater spoke, patting Trixie on the back, “you learn whatever it is you need to know from these ponies here. I’m going to grab a cocoa and sing a bit with those ponies over there.”

“Strater? Strater Hooves?”

“Eh?”

“It *is* you, Strater! How have you been?”

A pegasus mare from the singing ponies called out to Strater, flying back with an empty mug for some more hot chocolate. Her coat was a pale grey, and in the light of the fire Trixie could make out her blond mane and a cutie mark consisting of seven bubbles. She looked familiar, but Trixie couldn’t place why.

“Is that... Cousin Derpy!” Strater’s face lit up in surprise, and he reached out and embraced the pegasus. “It’s been ages! What have you been up to? What brings you here?”

Trixie flinched as the pegasus became fully illuminated, showcasing her lazy eye. She had known others like this mare and hadn’t thought anything of it, but the sight was always enough to initially shock her. She continued to watch the pegasus, trying to figure out where she’d seen her before.

“I had a special package that needed to get to Fillydelphia on a rush job. But I caught a headwind on the way down, and by the time I made it here it was too dark to fly back. Needing a place to stay, and seeing a random village of tents, I figured I’d try my luck at catching a spare bed. That unicorn playing the guitar over there was more than happy to lend a mattress.”

“It’s funny how small this world really is, isn’t it?” Strater chuckled a bit. “Say, how’s Dinky doing? Is she holding up well since your husband volunteered to the Royal Guard?”

“Every letter he sends makes it a little easier on her. I’m just glad my job lets me see him every once in a while. Not many mares can say that.”

“Well, that’s nice. How’s Ponyville treating you these days?”

Suddenly it clicked. *The Ponyville incident, of course! That mare was in the crowd, I remember. What is she doing here? Ugh, the nerve of some*

ponies, to mock me and cast me as an outcast and then continue to follow me-

Trixie's train of thought was cut off by Derpy's response to Strater's question.

"Al- Alright, I guess... There's still a lot of ponies there who don't understand that it's just a lazy eye. None of them stop to think about how difficult it is to fly and do basic tasks with vision like mine. I... I get insulted a lot."

Strater nuzzled his cousin with a sad look on his face. "That's too bad, Derpy. Why don't you move, then? Canterlot's a much more accepting place, and you'd be closer to your husband."

"Oh, Strater, you know I can't do that. Why should I let the jeers of uninformed ponies bother me, anyways? Dinky grew up in Ponyville and has just as many friends as any other foal, and I've got real friends that matter to me there, too. No pony should ever let others mock them and cast them as an outcast without learning who they really are."

Trixie flinched as the sentence hit her, and for the second time that night her mind began reeling with thoughts and ideas.

"H- Hey, Strater?"

"Yeah Trixie?"

"Why don't you and Derpy go catch up by the singers there, so Trixie can talk with her fans? Would that be alright?"

Strater stared at Trixie, shocked by her sudden politeness. He gave her a questioning look, wondering what had caused the transition from haughty to distracted.

"Must be the time of night," he muttered, encouraging Derpy to go over to the singers. They talked enthusiastically as they trotted around the fire.

Trixie shook her head to regain her composure. One of the ponies offered her some hot chocolate, and she nodded. In an act that would have sent Strater into convulsions, she pulled out a couple bits and handed them to the pony that served her the beverage.

“Oh, there’s no need for that, Trixie. A couple businesses in town graciously donated the food and drink we’ve been sharing in return for some free help.”

“Please, Trixie insists. You’ve done all this... just for her. The least she could do is return the favor, even if in the slightest.”

“Thank you, Trixie. You’re a real saint.”

Trixie stared at the pony blankly, her tired eyes wide and unblinking. The pony looked uncomfortable, and eventually edged away from Trixie’s line of sight. She shook her head again.

“... Sorry. Trixie doesn’t hear that too often. Which, really, brings her to the first thing she’d like to ask you ponies here.”

“Ask away.”

“All her life, she’s never seen something like this happen. She’ll admit she’s been... Pretty arrogant and rude. No pony ever thought of her like you folks do. Why? Why is it you leave your lives behind to follow her, to camp on the cool ground, to depend on charities for survival?”

The ponies all considered the question, thinking for a long time. Trixie laid down on the ground by the fire in silence, sipping from her mug as she waited for an answer. She was too tired to be impatient, too tired to care about insults or jokes. Too many thoughts had passed through her mind and she could no longer focus on anything she didn’t care for. All she wanted was an answer. *Trixie can get happy or angry or whatever about it tomorrow*, she thought. *No sense wasting the night on a bad mood.*

“Well,” one of the ponies began, speaking deliberately so as not to use the wrong words, “I don’t speak for all of us, but I’m pretty sure I’ve got the main idea behind the fascination.”

“Trixie’s listening.”

“It’s just... For thousands of years, all Equestria’s ever had is regular ponies and the Alicorns. Sure, every once in a while a unicorn will come along with a lot of magical power. Take Princess Celestia’s apprentice there, whatever her name is. Midnight Twinkle, I don’t know. It’s not important. Sure, she’s got a lot of magic power, but she’ll never raise the sun. She’ll never bring the moon into the sky to grace us with a night as beautiful as we have here. I wasn’t there for that healing in Stableton, but I

hear it was something amazing. Those regular unicorns have power, alright, but yours is unique.”

The other ponies agreed as the pony talked. A mare to the side spoke up immediately after the stallion finished.

“Yeah, that’s the fascination point of it. But there’s also a bit of... common ground to it, too, right? Here we have a unicorn, heck, just a pony, who could probably outmatch an Alicorn. And you’re a pony just as much as him or me. We can relate to you. So, yes, you have unmatched power. You’re also one of us.”

“So, you’re not just followers of Trixie’s acts, then, you’re-”

“Followers of Trixie, yes. Maybe not every pony here, but I bet you at least nine out of every ten of us would follow you to the ends of the earth. You just wait, too. Once ponies start to hear about you coming down here, sharing a drink, and just talking with us? Expect great things, Trixie. While power can get you anything for a price; respect is a source of credit.”

Trixie fell silent, thinking about what she was just told. She shivered as a chill breeze penetrated past her coat, and noticed several of the others quiver. She watched as they took a brief pause to down more hot cocoa.

Well, if respect is a source of credit, it couldn’t hurt to raise Trixie’s limit a bit, could it?

Trixie cast a light spell, surprising the group of ponies as the air shimmered around them. Soon, a deep warmth overcame them all. The mare who last spoke reached a hoof tentatively out of the haze and quickly drew it back, shocked.

“... Thank you, Trixie. Can we get you some more to drink? It’s the least we could do.”

“No, that’s fine. Trixie needs to sleep. Even unicorns as majest- uh,” she paused, remembering her lessons, “Even... even talented magicians need their rest, just like everypony else.”

“Have a good night. We look forward to your performance!”

“How do you-”

“We’re fanatics, dear. We learn things we shouldn’t,” the mare laughed, waving a hoof goodbye while Trixie walked away. A quizzical look overcame the unicorn’s face, and she shook her head sleepily on her way to where Strater was with his cousin.

“Strater, Trixie thinks it’s time for bed.”

“Hold on, hold on, one m- one more verse!” Strater hiccuped in his apparent excitement.

Trixie stood dumbfounded, watching Strater lean down and noisily suck the contents of a brown-coloured bottle out through a straw. He whipped up quickly, stumbling over slightly into his laughing cousin, before launching out into song. Derpy and the unicorn playing the guitar joined with him; neither, however, were as drunk as the earth pony.

*“Ohh, all the nice mares love a candle
All the nice mares love a wick,
For there’s something about a candle
Which reminds them all of a-”*

“Strater Hooves!”

“Yes, Preat and Gowerful Trixie?”

“Trixie is seriously astounded. She’s been gone maybe ten minutes, and you’re already out of control. Trixie thought *you* were supposed to make the good decisions. And singing songs like that, in front of this little foal.”

The guitar player’s eyes widened, and he looked down, surprised to see his child still nestled asleep by his legs. Sheepishly he stood up, resting the foal onto his back, and walked off to his tent while saying goodnight.

“I won’t be far behind,” Derpy called out to him.

“Well?” Trixie tapped a hoof, glaring at the tipsy stallion.

Strater flopped onto the ground defeated, his rear legs splaying out awkwardly. He pouted at Trixie, his clouded eyes widening in sorrow. “But I was just tryi- trying to have some fun. I haven’t seen Derpy here in ages.”

“To be fair, Strates,” the grey pegasus spoke up, giggling, “I haven’t seen you in as much time, and I’m still quite sober.”

Strater looked at his cousin, his open eyes and lower lip continuing to search for pity. “You too, Derpy?”

“Sorry Strater. It was nice seeing you again, you take care.”

“Say hi to Dinky for me, then.” Strater watched his cousin hop into the air and glide after the unicorn, and turned back to Trixie with a goofy grin on his muzzle.

“... Now what?”

“Want a cider?”

“Trixie’s going to bed. And you’re going to sleep too, before you become utterly useless to me tomorrow.”

“I don’t wanna,” he chuckled childishly. His laughter was cut short though, as a shimmering aura enveloped and lifted him into the air. “Oh, for buck’s sakes, not again!”

“You complain a lot,” Trixie commented, pulling the hovering pony along behind her as she trotted back to the wagon.

“I complain a lot. Me. Your cutie mark should just be somepony whining.”

Trixie sighed and shook her head. Her horn shone maroon for a moment, and a solid orb of red energy rocketed out from her and connected with Strater. He flinched when it impacted his head.

“What the hay was thaaaaaauuhhh...” was all he could make out before he fell limp, hanging in the air like a ragdoll.

That was far too satisfying for Trixie’s own good.

Trixie climbed into the caravan, unable to hold back her yawns any longer. She settled into her own bed before moving Strater’s unconscious body above his own bed.

“Goodnight, Strater.” With that, she dropped him carelessly onto his cot and fell asleep almost immediately.

Strater groaned lowly and painfully as he woke, moaning from the very depths of his soul while he turned to roll out of bed. Lazily lifting his head, he gasped in pain when the morning light from the window hit his face and he slammed his eyes shut in agony.

“This is what happens when you act like an idiot.”

The grey pony risked cracking open one eye, and his lagging mind struggled to comprehend the scene in front of him. Trixie was trotting around the table, her cape hanging from her neck like an apron, and on the table magical fires warmed a couple large pots and a kettle.

“Wh... what’s all th-”

“Well, you were up so late,” Trixie tutted, leaning across the table to sniff deeply from the large pot in the center, “Trixie figured you’d appreciate a good, healthy breakfast.”

Strater swayed in his bed, gagging as he watched the blue unicorn lift a ladle of the oatmeal high over the bowl, turn it over, and let the congealed grains slowly stretch and splatter into the bowl with a wet ‘plop’ sound.

“Now if the oatmeal isn’t enough, Trixie’s also cooked some vegetables for you. She hopes you like spinach,” she started, grabbing a plate and dropping a large serving of slimy, rubbery greens onto it. “And as a special treat, Trixie’s cooked up her family recipe hangover cure. It consists of magic, tulip stems, mineral water, grass, more grass, dandelions, and a lot more grass.” She placed a glass on the table and poured the contents of the kettle into it, letting the frothy, green, gelatinous mixture ooze out slowly in front of the nauseated stallion.

Strater stared at the plate set in front of him for several seconds, his swaying increasing.

“Well, Strater? Hungry?”

And with that he bolted up off his cot, planting a hoof on his muzzle as he burst out the door and stumbled outside of the caravan, tripping on the steps on his way out.

“Do please clean yourself up a bit when you’re done,” Trixie called out after him, laughing evilly as she moved the contents of the table to the side

and placed her notebooks and scrolls in the center. She hummed loudly to mask the unpleasant sounds coming from behind the trailer and dove into her research with renewed intensity. After a moment, Trixie paused and looked up and stared at the bowl of oatmeal.

“Oh, why not.”

She pulled the bowl over and started eating, savoring the delicious cinnamon and maple flavours she had cooked into the meal. She turned back to her notes as she ate, scribbling haphazardly as she juggled a quill and a spoon while reading. The door to the caravan creaked open, and Strater heaved himself inside and sat down.

“Luna’s beard, does my head hurt. Ugh.”

“Drink the mixture. Honest to Celestia, Trixie wasn’t making that up.” She pulled the glass close and took a sip, proving her words. Strater watched with a pained expression as Trixie set the cup down in front of him and tossed in a straw. She waited a beat before sliding the glass closer to him with a hoof. An odd gurgling noise escaped the earth pony’s muzzle.

“Drink up, Strater, or Trixie will teleport you back and forth.”

With a glare that could have boiled water, he leaned forward and drank the mixture in one go, before sitting back in his chair.

“... That’s... wow. Actually not that bad. And I’m starting to feel better, too. Right now. That stuff is a miracle!”

“Trixie’s glad you think so, because you’re going to go through hell and back today. She needs a mind-blowing routine for audition.”

Strater rubbed his temples, struggling to think through his headache. “Oh Luna, Trixie. I have no idea. You are absolutely not allowed to cut me in half lengthwise again, at least.”

“Duly noted.”

“Maybe, try... What can you do, anyways? I see something new every day.”

Trixie shuffled some of her large textbooks and papers and slid one of the more massive books across to him. With a flick she opened the text to the exact page she wanted, and let Strater read it.

"The *Encyclopedia of Magic*... I can see that as being useful."

"Hush up and read, or Trixie will force-feed you the spinach."

"What is with you and threats today? Okay, fine." Strater began reading, occasionally spouting suggestions of spells and tricks Trixie could do. Trixie continued to read and jot notes as he read.

"Ooh, this sounds interesting. A 'Flutterwing' spell. Temporarily makes wings out of gossamer and morning dew."

"Hmm. Trixie could do one, but they're pretty common in regular magic shows. She'll keep it in mind."

"'Variations on the Cup and Ball' tricks? How do you even do a variation on that?"

"Ooh, Trixie likes that. You don't get motion sick easily, do you?"

"...Against my better judgement, I'm going to tell you no, I don't."

"Excellent. Anything else catch your eye?"

"Just this last one, here. I haven't read into it at all, but the name seems cool. 'Spontaneous Cri-'"

Trixie slammed the book shut and lifted it back to the bookshelf, violently shoving it into its place.

"Those first two will do fine."

"... I am in way too much pain to even question what just happened."

"Good. Have some oatmeal."

Strater opened his muzzle to object, but stopped himself with a defeated shake of his head. He grabbed the bowl Trixie offered and leaned back in his chair, eating silently. Trixie let Strater eat as she packed up her work, standing up and stretching her back in a cat-like manner as she cleaned. Strater finished the bowl and looked up at her, curiously.

"So I've been wondering. Every time your parents are mentioned, you freeze, look all sad, and then change the topic. Since I'm still really not prepared to teach you anything yet, why don't you entertain me. What's their story?"

Trixie tilted her head away from Strater, hiding her eyes. "Trixie doesn't want to talk about it."

"Horse manure. Yes you do. You just think you don't. Get it off your chest."

"Leave Trixie alone! She doesn't want to talk about it. It hurts too much." Trixie's horn glowed deep red with another combat spell, and she glared--almost frightened--at the earth pony.

"No. Hit me with more magic, I don't care. This is obviously a problem, and-" Strater was cut off as an energy projectile connected with his shoulder. He yelped, but stood tall again, staring sternly at Trixie. "This is a problem, and talking about it can only make things better. Shooting me with magic however," he swore, rubbing his shoulder, "Only serves to piss ponies off and leave you bitter."

Trixie's face scrunched up, her expression morose yet infuriated, and she turned from Strater.

"We're alone here, Trixie. Just try it, for once."

"You won't be able to appeal to Trixie's guilt, Strater. Not now, now this subject."

Well, Strater thought with a smirk, then I'll appeal to her ego instead.

"Consider this then. You are *almost* perfect. You can do *almost* anything."

"Trixie can do anything, haven't you noticed?"

"No, you can do almost anything. Anything providing your parents are never mentioned. And, until you talk about it and get over it, you'll never pass that wall."

"... Fine." Trixie cleared the rest of the objects off the table and stepped onto it, sitting in her usual proud manner. Her horn glittered, and suddenly particles manifested themselves in the air above the unicorn, focusing into neon-sign-like images. Strater's jaw dropped slowly as he watched the projection, listening to Trixie's narration that accompanied the show.

"When Trixie was just a little filly," she began...

A small, gleeful blue pony appeared, sitting in between two adult unicorns. They nuzzled each other, smiling and embracing each other as only a family could.

“She travelled with her parents as they entertained Equestria. We didn’t make a lot of money, but we always had enough to live a comfortable life. We were happy. We were happy because we made other ponies happy.”

The scene vanished and replaced itself, the adult ponies standing on a stage with various magic effects flashing behind them. The blue filly appeared between them again, laughing as she tried to reproduce the tricks her parents performed.

“Trixie’s parents would teach her and help her hone her own magical talent. Her cutie mark appeared very early on, a wand surrounded by magic. Her destiny was...”

Trixie paused, gauging Strater’s reaction. He was locked on the magical display, his jaw lax in awe. Trixie smiled and continued. “Her destiny was... to *entertain!*”

Strater flinched as the scene continued.

The filly jumped high while Trixie’s cutie mark glittered in the air behind her. Fireworks and other mystical displays shone brightly, surrounding and lightening the unicorn.

“But she went too far,” Trixie sobbed.

The scene turned dark, the magic fading and enveloping the filly in shadow. She stopped jumping, instead curling into a ball and shaking in fear.

“Her parents always supported her, even when she took over their shows and became the main attraction. She demanded more, in every town and every city, she strove to become better and more amazing. Greater. In one fateful act, one day...” Trixie stopped, and tears were running down her face.

The unicorn started crying silently, the tears shimmering as they fell slowly, serenely.

Strater's eyes watered in sympathy, but still he watched, fixated on the projections in front of him.

"One day," Trixie choked, continuing, "She set up a massive fireworks display. All of Hoofington would be lit up that night. Ponies would be sure to talk about the event for years, Trixie was sure."

Again the scene was replaced by another, a stage and trailer appearing as everything brightened. The filly was running gleefully through a crowd of faceless ponies, with various bursts of magic escaping through her enthusiasm.

"But one pony got violent. Some show unicorn, ages ago, had embarrassed him, and that pony held onto that grudge, fueling and feeding it over the years. He attacked Trixie's-" She frowned, and shook her head. "No. He attacked *my* parents. In the struggle, some of the fireworks that were stockpiled were set ablaze."

Behind the trailer, a pony accosted the adults, swinging wildly while the stallion reached to protect the mare. There was a shout, and the third pony fell back into a mysterious crate.

"The explosion killed them all."

The show flashed violently, shooting sparks and smoke out chaotically. The projection finally settled, fading slowly into a grey mist with only a lone, sobbing blue filly in the center. The mist dissipated completely, vanishing with a distant, echoing wail of mourning.

Trixie lowered her head, her horn's glow receding, and she sat on the table--once again dark with shadows--and cried.

"Trixie was old enough by then," she whispered hoarsely. Strater struggled to hear. "After the citizens of Hoofington gave what they could, they shooed the poor filly away, leaving her to her own devices. Trixie moved the wagon on her own. She used her own bits to feed herself. And every night, Trixie went to sleep, by herself, in her dark and lonely caravan, knowing in her heart the best she could do is make her parents proud by becoming better and better."

Strater reached a comforting hoof out, patting Trixie on her back. Trixie sniffed as a single tear dropped from her muzzle and landed on the table.

“So that explains it,” Strater spoke softly, leading Trixie down to the floor and giving her a hug. “Why you freeze at their names... you don’t think it was your fault, do you?”

“Well... Trixie did demand all the fireworks, and if it wasn’t for her-”

“Stop,” Strater ordered. He pressed a hoof against Trixie’s mouth, shushing her. “There’s always a risk with fireworks. If your parents were as talented as they sounded, they would have known all those risks and taken all the precautions. That other pony caused them to go off. Not you.”

“But, the Grea-”

“Not. You.”

Trixie opened her mouth, but the words caught. She tried again, yet despite her efforts no sound issued from her. Eventually, she lowered her head and nodded, sniffing again. Strater walked over to the counter and grabbed a rag, offering it to Trixie. She smiled weakly as she wiped her face and cleaned herself up a bit.

“Trixie, I have to tell you. You’ve done your parents good. You may not be the most... shall we say... well-mannered of ponies, but you have a kind heart. And you’re not just better and better. You are the best. There’s no denying that. I don’t think your parents would have any reason not to be proud of you, wherever they are.”

Trixie’s smile widened, and she raised her head a little. After a moment’s thought, she raised her shoulders and straightened her back, limiting her cockiness while still wearing a face a pride. “Trixie... Trixie thinks you’re right. She has made them proud. She has.”

“That was your lesson for today,” Strater chuckled. “You feel better now?”

Trixie nodded. “Thank you, Strater.”

“Nothing to thank me about, Trixie. Although, in return, you could tell me what kind of trance spell you used on me just then.”

“Trance spell?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t look away from your story. It was like some sort of magic was entrapping me, preventing me from looking away.”

Trixie tilted her head in confusion. "There was nothing like that. The spell just makes the presentation. If anything was making you watch, it was just... you."

"Fascinating. I'm going back to bed now, anyways. My head hurts."

"Oh, no you don't. If Trixie's going to pay you bits per day, you're going to work per day."

"But Trixie," Strater whined, his cry a mixture of sarcasm and genuine pleading.

"No buts. Does Trixie need to use her magic again?"

Strater grimaced, biting his lower lip. "Fine. But don't expect the best performance from me today."

"The best performance wouldn't come from you, it'd come from Trixie."

Strater walked to the door and opened it, pointing his hoof outside with a flourish. "I miss the midnight Trixie," he muttered, stepping out after the blue unicorn.

Showtime paced urgently in front of Trixie and Strater. Behind him hung a great red velvet curtain, its heavy fabric dampening the sound and lights beyond. Showtime's eye twitched as he paused his pacing to glance onstage.

"Strates, baby, I love ya, but didya have to bring a whole freaking village with you? I have no idea how this is going to turn out. Oh colt, oh colt..."

Strater laughed and patted his friend on the shoulder. "Calm down, Showtime. It'll be amazing, just you watch. We've been practising for a few days now too, just in case. You've never had anything to worry about!" He laughed and sat next to Trixie. She was frozen still in her upgraded 'proud pose'; her back rigid, her muzzle high in the air-- so much in fact, her hat

was starting to slide off her mane. Showtime glanced at her and shook his head.

"I dunno, Strater. Those ponies in the V.I.P. booth don't care about a massive crowd here. They care about how good the show is. For all they know, Trixie coulda bought'em all off!" Showtime slammed a hoof into the ground, a nerve by his horn twitching. He shouted down the hall. "Proby! More decaf!"

"Trixie thinks," the unicorn started, her form unmoving, "That Mr. Showtime would do better with a shot of alicorn tranquilizer than simple decaf."

Showtime looked at her and spasmed. "Yah know what? Fine. Do your own thing. Baby, I don't care. I've got my money back for bringing those ponies here. If you fail miserably, I can just say you brainwashed me like that whole crowd."

"That's the spirit, Showtime!" Strater laughed and ushered him out of the way. "You head back to your office and have a cigar. Relax. You're done with us now!"

"Strates, I wish it were that easy! On the one hoof, you could screw up, and life goes on for me. I'll call that pegasus filly back and get her to do that *unbelievable* act, if she gets over having her show punted for yours." Showtime slammed a hoof into the ground, emphasizing his astonishment. "But on the other hoof, if you guys succeed, I'm coming with you."

"Oh?"

"As your agent, I'll be contractually obliged to follow and make sure you have everything you could want or need."

"I think that's a little unnecessary, Showtime. Trixie can already acquire everything we would want or need," Strater beamed at the panicking unicorn.

"Now hold on, Strater." Trixie broke her pose, frowning and looking at her red-maned friend. "Why should Trixie do all the work if someone else is willing, or at least forced," she added, noticing Showtime roll his eyes, "to do it for her?"

Strater gave Trixie a questioning look. "Wait, wait, you strive for unlimited power, but don't intend to use it?"

Trixie resumed her arrogant stance before replying. "Oh, Strater, Strater, Strater. The point of having power is not to use it, but simply to be able to."

"I don't follow."

Showtime elbowed Strater back away from the stage. "Well then find out later, Strates, because right now," he trailed, taking one final glance at the audience beyond the stage. He turned back and flipped his head up, launching his sunglasses off his mane. With a perfectly timed kick, the shades rebounded off his rear hoof and spun back, landing expertly on his muzzle. "Iiiiiit's *SHOWTIME!*"

Trixie and Strater stared blankly at the panting, silver-and-orange unicorn. Showtime's grin slowly faded to a frown. "Oh, c'mon. You cannot *believe* how long I've wanted to do that. And I pulled it off, too! But seriously. Get out of the way, the show's starting." With that, Showtime cantered off down the hall, screaming orders at unfortunate workers.

"Strater."

"Mmyes, Ms. Great and Powerful?"

"My cape."

As per their tradition, which they had started back after Stableton, Strater grabbed Trixie's trademark cape and walked up to her, balancing on his rear hooves as he fastened it around her neck.

"Trixie," Strater spoke, continuing the tradition.

"Mmyes, Mr. Hooves?"

"My pay."

A handful of bits levitated from some saddlebags that had been tossed to the side and set themselves in Strater's hooves. Strater smiled approvingly as Trixie walked over to the centre of the stage and sat right next to the curtain. With a nod to Showtime, the curtains began to rise dramatically. Trixie's posture perfected itself as the intense lights illuminated her from all angles, surrounding and filling her with the thrill of performance, the excitement of being watched, and the pride of being the center of attention. Strater called out to her before he exited the stage, completing their pre-show ritual.

“Chip a hoof, on with the show, let that good ol’ magic flow!”