

Of Two Minds

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Of Two Minds

Chapter 1

As the Great and Powerful Trixie looked out over the crowd of ponies gathered in front of her stage-coach, she realized that her initial hunch was right: trying to put on another show in Ponyville was a very bad idea. Canterlot hadn't been a great location for her off-season travels either, but that was mostly because the mountain-side city was a hub for unicorns and magic, which made it difficult for a magic stage show to attract any real attention. Ponyville, however, was much worse for one reason: she'd been made an absolute fool of in that town – twice – and thus the residents weren't likely to be supportive of a third attempt. She'd let some of her... not quite friends but more than acquaintances, who lived in Canterlot talk her into taking her new, improved, and generally successful act to the small town to try and repair her reputation. Trixie knew that they, or at least one of them, had her best interests in mind, but she was having second thoughts before she'd even started.

The audience was giving her tolerant stares at best, although she could see clear disapproval and outright malice in more than a few eyes. She'd started her act as usual, starting behind the scenery as she projected her voice out to welcome everypony to her show, promising mind-blowing illusions, amazing sleight-of-hoof, and, of course, great tales of daring-do. She announced her name and cast a smokescreen spell along with setting off some fireworks to cover the flash and sound of her teleporting onto the stage in time with announcing her name. Although doubts ran through her mind at the sight of the lackluster response, Trixie didn't falter. She was used to getting poor receptions, having had to muscle through more than her share when she was rebuilding her image. What she wasn't expecting, however, was the flying produce.

Trixie had no idea who'd started it. It wasn't the cyan pegasus with the rainbow mane, since she'd have been all too eager to be known as the

instigator. Trixie couldn't see the orange earth pony apple farmer in the audience, so she wasn't a suspect either. All the blue showmare knew was that a slightly over-ripe tomato hit the stage only seconds after the smoke had cleared, and that impact heralded a storm of fruits and vegetables flying up from the crowd, which began to jeer and boo, and homing in on Trixie's location. Trixie dropped out of her dramatic reared-back pose and raised a hoof to cover her head as she activated her horn and tried to decide what to do. She simply couldn't allow herself to take the abuse lying down, but to grab the projectiles with her magic and fling it back would only serve to cement her image in the Ponyvillians's minds. She decided that a tactical retreat would serve best, but just as the produce was about to impact and she was working her teleport spell, the projectiles all stopped and hung suspended in a purple aura of magic.

"Shame on all of you," said a voice Trixie found familiar and which raised an old anger that she quickly forced back down. A purple unicorn with a slate blue mane with a pink highlight and a cutie mark of a large starburst surrounded by smaller stars approached the stage from off to the left, her horn glowing brightly with magic. She hopped up on the stage and leveled a disappointed glare out at the ponies. "Now," she said, "I know Trixie here hasn't been the best visitor to Ponyville in recent times, but that's no excuse to pick on her now."

"But," a pony in the audience started to say.

"No buts," Twilight Sparkle snapped, "If you don't want to watch Trixie's show, then you can just leave." She gathered the fruits and vegetables together and dropped them in a neat pile in front of the stage. The crowd slowly dispersed, the ponies grumbling as they went. Twilight gave a deep sigh and lowered her head, feeling worn out from the effort of holding so much in her magic at once. Silence reigned for a while as Trixie simply stood and looked at Twilight, trying to sort out her thoughts and feelings. Beyond a doubt, she was grateful that Twilight had intervened, since Trixie hadn't been sure she could've escaped without suffering some fruit-based damage to her self or, worse, her outfit. On the other hoof, she had her pride and there was a voice in her head trying to link this latest event to the previous times Twilight had gotten involved with Trixie. She finally decided that the best course of action required talking to the lavender unicorn. She cleared her throat to get Twilight's attention.

"Sorry about that Trixie," Twilight said, cutting off what Trixie was going to say.

"What are you apologizing for?" Trixie asked, rallying to her usual attitude of pomp, "You are not responsible for those foals and their treatment of the Great and Powerful Trixie. Perhaps, though, you mean to apologize for stepping on Trixie's hoof once again and-

"Please don't go there Trixie," Twilight said, narrowing her eyes at the showmare, "I saw a pony in trouble and decided to lend a hoof, that's all. I was hoping the things I'd heard about you lately were true, that you'd learned a little humility and responsibility." Trixie opened her mouth to make a scathing reply, but then paused and closed it, feeling a little ashamed. She *had* changed since her last visit to the backwater little town, a visit which had been far more humiliating than the first by a long shot for reasons Trixie did not wish to dwell on. Twilight sighed and gave Trixie a small smile. "Look," she said, "I think we need to talk, just the two of us. I was just on my way home for lunch; would you care to join me?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie... accepts," Trixie said, "Just give me a minute to close up."

Trixie lingered over her carrot soup. It wasn't because it tasted bad; in fact, Trixie had to admit it was a lot better than most of the soups she'd eaten on the road. No, she was simply feeling awkward sitting in Twilight's library home, being served food by the lavender unicorn's baby dragon assistant, whom she recalled from her first Ponyville show as one of the more persistent hecklers. The fact that he was holding his tongue and only giving her cool glances now was obviously due to the fact that Twilight was sitting across the table from Trixie at the moment, finishing off her own bowl of soup.

"Thanks for making lunch Spike," Twilight said to the dragon after swallowing the last of the soup and setting the bowl on the table. Spike just nodded and took the bowl to the kitchen, returning quickly out of a determination not to leave his caretaker and employer alone with the showmare longer than necessary. Ignoring the dragon for the moment, Twilight met Trixie's eye and asked, "What exactly were you expecting to happen when you showed up here again?"

"Trixie was *hoping* the ponies of this little backwater would give her at least a few moments to perform before they broke out the produce," Trixie replied sourly, "Although, considering what happened before, even that may be too much to expect..." She took a sip of soup while she considered her next thought.

"You're still not trying to find some way to prove you're better than Twilight, are you?" Spike asked. Trixie eyed him angrily before swallowing.

"For your information, lizard," she said, "The Great and Powerful Trixie does not harbor petty grievances."

"Lizard?" Spike exclaimed, "I'll have you know I'm a dragon."

"Whatever," Trixie said dismissively, "This conversation does not concern you, so be off with you."

"That's enough," Twilight said, shooting Spike a disapproving gaze as he took a breath as if preparing to spit fire, "Trixie, I invited you here so we could have a nice, calm talk. Besides, this *is* a library." Spike let his breath out in a disgruntled noise and slumped away.

"I'll be shelving books if you need me," he grumbled.

Twilight sighed and looked back at Trixie. "He did make a good point," she said, "You have gotten over the Ursa Minor incident, right? Applejack told me you were telling an... altered version of that night in your Manehattan show."

"Well," Trixie said, "Telling the true account would destroy the image I portray on stage. Don't worry though Twilight Sparkle, I've come to terms with that unflattering episode of my life and realize that although the blame can be shared among many, you are not one of those ponies."

"So you're coming here had nothing to do with me?" Twilight asked, sounding a little pleased at the prospect.

"No," Trixie said with finality. A few seconds later though, her face fell and she added, "However, I'd be lying if I said you're not on my mind more than I'd like. I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, have traveled the length and breadth of Equestria, faced many ponies in contests of skill and wit, and

have experienced every nearly level of success a performer of my caliber can stand at. I should be happy with the course of my life now, but always, in some corner of my mind, I hear this voice questioning why I've never met you on even ground. I hold no grudge, and I'm sure it will only lead to trouble, but I don't think I'll ever be truly content to move on until I've tested myself against you in a proper challenge."

"Ah-ha! I knew it!" Spike declared, poking his head in from the back room.

"And just what would a 'proper challenge' entail?" Twilight asked.

Trixie's eyes shifted to the side and she took several slurps of soup while she thought. "That is the conundrum," she said at last, "Based on the incident with the Ursa, it is obvious that you have more power than the Great and Powerful Trixie. Therefore, a direct contest of strength would be weighed significantly in your favor. We would need something that's more or less an equal challenge for the both of us." Her gaze went around the library until it settled on the window through which she could see her wagon parked next to the tree and her eyes lit up. "Of course," she said, stamping a hoof as she gave Twilight her best game face, "This will be the challenge Twilight Sparkle: can you put on a better, by which I mean more well-received, magic show than the Great and Powerful Trixie here in Ponyville? Of course, we'll have to make sure the Ponyvillians will give Trixie an actual chance to perform this time..."

"Can I cut in?" Spike asked, coming over to the table.

"What's up Spike?" Twilight asked.

Spike turned his face toward Trixie and said, "As much as I'd love to see Twilight beat you at something, you do realize that the ponies around here like and respect her, and don't like you at all. Do you really think they'll give you a fair chance?"

"Some might," Twilight said.

"No," Trixie said, looking thoughtful, "he's quite right. The odds are still against Trixie. There must be some way to balance things out." She thought for a few seconds and then stood up from the table. "I will return in a moment," she said, "I may have just the thing." She walked out the door and headed to her wagon. She entered the portable stage and located her

stash of scrolls and spell books. After she'd earned enough bits from her big break in Manehattan to replace the wagon she'd lost during her first Ponyville fiasco, the blue unicorn had picked up the hobby of collecting spells that weren't exactly common in the hopes of integrating or adapting them to her act. What she was looking for now was a spell she'd found in an old tome in the Trottingham Library a few months back. She hadn't found a way to alter it for use on stage, but if she understood it properly it would be the perfect way to level the playing field between her and Twilight. She found the scroll and picked it up with her magic, making it float along behind her as she returned to the library. Spike had cleared away her bowl of soup, which had still been half-full, but Trixie simply filed that away to deal with later. "Here," she announced, bringing the scroll forward and unrolling it, "I have a "Mile in Another's Hooves" spell. It will cause us to switch bodies for a short time."

"What?" Twilight and Spike both asked at the same time.

"What I'm thinking," Trixie explained, "Is that if I look like you I'll be able to get my next show going before anypony realizes who I actually am. By the same token, if you look like me, your success will depend wholly on your skills at charming the crowd and not on any biases of friendship or familiarity."

"Have you ever used that spell before?" Twilight asked, walking over to look at the scroll. Trixie rolled it up with a snap and pulled it away from the lavender unicorn.

"I am the Great and Powerful Trixie," she said, "Do you think I'm so irresponsible?" Twilight and Spike just narrowed their eyes at her. "Look," the showmare said crossly, "I may not be as powerful or skilled as you Twilight, but my talent *is* in magic and I know how to follow instructions for a spell. Besides, the book from which I copied it was quite informative regarding its successful use in the past. What do you say?"

Spike and Twilight shared a glance and then huddled together for a discussion. "I don't like this Twi," Spike said, "It seems really risky."

"I'm inclined to agree," Twilight, "but she seems pretty sure of herself."

"She was pretty sure about her ability to vanquish an Ursa Major," Spike deadpanned.

"This is different Spike," Twilight said, "It looks like she's put in at least a little research. And if this will make her happier, I'm willing to risk it. We might even become friends after this." She looked up at Trixie and said, "Ok Trixie, I'm in."

"Wonderful," Trixie said triumphantly, unrolling the scroll again. She read it over quickly, frowned for a split second, and then nodded. "You just stand there and try to keep your mind clear," she said, "This should only take a minute or two." Twilight nodded and Spike moved to give the two unicorns space, watching Trixie warily the whole time. Trixie took a deep breath and began to focus her magic, glancing at the scroll every once in a while to make sure she was doing the spell right. As the magic moved into place, she sent it toward Twilight. The lavender unicorn stiffened and her eyes glazed over as the spell entered her head. Trixie felt herself start to sweat a little from the effort of maintaining the spell, but kept her concentration as she began to guide the magic into herself to begin the transfer of minds. As soon as the energy touched her, Trixie suddenly began to feel lightheaded and disoriented. Her horn flared and dimmed several times as she fought the dizziness, but ultimately she lost that battle and blacked out as the spell collapsed on itself and Twilight fell unconscious to the floor as well.

Chapter 2

Twilight Sparkle was drawn out of unconsciousness by the sound of Spike's voice calling her name. "Come on Twilight! Wake up!" He sounded really worried, and Twilight was surprised that she didn't feel him shaking her or anything. She shifted slightly before opening her eyes. She blinked them several times to try and clear away the blurry clouds in her vision and, when that wasn't quite working, brought her front hooves forward to rub her eyes. She stopped as leg-shaped blobs came into view; they were pale blue. *I guess it worked*, she thought, rubbing her eyes until she could see. Her guess was confirmed as she saw herself laying on the floor a few feet away, with Spike frantically shaking the lavender body's shoulder as he continued to implore her to wake up. Twilight moaned a little to test her throat and, finding it to be in working order, spoke up.

"Spike?" she said. The baby dragon froze and slowly turned to look at her, his eyes widening in surprise.

"T-twilight?" he asked, coming over for a closer look, "Are you ok?"

"I think so," Twilight said, slowly getting to her feet. Her vision was suddenly blocked by something falling over her eyes, and after she shook it off she realized it was Trixie's pointed hat. "It seems the spell worked," she said, looking herself over. She was wearing the showmare's starry purple cape and so far as she could tell looked exactly like Trixie, down to the cutie mark.

'I must disagree with that assessment.' Twilight leapt a few feet in the air as a disgruntled voice echoed from off to her left.

"What was that?" she asked, looking around once she landed back on the floor.

"What was what?" Spike asked, giving the unicorn a strange look.

"That voice," Twilight said, "It... you didn't hear it did you?" Spike shook his head.

'You can hear me?' the voice said, 'I guess that's one bit of good news. What's not good is that I seem to be a passenger in my own body!'

"Twilight? Are you ok?" Spike asked, getting worried again as Twilight's face screwed up in confusion.

"I... don't know Spike," she said. She put a hoof to her forehead and closed her eyes as she tried to think. As soon as her eyes closed all the way, she felt something shoving her head to the right and all but the faintest sensations fled away. Her eyes opened, but not by her will. The pale blue unicorn body squirmed and stretched slightly under some power that Twilight couldn't override. The other entity put a cocky smile on her face and then spoke.

"Ah, that is much better." The voice was that of the Great and Powerful Trixie.

'Wait,' Twilight said, and then stopped in shock, hearing her voice as a faint echo in the air. *'What... what's going on here?'*

"Trixie?" Spike exclaimed at the same time, "What's going on here? What happened to Twilight?"

"Oh, she's in here somewhere, I'm sure," Trixie said, rubbing the side of her head before picking up and putting on her hat, "Most likely feeling annoyed that she's no longer in control."

'I'm actually more concerned about why this happened,' Twilight muttered, *'Trixie, you can hear me, right?'*

Trixie sighed and closed her eyes. "Yes Twilight, I-" There was another shifting sensation and Twilight found herself in control of Trixie's body again. *'-can,'* Trixie finished, and then made a frustrated noise. *'I take we we're going to switch control every time we blink?'* she asked sourly.

"I hope not," Twilight said, "now, where'd that spell scroll go?" A quick look around revealed that the scroll had landed on the floor a short distance away. Twilight picked it up and began reading.

"Um, Trixie?" Spike said tentatively.

"It's me again Spike," Twilight said, sparing her assistant a quick glance and smile.

"Oh, well," Spike said, "So... both you and Trixie are there in that body, right?"

"It seems so," Twilight said.

"Then, what about your body?" Spike asked, looking at the unmoving lavender body behind him. Twilight dropped the scroll with a gasp and rushed over to her body.

'Oh please tell me you're not dead,' Trixie's voice said, sounding legitimately worried. Twilight leaned her head and put an ear on her body's side.

"I hear my heart," she said, relaxing a little, "and I'm breathing steadily." A sigh-like echo floated through the air.

'So this can probably be fixed then,' Trixie said.

"It probably can," Twilight said, returning to the dropped scroll, "Spike, take a letter." As Spike jogged off to find writing equipment, Twilight blinked and Trixie's mind slid into control. Spike returned with paper and quill and looked expectantly at the blue pony. *'Uh, Trixie,'* Twilight after an awkward moment passed, *'would you mind blinking?'* Trixie sighed and complied, letting Twilight take control again. "Ok," Twilight said. She cleared her throat and began dictating, "Dear Princess Celestia."

'Why are you writing to the Princess about this?' Trixie asked.

Twilight gritted her teeth. *Because I'm her most beloved student and if anypony knows how to get me out of your head, it'll be her,* she thought sarcastically before preparing to give a less scathing version of the explanation out loud.

'Oh,' Trixie said in amazement, cutting her off, *'I wasn't aware... that explains a lot about you.'*

You can read my thoughts? Twilight asked silently, blinking in surprise, and then groaned as she felt herself forced to give way to Trixie's will again.

Apparently I can... the show-mare replied mentally.

"Uh, Twi?" Spike asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You are speaking to the Great and Powerful Trixie now," Trixie declared.

Spike threw up his hands in frustration, but kept his grip on the paper and quill. "Stop switching up on me!" he shouted, "This is going to take forever if you girls can't decide who gets to be in control!"

"Believe me little dragon," Trixie said with an over-played tragic air, "Trixie agrees with you whole-heartedly, but this an altogether new experience that has caught even the Great and-"

"Yeah yeah," Spike cut in impatiently, "just give me Twilight back so we can write this letter." Trixie huffed indignantly at being interrupted. She intended to remain in control to spite the dragon, but in her annoyance she closed her eyes and found herself once again feeling like a sentient puppet in another pony's hooves.

"Sorry Spike," Twilight said once she was back in control, "Are you ready?"

"I've been ready," Spike replied dryly.

Twilight cleared her throat again and began dictating from the start, "Dear Princess Celestia, I am writing to request your advice and help with a magical accident I have just had. I'm not sure if you know of her, but a traveling performer-"

'She knows about me,' Trixie said, cutting off Twilight's train of thought again, *'Through her sister at the very least.'*

"-named Trixie," Twilight continued with a little extra force in her voice, "who has visited Ponyville a couple times before, returned today and, to make a long story short, talked me into letting her attempt a mind-swapping spell on the two of us. The spell collapsed on her with the result of trapping both of us in a single body- Trixie's body to be precise. My own body, while obviously without any consciousness..." She paused to let spike work his way through the large word before continuing, "... still maintains basic autonomous-"

"Auto...?" Spike asked, giving Twilight the look that meant he didn't understand the word.

"Automatic," Twilight offered instead. Spike nodded and resumed writing. "... automatic functions like breathing and operating my heart. Along with this letter I am sending the scroll from which Trixie cast the spell as well as notes on how this... oh, how do I describe it?"

"Bodymates?" Spike suggested.

'Body sharing?' Trixie put in, *'Or... Bipersonality perhaps?'*

Bipersonality? Twilight thought, *Where'd that come from?*

'It just rolls off the tongue. So to speak...'

Twilight rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Spike. "I think I'll call it a Multiple Mental Occupancy for now," she said. Spike raised an eyebrow and set to work writing the phrase down. "Anyway," Twilight said, getting back into diction mode once more, "...notes on how this Multiple Mental Occupancy seems to operate. I humbly request that you provide as much assistance as you can to reversing this situation as quickly as possible. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle." As Spike finished writing, Twilight began to turn her attention back to the spell scroll, only to blink and have her control stolen away again.

"So, it's finally my turn again," Trixie said, stretching out a rear leg before picking up the spell scroll. *I do hope you don't mind if I run things for the moment* Twilight, she added mentally in an off-hand manner.

'We really should figure out if we can control this blink-to-switch thing better,' Twilight said.

In a moment, Trixie thought as she laid the scroll out on a book stand and began reading it. "What I am interested in," she said, out loud so Spike could hear, "is where I went wrong with this spell. I won't let you send it until I figure out my error."

'Fair enough,' Twilight said, reading along with Trixie. She realized rather quickly that reading through the eyes of somepony else was an exercise in patience, especially when that somepony else read at a noticeably slower

rate than Twilight was used to. After a few lines, she was able to adjust to Trixie's rate and started mastering the art of reading out of the corner of her eyes whenever she overtook the showmare. After they made it halfway through the spell, Twilight started to suspect the reason it had failed. If she was right, it was a big error.

"I do not understand," Trixie said after she finished the first read-through, "I followed this to the letter."

'Even that part where this spell is supposed to be cast by a third unicorn who's not part of the mind-swapping?' Twilight asked. Trixie's eyes returned to the start of the scroll and blinked, ceding body control to Twilight. "Right here," Twilight said, not missing a beat as she placed a hoof below the relevant lines, "This spell is designed to be cast by a mediator on two other subjects. I'd have to read the book you found this in Trixie, but I suspect this was meant as a way to help ponies learn to appreciate one another's point of view."

'Well,' Trixie said, *'we didn't have another unicorn, so I had to adapt.'*

Twilight sighed and shook her head slowly. "I should have insisted on looking this spell over before letting you cast it Trixie," she said, "But, what's done is done. Are you finished with the scroll now?"

'Yes, I suppose so,' Trixie said after a few seconds of thought. Twilight nodded, rolled up the scroll, and levitated it over to Spike so he could add it to the letter. Twilight then found a few blank sheets of paper, borrowed Spike's quill, and set to work noting down the aspects of MMO. After noting the means by which the situation was created and how the inactive mind – which Trixie quickly insisted be referred to as "the passenger" – was only capable of speaking to the active, or controlling, mind and experiencing the world through sight and sound, she and Trixie began experimenting with the method of switching control. They determined that the Passenger mind held the power to decide if control of the body was exchanged, although exchanging seemed to be the automatic choice if they weren't paying attention, and that a switch couldn't occur less than twenty seconds after the previous one, give or take a second.

At the end of the testing, Trixie ended up in control and took the time to add her own thoughts to Twilight's notes – despite protests from the latter – before adding them to Spike's load. "There you go," she said, "now make

yourself useful and get those mailed off before the post office closes." Spike gave Trixie a withering look before rolling the papers up, tying a ribbon around them, and then sending them off with his magic fire. Twilight couldn't help but chuckle as Trixie's mouth dropped open in utter disbelief.

'It's ok Trixie,' she said before the showmare could get mad at the dragon, *'Spike has magic that lets him send letters to the Princess by breathing fire on them.'*

Trixie closed her mouth and looked askance at Spike. *You could have warned me,* she accused. Spike returned the look.

'Sorry,' Twilight responded, *'We do it all the time, so I forget it's not a common method of correspondence.'* Trixie huffed and rolled her eyes, turning away from Spike and gazing upon Twilight's body.

"Now, what should we do about this?" she asked, nudging the comatose body with a hoof, "We can't just leave it here on the floor, can we?"

"No," Spike said simply.

'Let's put me... it... in my bed,' Twilight said.

"What?" Trixie exclaimed, "why should this... shell get the bed?"

'Because it's my body and I want it to be in good shape when I get it back,' Twilight said.

"I'm not going to let you just stuff her in a closet or whatever you're thinking Trixie," Spike said at the same moment, arms crossed in determination.

"I wasn't suggesting anything like that," Trixie protested, "Do whatever you want with it." She blinked and Twilight took control of their shared body. She took a deep breath and began to focus her magic into levitating her comatose body. The aura of magic surrounded the body, but when Twilight went to lift it into the air it barely rose, the legs still laying limply on the floor. Twilight squeezed her eyes to the brink of closing in concentration and managed to get the body another few inches higher, the legs tucked underneath, and the head propped up. *'Now, where's all that power of yours?'* Trixie asked mockingly as Twilight began moving toward the stairs.

It's with my body, Twilight responded, struggling to maintain the spell as she did so, *Not only... do you have... less magic than me... yours is unfamiliar to me.*

'Then let me take care of this,' Trixie said, *'I know the Great and Powerful Trixie can handle a pony's weight more easily than this.'* Twilight nodded and blink-switched with Trixie, wincing mentally as the magic suddenly stopped and the unconscious unicorn body fell to the floor like a rag doll. Trixie frowned and re-activated her horn. The lavender body drifted effortlessly upward, floated up the stairs, and into Twilight's room at the showmare's command. "If this situation is going to take very long to undo," she said as she settled the body onto Twilight's bed, "Then I insist you work at familiarizing yourself with my magic because that last attempt was simply embarrassing."

'Thanks for rubbing it in,' Twilight replied sarcastically. Trixie smirked. *'Well,'* Twilight said, *'there's not else to do until we hear back from the Princess so-'* Her thoughts were cut off by a loud, high-pitched, and cheerfully familiar voice calling from downstairs.

"Twilight! Hey, Twilight, where are you? I've got something *amazing* to tell you!"

'Oh no...' Twilight moaned, wishing she could do more to convey her distress, *'Not Pinkie Pie...'*

Chapter 3

Twilight Sparkle was in a panic. With all the effort of learning and adjusting to the Multiple Mental Occupancy and writing to Celestia, she hadn't had time to figure out what to do about it in regards to her friends! The rational part of her mind tried to assure her that her friends would be helpful and supportive once everything had been explained, but that part was rapidly drowned out by neurotic worries over how to explain, and what everypony's first reaction would be, and the fact that the first pony who was going to find out was the rather unpredictable Pinkie Pie. So wrapped up in her thoughts as she was, Twilight didn't realize that Trixie had ceded control of their shared blue body and that she was pacing around until she heard the showmare's voice echo loudly in the back of her mind. *'Will you just calm down!'* Trixie insisted, *'you're driving me crazy in here with all this worrying about who'll think what about us!'*

"But I haven't had time to plan anything!" Twilight wailed quietly. She squeaked in terror as she heard hooves climbing the stairs outside her room, accompanied by Pinkie's voice calling for her. Twilight threw herself up against the door and cast a very sloppy locking spell on it as Pinkie reached the room and tried the door latch.

"Ok Twilight," the pink pony's voice said through the door, "I know you're in there because you *never* lock your room, even when you say you need privacy because somepony's being waaay to chatty, although you never tell me *who's* being too chatty and..."

'Does she ever stop talking?' Trixie asked, distracting Twilight from Pinkie's word tsunami for a moment.

Only once she makes her original point, Twilight responded wryly, *the question is how long it'll take her to circle back around to it. I'd rather not wait for that...* She opened her mouth to call out Pinkie's name, but then paused as she came up with an idea. She made a few ragged-sounding coughs and put a rasp in her voice before speaking. "P-pinkie?" she said weakly.

"Ah ha, I knew you were in there!" Pinkie declared, dropping whatever her latest train of thought had been.

"Pinkie, I'm not **cough** not feeling very good right now," Twilight said, adding more coughs and a low moan to the end for good measure.

"Aw, that's too bad," Pinkie said, her voice dipping into melancholy for a second before returning to its normal chipperness, "Although, it's strange that Spike didn't mention that when I came in..."

'Oh dear,' Trixie said with clear sarcasm, *'your little lie is already breaking down. Whatever shall we do?'*

Just try not to switch with me when I blink, Twilight retorted.

"What... **cough cough** what did you need Pinkie?" she asked, hoping to divert the earth pony onto a different, safer line of thought.

"Oh," Pinkie said, remembering the original purpose for her visit, "I wanted to ask you for help with a surprise. You see, I was walking near the edge of town earlier and guess who I saw lurking around Whitetail Wood?" She paused to give Twilight time to guess, but the librarian pony kept silent, drawing a blank. "It was Rainbow's old griffon friend Gilda!" Pinkie announced enthusiastically.

"Gilda's back too?" Twilight exclaimed, forgetting to keep up her sick act. She winced as she realized her error and prayed that Pinkie wouldn't catch it. Trixie did as Twilight had asked and held back against the exchange of body control when their eyes closed. That was the only good news.

"Twilight," Pinkie said, sounding suspicious, "are you *suuure* you're not feeling ok? You're not trying to avoid me are you? We're friends, right?"

"Yes Pinkie," Twilight said, deciding just to abandon the act, "I'm just... dealing something really weird that just happened to me and I... let's just say I'd rather not be seen in public until I fix it."

'Are you implying that Trixie is ugly or something?' Twilight ignored the showmare's indignation as best she could, focusing more on the silence that had fallen on the other side of the bedroom door. Pinkie was processing Twilight's new story and the unicorn hoped she was buying it.

"Okie dokie lokie," Pinkie said at last, to Twilight's relief, "Just don't forget, me and Applejack and everypony else are always ready to help if you need us!"

"Thanks Pinkie," Twilight said with a real smile. As she heard Pinkie's hoof-steps head back down the stairs, she backed away from the door, undid the lock spell, and let herself relax.

'Is it over?' Trixie asked. Twilight simply nodded. 'Very well,' the showmare continued, 'I would like my body back for a minute or two; it is quite boring to simply spectate.'

"Well," Twilight replied, mulling over the request, "I really should practice using your magic, like you insisted."

'Please,' Trixie begged, 'Just long enough get rid of the feeling that I'm just a puppet with a brain.'

"Fine," Twilight said, blinking as emphatically as she could. As Trixie took control and stretch and revel in the freedom to move about, Twilight said, *'You know we're going to have to get used to long periods of not being in control if we go outside like this Swapping every few minutes around Spike is awkward enough.'*

"Well then," Trixie said, walking up to Twilight's vanity to look at herself in the mirror, "we simply won't go outside then."

'True, I could get away with that for a little while,' Twilight demurred, *'but-'* She stopped suddenly when she heard the distinct and currently very welcome sound of Spike belching, with an undertone of dragon fire. *'The Princess wrote back!' she exclaimed. Trixie made use of the mirror to give Twilight a good look at her confused expression. 'Trust me on this Trixie,'* Twilight said with some amusement.

"Very well," Trixie said, turning away from the mirror. As she headed for the door, the sound of Spike's rapid footsteps could be heard, growing louder as he climbed the stairs.

Trixie stopped by the door and sat down, adjusting her hat and cape to look properly regal for Spike's arrival. The footstep sounds were suddenly

drowned out by a shout from downstairs that sounded like Pinkie Pie: "Ear-flop-eye-flutter-knee-twitch!"

"What in Equestria?" Trixie asked.

'*Pinkie sense*,' Twilight answered, racking her memory for the meaning of that combo. '*Ear-Eye-Knee is...Uh-oh. Trixie, get away fr-*' she was cut off as the door flew open, smacking the pale blue unicorn in the face and sending her rolling backwards. Spike froze in the doorway, unsure whether to laugh at Trixie or be concerned that he'd just hurt Twilight. 'Ow... *I felt that...*' Twilight moaned as Trixie checked to see if her nose was bleeding. Her hoof came away free of blood, but her pride was more than wounded enough for her liking.

She sat up and leveled a glare at Spike. "You overgrown lizard!" she shouted, "Be more careful! Don't you know how to knock?"

"Sorry," Spike said with a roll of his eyes. He stepped into the room and held up the sealed scroll in his hand. Trixie looked at it expectantly as Spike broke the seal and began to unroll it.

Pinkie Pie's head appeared from the doorframe, looking slightly concerned. "Hey Twilight, did you..." she trailed off when she saw Trixie in the middle of the room getting to her feet and keeping a neutral expression on her face. "Hey, I know you," Pinkie said, pushing past Spike to enter the room, "You're that magician pony Trixie!"

"That's the Great and Powerful Trixie to you," the showmare replied.

"Ok," Pinkie said, giggling a little before putting on a very serious expression. "Now, what are you doing in here? Twilight didn't say anything about having another pony in her room." She looked around and spotted Twilight's body lying on the bed, seemingly fast asleep. "There you are!" the pink earth pony declared, bouncing over to the comatose lavender unicorn. "Now Twilight," she said in a lecturing tone, "Tell me the truth this time, because you don't look very funny to me. Twilight?" She poked the body a few times, frowning when she didn't get a response. "Are you pretending to be asleep Twilight? You're doing a really good job with that and all, but I'm not leaving until I get some answers missy."

"She's not, is she?" Trixie asked in a low, disheartened tone.

"Nope," Spike said.

'*Argh,*' Twilight moaned, imagining the act of rubbing her forehead in frustration, '*Ok, we obviously can't avoid it any longer. Trixie, give me control please.*'

Why? Trixie responded mentally, *she might just think I'm playing a trick by altering my voice or something.*

'*She's very perceptive,*' Twilight said, '*And with the way her mind works, she'll probably just take my word for it. If not, I'll just have Spike read the Princess's letter to her.*'

All right, Trixie thought, *but you're taking full responsibility if this turns out badly.* She blinked and the two mares exchanged places, putting Twilight in control of the body.

Pinkie had progressed from poking to shaking Twilight's body gently. When she still didn't get a response from the unconscious pony, she attempted to tickle it into wakefulness. The lavender unicorn didn't even twitch as Pinkie lightly dug her hooves into its sides. "Oooo, you're *good*," Pinkie said, sitting back to think. Twilight decided that she wouldn't have a better opportunity, so she cleared her throat and spoke Pinkie's name. Pinkie's ears went up and she craned her head around to look at the pale-blue pony in the purple cape and hat. "Twilight?" she said incredulously, looking from the comatose body to the one Twilight was currently inhabiting.

"Yes Pinkie," Twilight said, "It's me. I wasn't lying when I said I was dealing with something weird. You see-" Pinkie interrupted her by dashing over to her, holding her mouth open with both hooves, and staring down her throat with one eye.

"Whoa," Pinkie said, "Did Trixie magic your brain out and swallow it or something Twi?"

'*WHAT?*' Trixie exclaimed, '*Where did... what?*'

Twilight rolled her eyes and chuckled. *That's Pinkie Pie for you,* she thought before shoving the earth pony away from her. "No Pinkie," she said, still smirking a little, "That's not... quite what happened. Trixie and I were trying out a mind-switching spell and it didn't work quite right."

"Oh," Pinkie said, grinning, "That makes *much* more sense! So, what's it like?"

"It's... interesting," Twilight said simply, "I'm not sure how to describe what it feels like; you'd have to experience it for yourself. And no, I'm not going to let you talk me into adding your mind to this," she added, seeing the interest in Pinkie's eyes.

'*Thank you,*' Trixie said with a strange degree of relief.

"Okie dokie," Pinkie said with a shrug.

"Ahem," Spike said, waving the letter in the air, "I think you girls need to hear what Celestia has to say."

"Oh right, sorry Spike," Twilight said, turning toward the baby dragon, "Would you mind reading it?"

"Gladly," Spike said, holding the letter in front of his face. "Ahem, 'Dearest Twilight Sparkle,'" he began.

"I must admit your letter has caused me great concern. I will spare you any reprimands regarding the lack of reasoning and precaution that has led to your predicament, but only because I can see by the tone of your letter and what I could glean from a quick overview of the notes you sent that you are treating this with the care and seriousness it deserves. The spell that Trixie attempted to use is one that has not seen sanctioned use in several centuries due to the risks inherent in transferring a pony's mind into another vessel; although neither I nor Luna can recall it ever resulting in something like your Multiple Mental Occupancy. As you read this letter I will be gathering the best spell-makers from both my school for gifted unicorns and other sources for the purpose of analyzing the spell and your notes to find a means to restore you and Trixie to normal. If Trixie can recall the precise way she altered the spell, please send that information to me as well. In the meantime, continue to study. I strongly suspect you'll find a new lesson on the magic of friendship or two from this experience. I will write to you again once a solution has been found.

"Sincerely, Princess Celestia."

"P.S. If possible, make sure to feed your unoccupied body; small amounts of thin vegetable broth should suffice every half hour or so."

"Good," Twilight said with a smile, "Between doing that and keeping Trixie happy by practicing magic, I'll be well occupied until the Princess can fix things."

"What about the surprise for Gilda?" Pinkie asked, "I don't see why you can't help me with that, and I promise it'll be super-duper fun!"

"I'm sorry Pinkie," Twilight said, "I'd like to help, but I can barely do any magic right now. Although, maybe Trixie..."

'Trixie sees no reason why she should be lending her skills to some pony she barely knows,' the showmare replied.

"...Trixie's being a sourpuss," Twilight said, not all that surprised.

"Well, you just said you were going to practice your magic," Pinkie said, "Will you help once you're good at it again?" She put on a pleading face that made Twilight swallow the refusal she was about to shoot out.

"Fine," she said at last, "If Gilda's still lurking around after I feel confident in my abilities, and assuming I can talk Trixie into playing along, I'll help you."

"Pinkie Pie Swear?" the party-pony asked. Twilight resisted the urge to blink in surprise; she wasn't sure if Trixie was willing to hold back from taking control at this point.

"You must really want to do this," the unicorn mused. Pinkie smiled and nodded energetically. "Tell you what," Twilight said, "If you Pinkie Pie Swear not to tell anypony about me and Trixie, I'll Swear to lend you a hoof with Gilda."

"Deal," Pinkie said. She and Twilight mimed the actions and spoke the words in unison: "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

'I am not going to play along with a promise made in such a... foalish manner!' Trixie protested as Pinkie left the room with her signature bounce-step.

"Too late Trixie," Twilight retorted, "A Pinkie Pie Swear is as binding as a royal decree here in Ponyville. Now," she added as Trixie continued to protest, "if you want me to learn your magic, you'll need to be quiet so I can concentrate."

Spike hid a chuckle as he went to file Celestia's letter away. To him, it seemed that Twilight had things well under control.

Chapter 4

Falling asleep with a case of Multiple Mental Occupancy proved to be less of a hassle than either Trixie or Twilight expected, but it wasn't easy either. For the sake of appearances, the double-minded blue mare bedded down in Trixie's stage-wagon which, while not truly uncomfortable, was not the kind of place Twilight was used to sleeping. It took her a bit longer than usual to feel comfortable enough to fall asleep, and even being the Passenger mind – a status that kept being changed up – didn't seem to help. On top of that, the pair's thoughts kept waking the other one up. Eventually, though, they were both able to drift off and get some real sleep.

Trixie was pleased to find that she was in control when she woke up the next morning; there had been so much control swapping the previous night that she'd lost track of her position. A chill ran down her spine as her thoughts turned unbidden toward the possibility that she and Twilight might begin to lose their sense of individuality if they remained the way they were for too long. Chasing that thought away, she stood up, located her hairbrush and hoof mirror, and began fixing what was probably the worst bed-head she'd had in months. Once her mane was styled to her satisfaction, she levitated her cape onto her back and tied it on. As she picked up her hat, a thought occurred to her and she decided to speak it out loud. "Trixie does not relish the prospect of spending the entire day indoors waiting for your pet to burp up a letter Twilight," she said. Twilight didn't respond right away, causing Trixie to frown in disappointment. After a few more seconds of silence from her mental tenant, Trixie began to get worried. "Twilight? Twilight Sparkle! Answer me!"

'Muh... huh?' the echoing mind-voice of the other mare sounded groggy, 'Oh, morning Trixie. What's going on?'

Trixie heaved a huge sigh of relief. *Oh thank Celestia*, she thought, *You were just still asleep.*

'You were worried that something had happened to me?' Twilight asked, 'How sweet.'

"I was merely afraid of having to tell your mentor that your mind had become lost or something," Trixie replied with an air of unconcern as she floated her hat onto her head, "Now, to see about breakfast." She went to her little pantry box, which was beginning to run a little empty. She dug out a container of oats and regarded it for a moment.

'Spike'll be making breakfast in the library if he's awake,' Twilight noted.

Trixie lowered the oats and grabbed her mirror so she could shoot Twilight a glance. "Do you think he'd be willing to feed me?" she asked.

'He'll feed me,' Twilight pointed out.

That is true, Trixie thought, *and it would be nice to have a hot breakfast for once.* She blinked and let Twilight take control of their body. *'However,'* she added as Twilight peeked opened the top half of the wagon door to look around, *'since you were in control for dinner last night, I insist on being the one who actually eats breakfast.'*

"We both taste the food you know," Twilight muttered, and then sighed and added, "But if it'll keep you happy..." Twilight couldn't see any ponies nearby, so she opened the lower door and stepped down to the ground. After closing and locking the wagon – all by magic to continue acclimating to the magic in Trixie's body – she walked around to the library door and stepped inside. She found Spike in the kitchen in the act of hopping down from the step-stool in front of the stove with a plate in his hand. "Good morning Spike," Twilight said cheerfully.

"Morning Twixie," Spike replied with equal cheerfulness as he set his plate down on the kitchen table, "I hope you're in the mood for wheat waffles, because I've got everything you'll need for them set out."

"Twixie?" Twilight said, giving the dragon a confused look.

"Yep," Spike said, returning to the counter to reposition his step-stool in front of the waffle iron, "It's such a hassle keeping track of which one of you's in control, so I decided to combine your names into one that I can use for both of you." He poured some batter onto the waffle iron and clicked it shut.

"It sounds more like you just replaced the 'r' in Trixie's name with a 'w,'" Twilight said.

"Well," Spike said, "It's either that or Trixie Sparkle." Twilight frowned slightly. She wasn't pleased, but she didn't want to ruin Spike's good mood at the moment, considering her current arrangement with Trixie.

"Speaking of Trixie," the unicorn said, "I'm going to let her run things while we eat. Try to behave." *And that goes for both of you*, she added mentally. Spike simply nodded his acknowledgment as he busied himself with moving the completed waffle onto another plate. Hoping she wasn't about to unleash some kind of storm, Twilight closed her eyes and let Trixie take control of the body. The showmare opened her eyes and wrapped the plated waffle in her telekinesis magic. Spike cast a glowering glance at her, but released the plate into her control and turned back to the waffle iron.

"Thank you," Trixie said, setting the plate in front of herself, "By the way, Trixie is willing to answer to the nickname. It's rather cute sounding, like a little foal trying to get Trixie's attention."

"Thanks," Spike said dryly, "Good to know that somepony approves." Trixie smiled in satisfaction as she began to top her waffle with some berries Spike had set out in a bowl earlier. She paused when she laid eyes on the plate Spike had placed on the table when she and Twilight had entered. "What, pray tell, is *that*?" she asked, pointing at the yellow, vegetable-studded mass sitting on the plate.

"Huh?" Spike said, glancing over his shoulder, "Oh. It's just an omelet. You know, slightly scrambled eggs with stuff in them?"

Trixie's hoof recoiled from the plate in horror. "Eggs?" she exclaimed, "As in, bird eggs?"

"Chicken eggs," Spike clarified, fishing his new waffle off the iron, "Fluttershy gives me the ones her chickens lay that she can't sell to anypony else." Trixie found herself unable to respond, as her mouth was hanging open while one eye twitched in an expression of disgust. Spike raised an eyebrow as he turned around and saw her look. "What? I'm a dragon," he said, "I eat all sorts of stuff: grass, flowers, eggs, gemstones, lemon worm muffins..." Twilight gave herself an imaginary face-hoof as Trixie continued to simply stare. "Besides," the dragon continued, taking his

seat across from the blue unicorn, "Eggs are used in all kinds of baked goods: cupcakes, muffins, bread, and donuts just to name a few. You did know that, right?"

"I... I..." Trixie stuttered, regaining the use of her mouth at last, "I think I've lost my appetite."

'*Well I haven't,*' Twilight said, a little impatiently, '*so move aside and let me eat.*' Trixie complied without saying a word, and as soon as Twilight was in control, she gave Spike a slightly disapproving look. "That wasn't very nice you know," she said.

"What?" the baby dragon said innocently, "I was trying to help her understand. It's not my fault that she's obviously never taken the trouble to find out what goes into her food." Twilight wasn't sure if she completely believed that explanation, but Spike's expression seemed genuine to her, so she let it slide and applied herself to eating her waffle.

By the time breakfast was over, Trixie had come to grips with the idea of edible eggs thanks to being exposed to Twilight's casual acceptance of the three omelets Spike had consumed during the meal alongside his share of the waffles. Twilight had tried to help her along by drawing parallels between the use of eggs and cow milk, but Trixie simply couldn't see her logic. To the showmare, milk was produced specifically to provide nutrition, whereas eggs seemed only a step away from eating the bird itself. Faced with that logic, and surprised to be out-done, Twilight had backed off and left Trixie to her own thoughts. Now that breakfast was over and she wasn't distracted by hunger, Trixie's mind returned to the thought she'd been voicing before Twilight had awakened. '*Twilight,*' she said, '*I've been thinking; it might be best if we leave town until the Princess can restore us.*' Twilight stumbled in surprise and lost her grip on the waffle iron, which she'd been the in the middle of returning to its place in the cupboards, only to restart her magic and catch it a split-second later. '*Impressive,*' Trixie said, '*Your magic is progressing quite well, my student.*'

Thanks, Twilight replied flatly, putting the waffle iron away. "Spike," she said to her assistant, "Trixie and I need to have a talk. Do you mind cleaning up by yourself?"

"No problem Twixie," Spike said, busying himself with washing the dishes. Twilight shot him a frowning glance at the nickname, and she thought she heard Trixie's self-satisfied chuckled in the back of her mind. She went out into the main room of the library and made a quick circuit to insure the door was locked and that nopony was hanging near the windows or by Trixie's wagon before sitting down by the central table.

"You want to go out?" she asked, staring at the statue in the center of the table and imagining Trixie's face on it, "I thought you said you'd rather stay here, out of sight, rather than having to spend a long time as the passenger mind."

'What, is Trixie not allowed to change her mind?' Trixie snapped. 'I've put more thought into things since then,' she continued in a level tone, 'and I've realized that there isn't much reason for me to take control if we simply sit here. You still need to work on adapting to my magic, and if I'm in control I'll probably just end up getting on your... assistant's nerves. Besides, if we go somewhere else we won't have to worry as much about other ponies catching on to our present predicament.'

"If we left, we'd have to take Spike with us," Twilight pointed out, "not to mention my body; I want to know the minute Princess Celestia's ready for us. And what do you mean by 'we won't have to worry about other ponies catching on?'"

'I can easily pass off your moments of control as part of a routine,' Trixie said, 'I am the Great and Powerful Trixie after all, one of the best actresses in all of Equestria. And being able to get back on the road performing for other ponies will do a world of good for my patience with Spike, I'm sure.'

"Even so," Twilight said, not sure if she believed the entirety of Trixie's claim, "I promised Pinkie Pie I'd help her out with Gilda. Even if I hadn't made a Pinkie Pie Swear over it, I still refuse to back out of a promise to a friend." Trixie fell silent, and after a moment Twilight stood up and walked to one of the bookshelves, considering the matter resolved and dropped. She grabbed a book on a high shelf in her magic and began pulling it out when Trixie spoke up with the mental approximation of a shout.

'Trixie demands some fresh air!' Properly startled, Twilight lost control of her telekinesis and the book fell onto her head. The strict and seemingly arbitrary rules of Multiple Mental Occupancy translated the involuntary,

pain-induced closing of her eyes as the signal to allow for a control swap, leaving Trixie as the one to rub the bump forming behind her horn. "Right," she said with a triumphant grin, "my larder is running a bit low, so I'll settle for a simple trip to the market at the moment."

She made it halfway to the door before Twilight brought up a point that gave her pause: '*What sort of treatment do you expect the ponies at the market to give you?*'

"I would think they'd be willing to sell to any pony with bits to spend," Trixie replied, but her voice betrayed her uncertainty. *At best they'll just overcharge me...* she admitted silently, frowning at the front door, *ingrates...* Twilight fought back the desire to come to Ponyville's defense, since Trixie's reaction was what she'd been shooting for. Trixie lowered her head and began to pace, deep in thought. Twilight tried to follow along, but the showmare quickly lost her in a mess of half-formed ideas. The general tone was easy to determine: how to make use of Twilight's standing in the community despite Trixie's distinct appearance. "Twilight," Trixie said at last, "Do you have any experience with illusion spells?"

Chapter 5

If there was one thing Twilight Sparkle could take from her experience sharing a body with Trixie, it was the unique opportunity to study the differences between unicorns with similar talents. It was common knowledge that each unicorn's magic manifested in ways connected to their special talent, but now Twilight was learning that said magic operated differently on a much deeper level. Her initial trouble in using magic while controlling Trixie's body wasn't because the showmare had less potential power than Twilight; in fact, Trixie had more than enough power to fuel most of the spells Twilight knew by heart. The difficulty stemmed from the fact that Trixie's magic *felt* different from Twilight's; the studious unicorn struggled to find the words as she wrote her notes in between attempts to cast the spells Trixie was drilling her on, but eventually she decided to compare her magic to squeezing a bottle of mustard, requiring focus and effort to output the required energy, whereas Trixie's magic felt more like pouring out a cup of water, requiring more attention to keeping the magic from "spilling" out of the spell and going to waste. Trixie hadn't understood the analogy, but Twilight chalked that up to not having to learn to master another's talent.

Once Twilight formed the mental concept of how Trixie's magic worked, it took her only a few minutes to make the illusion spell work to her and Trixie's initial satisfaction. The result was to make Trixie's blue-coated and silver-haired body a dead-ringer for Twilight's lavender body, down to the colors and style of her mane and tail and, most importantly, her cutie-mark. The only issue was that Twilight had to keep part of her attention on maintaining the illusion to keep it intact. '*That is a detail we'll have to work on,*' Trixie noted, feeling the fatigue from using so much magic despite not being the dominant mind at the moment, '*Have you honestly never tried illusion magic before now?*'

Never got around to it, Twilight responded mentally, *It's going on top of the to-do list after this though.*

"Wow Twixie, that's amazing!" Twilight turned her head to smile at Spike, who was standing just outside the kitchen door admiring the now-lavender

unicorn, "I bet I couldn't tell the difference if you stood next to the real thing."

"Thanks Spike," Twilight said. She took another second to admire herself before letting out a tired sigh. "I think it's high time I took a-" She was interrupted by a faint, all-too familiar cry of "Incoming!" followed by rainbow blur entering the library through one of the higher windows and crashing into a wall, shaking the giant tree enough to dislodge a number of books from their places. Twilight groaned as she refocused on the illusion spell; she didn't even need to look to know that Rainbow Dash had already picked herself up and was giving the unicorn her usual sheepish post-crash grin. That meant the cyan pegasus had seen her looking "normal," so dropping the illusion would be a bad idea. "Can I help you?" Twilight asked, looking toward Dash. *Please let this be a quick visit*, she added mentally.

Rainbow Dash dug at the floor with a hoof for a second, clearly uncomfortable, and not just because of the angry look Spike was shooting her. "Um," she said at last, "Have you seen Pinkie Pie lately?"

"Not since yesterday," Twilight answered.

"When exactly?" Dash asked, regaining some of her normal attitude.

"Some time in the afternoon," Twilight said, thinking back, "Why? Is this..." she paused for a moment. Pinkie hadn't said anything about not telling Dash about the Gilda surprise, but Twilight wasn't sure if she could deal with the pegasus's reaction if this turned out to be the first she'd heard about it. Still, beating about the bush was not something Twilight was very good at; that was probably a big reason she was so bad at keeping secrets. Deciding to just go for it, she took a breath and asked, "Is this about Gilda lurking around Whitetail Woods?"

Dash nodded. "Pinkie told me a little about the welcome surprise she's trying to set up," she said, "At first I thought that was cool. But while I tried to go to sleep last night, I started worrying. I'd love it if Gilda and I could be friends again, but... well, you remember what she was like when she came to town last time." Twilight just nodded. Dash continued talking, but as she went on about her concerns that Gilda hadn't actually changed, that she might just be looking to make trouble, and how those worries were making Dash question if it was ok to feel loyalty to someone who'd been a jerk, the effort of maintaining the illusion spell started catching up to Twilight and her

focus began to fade. She didn't realize that Dash had stopped talking until the rainbow-maned pony walked over and gave her an impatient poke on the shoulder. "Hey, are you ok?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," Twilight said, blushing, "What were you saying?"

Dash snorted and backed up a few steps, "I was *asking* if you had any advice. You know, from one of your friendship reports or something?"

"Oh, well," Twilight said, trying to think through the fog of fatigue, "I... Well, I've never had to fix a..." She shook her head, trying to clear it out enough to form a complete thought.

'Don't you dare pass out on us Twilight Sparkle!' Trixie shouted, wishing she could do something to help keep the other unicorn awake.

"If you want my advice," Spike said, "I'd let Pinkie go ahead with her plan and see how Gilda reacts." He gave Twilight a wink and subtle nod toward the stairs as Rainbow turned her attention toward him. The unicorn just gave him an odd look, not catching the hint.

'Get out of here you fool!' Trixie hissed, *'Before you collapse and drop the spell!'*

Huh? Oh... right, Twilight responded, having enough mental power left to remember to keep the reply silent. She began to turn away while Spike kept Rainbow occupied, but lost the fight against exhaustion before she took two steps.

Trixie found herself in control of a body that started to go limp, only to catch itself a split second later in a stumbling shuffle of hooves. She bit her lip and froze, hoping Dash hadn't heard anything. Her gaze slid toward the pegasus and locked onto a pair of rose-colored, suspicion-narrowed eyes. *Twilight...* Trixie thought as she and Dash continued to look at each other, *Please tell me you're awake already.* There was no response from the other unicorn's mind; Trixie had to face the Rainbow alone. "Hello," she said with just the right amount of pleasantness for her stage persona.

"What the hay are *you* doing here?" Dash asked, instantly belligerent, "What happened to Twilight?" Trixie stood her ground, but blinked furiously, partly in surprise and partly in the vain hope that she could drag Twilight

into the controlling position so she could calm her friend down. There was no luck on that front, so Trixie fell back on the tried-and-true performer's back-up plan: improvising.

"I honestly do not know where Twilight popped away to," she said, grabbing her hat and cape with her magic, "As for me, I was just leaving."

"Oh no," Dash said, going into a hover and shoving her face right up next to Trixie's, "Twilight wouldn't just teleport away in the middle of a talk. Besides, I know what her teleport spell sounds like, and I didn't hear it. All I heard was..." She trailed off and backed away as she was struck by a realization. "You," she said, pointing an accusing hoof at the blue unicorn, "You were pretending to be Twilight just now, weren't you?"

"What possible reason would the Great and Powerful Trixie have to do such a thing?" Trixie replied, eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

Behind Dash's back, Spike raised a claw and opened his mouth to speak, but the pegasus fired off her retort first. "I don't know," she said sarcastically, "embarrass her, ruin her reputation, try and make her as big a laughingstock as you are?"

"Trixie is no laughingstock," the showmare hissed, "just because all you insular little ponies in this backwater of a town can't appreciate the wonder that is Trixie-"

"Shut up!" Rainbow Dash shouted, "I don't have time for any of your lame boasting. What did you do with Twilight? You know what?" she added as Trixie and Spike tried to speak, "Don't answer; I know you'll just lie. I'll find her myself." Without another word, she zoomed away toward the stairs, the wind from her passing knocking Trixie's hat out of her telekinetic grip.

"Just great," Trixie muttered, dropping her cape and focusing on teleporting to Twilight's room to head off the irate flying pony. Her horn sparked and flared a few times before the aura died away completely; her magic hadn't recovered enough from Twilight's efforts to allow for teleportation. Grumbling, Trixie galloped up the stairs and into Twilight's room, arriving just in time to see Rainbow Dash starting to lift Twilight's unoccupied body from the bed. "Stop at once!" Trixie shouted, leaping up to the sleeping alcove, "you don't know what you're doing!" She tried to wrap the lavender unicorn in a magic grip, but Rainbow Dash cut her off with a kick that sent

her tumbling out of the alcove. Trixie hit the floor hard and lay there stunned, eyes rolling as Rainbow got a better hold on Twilight's body and fluttered out the window with it. With much effort and some painful wincing, Trixie picked herself up and then climbed back into the alcove to look out the window. She made it just in time to see Dash's tail disappear around the side of the tree, and she pounded the window sill in frustration. "Stupid pegasus," she muttered as she climbed back down, "I am *not* going to let you get away from me!" After some quick stretching to make sure she wasn't too badly hurt from the fall, the pale blue showmare galloped down the stairs, past a worried and confused Spike, and out into the street. A quick scan of the sky revealed a rainbow contrail leading toward the middle of Ponyville, giving Trixie cause to smile slightly as she galloped off in pursuit.

Several blocks later, a moaning echo alerted Trixie to the fact that Twilight was returning to consciousness. '*What's going on?*' the librarian asked, seeing that they were no longer indoors.

"You've been kidnapped," Trixie replied, keeping an eye on the fading rainbow streak in the sky.

'*Kidnapped?*' Twilight asked, confused, '*Why? Where are you taking me?*'

Trixie rolled her eyes. *Let me rephrase that*, she said mentally so as not to attract more stares than she already was, *your body was stolen and I'm trying to catch up to the pegasus who did it.*

'*What pega...*' Twilight began, and then stopped as pieces started to fall into place in her mind. '*Rainbow Dash,*' she said, sounding weary, '*My disguise fell apart right in front of her, didn't it? What did you do?*'

Nothing at all! Trixie said defensively, *She jumped to conclusions, kicked me, and flew off with your body before I could get four words out. I seriously doubt she would've listened to reason anyway. Not coming from the Great and Powerful Trixie anyway.*

Twilight sighed and traced the rainbow contrail as best she could when Trixie glanced at it. '*There's a good chance she'll take me to the medical tent,*' she said, '*We're heading in that general direction anyway.*'

Well, since you know where that is and I don't, I'll let you take over. She blinked control over to Twilight, who immediately tripped and somersaulted several feet down the road, ending up on her back covered in road dust and an aching nose.

"Ow," Twilight said, rubbing her nose, "Next time, slow down before we switch." Trixie muttered an apology as the bookish unicorn glanced at the fading rainbow contrail in the sky and then leapt back into a gallop. Although she had a good guess where Rainbow Dash was heading, Twilight did her best to stay ahead of the contrail's fading end just in case the pegasus had decided to do something unexpected. So focused on the sky as she was, she didn't realize she'd entered the marketplace and nearly collided with Applejack until the orange farm-mare brought her to a stop by grabbing her tail.

"Now, just where are you rushing off to?" AJ asked, giving the blue unicorn a suspicious look as the latter picked herself off the ground once again, "It wouldn't have anythin' to do with why I just saw Rainbow Dash flyin' by with Twilight hangin' from her like ragdoll, would it?"

'Oh of course,' Trixie said with pure sarcasm, 'The Great and Powerful Trixie's in town, so everything out of the ordinary must be her fault!'

She's correct this time, Twilight pointed out flatly. She mulled over her options for handling this new confrontation, *she's a bit biased, so being honest might not... wait. Applejack is the Element of Honesty! She'll know it isn't a trick if I explain.* She realized that Applejack was waiting impatiently for a response and opened her mouth to give it, only to be interrupted by a gust of wind announcing Rainbow Dash's arrival on the scene.

"The jig's up Trixie," the pegasus declared, "Twilight's in the doctor's care, and I'm on to your little plan."

"What plan?" AJ asked, looking between the two ponies.

"Messing with Twilight's image," Dash announced, clearly wanting to make a scene, "She put Twilight in a coma so she could take her place and..." she trailed off as she tried to think of a good way to spoil a reputation. Twilight saw her chance and took it.

"There's no 'plan' Applejack," she said. The farm-mare blinked in surprise at hearing her friend's voice come out of Trixie's mouth. "Trixie simply-"

"Oh no," Dash said, interrupting the unicorn by shoving a hoof in her face, "Don't even try using that voice-change trick." She exchanged her hoof for pushing her face right up against Twilight's, forcing the mare to take a few steps back. "Why'd you even bother coming back here anyway?" she asked, "All you do is cause trouble and mess with my friends! And this time... this time you took advantage of Twilight! Don't think I haven't heard how she protected you when you tried putting on your stupid show yesterday. How could you stoop so low?" Twilight's mouth hung open under the onslaught of accusation. She knew she had to speak up to explain everything and defend Trixie, but she couldn't get a word in edgewise.

'*Twilight*,' Trixie's mental voice sounded worried, '*Look around*.' Twilight complied, casting her eyes left and right. A crowd of ponies was gathering around to watch Rainbow berate the unicorn, and none of them were looking very happy. '*This is starting to look like a mob*,' the showmare said.

What do we do? Twilight asked.

'*Simple, just give me control*.' Twilight blinked. "Good," Trixie muttered, taking a defensive stance and glancing around, "and now..." She reared back, waving her front hooves dramatically, and then cast a smokescreen spell and teleported away.

Chapter 6

'Running away. Is that your answer for EVERYTHING Trixie?'

"She who turns and runs away, lives to act another day," Trixie recited elegantly, gesturing dramatically with a hoof. The Double Mentally Occupied mare was standing just inside the door of her stage-wagon, front hooves propped up on the lower half as she guided the vehicle down the road through Whitetail Wood at a rate meant to leave even the fastest galloping pursuers in the dust. After teleporting herself away from the growing mob of ponies in the market, Trixie had made a beeline for her wagon and managed to get it and herself to the outskirts of Ponyville before the masses had caught up. She, and her mental passenger Twilight Sparkle, had been dogged for a fair distance down the road and into the woods, but now it seemed like the pursuit was breaking off. After using her hoof mirror to assure herself that she wasn't being chased anymore, Trixie slowed the wagon down and turned it off of the path to park out of sight beneath a few trees.

'We should have grabbed Spike before we left,' Twilight said as Trixie closed the top half of the door and allowed herself to relax, *'We need to go back and get him.'*

"Eventually, yes," Trixie said, curling up on a cushion and holding her mirror up, "But first we need to wait for Ponyville to calm down and drop its guard, and then make our move under the cover of darkness or something. Angry mobs are not be trifled with Twilight, and you must admit that was a mob."

'Have you ever actually been chased by a mob before?' Twilight asked, feeling quite annoyed by the current situation, *'You basically ran yourself out of town after your previous visits.'*

"Do you honestly think Ponyville is the only place the Great and Powerful Trixie has found herself unwelcome in?" the showmare asked, cocking an eyebrow, "Between the Ursa Minor incident and her second showing, Trixie was chased out of towns by an angry mob at least three times, and even when I wasn't, I barely made enough to get by on. In hindsight, it was utter

folly to try and continue using my boastful routine without my stage, costume, or fireworks to support the image, but my pride was still too great for me to realize it."

'Oh my,' Twilight said, 'I... that must have been really hard.'

"You have no idea," Trixie said haughtily, "How could you anyway? Princess Celestia's prized student, I'm sure you've had everything given to you on a silver platter. You've never known want, or real hunger, to what it's like to not have any real friends in the world."

'I know what it's like not to have friends,' Twilight said, 'For years I buried myself in my studies, spending more time with my books than with other ponies. The Princess literally had to order me to make some friends. So, I think I can sympathize with you on that at least.' Trixie sniffed and wiped a tear out of her eye, but then gave her reflection an askance glance. *'A-anyway,' Twilight said, feeling awkward, 'You got through that, right? You've had more success lately, haven't you?'*

"I have," Trixie said, "Thanks in part to that one unicorn... actually, both of them. If Soul Mage hadn't outwitted me, I probably wouldn't have bothered to listen to the other one's advice. 'The livelihood of the performer depends on the audience's reaction to them. Please the audience first, yourself second.' I ran off without giving that the thought it deserved, but after a few nights of sleeping on the ground with a belly full of nothing but wild grass I was forced to re-evaluate myself." Her ears dropped and a melancholy shadow fell over her face. "I had to admit that I had let my persona as the Great and Powerful Trixie take over my life. My talent is in prestidigitation and showboating, to be able to leave ponies standing in awe. It was-" a knock at the wagon door interrupted the story and Trixie fell silent.

After a few seconds, there was a second knock followed by a cheerful call of "Mail call!"

"Mail call?" Trixie said in a quiet, suspicious tone as she approached the door.

'That sounded like Ditzzy Doo,' Twilight said, mildly surprised, 'She is the mail-pony for Ponyville...'

Trixie frowned and opened the top half of her door with caution, peeking around it to look outside. A grey pegasus with blonde hair and bright yellow eyes, one of which was wandering slightly, was hovering in front of the door with a mail satchel slung across her shoulders. Trixie glanced around to confirm that the pegasus was alone before opening the top of the door completely and giving Ditzy an expectant look. "Special derp-livery," the mail-pony said before chuckling at her own pun and pulling a letter out of her satchel. Trixie gave her an odd look before taking the letter in her own mouth and setting it aside.

"Thank you," she said, "but, how did you find me out here?"

"Neither rain, nor snow, nor the intended recipient being run out of town can stop the postal service from completing its duty," Ditzy declared with a salute and a big smile. The smile quickly faded though, and the pegasus's eyes both slid to focus on the blue unicorn as they narrowed dangerously. "Also, next time you show your face in town, it had better be to fix up Ms. Twilight Sparkle." Trixie blinked, sliding Twilight into control, as Ditzy turned around and flew back toward Ponyville. Twilight couldn't help but smile as she closed the door and picked the letter up with her magic.

'Do you have that entire town wrapped around your hooves or something?' Trixie asked. Twilight paused, her reply dying on her lips as she considered her actual position in Ponyville's society. *'Oh, never mind,'* Trixie said, *'I honestly don't care that much. Can I read my mail please?'*

"Of course," Twilight said with a blink. When the two didn't switch control, Twilight pursed her lips in confusion, and then counted to five before blinking again, this time resulting in a successful switch. *'Roughly twenty seconds between swaps,'* she mused, *'I forgot about that.'* Trixie rolled her eyes and picked up the letter again, since it had fallen to the floor during the control swap. *'How is it that you're getting mail anyway?'* Twilight asked, *'You've only been around Ponyville for... about 36 hours now, and with me for almost all of that time.'*

"Before leaving a town or city, I make it point to make sure my mail is going to be sent to my next destination," Trixie explained, "I don't get much mail though, and I usually pick it up at the post office, but..." She shrugged and checked the post-mark on the letter before opening it, and smiled when she saw it had come from Manehatten. "Ah, this must be from Mr. Arch," she

said, opening the letter and holding it up, "Let's see... 'Dear Great and Powerful Trixie, I trust this letter has found you in good health and that your tour is meeting with success.' Well, yes, current predicament notwithstanding," the showmare commented before continuing, "'I am writing to you in regards to the upcoming theater season here in Manehattan. I know we had previously discussed adding your show to our line-up, but over the past few weeks I have been approached by a number of other performers and acting troupes who seem to be good investments. In order to make a proper decision between all the possibilities, I'll need you to return to Manehattan as soon as possible for an audition. Sincerely, Proscenium Arch, owner and operator; Silver Halter Theater. P.S. I feel I should warn you, your competition is formidable.' Hmph." Trixie set the letter aside with a nonchalant air and walked over to her stash of books and scrolls. Twilight kept quiet and observed as the showmare began sorting through the books and setting a few off to the side in a pile along with a pair of scrolls.

'So,' she said at last, startling Trixie for a second, '*Sorry. Are you ok? That letter...*'

Trixie laughed, a genuine, if somewhat condescending sound of mirth. Twilight held herself back as Trixie's eyes closed in amusement to avoid switching places; she was getting wary of pulling swaps in the middle of high-energy activities like magic or running. "Am I ok?" the showmare said, "Oh Twilight, I'm more than ok. I've got a challenge on my hooves. Ponies are lining up to try and steal the spotlight from the Great and Powerful Trixie, and Trixie intends to give them a run for their bits. Who needs the approval of Ponyville? The minute you leave Trixie's head, she is heading straight for Manehattan to defend her place in the Silver Halter's summer performance series! And while we wait, I can focus on creating the perfect act to prove why the Great and Powerful Trixie is the greatest magician to ever grace an Off-Broadway stage!"

'*Only Off-Broadway?*' Twilight asked sardonically.

"I'll take my victories where I can," Trixie replied, opening one of her books to a random page, "Besides, I'm indebted to Mr. Arch for giving me the chance to escape the desperate pan-handling of street-corner 'shows' so quickly after my last fall. I intend to work with him for as long as I can. Now, if you don't mind, I've got an act to put together."

'Just don't forget, we still need to get in touch with Spike,' Twilight said.

"As if I would forget," Trixie said with a haughty sniff.

As Trixie had come to learn, a successful stage show depended as much on the audience's reactions as the performer's act. Even during rehearsals, having some pony around to observe greatly enhanced the experience and helped to smooth out the rough patches. Trixie had performed before crowds of all sizes and dispositions in her life, but none of those shows were anything like performing for somepony who was sitting in the back of your own brain, seeing what you saw and being able to read your surface thoughts. All in all, it was not a particularly helpful arrangement, especially since Twilight had no practical knowledge of what constituted good theater. Not that the other unicorn was entirely useless; she had given Trixie some useful notes on managing her magic during transitions between tricks.

Trixie's act typically followed a four-step formula. She would open with a dramatic entrance and a speech to welcome and entice the audience with promises of amazing feats. She would then begin a series of increasingly complex-looking sleight-of-hoof and illusion tricks that would transition smoothly into the third part: stories of monsters and heroics starring, of course, the Great and Powerful Trixie. The final part was impossible to rehearse, since it was when Trixie invited any and all nay-sayers to challenge her skills, and was never the same twice. For Trixie, the trickiest part of planning an act was selecting the stories to tell. For several hours, she had tried several combinations of stories, looking for the perfect increase in spectacle to leave the gullible properly wowed and the skeptics chomping at the bit to challenge her by the end. There was one story she resisted adding to the act though, simply because she didn't want to hear Twilight's criticism about it. However, as time went by without finding a set of stories that felt right, she gave in and began setting the illusions for her all-time most popular tale: the Ursa of Ponyville.

'Ursa of Ponyville?' Twilight asked, picking up on Trixie's thoughts as the showmare filled the back of the stage with illusory houses and tents to represent the town, 'You actually tell ponies about that?'

"Yes," Trixie said, "with a little creative license so Trixie doesn't come across as a coward at the end." She conjured up a few pony-shaped blobs

of light and set them to wandering about the set. "Didn't your earth pony friend... the apple one, tell you about this?" she asked, "She came to one of my shows a few months back. She seemed rather perturbed by the freedoms I took with the telling."

'AJ did mention seeing you,' Twilight answered, 'All she told me though was that Princess Luna was there too and that it ended rather badly.'

"That's a fair assessment," Trixie said with a sigh, "It could have gone a lot worse though, with the way I was egging the princess on..." She shook her head and refocused on her illusions, which had begun to waver and fade. "No matter," she said with firmness, "Just sit back and watch this, with an open mind if possible." She took her place in the center of the stage and put on a slightly ashamed air. "Now, not all of Trixie's adventures began so well," she said projecting her voice while still sounding demure, "But even the hardest of beginnings can lead to opportunities." She raised her head and gazed out at the trees, imagining each one to be a pony giving her their full attention. "The Great and Powerful Trixie had brought her show to the town of Ponyville, expecting nothing more than an eager audience and acclaim. Sadly, the residents were less than welcoming..." Trixie's horn flared ever-so-slightly and the illusory ponies turned toward her and began approaching in a menacing manner.

'It wasn't that bad,' Twilight protested.

"Let Trixie tell the tale," the showmare snapped. She cleared her throat and sent the illusions back to their starting places. "Sadly," she said, picking up where she'd left off, "the residents were less than welcoming." This time, the ponies gathered around in an attitude of booing and heckling.

"Nevertheless, Trixie withstood the mocking and completed her show, planning to leave the town on the following day." She dismissed the pony illusions and cast a spell to darken the stage slightly, simulating night.

"However, that very night an Ursa Minor, disturbed from its sleep by something, came rampaging out of the Everfree Forest to attack the town." A large blue bear-shaped illusion materialized at the edge of the stage and began tearing into the nearest "building." "The noise awakened Trixie from her slumber," the showmare continued, affecting a dizzy wobble as she turned toward the beast, "And being so tired meant she was not at her full potential." She sent two weak-looking bolts of magic at the Ursa. The Ursa turned toward her and swung a paw at her. Trixie jumped back and rolled

across the stage as if she'd been sent flying by a powerful blow. Regaining her feet, Trixie's horn took on a purplish glow and the image of a purple unicorn trotted onstage from behind her. "Luckily for her," Trixie said, resuming her narration, "there was a unicorn in Ponyville who, although not as Great and Powerful as Trixie, knew how to tame an Ursa Minor. By working together we calmed the beast and sent it home to its cave." The purple unicorn image raised its head and a flute appeared above it playing a soft melody as Trixie "lifted" the Ursa off the ground and rocked it gently before moving it off stage before dismissing it and the other illusions. "And that," Trixie declared with a dramatic pose, "will be my final story. Any critiques Twilight Sparkle?"

Twilight's long list of comments regarding the inaccuracies of the story was derailed before she could start it by the sound of clapping hooves. "Woo hoo!" a bright, cheery voice declared from somewhere in the woods, "Brava! That was an awesome story!" Trixie's face screwed up in confusion as he looked around, and then leapt back in fright as Pinkie Pie jumped into view from behind the closest tree. Spike was sitting on the pink party pony's back, looking slightly ill from all the bouncing. "Encore!" Pinkie shouted, continuing her praises.

Handle this, Trixie told Twilight, blinking to give the other unicorn control.

"What are you two doing out here?" Twilight asked, hopping down to the ground to meet Pinkie eye-to-eye.

"Oh, right," Pinkie said, growing sober to Spike's obvious relief, "Well, I don't think I'll be needing your help with Gilda's welcome-back surprise anymore Twixie."

"Why is that?" Twilight asked, giving spike a withering glance.

"Don't look at me," the dragon muttered, "she came up with it on her own."

"It's bad Twixie," Pinkie said, "Gilda came flying into town just a few minutes ago with a bunch of other griffons, and they're being *really* big jerks to everypony."

"They're breaking everything," Spike exclaimed, "Store windows, stalls, and a couple of them were picking a fight with Applejack when we left."

"Oh dear," Twilight said, "What about Rainbow Dash? What was she doing?"

"I don't know," Spike said, "I didn't see her anywhere. I'll bet she'll be confronting Gilda when she shows up though."

"How many griffons are we talking about here?"

"A whole bunch," Pinkie said, "I saw One... Two... Three... Four... Maybe seven or eight in all besides Gilda the Grump. You've got to come help Twixie, we're going to need all the help we can get to stop them."

"Of course I'll help Pinkie," Twilight said with a reassuring smile.

'No,' Trixie said, 'I refuse to set hoof in that town again. They've made it quite clear that Trixie is not welcome, and don't forget that we look like Trixie.'

"One moment," Twilight said to Pinkie and Spike. She turned away from them and turned her attention inward. *Come on Trixie, she pleaded, I can't just sit back while my home is being attacked.*

'Hmph,' Trixie replied, 'Why should I care? There are already plenty of ponies in Ponyville, more than enough to drive out nine griffons. If they don't have the backbone to help themselves-'

What about all your stories Trixie? Twilight asked.

'Most of those are made-up, as you know all too well,' the showmare retorted.

True, the librarian replied smoothly, But in every one you pass yourself off as the defender of those who can't help themselves. And think about this: as successful as you are telling stories that are mostly fabrications, wouldn't it help to have just one story that's more fact than fiction?

Trixie paused and thought for several seconds. *'You have a point,'* she said with mild surprise, *'however, I'm just a showmare, and you still aren't as good with magic as you used to be. How do you expect us to face down a gang of angry griffons?'*

"Gilda's a proud creature," Twilight said aloud, feeling confident enough in her argument to let Pinkie and Spike hear it, "She thinks she's superior to ponies, and her pride was hurt pretty badly at the end of her first visit to Ponyville. All it took was Rainbow Dash standing up to her last time, but if she's got back-up, we'll need a pony with more presence. Somepony who's both Great and Powerful." She grinned as Pinkie applauded.

Chapter 7

The Ponyville Marketplace was the scene of a stand-off. Broken stalls and ruined food littered the ground between the two groups that were staring each other down. One group was comprised of griffons, with none other than Gilda standing at their head. The other group was led by Rainbow Dash and included Applejack, Big Macintosh, Caramel, Carrot Top, and several members of the weather patrol. The remainder of Ponyville's population was keeping its distance from the scene, watching from the relative safety of the nearby stores and alleyways between buildings. All those standing in the street showed signs of battle- bruises, black eyes, missing feathers or patches of hair, and Dash was sporting a scratch on her right cheek that was bleeding lightly. The cyan pegasus and Gilda eyed each other in silence for a long time, and then the griffon's beak quirked upward in a smirk. "Good to see you've still got your spunk Dash," she said, "too bad you're wasting it defending all these lame ponies."

"Shut up Gilda," Dash snapped, "you wouldn't know real coolness if it came up and bit your tail off." She flared her wings out and took a few steps forward. "You know, I've been beating myself up with worry ever since I heard you were back in the area. I was starting to think you'd changed, that you were here to apologize for being such a jerk to my other friends, and I was going to *forgive* you!" Tears started to well up in the pegasus's eyes as she stepped closer to the griffon, but her face was set in an expression of pure anger. "And then... Then you finally show your dumb beak in town with a bunch of thugs at your back, just to prove how big of a bully you really are." She came to a stop right in front of Gilda, who actually took a step backward in the face of her former friend's anger. "Get out of Ponyville," Dash growled, "Get out and take your new *friends* with you, or so help me..." She let her voice trail off, leaving the threat up to Gilda's imagination.

The fearful look on Gilda's face vanished after she took a glance back at her posse of eight griffons. When her gaze returned to Rainbow Dash, she was scowling. Without speaking, she lashed out and grabbed the pegasus in her talons, squeezing just hard enough to start breaking skin before throwing her back toward the group of town defenders. Dash's back legs hit the ground first and her momentum carried her onto her back. She lay still

for several seconds before slowly struggling back to her feet, one wing hanging limp at her side. Applejack was at her side instantly, giving her a body to lean against and glaring death at the griffons across the way. The other ponies tensed, as did the griffons, both groups simply waiting for any excuse to launch into a fight. Just as the tension was about to snap, cries from the east side of the marketplace followed by the sound of rapidly rolling wheels diverted their attention. A small caravan wagon came thundering toward the groups, forcing both to back away and give it space to pass. Those who took the time to focus on more than getting run down thought they saw a blue and purple, manically smiling something on the front end of the wagon before it blew past them. The wagon slowed slightly after it passed the groups and then turned sharply to the right before skidding to a halt a short distance away.

"What in tarnation?" Applejack asked, voicing the confusion of all the ponies, and griffons, as they stared at the contraption. Casting glances at their opponents, the griffon gang and Ponyville defenders slowly approached the wagon, joined by some of the braver spectators.

As they approached, a magically amplified voice rang out as the wagon unfolded into a modestly-sized stage. "Come one, come all," the voice declared, "Come and witness the wonder that is... The *Great and Powerful Trixie!*" Fireworks went off, trumpets sounded, and the pale-blue, hat-and-cape wearing showmare appeared onstage in a puff of magical smoke.

"What?" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, eyes twitching furiously, "You have *got* to be kidding me! Why that..." She started to leap toward the stage, only to find herself being restrained by a pull on her tail. She looked back, expecting to see applejack holding on to her and blinking in surprise when she saw it was actually Pinkie Pie, wearing a dangerously serious expression. "Pinkie, what's the big idea?" the pegasus asked.

"Give 'er time," Pinkie said around the mouthful of rainbow-striped tail. Dash tried to protest, but the look on Pinkie's face brooked no argument. Dash sank to the ground with a sigh and turned her attention to the stage, digging at the ground impatiently with a hoof.

Gilda, not facing any similar restraint from her group, marched up to the foot of the stage and eyed Trixie dangerously. "What's all this?" she asked.

"Did you not hear the Great and Powerful Trixie?" Trixie replied, her superior attitude cranked to the max, "You are gazing upon the greatest and most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria!" This declaration was greeted by a round of raspberries from the pony group and loud "Boooo" from Rainbow Dash.

'Easy Trixie,' Twilight cautioned from her place as the Multiple Mental Occupancy passenger, feeling a slight twitch in Trixie's face, *'Stay focused on Gilda.'*

I do not need coaching, Trixie snapped back silently, *I know how to act!* She gave Gilda her smuggest smile and waited for the griffon's response.

"Great and Powerful huh?" Gilda said, arching an eyebrow, "So what? You're still just a pony."

"Just a pony?" Trixie replied in an offended tone, "The Great and Powerful Trixie is more than 'just a pony,' my fine feathered friend. The Great and Powerful Trixie wields powers beyond the imaginations of ponykind, and none can boast a greater skill at the vanquishing of monsters. In fact, Trixie stands alone as the only pony to even vanquish the great Ursa Major!"

"Yeah right," Dash deadpanned, "you'd never even seen an Ursa bef-" she was suddenly muffled by a pair of muffins being shoved into her mouth by a pink hoof.

Gilda cast a glance at the pegasus before looking back at Trixie. "Yeah," she said, "I'm calling you out on that. There's no way you fought an Ursa and lived. Even a griffon can't do that without help."

"Ah my," Trixie said in a long-suffering tone, "Always with the doubt and disbelief; such is the life of the Great and Powerful." She went back to her cocky stance and strode the edge of the stage to look down at Gilda. "You want proof?" she asked.

'Don't say anything that might cause them to lure an Ursa Minor into town,' Twilight warned.

"Then the Great and Powerful Trixie challenges you," the showmare said without missing a beat, "Anything you can do, I can do better."

Gilda turned her head to the side and regarded Trixie with a single eye. "Anything?" She smirked wickedly and took flight, hovering up to look the unicorn square in the eye. "I can fly," she said, "beat that."

Trixie gave Gilda a strange look and then chuckled. "Flying?" she said mockingly, "Is that really all you have to challenge the Great and Powerful Trixie with? Certainly you have *some* sort of unique-

"You said 'anything' Lame-o Trixie," Gilda retorted, poking the unicorn's nose with a talon, "I pick flying, so unless you can grow a pair of wings in the next few minutes, you lose."

Oh no, Trixie thought, panicking behind her façade, *I wasn't expecting something like this*.

'Really?' Twilight responded, '*You've never been challenged to fly before?*'

Never, Trixie thought, *I guess it's just taken for granted; Unicorns use magic, Pegasi fly, and Earth Ponies... do whatever makes them special. I've never had to try something so... ordinary to win*.

'Hmm...' Twilight thought, racking her memory, '*There's a spell I used once that can give wings to non-pegasus ponies...*'

Quick, use it! Trixie exclaimed, catching Twilight off-guard long enough to blink-switch with her. Twilight froze up for a brief moment upon finding herself in control, on a stage, and with an annoyed griffon hovering in front of her face.

You could've given me a few minutes to remember how to cast it, the unicorn groused to her mental partner. Doing her best to re-claim the image Trixie had been projecting to the audience, Twilight thought back to the day of the Best Young Fliers competition, trying to recall how she'd cast the spell to give Rarity wings. *O...kay*, she silently said at last, *I've only done this once before, and it was on a different pony. Brace yourself Trixie*. She removed Trixie's cape, squeezed her eyes shut, and concentrated, imagining the pathways her magic would have to follow and guiding the energy with as much delicacy as she could. Whether due to her previous experience with the spell, or to the relative ease of getting Trixie's energy to flow, the spell left Twilight feeling less worn-out than she had been after using it on Rarity. When the swirling energy faded from around her, the

unicorn looked over her shoulder to see a pair of large, iridescent butterfly wings on her back. *There you go Trixie*, Twilight thought with a proud smile, *put them to good use.*

'Wait,' Trixie said as Twilight started to blink, *'The spell will break if we switch, remember?'*

It shouldn't, Twilight thought, *I'm not maintaining it. It's supposed to stay put for a few days, or until the wings break. They're rather fragile.*

'Very well,' Trixie said, allowing herself to be pulled into the control position when Twilight blinked. The showmare glanced at her back and saw that the wings were still in place. Satisfied, she looked back and Gilda, and grinned wickedly at the griffon's shocked expression. Flapping her new wings took almost no thought at all, so Trixie took a confident upward leap and began hovering several feet above the stage. Gilda's beak, which had already been hanging open, dropped even farther. "That's right," Trixie said, crossing her front legs and looking down on the griffon, "gaze in awe at the Great, Powerful, and Airborne Trixie!"

Gilda gaped for a moment before shaking her head and flying up to Trixie's level. "All right," she said, "You've got the wings, but do you know how to use them?" She turned away and scanned the sky. "There," she said, pointing to low-hanging cloud, "Think you can beat me to that cloud?"

'The wings come with cloud-walking,' Twilight noted as Trixie contemplated the dare.

"First one onto the cloud wins?" Trixie asked, descending to the stage, "Agreed. So long as we start on even footing." Gilda snorted and alighted next to the unicorn.

"Count us off," the griffon said, pointing to one of her gang members. That griffon stepped forward and flared his wings up as high as he could. Gilda and Trixie both knelt down in preparation and waited for the signal.

"Ready," the starter said slowly. Gilda snorted and narrowed her eyes, focusing entirely on the cloud. Trixie smirked and began preparing a spell, grateful that her hat was covering her glowing horn. "Aaaand, go!" The griffon snapped his wings down and Gilda took off like a rocket, leaving a cloud of dust that obscured the sight of Trixie vanishing in a burst of light.

The showmare re-materialized on the cloud and scooped some of it up to make a pile to lean against as she smiled smugly at the rapidly-approaching and very angry Gilda.

"You cheater!" the griffon shouted, coming to a stop just inches from the unicorn's face.

"Cheater?" Trixie protested, trying to calm her racing heart as she kept her face impassive, "In what way did the Great and Powerful Trixie cheat?"

Gilda gave Trixie a look of utter confusion as she tried to find her voice. "You... you teleported," she said at last.

"Yes," Trixie said, nonchalant. *Twilight*, she said mentally, *do these wings give me other pegasus skills?*

'I'm... not sure,' Twilight replied, *'Why?'*

You'll see, Trixie said, turning her attention back to Gilda, who'd been rendered speechless again by Trixie's blasé attitude. "Do you have an issue with Trixie's methods?" she asked in a prompting manner, "Or are you just blowing smoke?"

Gilda's beak snapped shut and she lashed out with a hand, grabbing Trixie by the neck and dragging her closer. "Don't toy with me *Pixie*," she growled, "you know darn well what I'm talking about."

"Unhand Trixie," the showmare demanded, knocking the griffon's arm aside. She took a step back and made a show of composing herself before settling onto her rump and giving Gilda a flat look. Then, without warning, she jumped up and kicked at the cloud with both hind legs, adding a spark of magic just to make sure the white mass broke apart completely under Gilda's front legs. Gilda tipped forward into the gap and tumbled through the air with a shriek, hitting the ground before she could recover her balance. "You never specified *how* we had to reach this cloud," Trixie shouted down as she peeked over the edge of the cloud at Gilda.

Gilda stood up slowly, shaking her head to clear away the strange chirping sound in her ears and to stop her eyes from spinning. She glared up at Trixie with one eye, and then turned her attention to her cronies, who were

looking at her with a mixture of expectation and worry. "What are you goons looking at?" Gilda snapped, "Go teach her a lesson."

Eight pairs of wings flared open and eight pairs of eagle eyes locked on the hovering blue unicorn in the sky. The griffons jumped into the air and began flying toward Trixie, spreading out to approach from as many angles as possible. Trixie's irises shrank as she looked around for an avenue of escape or, by some small miracle, somepony coming to help her. As the griffons drew closer, Twilight spoke up, *'I've got an idea. Give me control.'* Trixie complied and Twilight began charging magic. At the last minute, just before the griffons reached her, she forced the magic into a teleport spell and re-appeared on the stage. The griffons back-pedaled, but most of them ended up colliding with each other. Meanwhile Twilight wasted no time in casting another spell. Three long ropes materialized out of thin air and began wrapping around the dazed group, lashing their legs together and tying the whole group into a rough jumble of feathers, fur, and outrage. Twilight took a hold of them in her magic and lowered them gently to the ground before releasing everything and catching her breath.

'You know, Trixie said, I could have done that.'

Probably, Twilight responded, *I don't mind if you want to claim credit for doing that. Everypony else is going to be giving it to you.* She blinked control back to the showmare and then added, *'Now you need to make sure Gilda's going to leave.'* Trixie nodded imperceptibly and took advantage of the twenty-second post-switch period to close her eyes and take a calming breath. When her eyes opened, they locked onto the slightly sagging Gilda, who was trying to maintain her tough look despite the pain from her fall. She opened her mouth to begin taunting the griffon, but was interrupted the sound of a fiery belch from behind the stage curtain. Trixie sighed and cast a glance behind her to see Spike poke his head out from behind the curtain and holding out a scroll. *'Finally! Princ-'* Twilight began.

Later, Trixie thought sharply, *I've got a show to finish.* "So," she said aloud, turning back toward Gilda and raising herself up with her wings, "What do you think of the Great and Powerful Trixie now?"

"I still say you're a lame little cheater," Gilda growled, limping toward the stage, "All you did was pull a bunch of cheap parlor tricks on me."

"True, but those tricks took the wind out of your feathers pretty quickly." Trixie and Gilda both stared in amazement as the speaker, Rainbow Dash, flew up onto the stage and landed next to the showmare. Dash looked Trixie square in the eye and said in a low tone, "I don't know what your motive is, but I can't help but admire your courage in coming back." She gave Trixie a wry grin before turning on Gilda. "Just how cool are you anyway, if ponies like Trixie here can beat you?"

"What?" Gilda asked flatly, eyes narrowing dangerously.

'Oh great... she provoked her...' Twilight moaned with an imaginary face-hoof.

"I'll show you 'beat!'" Gilda roared, pouncing. Dash flinched and spun around to bring her rear hooves to bear, but Trixie acted faster, conjuring up a small storm cloud in Gilda's path. A bolt of lightning shot out and hit Gilda in the face, knocking her out. Trixie stepped smoothly to the side as the griffon crashed onto the stage and rolled over once to lie on her back, face blackened and eyes rolling in slow circles.

Trixie gave a derisive snort in Gilda's direction, and then flared her butterfly wings wide as she reared back and declared, "And thus the Great and Powerful Trixie has once again proven herself to be the greatest in all of Equestria!" She settled back onto all four hooves, picked up her cape and turned to walk backstage. "Was there ever any doubt?" she asked flippantly.

"Yes," Rainbow Dash answered emphatically, echoed by several ponies in the audience.

"Ingrates..." Trixie muttered.

Chapter 8

"Tell me good news," Trixie said to Spike as she stepped behind the stage curtain. She glanced at her back and added, "And Twilight, how do I get rid of these wings?"

'They're made from gossamer and morning dew,' Twilight said, 'Like I said before, they're fragile. Oh, and they burn off rather easily.'

"Burn?" Trixie said, glancing at Spike, who was unrolling the scroll in his hands. "Could I bother you for some flame?" she asked him, "On the wings," she added when he gave her an odd look.

"Sure thing Twixie," Spike said with a malicious-looking smirk. He spat out a jet of green fire that pierced both of the iridescent wings, which quickly disintegrated into ash.

"Thank you," Trixie said, placing her cape onto her back and fastening the clasp, "I feel much more like myself now."

"That's either a good thing or a bad thing, and I ain't sure which I'd prefer." Trixie turned around to see Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie standing just inside the curtain.

"I assume you're here to thank Trixie?" the showmare asked.

"As a matter of fact," Applejack said, throwing up a leg to stop Dash from charging, "yes, we are. We certainly coulda handled those griffons on our own, but you saved us more than mite bit of time and pain gettin' the job done. That said," she added, cutting off Trixie's preening, "I think ya owe us some explanations, right?" she looked at Dash, who nodded emphatically, and Pinkie, who was keeping a neutral look on her face.

"You can start by telling us why you've got Spike with you," Dash said, pointing at the baby dragon.

Trixie also cast a glance at Spike. "She's on her way?" she asked simply.

"Yeah," Spike said, scanning the letter.

"Good." *Twilight*, the showmare said mentally, *these are your friends. You should explain everything.*

'*I agree,*' Twilight said, '*Thank you.*' Trixie blinked and Twilight took control of the body. She looked at each of her friends in turn before settling on Pinkie. "You don't have to keep the secret anymore Pinkie," she told the pink pony.

"Okie dokie Twilight," Pinkie replied, her customary grin spreading across her face.

"Pinkie," Dash said, giving Pinkie a sideways glance, "Don't tell me she's got you fooled with that voice trick."

"It's not a trick silly," Pinkie said.

"Rainbow," Twilight said, "Please stop jumping to conclusions and just *listen.*" She looked at Applejack next and said, "AJ, I hope you're willing to keep an open mind, because I'm going to need you to be true to your Element."

"How do ya know about me being an Element of Harmony Trixie?" the farm-pony asked.

"Because," Twilight said, "the pony talking to you right now isn't Trixie. I'm Twilight Sparkle." Rainbow groaned and ragged her hooves down her face, while Pinkie simply smiled and nodded. Applejack's jaw dropped slightly as she stared at the unicorn mare in front of her.

"Give it up," Rainbow said, "you're not going to convince-"

"She's tellin' the truth," AJ said in amazement.

"What?" Dash exclaimed.

"I can sense it," the orange earth pony said, "She was tellin' the honest-ta-pony truth. That's our Twilight standing there."

"But... how?" Dash asked, "She was Trixie a minute ago! And Twilight's in the hospital right now, comatose!"

"That's just her body Dashie," Pinkie said, "Her mind's hanging out in Trixie's head right now." Dash glanced between Pinkie and twilight repeatedly with a look of pure confusion on her face.

"You knew about this Pinkie?" Applejack asked, "Why ain't you said anything before now?"

"Pinkie Pie Swear," Pinkie and Twilight answered at the same time.

"Oh."

"I, well, Trixie and I were hoping to fix this before anypony could find out," Twilight said, and then gave Dash a flat look.

"How'd this happen anyway?" Applejack asked.

"Well," Twilight began, only to be interrupted by a thought from Trixie.

'May I take this?' the showmare asked, 'It was my fault, so I should take responsibility for it.'

"Trixie's going to answer the question," Twilight told her friends, "just a second." She blinked and surrendered control to Trixie.

"After Twilight came to my aid," the showmare explained, "We talked for a while and I convinced her to have a little contest with me, to test our performance skills against one another."

"Pffft," Rainbow said, barely holding in a laugh, "Twilight putting on a magic show? I'd like to see that."

'I wouldn't have been that bad...' Twilight thought grumpily.

"To try and even the odds," Trixie continued, warming up to the story, "Trixie attempted a spell to transfer our minds into one another's bodies, so that Twilight would have to work around Ponyville's... bias against me and I would have had a disguise that would allow me to actually perform without the fear of flying fruit pre-empting me. However, the spell didn't quite work..."

"Shoot, that doesn't sound like much fun," Applejack said, "So, uh, I hope y'all don't mind me askin', but what's it like?"

"It took some getting used to," Twilight said, taking control again, "but it hasn't been all that bad. Still, the sooner Princess Celestia gets here with the spell to put me back in my own body, the better." She walked past her friends and poked her head through the curtain to look around. Her eyes fell on the limp form of Gilda and she frowned slightly. "Well," she said, "hopefully she doesn't get here *too* soon. What will she think if she sees this?" She gestured out at the messed-up marketplace and the eight hog-tied griffons as Pinkie, AJ, and Dash joined her out on the stage. As if in answer to Twilight's question, a large ball of white light began to appear in the middle of the street. The ponies who had just started to clean the place up stopped their work and stared at the light until it grew too bright to look at. With a sudden flare and a warping noise, the light vanished, revealing Princess Celestia, along with a small entourage. Besides the usual pair of statuesque white pegasus Guards, she was joined by a slightly dazed-looking ash-grey unicorn with a red-and-orange mane and tail styled to resemble flames wearing a necklace made of gemstones and a pair of saddlebags.

"Next time," the ash-grey unicorn said, blithely ignoring the ponies around him, "I run the teleport spell. Assuming I can set up a proper way-point before we leave."

Celestia cast a glance at the unicorn before looking around the marketplace with a genial smile on her face. "My little ponies," she said, "Please, get up and go about your business." As the crowd stood up and resumed cleaning up the mess, Celestia made her way toward the stage, avoiding the debris in her way with perfect grace. Her smile faded briefly as she saw the trussed-up griffons, but by the time she reached the panicked-looking Twilight/Trixie, the smile was back. "It looks like you've had a bit of excitement here," she said.

"I suspect that's an understatement," the ash-grey unicorn muttered as he joined the Princess.

"Oh," Twilight said, rubbing her head, "Just... just an average day in Ponyville really." She grinned widely at Celestia, and the ash-grey unicorn

snorted in amusement. "So," Twilight continued, looking at the unicorn, "Why did you bring Ashen Blaze Princess?"

"Because," Ash said, "It is I who constructed the spell which shall restore the fair Twilight Sparkle to her original body."

"And since he designed the spell," Celestia added, "he's currently the only one capable of casting it. Now, shall we proceed?"

"Yes!" Twilight exclaimed, jumping down from the stage and looking at Ash expectantly.

"Yes, right," Ash said, looking uncomfortable at the attention, "We'll have to be near your... Twilight's body. Sorry, I'm not sure who I'm speaking to. Can I just call you Twixie for the time being?" Twilight groaned as Trixie broke down into laughter.

'Clearly,' Trixie said through her mirth, 'the very universe itself has decreed that our combined nickname shall be Twixie.'

"Let's just get this over with," Twilight said flatly. She looked over her shoulder at the stage and asked, "Rainbow, would you mind leading us?"

"Uh, sure," Dash said, blushing slightly as she hopped down from the stage, "Follow me; we're keeping it at the hospital."

"Wait up," Pinkie Pie said as she and Applejack jumped down as well, "I wanna see this." Celestia nodded her approval as Spike trotted out from behind the curtain and jumped down onto Pinkie's back, and the group made their way out of the market and toward the hospital tent. They arrived to find Rarity and Fluttershy standing just outside the entrance, talking in low tones.

"Scuse us," Rainbow Dash announced as she approached, "Royalty coming through."

"Royalty?" Rarity said, disapproval clear in her voice, "Rainbow Dash, what are you- *Princess Celestia!*" The white unicorn dropped into a bow, followed quickly by Fluttershy, both of them quivering in different forms of panic.

"Please get up," Celestia said soothingly, "I'm simply here to lend a hoof with Twilight's condition."

"Really?" Fluttershy asked, looking up with a small smile, "Oh that's wonderful." Rarity scrambled to her feet and quickly moved the tent flap aside far enough to accommodate the alicorn, although Celestia still had to duck her head slightly to sticking her horn through the ceiling. As the group filed in behind the princess, Rarity noticed Trixie and narrowed her eyes.

"What is *she* doing here?" the white unicorn asked.

"Her presence is integral to restoring Twilight," Ashen Blaze said, locating the cot that Twilight's body was laying on and trotting over to it, "you know, since Twilight's mind is currently riding shotgun in her head. Now," he continued, ignoring Rarity's confused reaction and levitating several sheets of paper out of his bags, "Everypony not directly involved in this spell should keep well back. I need plenty of space in order to set this up right." He consulted a paper and then moved an empty cot to sit facing the body's cot with about four feet between them. "Trixie," the ash-grey unicorn said, "lay down there, and make sure the Great and Powerful one is in control." Twilight nodded and ceded control to Trixie, who walked over and climbed onto the cot. "Right," Ash said, moving on to another paper, "Princess, stand next to Twilight's body, on her right side." He glanced at the dirt floor of the tent, frowned slightly, and then produced a large piece of chalk. He marked out a rough circle on the floor that encompassed both cots and then began sketching a pattern in the space between the cots. "If I understand the situation correctly," he said as he worked, "The reason Trixie's mind-swap spell failed and trapped both minds in a single body is because magic cannot be used by an unconscious pony, and when one's mind is separated from their body, they're technically unconscious. That's why the spell has to be used by a third party. Reversing the effects isn't going to be as simple as re-casting the mind-swap spell; Twilight and Trixie's minds are likely intertwined with each other at this point. I'll need to remove both minds, and then Celestia and I will help them separate and guide them back into their proper bodies." He finished drawing and then looked at the pale blue unicorn. "Twilight," he said, "if you can, try to focus on Celestia's aura. Trixie, look for me. That should make things a little easier. Now, are we ready?"

"Yes," Celestia said.

'Let's do this,' Twilight said.

"We're both ready here," Trixie reported.

"Good." Ash's horn began to glow, followed by his gemstone necklace. He traced the pattern on the ground with his eyes and then tapped it with a hoof, causing it to begin glowing as well. Backing up to stand next to Trixie's cot, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. A beam of energy stretched out from his horn and wrapped around Trixie's head.

Twilight had no recollection of the time spent out of her body during Trixie's spell, so she was quite surprised to discover that she was still awake, in a sense, when Ash levitated her mind out of Trixie's body. She couldn't sense anything in the usual manner, but she was aware of several points of life around her, including one that felt like it was right next to her. She "looked around" and found she could identify each presence: Pinkie Pie, full of energy but with a curious melancholy beneath it, Applejack, strong and uncomplicated, Spike, somehow smaller and larger than the others at the same time, and a pure, comforting, enormous aura that could only be Princess Celestia. Recalling Ash's instructions, Twilight tried to reach toward Celestia's aura and felt herself slowly draw closer to it.

'Twilight?' Trixie's voice echoed from the aura she was pulling away from, 'Don't leave.'

'I have to Trixie,' Twilight answered, *'That's the whole point.'*

'But...' Trixie sounded scared, 'I... I don't know where to go. There are so many... people around and I don't know which one to go to.'

Twilight stopped and returned to the Trixie-aura. *'Let me help,'* she said. She "looked" around again at the auras. She described each one to help make sure Trixie was "looking" at them too, and put a name to each one. *'Elegant but tense: Rarity. Firm and fiery: Rainbow Dash. Soothing and disarming: Fluttershy.'* Finally, they focused on an aura that was quite unlike the others. It didn't feel like it belonged to a pony, and it seemed to be in slight turmoil; a strong, almost obsessive net of determination that was just barely holding in a darkness tinted with despair. Trixie recoiled from the aura, but Twilight held fast. *'A troubled soul looking for peace by righting wrongs,'* she said, *'That's Ashen Blaze.'*

'I'd hate to be him,' Trixie said, *'with a mind like that...'* she trailed off for a second. *'No matter,'* she said, *'Go to the Princess now Twilight. I'll be alright.'* With a mental smile, Twilight drifted away from Trixie and toward the presence of her beloved mentor.

As Twilight stirred, her friends rushed over to the cot on which she lay. They all held their breaths as the lavender unicorn's eyes blinked open and focused. "Twilight?" Rarity asked quietly.

"Hey girls, Spike," Twilight said smiling up at each of them in turn. Her smile grew wider as she looked herself over and found everything to be in place- lavender coat, dark-blue-with-pink-highlight mane and tail, star-burst cutie mark...

"How are you feeling?" Fluttershy asked.

"I feel fine Fluttershy," Twilight said, stretching out and rolling off the cot. Her stomach rumbled and she gave an embarrassed smile. "And a bit hungry. How's Trixie?"

"Trixie is fine," the showmare said, standing up on her cot as the group turned to look, "It's good to be alone with my own thoughts again."

"Welp," Ashen Blaze said, rubbing out the magic pattern on the floor, "My work here is done. I'll see myself back to Canterlot. Farew-" He was cut off by Pinkie pouncing on him as he tried to leave the tent.

"You can't leave yet!" the pink pony said, "you'll miss the 'Twilight and Trixie are all better now' party!"

"Yes," Rarity said, "We simply cannot allow you to leave without a proper thank-you."

"I believe I have time to enjoy your company," Celestia said, "provided it's kept casual."

"Yipee!" Pinkie said, bouncing in place on top of Ash, "Just give me some time to get Sugar Cube Corner set up." She ran off without another word, leaving Ash with a mixture of relief and disgruntlement on his face.

"So Twilight," the Princess said, turning to look at her student, "Do you have anything to report on the magic of friendship?"

"Uh," Twilight said, looking around the room and thinking back at the previous days, "Can I... get back to you on that? I've got a lot to sort through." Celestia nodded and left the tent.

Epilogue

As a result of her role in stopping Gilda's gang, and Celestia putting in a good word for her, Trixie was able to spend a couple days in Ponyville to re-supply for her trip to Manehattan. However, despite taking the stage to make a formal apology for her rude behavior in the past, the showmare was denied the opportunity to publically rehearse her new act. She made do with practicing out in Whitetail Wood with Twilight, Spike, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash for company. The showmare and the prismatic pegasus continued to butt egos from time to time, but the others were able to keep them in line.

When the day came for Trixie to leave, Twilight and company met up at the edge of town to see her off. "Good luck," Pinkie said. The sentiment was echoed by Fluttershy, AJ, and Rarity.

"After all you've done, you better knock 'em off their hooves," Dash said, giving Trixie a challenging smile.

"Thank you," Trixie said, returning the smile, "I'll be sure to give you proper credit when I talk about how I saved Ponyville from a marauding army of griffons; you'll be the fearless defender who held out until Trixie could arrive."

Dash mulled that over in her mind and then smirked. "Darn right," she said.

"Of course," Trixie continued with a mischievous glint in her eye, "it may be more dramatic if you were to die seconds before Trixie could get to you." Dash's smug look vanished, the pegasus puzzling over whether that was a good thing or not.

"Have a safe trip Trixie," Twilight said, horn aglow as she floated a scroll toward the showmare. Trixie took the scroll and looked at it curiously.

"That's a copy of the wing-making spell," Twilight explained, "I thought you might like to have it, just in case someone challenges you to fly again."

"Oh," Trixie said, surprised, "Thank you. I'll put it to good use." She opened the wagon door and dropped the scroll inside.

"Feel free to stop by if you're ever in the area again," Twilight said, "I can't speak for everypony in town, but my door will always be open for you. And if you still feel you need to test your skills against mine..."

Trixie chuckled. "Oh, don't you worry about *that* Twilight Sparkle," she said, "Having you in my head for over a day has given me more than enough opportunity to come to terms with our differences." She turned away and stepped up into her wagon. Pausing in the doorway, she looked back with a smug smile and said, "However, the Great and Powerful Trixie never turns down a challenge. If you're ever itching to prove yourself, I'll be waiting for you in Manehatten." She took the last few steps into the wagon, closed the lower half of the door, and turned around to look out at the group. With a final "Farewell!" she activated her horn and guided the wagon down the road.

Dear Princess Celestia,

Your student, Twilight Sparkle, has given me a brief overview about her studies on "The Magic of Friendship," and encouraged me to attempt to write a report of my own.

If you are reading this, it means I, Trixie, have decided that I have indeed learned some things that I would not mind telling you about.

First, I've learned that friendships can arise from the oddest of situations. It wouldn't be an exaggeration that the time I spent with Twilight in my head is the closest I have ever been to another pony, but even so, she's the only pony besides my parents I can recall spending time with outside of my stage persona. At times it felt like she was trying too hard to make me happy, but I can tell she can be a reliable anchor when things get rough. She probably had me on her list of friends before I was even willing to consider the possibility.

From Rainbow Dash, I learned that being loyal to one's friends can occasionally lead to pain and disappointment. It takes a strong heart to be ready to forgive and forget old wounds, but an even stronger one to get through the moments where you realize that those wounds might never heal. I do hope that Dash learned from me and Twilight that true friends

never stop giving each other second chances. The griffon, Gilda, may never change her ways, but for Dash's sake I hope she does.

Lastly, I've learned what may be the most important lesson of all: if you want to make a friend, be a friend.

Sincerely,

Trixie

P.S. On behalf of Mr. Proscenium Arch, I'd like to cordially invite you and Princess Luna to the opening night of the Silver Halter's new season, starring none other than the Great and Powerful Trixie. It would be an honor to perform for you, and this time the show should reach its proper conclusion.

Multimental in Manehattan

Chapter 1

The Lure

"The seal is imperfect. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say somepony wasn't one hundred percent committed to the spell."

As the late afternoon sun slowly sank toward the horizon, the tall city buildings cast shadows that plunged most of the streets into an early twilight. For those who lived and frequently visited Manehattan, the premature evening was a simple fact of life that garnered no commentary or attention. For one pale blue unicorn mare, however, it felt like another light blow between the ears after a day of disappointments. With her head and ears drooping and a simple mauve skirt chosen simply to hide her cutie mark, one would need to look twice to recognize her as the Great and Powerful Trixie. She sighed as her stomach rumbled, and the stallion walking beside her gave a small chuckle. "Let me buy you some dinner," he said, "I'm sure you'll feel better after some food."

"Thank you, but Trixie has already taken up enough of your money," the showmare said, "I can pay for myself."

"I insist," the mahogany-colored unicorn said, "you've talked me into deeper pay cuts than you deserve. I can't have my shining star starving herself sick in the middle of the season."

"You flatter me Mr. Arch," Trixie said, her dull tone giving lie to her words, "But can you really consider me a star when my shows are barely breaking even in ticket sales? And don't try to tell me I'm wrong about that; I've seen the books."

"We're simply having a slow patch," Proscenium Arch said, "That happens from time to time in our line of work. Surely you've noticed that Trixie."

Trixie pursed her lips in thought for a second before replying. "On the road, I could always pack up and move on if I received a lackluster reception." She looked over at Arch and said, "To be honest, I think I prefer the traveling life."

"Well, don't let me hold you back from it," Arch said, and then coughed and added, "After you've fulfilled your current contract that is. Ah, here we go," he said, stopping in front of a salad shop, "This seems like a good place to eat. What do you think?"

"It will do, I suppose," Trixie said, plodding toward the door. Proscenium held the door open for her as she entered and looked around. The showmare looked around at the tables, most of which were occupied.

"Go find a seat," Arch said, coming up next to her, "I'll go get our food. What do you want?"

"Something with pine nuts," Trixie answered. Arch made his way to the counter while Trixie resumed looking around the shop. A sudden peal of high-spirited laughter drew her attention to the far corner of the seating area. After working her way around another group of diners, Trixie spotted six familiar mares gathered around a table. Closest to her, with their backs to the showmare, were a vibrantly pink earth pony with a wildly curly mane and tail, an elegant-looking white unicorn with a purple mane and tail, and a butter-yellow, pink-maned pegasus. On the other side sat a cyan pegasus with a short, rainbow-striped mane, an orange earth pony wearing a Stetson hat, and, of course, Twilight Sparkle. Trixie was momentarily puzzled by their presence, but when Twilight looked up from her food and didn't seem to realize the showmare was looking at her, she decided to get some answers, in her usual way. She shifted her weight slightly as she struck one of her trademark condescension poses, with a hoof placed on her chest to temper it with an air of pleasant surprise.

"Hiya Trixie!" Pinkie Pie all but shouted as she spun around to give the blue unicorn a welcoming grin. Several eyes - including all those belonging to Pinkie's friends - were immediately directed at the showmare, who dropped her façade with a sigh.

"Hello," she said with a smile, "What, may I ask, has brought the six of you here to Manehattan?"

"We're taking a well-deserved vacation," Twilight said, "I'm sure you heard about how we defeated Discord a little while back."

"The embodiment of chaos and disharmony?" Trixie asked, arching an eyebrow, "Of course I have! That... creature's influence was felt all across Equestria! And of course the Princesses weren't shy about spreading the news."

"Yeah," Twilight said, "He picked Ponyville as the center of his kingdom, and even after using the Elements of Harmony to seal him and his work away, we're still finding little pockets of... whatever to clean up."

"We simply had to get away for a while to unwind," Rarity said, "and when Applejack here mentioned Manehattan, we all agreed it would be the perfect place to spend a week off."

"I see," Trixie said, "Well, I do hope you enjoy your time here."

"Hey," Pinkie said as Trixie turned to leave, "you're not looking too happy there. Why don't you take a seat and let me cheer you up?" She shifted to the side, ignoring the glare Rarity gave her as she bumped up against the white unicorn.

"I..." Trixie said, "thank you, but I don't want to intrude. Besides, I'm here with someone." She caught the sly look in Dash's, Applejack's, and Rarity's eyes and quickly added, "Not like that. It's just my manager, Proscenium Arch."

"Just your manager?" Arch's voice said from behind Trixie, "My dear, have you been leading me on this whole time?" Rainbow Dash muffled a laugh as the pale blue unicorn blushed furiously and whirled on the mahogany unicorn, who was wearing a goofy smile as he levitated two plates of salad above his head.

"Is this 'Embarrass the Great and Powerful Trixie Day' or something?" she snapped.

"My apologies," Arch said, "The opportunity was simply too good to pass up. Who are your friends?"

"Well, *friends* may be too strong in certain cases," Trixie replied, casting a withering glance at the laughing cyan pegasus, "but these are Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Twilight Sparkle of Ponyville. Everypony, this is Proscenium Arch, owner of the Silver Halter Theater where I am currently performing." Except for Fluttershy, who hid shyly behind her mane, and Dash, who cut her laughter off instantly to strike a proud pose, each pony nodded a greeting as they were named.

"It's a pleasure to-" Proscenium Arch began, but then did a double-take and nearly dropped the salads. Trixie grabbed the one that looked like it had her pine nuts on it as the mahogany unicorn found his voice again. "Pardon me," he said, "I wasn't expecting to meet the six ponies who saved Equestria. I'm honored to meet you all."

"Yep," Rainbow Dash said casually, all too willing to bask in the recognition. Twilight cast a glance at her friend, rolled her eyes, and then gave Arch and Trixie a friendly smile.

"You're welcome to join us if you want," she said, "I'm sure we can make room for two more."

"Thank you," Arch said with a low bow. The mares at the table shifted around to make space as Trixie and Arch set their plates down and took their seats. They spent a few minutes simply eating and giving the mahogany stallion better introductions, but soon the conversation turned toward the theater and Trixie's mood.

"It's terrible, to be honest," Trixie said dramatically, "I used to sell out the house almost every night, but now we're lucky if half the seats are taken during the evening, and there's simply no point trying to hold matinees anymore."

"Why would you hold a manatee?" Pinkie asked, earning several confused stares, "Is that a new part of your act?" The others puzzled over the question for several seconds, and then Twilight and Rarity both face-hooved.

"Darling, she said 'matinee,'" Rarity explained, "That means a performance held during the day."

"Ooooh," Pinkie said before applying herself to her food again.

"Yes, well," Proscenium Arch said, returning to the original train of thought, "As I was saying to Trixie here earlier, lulls in audience turn-out do occur on occasion, and I haven't seen any reason to panic about it."

"I suspect most folks are more concerned with recoverin' from Discord's shenanigans at the moment," Applejack said, "No offense to you Trixie, but listenin' to some of your tall tales don't sound to appealing so soon after that nightmare."

"You're hardly one to judge, little miss Honesty" Trixie said critically, "Besides, I've been cutting down on my stories in favor of more tricks and audience participation. Although now that I think of it, perhaps that is why my popularity is waning?"

"I believe Applejack makes a valid point actually," Arch said, "It's difficult to predict how large-scale disasters will affect audience turn-out. Sometimes they turn out in greater numbers to escape for a few hours, but sometimes they turn their attention to more important things like family or self-preservation." Silence fell for a few seconds as the ponies continued to eat. Suddenly, Arch's ears perked up and his chewing slowed for a second before accelerating in his haste to voice the idea that had just popped into his mind. "My dears," he said sweetly, looking around the table, "You aren't by chance busy this evening, are you?" Trixie gave him a suspicious glance.

"Not particularly," Twilight said, looking at her friends in case somepony thought differently. The other five Ponyville mares were simply looking at Proscenium Arch with varying levels of curiosity. "Why?"

"Perhaps you would do us a favor and grant tonight's show with your presence?" Arch asked, eyes shining in a manner that reminded Twilight of Rarity receiving inspiration, "Could you imagine the publicity-"

"No," Trixie said firmly, cutting the stallion off, "The Great and Powerful Trixie stands or falls on her own merits, not on her connections. Besides, my shows tend to go very badly when any of these ponies get involved."

"Well that's a bit of an exaggeration," Rarity protested.

Trixie raised an eyebrow at the white unicorn. "Ponyville visit number one ended with an Ursa trampling my wagon," she said, "visit number two was nothing less than an embarrassing temper tantrum. I recall Applejack here being present when Princess Luna almost blew the roof off the Silver Halter. And then when I returned to Ponyville for the third time, I was subjected to projectile produce, followed by nearly two days of having another pony in my head! So, as much I have come to consider you pleasant company, you'd be doing me a favor by spending your evening elsewhere."

"Oh, this just will not do at all."

"Indeed. Oh well, can't be helped."

"I beg to differ."

Shouts and cries from the street brought all conversation in the salad shop to a halt. Twilight and company found themselves at the back of the crowd pushing its way toward the front to peer out the windows. Even Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were blocked off by the pegasi flying in front of them. As Twilight, AJ, and Trixie tried to push their way through the mass, Pinkie Pie bounced up and down trying to see over everypony before losing her patience and jumping up onto the nearest back. Ignoring the complaints and attempts to shake her off, the pink earth pony bounced lightly from pony to pony until she reached the front and squeezed her head between a pair of pegasi wearing matching newsboy caps.

"What do you see?" Twilight called out as she continued worming her way toward the door.

"There's a squirrel out there," Pinkie reported.

"A squirrel?" Twilight replied, eyes crossing in confusion, "All this commotion is because of a little squirrel?"

"No," Pinkie said, "it's because of a squirrel the size of a pony running around dressed like a ninja."

"What's a ninja?" Twilight asked.

"Seriously?" Rainbow Dash asked, giving Twilight an odd look, "How can you read so much and not know about ninjas? They're only the coolest warriors ever! They can hide in the shadows and wield these awesome swords that can cut through anything. They're normally only found in Neighpon though..."

"So," Twilight summarized as she and the others grouped up to push their way out faster, "There's a giant squirrel out there dressed like some sort of magic shadow warrior from Neighpon. That doesn't make any..." she trailed off and then facehoofed as the realization hit her. "Great," she deadpanned, "it's got to be a Discord leftover..." Gasps and horrified whispers erupted as most of the crowd turned their eyes toward the lavender unicorn. "Uh," she said, briefly overwhelmed by the sudden attention.

"Well," Trixie said, raising her voice to project over the murmurs, "If that's the case, then the best thing for everypony to do is make room for the Elements of Harmony here so they can go deal with it!" It took several seconds for the message to sink in, but it had the desired effect. A path to the door began to form and Twilight's group, plus Trixie and Proscenium Arch, found themselves quickly herded out into the street and into a convenient gap in the street-side crowd that had formed. Like Pinkie had said, a pony-sized red squirrel dressed in a black bodysuit and matching ninja mask was running up and down the street in front of the salad shop. It even had a sheathed katana strapped to its back.

"Yep," Rainbow said, staring at the animal in mild shock, "That's a ninja squirrel alright."

"Right then," Twilight said, growing serious, "It may be big, but it's still just a squirrel. Fluttershy, you're up."

"Right," the yellow pegasus said with conviction. She walked toward the scampering rodent and cleared her throat politely as it ran past. "Excuse me," she said as it came to stop in front of her, "I don't mean to interrupt whatever it is you're doing, but you're causing a big scene. Why don't you

stop running for a bit and let us... fix whatever's wrong with you. If you don't mind." The squirrel's head cocked to one side as it regarded Fluttershy, and then pulled down its mask and stretched its cheeks out with its front paws while sticking its tongue out at her before running off down the street at full speed. "So that's a 'no' then?" Fluttershy said quietly.

"Don't let it get away!" Dash shouted, rocketing after the ninja. Her friends followed close behind her, with Trixie taking up the rear alongside Rarity. The showmare felt no obligation to help out, but she was quite curious about how the chase would end, hoping she could build some new story out of it later on. The Ponyvilleans may have been bad luck for her performances in the past, but by the same token they'd proven to be great sources of material.

After weeks of dealing with the remnants of Discord's brief reign, the Element Bearers had learned to expect the unexpected, so Dash wasn't too surprised when the ninja squirrel vanished from sight in a cloud of smoke and re-appeared on the fire escape of a nearby building. In fact, the cyan pegasus was impressed. "That is so *cool*," she squeaked as she banked toward the rodent of unusual size. As she approached, the squirrel jumped off the fire escape and pulled a quadruple somersault over Dash's head before hitting the street and taking off again. *Now I know how Pinkie felt about the chocolate rain*, Dash thought as she looped around to make chase again. She arrived back on the street just as Twilight and the others caught up. "When we catch this thing, can we just shrink it down to normal size?" she asked the lavender unicorn, "It would make the greatest pet *ever*."

"No Rainbow," Twilight answered flatly, "We can't let anything Discord made stay. There's literally no telling what kind of effects this creature could have on the city."

"But, it's a squirrel that's a ninja," Rainbow persisted, "You can't tell me that's not some kind of awesome."

"Consarnit Rainbow," Applejack snapped, "Just hurry up and catch the varmint. There's no point in arguin' over keeping it if ya can't even catch it in the first place."

"Puh-lease," the pegasus said, "There hasn't been a ninja squirrel yet that can out-run Rainbow Dash!" She zipped away in pursuit as several pairs of eyes were rolled.

For several blocks, the chase remained simple and straight-forward, right up until the moment that Dash was close enough to touch the squirrel. The rodent vanished in another puff of smoke, and Dash slowed to a stop as she looked around for it to reappear. With another, larger puff, the squirrel materialized in the middle of the next intersection and began making comical faces at the approaching ponies. "That's it," Rainbow growled, flying at the ninja with all the speed she could muster. After blowing one last raspberry, the squirrel ran off again – in three separate directions. Dash came to another stop, jaw hanging open in disbelief. "That's not... *WHAT?*" she exclaimed, looking around wildly at the trio of retreating ninja squirrels.

"I told you," Twilight said as the others caught up, "There's no predicting what'll happen. We'll have to split up. Pinkie and Fluttershy, take the left one; Rarity and AJ, take the right. Dash, you're with me. Catch them if you can, but make sure you don't lose sight of them. Go!"

"Could I-" Trixie began, only to snort in frustration as the six scattered to chase down their targets, ignoring her. After a quick glance around, she galloped off after Pinkie and Fluttershy, if only to give each pursuit group a unicorn to work with. "Do we have some sort of plan?" she asked as she came up even with the earth pony and pegasus.

"Nope," Pinkie said with a smile, "just go with a flow Trixie."

"Well," the showmare said, "I'd rather not run across the entire city waiting for that thing to tire out." With her magic, she removed her skirt and sent it flying ahead to wrap around the squirrel's face, forcing it to stop and try to remove the offending cloth. Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Trixie quickly caught up and surrounded it before moving in quietly for the capture. Trixie kept the skirt over the rodent's face while Fluttershy tried to talk it down with soothing tones. When it continued to scratch at the cloth blocking its eyes, Pinkie leaped forward to tackle it to the ground. The moment she impacted it, however, the squirrel disintegrated into a cloud of dust and a single pinecone that bounced off the earth pony's head after she hit the ground.

"Ptooey," Pinkie spat, clearing some dust from her mouth as Fluttershy helped her to her feet, "Wow, even *I* couldn't have seen *that* coming!"

Trixie picked the pinecone up in her magic and scrutinized it.

"Oh wow!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed as Twilight extracted a pinecone from the dust pile that had been their quarry until the pegasus had rammed it, "That was a decoy clone! Unicorn Ninjas are supposed to be experts at that trick!"

"As are chaos-powered squirrels it seems," Twilight muttered, dropping the pinecone and smashing it underneath a hoof. She sighed and looked around, noting that the chase had brought the pair into the theater district of Manehattan. "This is great," she said grumpily, "now we're probably going to have search the entire city to find the others."

"Nuh-uh, we're right here Twilight!" Twilight and Dash looked to see Pinkie Pie bouncing down the street toward them, each landing dislodging a fresh puff of dust from her coat. Fluttershy was behind her, using her wings to shield her eyes from the dust. Taking up the rear was Trixie, who was...

"Why are you eating that pinecone Trixie?" Twilight asked, giving the unicorn a strange look.

The showmare plucked another scale off the cone and chewed it as she thought. "I'm not sure what possessed me to start," she said, "but they taste pretty good."

"You just decided to start eating something that came out of a... clone of something altered by Discord?" Twilight nearly shouted.

"This isn't my first," Trixie shot back defensively, "and there's nothing magical or strange about this one. Although, it *is* a bit old, and tougher than I prefer..." She bit off another couple of scales and chewed them as defiantly as she could.

"Drinking all that chocolate milk rain didn't hurt me any Twilight," Pinkie pointed out. She cast a glance toward Trixie, and then leaned over and bit

a scale off of the cone. "Hmm," she said, chewing it thoughtfully, and then her face screwed up and she spit it out. "Bleh, needs sugar," she declared.

"Sugar?" Trixie scoffed, "Pinecones are meant to be enjoyed as they are. If you *must* put something on them it must be either salt or a mildly bitter herb." Twilight and Rainbow Dash exchanged bewildered looks before shaking their heads and leaving Pinkie and Trixie to their discussion.

"So," the cyan pegasus said, "Now we just need to find Apple-"

"*Put me dooown!*" The ninja squirrel landed in the middle of the group with a struggling Rarity tucked under one arm. "Girls," the unicorn said with forced calm as the squirrel looked around, "Would you be so kind as to *help me!*" Before anypony could react, the squirrel dashed toward the nearest building and kicked its way through the door. Applejack arrived a second later, sides heaving as she paused to catch her breath.

"Ha," she gasped out, "The... varmint's gone... trapped 'isself now... if we hurry... Come on!"

"Right," everypony said as they followed the farm-pony into the theater. Trixie noted that it was her venue, the Silver Halter, that they were entering. *I knew it, she thought, I start hanging around these ponies and something happens to the stage I use. At least it won't be my wagon this time.* The group entered the theater proper and saw the squirrel on the stage, trying in vain to taunt them while keeping Rarity from escaping his grasp. The white unicorn wiggled free and kicked the rodent's leg just as Rainbow flew in for a tackle, knocking it to the ground.

"Ok Twilight," the pegasus said, pinning the squirrel in place, "do your thing." The lavender unicorn nodded as she and her other friends climbed up on the stage and gathered around the over-sized rodent. Twilight's horn lit up as she began to examine the squirrel for spells and stray magic. The creature seemed to be a real squirrel that had been subjected to fundamental changes. Reversing Discord alterations was trickier than simply banishing constructs, such as giant pepper shakers, but this was nothing Twilight couldn't handle while she had her friends around her. A quick blast of magic to isolate the discordant elements followed by pin-point spells derived from the Elements of Harmony's rainbow blast cleaned the squirrel up and left it lying on the stage in a daze, restored to its proper size and frame of mind. As Twilight sat back and let her magic fade away, she

gave Fluttershy a nod to prompt the pegasus to take charge of the little critter. Trixie, standing out in the audience, stared in awe at the magic she had just witnessed.

And then the lights went out. The ponies didn't even get a chance to scream before something forced them into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2

The Challenge

"Admit it, you enjoyed that. I can sense the smile on your face.

How can you resist the joy of unbounded Chaos?"

"A little Chaos goes a long way. And this is pushing the boundary."

Twilight's mind woke up before her body, giving her a few seconds to unscramble her thoughts before fresh sensations got in the way. *I would be willing to bet real money that things are not going to be like they were before I blacked out*, she thought. As feeling started to return to her body and her senses kicked back in, she heard Trixie's worried voice, accompanied by the feeling of a gentle hoof pressing into her shoulder.

"Twilight? Or, Rainbow Dash? Somepony, wake up!"

Why would she be confusing me for Dash? Twilight thought as she stirred and opened her eyes. She winced as light flooded into her eyes, but after a few blinks she was able to make out the form of the pale blue unicorn magician. "Trixie," she said, "What happened?"

"You should probably see for yourself Twilight," Trixie answered, "I'd ask you not to scream, but maybe that'll wake the others up. Here." Her horn lit up as she used her telekinesis to help Twilight stand up, and then leaned up next to her as she guided the disoriented pony toward a mirror. Twilight took one second to wonder about the mirror's presence before registering what it was reflecting. Her mouth went dry and her irises shrank in disbelief and shock.

Then the screaming began, but it wasn't coming from Twilight's mouth. Rather, it seemed to come from a point just behind and to the left of her head, and sounded faint, with a slight echo, despite being so loud. *'Aaaaaaah! What's going on? I can't move!'*

Twilight was pretty sure she recognized the voice. *Rainbow Dash?*

'Ahhhhh!'

"Rainbow," Twilight said aloud, trying to get through.

'I'm possessed! Get out of my body you... you...'

"Rainbow Dash, BE *QUIET!*" Twilight yelled.

'Wait... Twilight?'

"Yes Rainbow," Twilight muttered, rubbing her forehead and trying to ignore the lack of horn she discovered there, "Can you *please* stay calm for a few moments so I can think?" She took a look around and finally realized that she was in a backstage dressing room. Besides Trixie, who was standing nearby with a worried look on her face, there were two other mares stirring out of sleep on the floor, whose appearances made Twilight do a double-take. One was an orange unicorn with a blonde mane styled long with an elegant curl and trio of red apples as a cutie mark. The other was a butter-yellow earth pony with a wildly curly pink mane and three pink butterflies for a cutie mark. Twilight herself was now a lavender pegasus with a short, somewhat ragged dark blue mane with a pink streak. "Oh dear," she said, realizing what had happened to her and her friends.

"Oh, mah head," the orange unicorn groaned in a country accent. She put a hoof to her forehead as she started to rise, and then froze when the hoof encountered her horn. "What in tarnation?" She looked around, and her jaw dropped when she saw Twilight. "What in- Who's there?" She jumped up and spun around to her left. "Rarity?" She spun left again, looking confused beyond measure. "I'm not imagining this, am I?" she asked, eyeing Twilight and Trixie.

"No Applejack," Twilight said, "I'm afraid this is quite real." She walked over to the third pony to try and shake her awake. It turned out, however, that she was already awake, but remained on the floor with her hooves covering her ears as she quivered in fear.

"Fluttershy?" Twilight guessed. The yellow pony squeaked something.

"Fluttershy, are you ok?"

"..."

"Please speak up," Twilight urged gently, "What's wrong?"

"Pinkie Pie's in my head," the quivering pony mumbled, and then looked up at Twilight, eyes almost pure white in fear and worry.

"It'll be ok," the lavender pony assured, nuzzling Fluttershy, "At least we're all accounted for. I've got Rainbow Dash, and AJ and Rarity are together."

"Multiple Mental Occupancy?" Trixie asked.

"Looks like," Twilight said with a slight nod.

'You mean, like what happened to you and Trixie that one time?' Rainbow Dash asked, *'Couldn't you two, like, share control?'*

Yes, Twilight said with a blink. When the expected sensation of being shoved aside didn't come and Twilight found herself still in control, she frowned slightly. *Rainbow, she thought, you're trying to take control, aren't you?*

'Yeah,' Rainbow Dash said, as if it were obvious. Twilight blinked again, and again, and finally a third time without sliding out of the control position. *'Well?'* Dash asked impatiently.

Twilight sighed and rubbed her head. "Applejack," she said, "Rarity's in the back of your mind, right?"

"I'm hearin' her voice," the orange pony replied, "So I guess so. She's yelling for me ta get out."

"Blink your eyes," Twilight instructed. AJ gave her an odd look before complying. "who am I talking to?" Twilight asked when her eyes opened again.

"Still me," Applejack said.

"Um..." Fluttershy said, "I... I can't seem to switch with Pinkie."

"So," Twilight concluded, "This isn't the type of MMO Trixie and I experienced." She looked at herself and added, "Although, since we're each apparently a fusion between two ponies now, that should have been obvious. Any idea how this happened Trixie?"

The showmare shook her head. "I think I blacked out when you all did, just after the lights went out. When I came too, the... three of you were lying unconscious on the stage and Mr. Arch and some of the stage crew were trying to make sense of everything. We brought you in here at my insistence. I suspected you'd been subjected to something like MMO, so I'll gladly offer my experience to help you all adjust."

AJ's eyes slid to the right for several seconds, and then she spoke, "Rarity says she appreciates the thought, but she'd prefer gettin' this un-done. I second that by the way." Fluttershy nodded her agreement.

'Same here,' Rainbow Dash said to Twilight.

"The first thing we need to figure out," Twilight said, "Is who or what did this to us and how."

A wicked laugh rolled through the room, coming from nowhere in particular. "*Well, as much as I would love to see you stumble about trying to solve that mystery,*" a masculine voice said, "*I've got something else in mind for you.*"

"That voice," Twilight said, sharing horrified glances with her friends, "It can't be!"

The voice laughed again and Trixie's mirror shone as the image of a beige, goat-like head with yellow eyes with mismatched red pupils, a deer antler, a goat horn, and a large fang dangling from its mouth appeared in the glass. "*Surprise!*" Discord crowed with a huge grin.

"H-how?" Twilight sputtered, unwilling to believe her eyes, "We sealed you in stone! How did you get out again?"

"*Oh, stop your fretting Twilight Sparkle,*" Discord said with sigh, all traces of amusement draining from his face, "*My prison is still intact, for the most part. I'm only able to speak to you now thanks to... a little assistance in stretching my power out to Manehattan.*"

"What pony in their right mind would help *you*?" Applejack demanded.

"*That would be telling,*" Discord said with a small smile, "*And I think you have more important things to worry about at the moment. After all, how can you use the six Elements of Harmony if there are only three bodies*

between you?" He laughed at everypony's reactions and his head spun upside down before speaking again. *"I am so very much weaker than I was,"* he said, *"But I can give you the means to un-do this little spell. All you need to do is fetch a few things."*

"No deal Discord," Twilight said emphatically, feeling her wings snap out under their own power, "We're not going to play your games. Come on girls, we're going to Canterlot. I'm certain somepony there can fix this." She turned away from the mirror and started heading toward the door. As she reached for the handle, it vanished without a trace, effectively sealing the ponies inside the dressing room.

The image of Discord's head met the lavender pony's glare coolly as she spun around to confront him again. *"Two choices,"* he said, *"Play the game or stay here forever. I do have enough power to keep you from leaving."*

"Heh, we'll see," AJ said. She walked up to the door, turned her back to it, and bucked at it with all her might. As her legs extended, the door bent away so that the orange unicorn hit nothing but air and lost her balance, falling flat on her stomach. She lay there mumbling curses under her breath for a few seconds before snapping, "Oh, like you had a better idea Rarity? Oh, heh heh, right..." She stood up, looked at Trixie, and asked, "any chance of you bein' able to magic us up a way out of here?"

"I can try," Trixie said. Her horn lit up and she blinked out of sight, only to reappear on the other side of the room. "I was aiming for the hallway!" she exclaimed, looking around. Discord chuckled.

"Please," the draconequus said, *"Do continue; this is so entertaining."*

"Pinkie Pie wants to play," Fluttershy said, "and... to be honest, I think I'd rather take my chances with playing along too. Uh, if that's ok with everyone that is."

Twilight and AJ exchanged a look while Rainbow Dash said, *'I want out of this, and I don't care how we do it.'*

"Fine," Twilight said, looking at the mirror, "what's the game Discord? And don't hide anything."

"Now where's the fun in telling you everything up front?" Discord asked with a comical frown, "You had to work to stop my lovely chaos, you'll have to work for this too. Here's the game:

A simple errand is all I ask. A trio of items you must fetch, if you're up to the task. The spice of life that rolls and twists, but only in its purest form. A living jewel, no, make it ten, in irritation born. Finally, excitement distilled, the element that can make rain go 'BOOM.'

The rules are simple: each paired pony must retrieve one of the items. You cannot leave the city, and no money can exchange hooves in the process of obtaining the items. Bring them back here once you've found them, and I'll reverse the spell." The face started to fade away, but then returned briefly. *"One last hint,"* he said, *"In each pair, one pony should be able to identify an item while the other has the means to acquire it. Good luuuck! Hahaha!"* The face vanished in a flash of light and the dressing room door flew open, revealing a very concerned Proscenium Arch.

"Oh thank goodness," the mahogany stallion said, breathing a sigh of relief, "Is everypony ok in here?"

"For a certain value of 'OK,'" Twilight said dully.

"It's almost curtain time Trixie," Arch said, "the house is only a quarter full tonight. If you'd rather not go on..."

"Trixie will perform," the showmare said, waving a dismissive hoof at Arch, "I need something familiar and normal to do after what I've just experienced. There will be only a slight delay at best." Arch nodded and left for the stage. "Girls," Trixie said, turning back to the three melded mares, "If you don't have a place to spend the night, I can find space for you in the apartment I'm renting."

"I appreciate that Trixie," Twilight said, moving to leave, "but we should get busy figuring out Discord's riddle so we can get this 'errand' over with." She found her way out of the room barred by Trixie's leg.

"It's far too late to be wandering around," Trixie said, "especially with bodies you aren't familiar with. Twilight, are you even aware that your wings are still out?" The pegasus glanced at her back and blushed slightly to see that Trixie was right.

'Just relax,' Rainbow Dash advised as Twilight tried to pull the wings in, 'you're thinking about it too much.'

Why didn't you say anything earlier? Twilight asked accusingly. Dash didn't respond, but Twilight picked up some embarrassed feelings.

"And," Trixie continued her line of thought in the meantime, "I'm sure Rari-jack there can't use magic at the moment."

"Rari-jack?" Twilight and AJ both asked incredulously.

"That is Rarity and Applejack, right?" Trixie asked, pointing to the orange unicorn.

"Can we *please* not do the nick-name thing?" Twilight asked.

"Hmm," Trixie said, rubbing her chin, "Well, for you I may have to forego the nickname. Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. Those just don't go together well."

"Rainlight." Everypony turned to look at Fluttershy, who shrank back with a slight blush. "T-that was Pinkie's idea," she said, "She, uh, also suggests Twidash. And Rainbow Sparkle."

'Oh bleh,' Rainbow Dash protested, *'Those are horrible!'*

"I'll answer to Twilight, Rainbow, or Dash," Twilight declared, finally getting her wings closed, "Nothing else."

Trixie sighed and then looked at the yellow earth pony. "I'm thinking Flutterpie for you," she said.

"Oh... ok, if you want," Fluttershy replied.

"As I was saying," Trixie said, "I insist on giving you a place to sleep tonight if you don't have someplace already."

"That's mighty nice of you Trixie," Applejack said, "We were gonna stay with mah relatives, but I don't think I want ta drop in on 'em so late, 'specially with this thing on my head." She poked her horn a few times.

"Fine," Twilight said, giving in, "We'll get started tomorrow. In the meantime, let's try to figure out what exactly we're supposed to be looking for."

"Say," Applejack said, looking around, "anypony see mah hat anywhere?"

"Well," Trixie announced as she opened the door to her apartment, "here we are." The apartment was larger than Twilight would've expected, looking to have been built for two or three ponies to live in. The lavender unicorn wasn't in much of a mood to take note of her surroundings though, as she was presently frustrated over untangling Discord's vague riddle. Applejack was also looking sour, since she had failed to locate her precious hat anywhere in Trixie's dressing room or the theater. Fluttershy simply walked into the apartment and found a corner to sit down in, her eyes barely focused as she tried to deal with wherever Pinkie Pie's thoughts were currently wandering. Trixie looked at each mare and shook her head as she closed the door. "Lighten up, all of you," she said, "This can't be the worst situation you've been in."

'Speak for yourself,' Rainbow muttered, 'I mean, does she really know what it's like not to be able to control my own body?'

She and I got stuck in Multiple Mental occupancy before, remember? Twilight asked.

'That was different,' Rainbow insisted, 'you two could switch out.'

"This ranks pretty darn high," Applejack said to Trixie while Twilight and Dash were talking, "I'd say it's either the worst or tied for when Discord brainwashed us." Her eyes slid to the side for a second and then she added, "Rarity says it's definitely the worst for her, what with not bein' able ta do anything except watch and..." she grit her teeth before finishing, "*suggesting* that I do certain things."

"Oh, right," Trixie said, "I... as similar as my experience with MMO was, I can only imagine not having the ability to share control of the body."

'Told ya,' Dash said smugly.

Twilight rolled her eyes and then looked toward the pale yellow pony in the corner. "How are you and Pinkie holding up Fluttershy?" she asked.

"Huh?" Fluttershy said, snapping out of her funk and looking around.

"You doing ok suger cube?" Applejack asked, looking at Fluttershy with concern.

"Oh, yes," Fluttershy said quietly, "I... I mean we're fine. Don't worry about us."

"Pinkie's not being too crazy, is she?" Twilight asked, "She's a big enough hoof-ful normally."

"Oh, no!" Fluttershy said, "She's trying so very hard not to be a bother. It's just..." her voice failed and her gaze dropped to the floor. Twilight went over and lay down next to her, trying to stretch out a wing to wrap around her back.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a soothing tone. Fluttershy mumbled something that sounded like "Pinkie Pie Swear" and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Fluttershy," Twilight said, "Pinkie, we're friends right? Friends shouldn't keep secrets if they're hurting. Remember your fashion model career Fluttershy, and how much trouble that caused for everyone involved?" *Most of all me*, she finished mentally, ignoring Dash's snickering.

Fluttershy was silent for a long time, but finally she looked up and met Twilight's eyes. "You might not understand," she said, "but, as hard as she tries, as much as she wants to for my sake, she just can't stop. She's... Oh, I can't say. Sorry Twilight." The lavender pegasus regarded for a few seconds before sighing and standing back up.

"Let me know if you want to talk about it later, either of you," she said as she clumsily returned her wing to her side and looked at Trixie. "So," she asked, "Where are we all going to sleep?"

"Let's see," the showmare said, looking around, "I don't normally have guests, but somepony can take the sofa... I can probably find enough

blankets and cushions to make up a spot on the floor somewhere, and then somepony can have my bed."

'*What, with her?*' Dash asked suspiciously.

"What about you?" Twilight asked more diplomatically.

"Trixie will sleep in her wagon," the showmare declared in a tone of finality, "I much prefer sleeping there anyway, but a successful performer like the Great and Powerful Trixie must not be seen to live below her means in this city." Her voice had taken on an increasingly sarcastic note as she spoke. She turned toward the door and opened it. "I shall return with the extra blankets momentarily," she said as she left the apartment, shutting the door behind her. Twilight and Applejack exchanged a glance.

"Well," Twilight said after a moment, "Any volunteers for the floor?"

Chapter 3

The Jewels

"Details and the big picture, propriety and pragmatism, the esoteric and the physical."

"You couldn't ask for a more mismatched team, could you? How long do you think it will take before they immobilize themselves with bickering?"

'Applejack,' Rarity said, 'Might I suggest that the two of us pursue the second item on Discord's list?'

Applejack mulled the suggestion over as she chewed her breakfast. Trixie had, with a little help from Flutterpie, who seemed to be doing better with something to occupy their attention, prepared freshly-baked bran muffins for everypony. The recently-created unicorn swallowed her food and said, "Remind me again which one that was."

"Which one was what?" Twilight asked.

"I was talkin' ta Rarity," AJ told the lavender pegasus, "but, the second item Discord wants. Rarity thinks the two of us should go fer that one."

"You don't have to speak to communicate with Rarity," Twilight said in a tone of reminder, "In body-sharing cases, the two minds can read each other's thoughts. Now, the second item..." She rubbed her chin as she thought, "I should have had somepony write the riddle down."

"Excuse me," Fluttershy said quietly, "But, Pinkie says she remembers it. I could repeat it if you want."

'That would be just lovely,' Rarity said.

"Rare says go fer it Fluttershy," AJ reported. *What?* she added mentally when she felt Rarity sigh.

'Oh, never mind,' the fashionista said, 'it just struck me again that I'm entirely dependent on your... manner of speaking to convey my thoughts to the others.'

"R-right," Fluttershy said, "It's..." she trailed off and closed her eyes in concentration, evidently trying to keep up with Pinkie Pie's thoughts. "First was 'the spice of life that rolls and twists, but only in its purest form'," she said at last, "and, uh, Pinkie says she's got lots of ideas for that one. The second one was 'A living jewel, no, make it ten, in irritation born.' Finally, 'excitement distilled, the element that can make rain go boom.' I guess Twilight and Rainbow are doing that one?"

Twilight tilted her head back and closed her eyes while conferring with her body-mate. "That sounds like a plan," she said at last, "I've got no idea what the last one could be, but if you... four have the other two figured out, Rainbow and I will have to fetch the last."

"All righty then," Applejack said, scarfing down the rest of her muffin, "Ain't no time like the present ta get started. See y'all at the theater when we're done!"

"Applejack, wait a-" Twilight's cry was cut off by the door closing behind Applejack as she trotted out of the apartment and headed for the stairs.

'Applejack,' Rarity said calmly, 'While I certainly approve of your desire to get this over with, don't you think it's a bad idea to go running off without knowing where you're going?'

"I was counting on you tellin' me what you think we're looking for before we get to the streets," the farm pony replied snarkily.

'I see. Well, it's quite clear that Discord wants us to find ten of a certain type of jewelry. Right away that makes you and me uniquely qualified to locate them, seeing as we are a unicorn and I know a spell for locating jewels.'

Well, that'd be just great, Applejack said mentally as she passed by other ponies on the stairs, *'Cept fer the part where I'm the one runnin' the body and I can't use magic!*

'I think you could if you tried,' Rarity said, *'Why else do you think my horn is on our head?'*

AJ paused at the foot of the stairs and thought for a moment. "I think it's cuz Discord used your body type and put mah coloring on it when he put us together. I mean, look, this is your hairstyle I'm wearin'." She hoofed at her curled mane to illustrate.

'Yes,' the fashionista said, *'speaking of which, I'm surprised you've kept it that way.'*

"Yeah," AJ said, stepping out of the building, "Well, I figure this look'll help us fit in round these parts better. It don't exactly grow right to make a comfortable ponytail out of it anyway." She looked around and then moved away from the door and out of the flow of hoof traffic. "Anyway," she said quietly, trying to look nonchalant, "Even if I *can* use magic now, ya still haven't told me which kind of gem we're supposed ta be looking for."

'Oh, sorry,' Rarity said, *'It's not actually a gem, but it is a jewel. We need to get our hooves on ten pearls.'*

"All right," Applejack mused, "Not ta doubt yer expertise, but how do ya figure that?"

'It's simple,' Rarity said flippantly, *'The riddle says 'born in irritation.' Pearls are only found inside of oysters, which make them as a reaction to getting particles of sand inside their shells. I'm told the process is quite irritating.'*

So, Applejack thought, *We can't buy the things, so how do we get 'em? Go find some oysters and ask 'em to spit out some pearls?*

Rarity laughed. 'Oh Applejack, she said, *'Oysters are not native to Manehattan's waterfronts. Even if they were, it would hardly be proper to go diving in the harbor looking for them.'*

Ya got any better ideas?

'Well,' the fashionista said, *'I know for a fact we won't find an answer if we just stand around here all day.'* Applejack took the hint and started walking off in a random direction. 'Now,' Rarity said, *'I'd expect a city like Manehattan to have the latest in fashion, both off-the-shelf and haute couture, including jewelry made from gems and precious martials of all kinds, most importantly pearls.'*

"Yeah," AJ drawled, fighting the urge to zone out.

'The problem is,' Rarity continued, 'The only places we can expect to see pearls are in jewelry stores or embroidered into somepony's party gown, not to mention the classic pearl necklaces I've already seen six mares sporting as we walk along. We cannot purchase them, and we shall not descend to petty theft.'

"Yer darn tootin' we ain't!" Applejack said firmly, causing a passer-by to give her a strange glance. *That don't leave us with any options though,* she added mentally.

'Yes,' Rarity said airily, *'If only we had some connections to high society...'*

What are you tryin' to... Applejack stopped, and then a smile slowly came to her face. *Mah Aunt Orange!* she exclaimed happily, barely suppressing the urge to express her glee out loud, *I'm know she's got plenty of fancy get-ups. I can just trot over to their place and ask ta borrow one of her necklaces.*

'What a marvelous idea Applejack!' Rarity said as the orange pony began trotting toward her relative's neighborhood.

Applejack chuckled, not missing the faint sarcasm in her partner's tone. *Thanks for givin' me the hint,* she thought, *I can't believe I forgot about my own... kin...*

'What's wrong?' Rarity asked as AJ came to a stop and looked upward with crossed eyes.

"I have a horn," the farm pony said quietly. Rarity remained silent, caught off guard by the statement and unsure how to respond. "I'm an earth pony," AJ said, "I'm not supposed to have a horn on mah head." She looked around and then approached a stallion who looked friendly than most of the ponies walking nearby. "Pardon me," she said to him, "Could I bother you fer some directions? I'm looking to buy a hat."

"Just a hat?" the well-dressed stallion asked, looking at the orange unicorn askance.

"Just a hat," Applejack replied with a look that dared the other pony to say something critical.

"There are several boutiques and hat shops around the downtown area," the stallion said, meeting AJ's gaze, "I'd ask around there if I were you."

"Thank you kindly," Applejack said with a smile and a polite nod. The stallion returned the nod and resumed his walk while Applejack began to make her way towards downtown Manehattan.

'Applejack, why the sudden interest in hats?' Rarity asked.

I want to make this as quick and simple as I can, the orange pony thought, We go ta the Oranges, ask ta borrow a pearl necklace, and go meet up with the others. It's gonna be awkward enough explainin' why we didn't show up last night; I'd rather not have ta explain why I've got a horn all of a sudden.

'Applejack,' Rarity said with disapproval and surprise, 'you're planning to be dishonest? And with family at that!'

I ain't gonna lie, AJ thought defensively, I'm just not gonna mention anything they don't need ta know. And anyway, I feel more than a bit weird without something on my head. If mah Stetson doesn't show up by the time we're done with this stupid game, I'm gonna find out where they're keeping that... thing's statue and buck a few limbs off of it! Rarity had some misgiving, but knowing how stubborn Applejack could be, she decided to drop the issue for the moment. Besides, the farm pony was willingly going to a vendor of fashion; Rarity simply couldn't bring herself to put a stop to *that*.

Applejack frowned as she gazed up at the hats displayed on the shelves above her. Her focus was mainly on a wide-brimmed, high crowned specimen that looked like somepony had taken the basic idea behind a Stetson, built it out of mint ice cream, and embroidered it with light blue cotton candy. "Yer kidding, right?" she muttered.

'This is the fourth store we have tried,' Rarity said, 'and that is the only hat I have seen so far that's not only properly sized to cover your horn without looking silly, but also suits your, or should I say our, present look.'

"It's also out of my reach," Applejack said. That was a fact; the hat sat on a shelf well above the reach of a typical earth pony's mouth.

'Not if you use your magic.'

"Cons-" AJ started to snap before catching herself. *Haven't we gone over this already?* she asked mentally, *I'm an earth pony. Earth ponies can't use magic, period.*

'You haven't even tried,' Rarity responded flatly, *'we have a horn, and I can feel the potential inside of it. All you need to do is try and channel it.'*

AJ looked up at her horn and concentrated for a few seconds before exhaling loudly and turning away from the shelf. "Nope," she said, "I ain't feelin' it."

Rarity gave an exasperated sigh and an imaginary face-hoof. *'You're not doing it right!' she said, 'Magic is not about brute force, it's about finesse and attention to detail. You have to be sure of everything you do so you don't embed something in a wall or tear any seams.'*

I can do finesse, Applejack thought darkly, *you've seen my rope and lasso tricks; those take a lot of careful attention to do right.*

'Is that so?' Rarity said, turning thoughtful, 'Well, I suppose one could compare basic levitation to using an invisible lasso, but then again that's a bit of a stretch...'

Are ya tryin' to goad me into tryin' to grab that hat again? Applejack thought with a raised eyebrow. Rarity didn't answer, but the farm pony could sense the other's smug confidence in the back of her mind. *Fine, challenge accepted.* She turned back around and fixed the minty hat with her strongest stare. After a moment of simply willing it to jump off the shelf, Applejack took a breath and started to imagine a rope reaching out and tying itself around the hat's crown. As she did so, her horn began to glow faintly and she felt something stirring in her head. AJ tried to ignore these sensations as she tugged at her imaginary rope. The hat shifted to the

edge of the shelf and then tumbled off onto the floor. *That'll do*, AJ thought with pride as she walked over and picked the hat up in her mouth.

'Very well done Applejack,' Rarity said with glee, *'We'll make a proper unicorn of you yet!'*

Heh, no thanks, Applejack thought as she carried the hat to the sales counter, *I've no interest getting' used to something I'm not gonna be able to use after today. Uh, assuming the others can get their stuff today as well.* She plopped the hat onto the sales counter and smiled at the pegasus mare standing at the register. "How much?" she asked.

"Fifty five bits," the salespony said after checking the tag. Applejack nodded and fished out the money. The sales pony went to scoop them into the register, but then paused and counted. "Sorry," she said, "but you're short by ten bits here." Applejack raised an eyebrow and looked down at the counter. Sure enough, upon counting up the coins, she only saw forty-five bits.

"Oops," she said, pulling out a ten-bit coin and placing it with the rest. The sales pony counted the bits again, and then gave the orange unicorn a strange look. "You're still short by five," she said.

"What the hay are you tryin' to pull?" Applejack snapped, "I was ten short and just gave you a ten-bit coin. There should be..." She looked at the bits and added them up in her mind. "Fifty... what the hay."

'Perhaps this comes under the 'no bits can exchange hooves' rule,' Rarity suggested.

This ain't got anything to do with gettin' the pearls, Applejack replied, finding a five-bit coin and staring at it, *I'm just tryin' ta buy a hat!*

'A hat you intend to use to make getting those pearls easier,' Rarity pointed out.

Applejack muttered and then set the coin on the counter and covered it with her hoof. "Count 'em up again," she told the sales pegasus.

The pegasus's eyes flitted over the bits a few times. "Fifty bits," she announced. Applejack grinned and lifted her hoof from the coin she was

covering. Her smile fled as she looked at the coin. Instead of a five-bit, it had changed to bear the image of a smirking draconequus resting his head on his lion's paw arm.

"Why that hodgepodge mish-mash of cast-off..." Applejack muttered darkly. "Fine then," she said crossly, reclaiming all the bits from the counter, "guess I don't need this hat anyway."

"Wait," the salesmare said, "I'm not sure what's going on, but I could let you take the hat for less."

"Nope," Applejack said, "too late. I've taken mah money back, so I doubt there's any way I'll be matching yer prices now. Sorry to have wasted yer time." She started to leave, but then turned back and picked the Discorded coin up in her mouth. She left the shop and then spat the coin at the closest storm drain, smirking in satisfaction as it flew through the grate and vanished from sight.

'Did that make you feel better?' Rarity asked sardonically.

"A little," AJ muttered. She heaved a sigh and began walking, pointing her way toward her aunt and uncle's place again.

"We should have disqualified them. They broke the rules."

"The stakes aren't nearly high enough to warrant not allowing them one strike. And you enjoyed the look on her face."

Judging by the feeling in her gut, it was nearing lunchtime when Applejack and Rarity arrived at the door of the Orange's apartment. AJ took a deep breath, cast a cross-eyed glance up at the horn on her forehead, and then raised a hoof to knock on the door. She paused and set her hoof back down with a sigh. *Rarity,* she thought, *I feel like I should apologize.*

'Whatever for Applejack?' Rarity asked.

I wasted our time trying to get a hat because I was ashamed of having a unicorn horn, AJ replied, *And you were right to try and talk me out of it.*

'Think nothing of it,' Rarity said, 'Let's just get those pearls so I can get out of your head.'

"Right," Applejack said with a confident nod. She raised her hoof and gave the door three solid knocks. *Wonder if I should put on my "dignified" voice,* the orange pony mused.

'Dignified voice?' Rarity asked, sounding confused and intrigued. Applejack smiled mischievously.

Guess that answers that question, she thought as she heard the door unlatch. The door opened to reveal a blonde-coated earth pony with her orange mane done up in a layered bouffant and wearing a gold, gem-studded neckpiece, who gave AJ a look of brief confusion followed by recognition, followed by greater confusion when her eyes settled on the distinctive growth on her niece's forehead. "Hello Aunt Mandarin," Applejack said in a voice dripping with culture and eloquence. Rarity was speechless, but Applejack could sense her utter shock at her drastic shift in accent. She fought down a smile as she imagined the white unicorn with her mouth hanging open in an unladylike manner.

"Applejack," Mandarin Orange said, still staring at the horn, "you... you're quite late. Your letter said you'd be here no later than last night." She shook her head and shifted her gaze down to AJ's eyes. "Oh, do excuse my manners," she said, "Come in." She moved aside to give Applejack space to enter.

"Thank you," Applejack said with a smile as she entered the apartment, "I am sorry to have worried you and Uncle Hamlin, but my friends and I had... a rather disturbing experience last night and this," she tapped her horn, "is only part of the fall-out." A door leading to another part of the apartment opened and a light orange stallion with a green mane poked his head into the room, accompanied by the sound of conversation.

"Mandy dear," Hamlin Orange said, "Whatever is keeping... Applejack?"

"Good day Uncle Hamlin," Applejack said with a nod.

"What is that on your head?" Hamlin asked, looking appalled.

'What is with that look?' Rarity asked, insulted, 'Has he never seen a unicorn before?'

He ain't ever seen an Apple family unicorn, AJ replied wryly. "There is quite the story behind this," she told her uncle, "which I will gladly tell you over a light lunch."

Hamlin stepped out into the main room and cast a glance at the door behind him. "We happen to be entertaining at the moment," he said, "since you and your friends did not arrive when expected, we found ourselves with far too much food. I notice that you came here alone by the way."

"Like I said," Applejack said, slipping back into her normal voice out of mild frustration, "It's a long story."

"All right," Hamlin said, "Mandarin, I'll see to our guests while you see if you can find something appropriate for our niece to wear. Listen to her story and decide if it's something that can be told among company."

"It probably ain't," Applejack noted, raising an eyebrow at her uncle before following her aunt into another room, "At least, not the company you're used to keeping." She followed Mandarin into the bedroom and the sophisticate earth pony motioned for her to sit at the vanity while she headed toward the closet.

"Now my dear," Mandarin said, "go ahead and 'spin the yarn,' if you'll pardon the expression."

'Do you actually get along with these relatives of yours?' Rarity asked.

They're family, Applejack thought, and if being a friend to you keeps me in practice for visiting here.

'Glad to be of service then,' Rarity said with a tiny hint of sarcasm, 'Now, if you can speak with such eloquence, why do you do so more often?'

Because that ain't the way I grew up talking, Applejack said with a mental snort, Besides, would you rather buy an apple from a fancy-talkin' pony or one who sounds like they actually put work into growin' and harvesting the thing? On second thought, don't answer that.

"Applejack?" The orange pony jumped and looked to see Mandarin standing next to her with an outfit laid across her back and a concerned look on her face.

"Ah, sorry Aunt Mandy," Applejack said with a blush, "I, uh... you know what? I'll just start at the beginning and it'll all make sense I promise." As she related the tale, starting with a quick summary of the big fight against Discord before talking about the previous evening's ninja squirrel chase, being knocked out by some unknown spell and waking up essentially fused with Rarity, and finally the strange scavenger hunt Discord had forced them into participating in, Mandarin got her into a simple forest-green saddle with a light green fringe and had begun trying to style her mane in such a way as to hide her horn. Even with the relative privacy that came with being a passenger mind, Rarity opted to hold her tongue regarding that detail.

Mandarin paused in her work, keeping one hoof in AJ's mane to keep it from falling out of place, as the orange unicorn finished her story. "That is... quite the tale," she said simply.

"I get the feeling you don't believe me," AJ deadpanned, staring straight ahead into the mirror.

"Oh, well," Mandarin said, biting her lip and looking up at the ceiling, "It's just so incredible. I mean, I can't deny that you have a horn, but that you actually have another pony in your head talking to you?"

"I'm not asking you to believe the whole thing," Applejack said, "Even though it *is* all true. All I'm askin' is if you'll let me borrow one of your pearl necklaces."

"Can you promise I'll get it back?" Mandarin Orange asked. Applejack looked up at her, and then dropped her gaze with a shamed look on her face. Mandarin sighed and finished setting her niece's mane in place. "I'll tell you what," she said, getting back down on all fours, "If you can carry yourself like a proper Manehattanite, in voice, table manners, and conversation, through this luncheon, I'll let you have one of my necklaces to keep or do whatever you wish with."

"Well," Applejack said hesitantly.

'Is that all?' Rarity asked with a laugh, 'She may as well give them to us now.'

Come again? Applejack thought, I haven't sat through a proper fancy meal without messing something up since... well, before I got mah cutie mark.

'Have you forgotten who I am Applejack?' Rarity replied disparagingly, 'I am Rarity. I am the most graceful, eloquent, fashionable, and trained-for-high-society pony in Ponyville. I have the poise to pass for Canterlot nobility. I can certainly coach you on proper lunch etiquette. You can speak the way they want to speak already. Everything else is simple, so long as you're willing to listen to me.'

A small smile sneaked onto Applejack's mouth. You're right, she thought, I shoulda known I could count on the Element of Generosity to lend me a hoof. Just promise me you won't try ta push me into actin' the way I'm about to after we get out of this mess. Rarity simply laughed politely, and AJ looked her aunt in the eye and said, "It would be my pleasure to join you for lunch."

"The best synergy comes from a diversity of personalities."

Chapter 4

The Spice

"Pinkie Pie was always my favorite."

"Because she could appreciate your humor up to a point?"

"No. Well, yes, but really because there's just so much potential in that storm she calls a mind."

"Applejack, wait a-" the slamming door cut Twilight off. "Minute," she finished dully. "Well," she said as she looked at Fluttershy and Trixie, "looks like we're going to meet at the theater when we're done. Trixie, would you mind heading over there to keep an eye out and make sure we don't end up waiting for each other at different spots around the building?"

"I'll be heading over there after I finish a few preparations anyway," Trixie said, "I do have a performance this evening after all. I'll... need to make sure everything's in place."

"All right," Twilight said with a nod, "Fluttershy, are you and Pinkie going to be ok?"

'Tell her not to worry,' Pinkie told Fluttershy.

"We'll be fine Twilight," Fluttershy said, "Thanks for asking though."

"Ok," Twilight said hesitantly. She started toward the door, but then stopped and looked back. "Out of curiosity," she said, "What do you think your item is going to be?"

"Cinnamon," Fluttershy answered.

"Cinnamon?" Trixie and Twilight both asked. "What makes you think it's cinnamon?" Trixie added.

"Well," Fluttershy said. *How did you put it again?* she asked Pinkie.

'Hmmmmmm,' the party said dramatically, *'Oh, right. Discord called it the "spice of life..."'*

"...that twists and rolls, and although he may have been trying to be tricky he was probably talking about an actual spice. And there's no spice that goes into *twiiiists* and rolls quite like cinnamon!" Fluttershy froze when she saw Twilight and Trixie gaping at her, and dropped back down onto all four hooves with a furious blush as she realized that not only had she relayed Pinkie's explanation with exact intonation, but had pulled a pirouette on the word "twists" and ended with a dramatic Pinkie-esque pose. Unable to hide her face behind her mane due to it mimicking the party pony's curly style, she settled for trying to hide behind a raised leg. "Oh dear..." she mumbled.

'Wow, that was a pretty good impression Fluttershy,' Pinkie said.

I didn't mean to... Fluttershy thought apologetically.

"Well," Twilight said after an awkward moment, "We should get going then."

"R-right," Fluttershy said, barely holding herself back from bolting for the door. She and Twilight arrived at the door at the same time and the pegasus motioned for the pale yellow pony to go first. As Fluttershy left the apartment and started down the stairs, strange thoughts began echoing in from the back of her mind. She was starting to develop the ability to screen out the products of Pinkie's idle mind, but most of them were still getting through to her. She'd spent most of the previous evening simply trying to block out the mental noise, accompanied by Pinkie's continual apologies and insistence on keeping it between the two of them, but now that she'd had time to acclimate, Fluttershy was working up the determination to confront it. After all, it would be unkind not to try to understand and help Pinkie Pie while they were stuck together. *Pinkie Pie*, she thought as she descended the stairs, *do you, um, have any ideas where we can get some cinnamon?*

'...nothing but a pile of rock under- Huh?' The noise faded as Pinkie began to focus.

Maybe Trixie has some in her kitchen? Fluttershy suggested.

'Nah,' Pinkie said, *'I only saw the powdered stuff, and it's probably way too old to be any good. The riddle says "only in its purest form," so we're going to need it to be fresh.'*

I see. So, where-

"Good luck you two." Fluttershy flinched and squeaked before looking around. She was standing outside the apartment building with Twilight next to her looking a little concerned.

"Oh," she said, "Thank you. Um, good luck to you two as well." Twilight nodded and trotted off down the street, wings occasionally twitching at her sides.

'Say,' Pinkie said, *'Are you going to be ok with not having wings Fluttershy?'*

'I'll be ok, Fluttershy said reassuringly, so long as I don't forget and try to fly. I do enjoy walking around more than flying anyway.'

'Okie dokie,' Pinkie said cheerfully, *'so, where are we going?'*

'I... was hoping you would have an idea actually, Fluttershy thought, but if you want me to figure it out, I guess I can.'

'Oh, no no no,' Pinkie exclaimed, *'I'll give you all the advice you want Fluttershy. Just ask and your Auntie Pinkie will do her best to help you out!'*

"I'm a year older than you," Fluttershy said, more out reflex than anything.

'Let's see...' Pinkie said thoughtfully, *'Before we can get the cinnamon, we need to know what we mean by "cinnamon."'*

Fluttershy blinked. *What?* she thought, *I thought cinnamon was just, well, cinnamon.*

'Nopey dope,' Pinkie declared, *'First of all, there's cinnamon sticks versus ground cinnamon. Ground cinnamon's ok if you're doing a lot of baking, but if you want to get really fancy, fresh, and pure, you have to go for the sticks. Nothing less than the best will do for Discord!'*

"Um..."

'And then there's the varieties,' Pinkie continued, 'There's cassia, which is what most ponies think of when you say 'cinnamon,' but maybe he'd be happier with true cinnamon.'

"Pinkie, why..."

'Why are we still standing around?' Pinkie asked, growing excited to the point of mania, 'We need to find a spice shop or an apothecary or someplace that sells all types of cinnamon, just to be safe. Oh, maybe we should get some nutmeg too? I've never heard of a nutmeg roll before, but since Discord's so ancient and older than the Princesses maybe they used to make sweet rolls with nutmeg because they hadn't discovered cinnamon yet and-'

"Oohh..." Fluttershy moaned as she started to walk. She listened to Pinkie go on for a bit more before working up the gumption to try and cut in. *Pinkie Pie*, she thought as firmly as she could.

'Yes Fluttershy?' the party pony responded, dropping her train of thought instantly to give Fluttershy her full attention.

Even without the physical presence of another pony looking at her, Fluttershy quailed under the attention, the question on her mind dying out as she thought twice. "N-never mind," she said quietly, "It's nothing."

'Was I starting to lose you again?' Pinkie asked, 'Sorry about that.'

Oh no, it wasn't that, Fluttershy thought, I should have just let you go on that one. She sighed and started to look around for places that might sell cinnamon. She had no idea how they were going to get any without paying for it, but at least it was somewhere to start.

'Fluttershy, it's ok to ask me stuff if you want to,' Pinkie said after a few seconds, 'I understand that you get scared picking up on my thoughts. Honestly, I scare myself sometimes, and it's really tough to focus on happy things right now when I can't move around for myself.'

I'll try and go faster, Fluttershy thought, speeding up to a fast trot, Why don't you think up a song? I love hearing you sing.

'Ooo, *great idea Fluttershy!*' Pinkie exclaimed happily. She started to think her way up and down the music scale, trying to piece together a tune. '*Can you bounce a little?*' she asked, '*I need a beat.*' Fluttershy started to bob a little with each step, just barely enough to be noticeable. '*A little more,*' Pinkie said after a moment, '*Get those hooves up.*' Fluttershy complied, but she started to feel foolish moving at a high-stepping canter. '*More, more!*' Pinkie demanded, her voice backed by random tones and frustration.

I can't, Fluttershy thought, *Ponies are already giving me strange looks.*

'*Let 'em look,*' Pinkie snapped. Fluttershy slowed to a stop, concerned at the tone of Pinkie's thoughts. She was starting to remind the timid pony of the time her friends had thrown Pinkie a surprise birthday party, and the party pony had thought they were no longer her friends. '*Why'd you stop? Dance!*' Fluttershy cringed and whimpered. '*Fluttershy! You... Oh.*' The building rage vanished from Pinkie's mind to be replaced by sadness. '*I'm so sorry Fluttershy,*' she said, before falling silent.

"It's... it's ok," Fluttershy said, getting back up and starting to walk again.

Pinkie remained silent for a while, but eventually thoughts started to slip into Fluttershy's awareness. '*Just so difficult... She has it so easy...*'

Who?

'... *You Fluttershy,*' Pinkie admitted, "*You're always so sweet and nice and ready to help everything you meet, it's so easy for you to be the Element of Kindness.*'

Yes, Fluttershy agreed, *isn't it easy for you too? You always have a smile on your face, a... funny comment to make, and no pony throws a party like you can. That is your special talent after all, right?* She paused at a corner to look around, finding herself on a street lined with booths and small tents with tables full of merchandise set out.

'*Well of course it is silly,*' Pinkie said, brightening up briefly before giving a mental sigh. As Fluttershy made her way down the street looking at the various merchants's offerings, Pinkie started to let herself wander through thoughts of her past. '*It just takes a lot more effort than you might think,* she said, '*I didn't grow up in a cheerful place you know. I was living on a rock farm, a rock farm, before I got my cutie mark. There was hardly ever a*

reason to smile until I saw the Sonic Rainboom Dashie pulled off. The happiness the sight of that rainbow gave me was such a huge-ariffic difference from anything else that I never wanted to lose it. I threw my first party to try and keep the joy alive and share it with my family. It worked for a few days, but the farm work started to take it away all too soon. I threw party after party, but I just couldn't keep things interesting. There's only so many ways to throw a party when all you've got to work with is rocks, and the rest of my family never had as much enthusiasm for them.'

No pony has much enthusiasm for parties as you, Fluttershy pointed out.

'Exactly!' Pinkie declared, 'It wasn't until I moved to Ponyville that I could find what I needed: color, friends, and lots of sugar. But even with all that, and lots of practice at looking on the bright side, I still need to work at being the Pinkie Pie everypony expects me to be. The Pinkie Pie that I need to be.'

You sound like you need a hug, Fluttershy thought, I wish I could give you one right now.

'Thanks Fluttershy,' Pinkie said, 'I'm not sure I could have told that to anyone else. I don't want ponies treating me any different than they do; their smiles and laughs are so much more real if they think I'm random through-and-through.'

I won't tell anyone, Fluttershy promised. She slowed to a stop as she spotted a food stand with muffins, donuts, and a jar filled with hard candy across the street. We can't buy what we're after, she thought, but it should be ok to buy something else, right?

'Just don't go for anything with cinna- Oh! Is that a strawberry muffin? Let's get that!' Fluttershy smiled to herself as she approached the stand and purchased the muffin. As she reached out to pass the six bits to the vendor, she got a sudden twitch in her leg that caused her to spill the coins onto the ground.

"Oopsie," she said with a blush, "how clumsy of me." She started to bend to down to pick up the coins, but the vendor pony waved her back and picked the coins up himself.

"It happens," he said, "no need for a pretty filly like you to lay down on these dirty streets. Here." He held out the muffin, which Fluttershy took with a mumbled thank-you and another blush. Transferring the treat onto her back, she turned and walked away to find a place to eat it. She found a clear spot of sidewalk next to a building and took the muffin in hoof before sitting down. As she lifted the muffin to her mouth, her leg twitched again and she nearly dropped it.

'Is that...?' Pinkie said, intrigued. Fluttershy quickly stuck the muffin in her mouth and held out her leg, which gave another couple involuntary twitches as she looked at it. 'Oh my gosh,' Pinkie said excitedly, 'You... I... We've got my Pinkie Sense! Hooray!'

What does this one mean? Fluttershy asked as she balanced on her haunches so she could hold the muffin in her non-twitchy hoof while she took a bit from it.

'I don't get a twitchy leg very often,' Pinkie said in contemplation, 'Let's see if I can remember...' As the party pony ran through a mental checklist of her various twitches, shudders, and niggling feeling, Fluttershy took delicate bites from the muffin, making sure to savor each bite for Pinkie's benefit, recalling that Twilight had mentioned that both ponies experienced sensations in Multiple Mental Occupancy, even if only one could control the body. *'Oh, I've got it,' Pinkie said as Fluttershy got down to the last few bites, 'Twitchy leg means I'm going to encounter someone I wasn't expecting to see. Or maybe it's someone you're not expecting Fluttershy.'*

But I don't know anypony in Manehattan, Fluttershy thought, *except for Trixie that is.*

'Well,' Pinkie said as Fluttershy finished off the muffin and stood up, 'We won't know until we meet them, so let's get these hooves moving! By the way, that muffin was a little dry. We should have a word with that pony about his stock.'

It wasn't all that bad, Fluttershy thought, *And I don't think that stand of his has an oven for baking fresh food.*

'Hm, good point.' Fluttershy resumed walking down the street, stumbling occasionally as her leg twitched. After several feet, the twitching reached a frequency that made it nearly impossible to walk, so the yellow pony sat

down and looked around, hoping to see either a familiar face or a spice merchant nearby. Ponies of all shapes and colors passed by, some casting glances at her as they passed by, but none of them were familiar to Fluttershy. She started to feel panicky when Pinkie Pie suddenly exclaimed, *'Dramatic gasp!'*

"Huh?" Fluttershy said, blinking in confusion.

'Well,' Pinkie said, *'I can't actually gasp since I'm just a voice in your head right now, so...'*

But why? What did you see?

'A little to the left,' Pinkie instructed as Fluttershy looked around, *'Now a teensy bit to the right. Right there, at that stall with the polished stone stuff, with the gray mane.'* Fluttershy nodded slightly as she spotted the pony, who was looking at the various polished stone necklaces on display. Her light gray mane and tail stood out strongly against her darker, purplish-gray coat, and her cutie mark was a slightly rounded block of lapis lazuli. As soon as Fluttershy looked at her, her leg stopped twitching. *'It's my sister Shoo Fly!'* Pinkie declared happily, *'I wonder what she's doing here? Hey, let's go say hello!'*

W-what? Fluttershy stammered mentally, feeling the panic return again, *but... but...*

'Aw, don't worry Fluttershy,' Pinkie said reassuringly, *'She's not scary. Just go up and say "hello Shoo Fly Pie." I'll be with you every step of the way.'* She giggled at her little joke.

Fluttershy closed her eyes for a second to try and calm herself and walked over to the stall. She came to a stop just behind the gray-scale earth pony and opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out at first was a little squeak. She closed her mouth, swallowed, and tried again. "Exc-"

'Nonono,' Pinkie said, *'don't get her attention yet. Just say it.'*

All right... Fluttershy took a few more breaths, closed her eyes and spoke, "Hello Shoo Fly Pie." She cracked one eye open to see the mare's ears perk.

"Pinka-" she said in surprise as she turned her head to look, but then suspicion clouded her face as she looked at Fluttershy. "Who are you?" she asked. In the back of Fluttershy's mind, she heard Pinkie Pie start to laugh.

"I... I'm," Fluttershy stuttered.

'You can do it Fluttershy,' Pinkie said supportively between chuckles.

"I'm Fluttershy," the yellow pony said, "I'm a friend of your sister Pinkie."

"Oh, of course you are," Shoo Fly said, closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead, "She's the only one who calls me Shoo Fly." She smirked and opened her eyes while holding a hoof out for Fluttershy to shake. "My name is Susan Fidelity Pie," she said as Fluttershy gently shook the offered hoof.

"It's nice to meet you," Fluttershy said. *Susan Fidelity Pie?* she asked Pinkie.

'My parents had a thing for those kind of names,' Pinkie said with a mental shrug.

Susan released Fluttershy's hoof and then started walking around her.

"Strange," she said, "Pinkamena's mentioned you, but she said you were a pegasus."

"Oh, it's a... long stor-*eep!*" The dark gray pony suddenly zipped in front of Fluttershy with one eye closed and the other seeming to bulge out slightly as she stared into Fluttershy's eye.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie," she said, "What in the world are you doing inside this pony's head?" Fluttershy gasped and sat down hard, her jaw falling open as she stared wide-eyed at Susan.

'Whoa, how did she know?' Pinkie exclaimed, equally surprised.

"I can sense your aura in there Pinkie," Susan said, "Remember how I was always the best of us at hide-and-seek back home? Turns out I can detect ponies and sense things about them much like you can sense the immediate future. It doesn't work so well on the farm for some reason

though..." She shook her head and opened her other eye. "But enough about me," she said, "What's the story here?"

"Um, well," Fluttershy began. She and Susan moved away from the stall and out of the flow of traffic as the yellow pony related the tale of Discord's new game, broken up occasionally as Pinkie asked her to relay a comment to Susan. When they finished, Susan regarded the bonded pony with a thoughtful expression.

"This seems like a lot of trouble to put somepony through just for some cinnamon," she said, "Are you sure it's even a good idea to be playing along? I mean, you know discord much better than I ever could, but from what I heard, he doesn't play fair."

"Oh, he's a big dumb meanie all right," Fluttershy said testily, "He didn't give us any choice though, and I do not want to find out what will happen if we don't win."

'Me neither!' Pinkie declared, just in case her sister could pick up on her thoughts.

"I'd like to help if I can," Susan said, "There's a pony selling spices near the next corner. Perhaps I-" The sounds of commotion drew their attention to a point farther down the street. Fluttershy and Susan stepped out into the street to see a light orange unicorn in a straw hat being mobbed by a bunch of small creatures. Susan sighed and shook her head. "Those rodents are at it again," she said.

"What's going on?" Fluttershy asked.

"That band of squirrels has been harassing and stealing from ponies on this street for the past few days," the dark-gray pony explained, "It looks like they've decided to pick on the spice merchant I mentioned." They watched as the unicorn tried to fend off the squirrels alone, as not even his neighbors seemed willing to leave their stalls to lend a hoof.

"Oh no," Fluttershy said with unusual firmness in her voice, "how can they all just stand there?" She started walking toward the melee, an inner drive to restore peace and kindness overriding her normal timidity. As she approached, a squirrel broke away with a large sprig of rosemary in its jaws and began scampering away in Fluttershy's direction. The yellow earth

pony spotted it, shifted to the left to stand in its path, planted her front hooves firmly, and Stared at the rodent. The squirrel skid to a stop in front of her and quivered as it locked eyes with her. "And just *what* do you think you're doing?" Fluttershy asked in a scolding tone. The squirrel's eyes darted guiltily to the rosemary in its mouth. "Well?" The squirrely slowly bent down, dropped the sprig, and then turned to run away. "Ah ah ah, no you don't!" Fluttershy said, leaping forward and grabbing the squirrel in her mouth by the scruff of its neck. She dropped it next to the rosemary and tapped her hoof expectantly. With a sigh, the squirrel picked up the sprig and walked back to the stall with Fluttershy looming over him every step of the way. When they reached the stall, the other squirrels stopped, took one look at Fluttershy, and started to scatter. "Hold it!" Fluttershy ordered in a voice that caused every pony in earshot to freeze in place and look at her while the squirrels sulkily returned and lined up on the countertop under the influence of the Stare.

'*Woo, go Fluttershy!*' Pinkie cheered as the yellow pony began to pace, looking each rodent in the eye.

"Now listen here all of you," Fluttershy lectured, "I don't know any of you, but I'm sure you were raised better than this. You're lucky I don't go and tell your parents what you've been up to." She noticed a pair of smaller squirrels cast furtive gazes at the one standing between them and she focused her gaze on it. "And you," she said, "What are you thinking teaching your little ones to steal? Isn't there enough food for you in the parks and trees? Well?" She looked around, but each squirrel simply avoided her gaze. "You're going to apologize for causing all this trouble and never do it again, got it?" One by one, the rodents nodded and those who were holding thigs put them back where they'd come from. Fluttershy's gaze softened and she said, "That's better. Now run along and behave yourselves." Released from their spell, the squirrels jumped off the stall and scampered away. "As for all of you," Fluttershy said, whirling on the crowd, "Shame on all of you for not helping. I..." she started to falter as the adrenaline from the Stare session wore off.

'*Come on Fluttershy,*' Pinkie said, picking up on her bond-mate's train of thought, '*They deserve it as much as the squirrels did. Just because they're bigger doesn't make them anymore right.*'

You... You're right Pinkie, Fluttershy thought, This... this isn't as scary as that dragon... Except it is.

'Hm hm hm...' Pinkie hummed, picking up a tune, *'When I was a little filly and the sun was going dooowwn...'*

The darkness as the shadows would always... Fluttershy's thoughts trailed off for a second. *Laugh the fear away. Ha ha.* She smiled slightly and then grew serious. "Those of you the squirrels stole from before should have helped when they came back," she said to the ponies around her. She snorted and walked away with her nose in the air. She managed to hold the pose until she got past the stunned crowd and a short way down the street. Then her normal timidity returned and she nearly collapsed into a shivering heap. "Oh my goodness," she mumbled, "That was awful."

"That was amazing." Fluttershy looked up to see Susan Fidelity Pie walking up to her with a look of awe on her face. "I don't think I've ever seen anything like that before," she said.

"It's... My special talent is taking care of animals," Fluttershy explained shyly, "but I'm normally much nicer to them. I don't like having to use the Stare on anything."

"Well, it worked," Susan said, "for now at least. Only time will tell if that lecture sticks with them." Fluttershy nodded slowly as she steadied herself, and then froze with a squeak when she felt a hoof tap on her shoulder.

"Pardon me," a male voice said. Fluttershy turned her head to see the unicorn from the spice stand. "Thank you so much," he said, "You saved my stock; I didn't lose a single sprig or seed thanks to you. If there's anything I can do in return..."

"Oh, no," Fluttershy said, blushing, "It was nothing."

'Fluttershy, Pinkie hissed, 'He had cinnamon for sale! Cassia and the real stuff! Ask him for some!'

"Oh!" Fluttershy turned around to face the unicorn properly. "A-actually," she said, "I... I'm looking for some... cinnamon. I don't have any money though. Sorry."

"Cinnamon? Is that all?" The unicorn smiled and placed a hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. "My dear, I'll give you all the cinnamon you need, free of charge. It's the least I can do."

'Get a few sticks of every kind he's got,' Pinkie advised, 'Just to be safe. Oh, and a nutmeg too. Mr. and Mrs. Cake would be thrilled if I came home with a fresh nutmeg for them.'

Let's not push it too far Pinkie, Fluttershy thought. She conveyed the request and the unicorn trotted away, returning a minute later with a small bag full of cinnamon sticks. "Thank you," Fluttershy said as she accepted the bag. The spice merchant smiled and went back to his stall. Fluttershy then turned to Susan and said, "It was very nice to meet you. We have to go meet our friends now. Good bye." She started to turn away, but Susan stepped forward and caught the yellow pony up in a hug.

"Good bye," the gray pony whispered into her ear, "Pinkie, you should come visit soon. Mother's in need of one of your parties."

Fluttershy blinked several times, and then smiled. "She says 'Okie Dokie Lokie.'"

"That Fluttershy is a living weapon."

"Aye, a weapon of peace. Everywhere she goes, peace and order spread."

Chapter 5

The Element

"Ok, now this is going to be an interesting pair to watch..."

"Hmm."

"What, bored already? We've barely begun."

"Um, good luck to you two as well."

'Let's get this show on the road Twilight,' Rainbow Dash said eagerly as Twilight turned away from Fluttershy and began walking down the street. Her wings twitched uncomfortably as she walked, opening and closing slightly and shifting about in just about every way Twilight could imagine and more. She suspected the movement was due to the wing muscles picking up some of the signals traveling between her brain and her legs muscles as she walked. It was likely a backwards version of the phantom limb phenomenon she'd read about in her studies on pony psychology; instead of the brain reporting sensation in an amputated limb, it was sending confused orders to a pair of newly- 'BORING!'

Come on Rainbow Dash, Twilight thought, This is fascinating. Think about it, of all the pony types, only Pegasi and the Princesses have six limbs instead of four. So long as we're stuck like this, I can't pass up the opportunity to study how pegasi work through personal experience.

'Ok...' Dash said, still bored, 'So, why don't we get to the experience part and save all the egghead stuff for later? I'm going to go stir-crazy if I don't get in the air soon. Besides, the sooner I can get you flying, the sooner we can get that Sonic Rainboom.'

What Sonic Rainboom? Twilight thought, dreading the answer.

'Duh, the Sonic Rainboom we need to pull off to complete our part of the scavenger hunt,' Dash said.

Of all the possible meanings of that part of the riddle, how did you arrive at Sonic Rainboom as an answer? Twilight asked, *Wouldn't it make more sense for it to be-*

'Whoa whoa whoa, stop,' Dash said, cutting Twilight off, 'I have to be the ideas pony this time, remember?'

Twilight finally came to a stop, finding a window that gave back a good enough reflection for her to cast a confused and annoyed look at herself and Dash. *Remember what? We never talked about who the 'ideas pony' is supposed to be. We never even established that there is an 'ideas pony'!*

'Discord did,' Rainbow answered confidently, 'He said in each pair there was one pony who had to figure out what to look for and the other would have a way to get it. It's obvious that since you're the one who actually gets to control our body, you're the one who has to get the thingy and that makes me the one who has to figure it out.'

"Rainbow, I don't think-"

'Pinkie and Rarity were doing the figuring out for their teams,' the brash pony continued, 'It only makes sense I have to do it four ours.'

"Rainbow Dash," Twilight said, "I'm pretty sure he called it a hint, and he never did specify which was which."

'Twilight, this is Discord we're talking about,' Rainbow said, 'He uses riddles and vague words so he can pull whatever he wants. And you're not exactly the best at figuring him out you know.'

Twilight's ears flattened as she glared at her reflection. *That's cold Rainbow Dash. Do you honestly think you're going to do any better than me? I may have messed up by leading us into the hedge maze, but that was simply because I focused on the wrong part of the riddle. You're trying to decipher an even vaguer clue by yourself.*

'Sour apples,' Rainbow scoffed, 'Think about it Twilight; Discord knows you and how smart you are. He'd try to trip you up by making you over-think all the things "excitement distilled" and "make the rain go boom" could possibly mean when the real answer is plain as day: Sonic. Rain. BOOM!' Twilight flinched at the strength of Dash's final word echoing in her head. 'Now come on,' Rainbow urged, 'Let's get in the air already!'

Twilight heaved a sigh and turned away from the window. She looked up at the buildings reaching into the sky above her and the noticeable lack of

pegasi flying about. *Tell you what*, she thought as she walked in what she thought was the direction of Manehattan Central Park, *After I let you teach me enough to fly around safely, you let me list every reason I have why I think a Sonic Rainboom is a red herring.*

'A what?'

"A false lead," Twilight replied in a mutter, pausing to rub her forehead in frustration, "a mistake, dead end, incorrect course of action."

'Fine, fine,' Rainbow said, *'Just stop being a dictionary. Where are you going anyway?'*

The park, Twilight answered, *Manehatten has a law restricting flying in the streets to weather patrol and emergency crews.*

'Oh yeah, that stupid rule,' Rainbow grumbled, *'Well, the wind currents between the buildings probably aren't the best for a rookie like you anyway.'*

"Were they just fighting? Maybe this will be the fun pair after all."

'We're lost, aren't we?' Twilight had been wandering around the city for close to two hours without any signs that she was getting closer to finding Central Park, or any other park for that matter. The lavender pegasus was growing weary, both of her seeming inability to recall the numerous directions she'd asked for from passers-by and of Rainbow Dash's barely-constrained impatience.

Yeah, Twilight admitted, ears drooping sadly, *Completely lost.*

'Then let's stop wasting time and start the flying lessons now,' Dash said.

But Rainbow, Twilight protested, *The airspace laws-*

'Just go into a secluded alley or something,' Rainbow insisted, *'We'll be staying low to the ground at first anyway, so you don't have to worry about the wind too much.'*

"If we get caught and fined, you owe me," Twilight muttered. Doing her best not to look suspicious, she walked to the nearest gap between buildings and stepped into it. She went down to the end, turned a corner to move behind a building, and then sat down and looked around to make she and Rainbow were alone. "Ok," she said with resignation, "Let's get this over with." With some effort she managed to extend her wings out and upward. Rainbow Dash sighed. *What?* Twilight asked, *I've never had wings before. I'm not used to working the related muscles.*

'You and Trixie used that wing-making spell when the two of you were stuck together,' Rainbow pointed out.

"Yes," Twilight said slowly, "I don't remember if I actually used them though. Besides, those wings were magic constructs and operate in a completely different manner from real pegasus wings. It was more dependent on thought than physical effort."

'So...' Dash said, *'You just had to think to fly?'* Twilight nodded. *'Welcome to pegasus flight Twilight Sparkle,'* the speedster declared, *'it works the same way.'*

"You must be joking," Twilight said, looking askance at her wings, "Unicorn magic requires effort and concentration. I can't believe that flying is easier than that for Pegasi. After all, didn't you have to attend schools and camp to learn how to fly?"

'Ok, yes,' Rainbow admitted, *'That's not the point though. You're thinking way too much about how my wings are supposed to move. You need to stop thinking like a science pony and start thinking like a flyer.'*

"And just how do you propose I do that?"

'Uh...' Rainbow fell silent for a long time, causing Twilight to sigh, roll her eyes, and start to lay down until she thought about what might be on the ground in a back alley. *'Ah-ha!'* Dash exclaimed suddenly, startling Twilight, *'I remember some of the old exercises they had us do. Twilight, find something to climb up on.'* Twilight looked around and spotted a closed dumpster nearby. As she jumped and tried to climb onto it, her wings started to flap and gave her an unexpected boost. *'That's what I'm talking about,'* Rainbow said with pleasure as Twilight stood up on the dumpster,

'don't think too much about the basics and it'll be just like walking. Now, let's start with some stretching...'

As Rainbow ran her through a crash-course in basic flying techniques, Twilight proved to be as good a student as she was with magic and other subjects. In other words, she kept getting hung up on the technical details until Rainbow lost her patience and made her start the current exercise over "with forty percent less thinking!" Eventually, though, the lavender pony got the idea and began to master hovering, altitude changing, and forward travel. The dimensions of the alleyway were not appropriate for learning how to turn, so Rainbow reluctantly called a halt to the lessons so Twilight could take another shot at finding a city park. "Ok Rainbow," Twilight said before stepping back out into the streets, "I'm a halfway decent flyer now, so it's your turn to listen to my ideas."

'I'm still not sure this is a good idea,' Rainbow muttered.

Just hear me out, Twilight thought, trotting out and joining the flow of hoof traffic, *You can make the final decision, but a good researcher makes use of every source available to them.*

'Just get on with it,' the pegasus moaned.

Item one, Twilight thought, *The Sonic Rainboom has only been performed successfully twice in modern history.*

'Yep, by yours truly.'

I'm not you Rainbow, the lavender pony pointed out, *I don't have the years of training and conditioning you do. Asking me to pull off a Sonic Rainboom would be like asking, say, Sweetie Bell to replicate my Ursa Minor taming method.*

'Twilight,' Dash said, *'I did my first Rainboom when I was filly in Summer Flight Camp. It doesn't take years of training to do one. You just have to go fast enough.'*

That brings me to my second point, Twilight thought, *What do you think would happen if we pulled off a Rainboom in the middle of a city like this?*

'Uh, everypony would stare in awe at us?' Dash asked uncertainly.

All except the city guard, who would likely arrest us for disturbing the peace, breaking who knows how many windows with the shock wave, and possibly other crimes I can't think of right now, Twilight answered, *Point three: how would we even deliver a Sonic Rainboom to the... oh, hello there Central Park.* She came to a stop in front of the arching decorative gateway that framed the entrance to the park she'd stumbled upon. She looked back the way she'd come and noted, *We were just three blocks away...* Rainbow Dash groaned and Twilight gave an embarrassed laugh.

'Whatever,' Rainbow said with a sigh, *'Take off and start working on your gliding turns. Just tilt slightly in the direction you want to turn.'* Twilight nodded slightly as she walked into the park. The path took her through a stand of trees before opening up into a wide field with a large pond near the center. She spread her wings and flew up until she was at the level of the tree-tops before going into a forward glide and leaning to her left. She panicked for a second as she tumbled into a barrel-roll, but managed to right herself and regain control before she crashed into the water. *'Good recovery,'* Rainbow said happily, *'Try again.'*

"Right," Twilight said as she regained her altitude and tried again. This time she succeeded in putting herself into a counter-clockwise spiral toward the ground. As she touched down on the ground, Twilight asked, *So, have you thought about what I've pointed out?*

'Try turning to the right, and tighten the turns,' Dash instructed. Twilight sighed and took flight again. *'I guess you're right Twilight,'* she admitted once Twilight was airborne, *'Trying for a Rainboom right now probably isn't the best idea. Still, I wouldn't put it past Discord to try and make us do something that would get us in trouble.'*

Not to mention the problem of delivering a Rainboom to the theater, Twilight pointed out, *Were you expecting me to loop around and catch some of the shockwave in a bucket or something?*

Rainbow gave an amused mental snort. *'That sounds like something Pinkie Pie would think up,'* she said *'And knowing her, she might find a way to...'* She trailed off for a second, and then began cackling. *'Oh my gosh, if I could actually grab a piece of a Sonic Rainboom blast and do something with it... that would be soooo-'*

Awesome? Twilight finished flatly, smirking.

'No,' Dash said, 'Beyond awesome. It would be like if I found the dial marked "Awesome," turned it up to eleven, then tore it off and ran away laughing! The Wonderbolts would be begging me to try out for the team!'

Focus Rainbow, Twilight thought, leveling out and coming to a stop in the air, If we're not going with a Sonic Rainboom, we need to get back to figuring out Discord's riddle.

'You got any suggestions?' Rainbow asked sardonically.

"Well," Twilight said as she came in for a landing, "it's getting close to lunch time and I'm famished. I'm going to go find some food, and we can discuss things on the way."

'Food is good,' Rainbow agreed, 'Just don't get lost again.' Twilight rolled her eyes and trotted out of the park. 'So...' the speedster prompted.

Let's look at the riddle as a whole and then break it down, Twilight thought as she walked, excitement distilled, the element that can make rain go 'BOOM.' You seemed to focus mostly on the last few words with your idea. What we need to do is come up with something that can be described by that entire line.

'He said rain,' Rainbow mused, 'So he was either talking about weather or water.'

There are some kinds of elemental metal that react explosively in water, Twilight added, Although, because of that there's no chance of finding any outside of a research lab. You could say they're distilled excitement though...

'Yeah... I don't think so,' Rainbow said, 'That's not something I'd think of on my own anyway.'

Technically, Twilight thought, flapping her wings a couple times, these are yours, so we could say you provide the means to get what we need and I can figure out the solution.

'Um...' Rainbow thought, 'sorry Twi, but to me that sounds like a complicated way of saying "sit back and let me do all the work Rainbow Dash." Anyway, no fancy exploding metal. What about the weather... Oh.

Ugh, imagine me doing a face-hoof.' Twilight quirked an eyebrow up but waited for Rainbow to continue. *'I should have thought of this first,* Rainbow said grumpily, *'Lightning and thunder. It adds a definite "BOOM!" to rainstorms, and kicking a thundercloud gets ponies excited.'*

If you call 'scared out of their wits' excited, Twilight thought sarcastically, *but that's a good point. Electricity energizes and excites whatever it goes into, whether it be by lightning setting something on fire or a hoof buzzer giving you a spasm.*

'So then,' Rainbow said excitedly, *'all we need is a small thunder cloud. That sound good to you Twilight?'*

Twilight nodded and then looked up at the sky. She frowned when she failed to locate any clouds in the parts of the sky she could see. *How long would it take you to teach me to make clouds?* she asked.

'Hmm...' Rainbow said thoughtfully, *'Find some food first.'*

After filling up on more spaghetti marinara than she imagined her stomach could hold, at Dash's insistence, Twilight made her way back to the Central Park clearing with the pond. She glanced around to see if there were any other ponies around. She knew some of Manehattan's rules regarding pegasi, but she wasn't sure if they included anything about making clouds or other small weather effects. She didn't see anypony around, so she let out a relieved breath and filed away the worrying for later.

'Ok, here's the basic idea,' Rainbow Dash said, *'Clouds are made of water vapor and air. If you want a simple fluffy white one you just need to gather enough water into one spot and mix it with the air using your wings. Clouds that can produce thunder when kicked need to be a little more dense, and that takes more time and tighter maneuvers. For starters, just skim the pond there with a hoof and try to catch some of the spray in your draft. If you start making a misty contrail, you're doing it right.'*

"Ok," Twilight said, blinking in mild surprise.

'What?' Dash asked indignantly, picking up on Twilight's amazement, *'I'm a weather pony. I have to know how this stuff works.'* Twilight flushed in

embarrassment and took flight, kicking off the ground occasionally as she glided in low toward the water. She tucked all but one foreleg up as she reached the shore and trailed her hoof through the water as she began to flap to maintain her momentum and altitude. *'That's enough,'* Rainbow said when she reached the middle of the pond, *'head up and let's see if you got it.'* Twilight pulled in her leg and angled her flight upward as she accelerated. She leveled out again near tree-top level and banked to the right to check behind her. She laughed in triumph when she saw a thin wispy line of mist curving up from the surface of the pond along the path she'd flown. Rainbow gave a short laugh as well and said, *'Not bad Twilight. Now, go get some more water and we'll see if you can form a real cloud.'* Twilight dove toward the pond, intending to zoom across the surface and drag as much water as possible into her wake. She miscalculated her speed however and ended up crashing into the water and sending up a short fountain of the liquid. Dash guffawed as the lavender Pegasus swam to the edge of the pond and pulled herself out, soaked to the skin. *'Wow, I wish I could have seen that from the outside,'* the pegasus said, *'That has to be one of the best- wait wait, don't dry off too much!'*

"Why?" Twilight asked, pausing in the middle of shaking the water out of her coat, "I can't fly with wet wings, can I?"

'Well no...' Twilight resumed shaking. *'But you can probably use the water in your coat as cloud material once you go fast enough for the wind to blow it loose.'*

"Oh," Twilight said, brushing her sodden forelock out of her eyes, "That makes sense, I guess. There's still these though," she added as she extended and flapped her wings as rapidly as she could to try and shake the water out.

'Careful,' Rainbow hissed with a mental wince, *'Don't mess up the feathers!'* Twilight slowed her flapping with a slight blush. *'I am going to be so happy when this is all over,'* Dash muttered.

After a few minutes, Twilight's wings were dry enough for her fly. She took flight, buzzed the pond a few times to collect a thick trail of mist, and then flew up to begin crafting the cloud. Under Rainbow's direction, she flew in tightening circles until she'd created a spiral disk of cloud material. Then, hesitantly, she flew around the disk in vertical loops to add thickness to the

proto-cloud. Finally, once her contrail had faded away, she began to fly around the mist, pressing in on it with her hooves as she went to force the vapor to condense into a smaller and smaller package. After five tiring minutes, the cloud had finished forming and hung in the air with inviting softness. Twilight came to a stop and settled onto it with a sigh, barely resisting the urge to burrow into it and fall asleep. "Is this why you're always napping Rainbow?" she asked.

'Yeeah, let's go with that,' Rainbow said, 'anyway, this feels pretty good for a first hoof-made cloud. Mind giving it a kick? I'm not expecting much, but I'd like to see how it responds.' Twilight nodded and stood up. She stomped down on the cloud, and it responded with a dull rumble and a few drops of water. *'Huh,' Rainbow said, 'It shouldn't be making noise yet. You must have packed it in tighter than I thought. Nice job.'*

"Thank you," Twilight said proudly.

'Don't mention it,' Rainbow said, 'Rest up a little, and then let's get to work turning this into a proper thunderhead.'

"You just can't break ponies who've been through what these girls have."

"You were counting on this the whole time, weren't you?"

"I never meant that to be a secret."

Chapter 6

The Delve

"I love it when a plot comes together."

"It's not over yet. I spy a possible complication for your little scheme."

"What are you talking abo... Ah. Well, we almost made it without discovery. That's respectable."

"Don't you worry, I'll handle it."

"Discord! Don't you dare-"

Fluttershy pranced down the street toward the Silver Halter, humming happily around the bag held in her mouth in time with the song Pinkie Pie was improvising around the theme of cinnamon. The spicy-sweet scent wafting from the bag combined with Pinkie's music drove all worries about confronting Discord from the yellow pony's mind. As the bonded pair arrived at the theater, they met Applejack coming from the other direction. Fluttershy blinked in surprise at the orange mare's mane, which was layered up on her head in a sort of forward-leaning bun, and the string of pearls hanging around her neck.

"Howdy there Flutterpie," AJ said, "How'd the two of you fare?"

"We got what we needed," Fluttershy said, setting her bag down, "What about you and Rarity? Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yup, right here," Applejack said, motioning to the pearls, "Ten pearls and then some." Her stomach gurgled and she chuckled, "Ah-heh-heh... Sorry. Say, you got anything ta eat in that bag? I forgot how tiny the portions can be fer a fancy luncheon."

Fluttershy shook her head. "Sorry Applejack," she said, "It's only the cinnamon we had to get."

"Cinnamon?" AJ cocked her head to the side, "Now what in Equestria would Discord want with ten pearls and a bunch of cinnamon?" Fluttershy just shrugged with an apologetic look on her face. A shadow fell over the

ponies and they looked up to see a pony-sized black cloud pass low over their heads and settle to the street. Twilight was on top the cloud, all four legs wrapped around it in a tight grip. "Looks like the gang's all here," Applejack said as Twilight stood up on the cloud and looked at her friends, "But Twi, ain't there some sort of rules 'bout flying in the city?"

"Yeah," Twilight said, "But if you're dragging a thundercloud around and acting like you have every right to do so, nopony asks any questions. It's called a..." She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head as she consulted with Rainbow Dash. "A Griffon Fire Drill apparently," she concluded with a shrug of her wings, "Anyway, here's hoping Rainbow and I guessed right in making this cloud. You girls ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," AJ said.

"Um," Fluttershy said, "Are you going to be able to get that cloud inside the building?"

Twilight jumped down from the cloud and looked at it. "That's a good question," she said, "Maybe if I break off a smaller piece?" She regarded to the thunderhead for several seconds as Rainbow gave her opinion on the matter. Finally, Twilight gave a nod and then proceeded to carefully split the cloud in half, and then in half again. She pulled one of the quarters aside and kicked the others out of existence. "Rainbow says this is only good for one or two lightning strikes," she said, taking flight and starting to push the smaller cloud toward the theater, "but that should be more than enough. Come on." Applejack ran ahead to open a door, but found them all to be locked.

"Huh, let's try around the back," she said.

"I hope Trixie's here," Fluttershy said as the group walked into the alley behind the building, "If they're not expecting us yet..." Applejack tried to open the backstage door and then stepped back with a frown when it refused to yield. "Oh dear."

"Try knocking," Twilight suggested, "Maybe Mr. Arch is here; I'm sure he'll let us in." Applejack approached the door and knocked on it twice, and then jumped back as it cracked open slightly and a thick pink mist hissed out and surrounded the ponies.

"Now what?" AJ asked as she and her friends drew as close together as they could. The mist encircled the group and curled up to close over their heads, sealing them inside a dome as Discord's laugh echoed around them.

"My little ponies," the chaos spirit's voice said, *"So dependable and trusting."*

"Cut the nonsense Discord," Twilight snapped, "We've brought what you asked for, so it's your turn to hold up your end of the bargain. Change us back!"

"I admire the confidence Twilight Sparkle," Discord said, *"But are you sure you solved my riddle? After all-"* the voice cut out suddenly and the mist ceased swirling, simply hanging where it was as if frozen in time.

After a moment, a new voice was heard from outside the pink curtain. *"That's enough,"* it said, *"you've crossed the line already. Game over, you lose, chimera. Dispell!"* The world seemed to vanish in a blinding flash of light. When the light faded, the misty dome was gone along with the thundercloud, the bag of cinnamon, and ten pearls from AJ's necklace. Also, where once three ponies had stood flank-to-flank now six ponies were laying in a heap.

"Oh yeah," Rainbow Dash shouted, leaping into the air and hugging her legs across her chest, "I'm back baby!" Twilight chuckled at the pegasus as she extracted herself from the pile and checked to see if her horn was back in its proper place. The others stood up as well and looked each other over.

"Welp," Applejack said, "Looks you got to keep the hairdo there Rarity."

"Indeed," the white unicorn said, using her magic to remove bobby pins until her hair fell free into something vaguely resembling her normal style, "and I notice that your hat has returned."

Applejack looked up and then pulled the Stetson off her head. "That's great," she said, "But that means Discord an' whoever else was involved in this just got saved from a serious flank-kicking." Twilight glanced at the farm-pony, and then at Rarity, who simply shrugged.

"Speaking of which," Rainbow said, coming back down to earth, "Who the hay was that other guy? And what did they want with all that random stuff?"

"Hey girls!" Pinkie shouted, waving a hoof from her place next to the theater door, "Come check this out!" The others gathered around to see a letter taped to the door, written in a rather sloppy manner. "Hmm," Pinkie said, sticking her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she leaned in close to read, "I think it says, 'Girls, congratulations on winning, but I'm afraid Discord left you one last surprise that's beyond my ability to reverse. Go to the showmare's dressing room and I'm sure you'll see what I mean.' Hm, this last bit's either a signature or a scribble..."

"Argh," Rainbow said with a face-hoof, "First a ninja-squirrel, then multi-mental whatever... NOW what? A ticking candy time bomb?" Pinkie's ears shot up and she ran into the theater with a cry of "Oo!" A few glances were exchanged between the remaining ponies before they followed Pinkie. They caught up to her outside Trixie's dressing room, where she was peering through the door with a slight droop to her mane and tail.

"It's not a candy bomb," she said as she opened the door wider and moved to let the others look inside. The mares gasped as they saw a pony huddled in the middle of the floor, face buried under front legs as she shook with muffled sobs. She was a solid, dull grey with pure white mane and tail and a cutie mark depicting a star-tipped magic wand and a swirl of pixie dust.

"Trixie?" Fluttershy gasped.

"She's grey!" Rarity exclaimed in horror.

"Discord's twisted her," Twilight said, pushing past her friends to kneel next to Trixie.

"He can do that?" Applejack asked as she and the others gathered around, "I mean, when he did it to us it was by turning us against our Elements, right? Trixie's just a regular pony."

"That's right," Trixie sobbed, "Just a... regular old... weak and useless Trixie."

"Aw, no you're not," Pinkie said, grabbing the grey pony up in a hug, "You're the *Great and Powerful* Trixie, remember? You're the best stage magician I've ever seen! Don't let mean ol' Discord get you down!"

"I'm a fraud!" Trixie cried, hanging limp in Pinkie's grip, "A charlatan! A pathetic pretender who's only good at making things up!"

"Well, she's still as big a ham as usual," Rainbow Dash said flatly. Twilight shot her a look. "She is," Dash said defensively.

"Trying to talk her out of this isn't going to work," Twilight said, starting to focus her magic, "I'll have to use the memory spell to knock this out of her."

"You sure that'll work sugar cube?" Applejack asked, "I mean, our history with her ain't been the greatest..."

"I may have to find a memory that doesn't include us," Twilight said as she placed her horn on Trixie's head, "wish me luck."

With a few days of "real" Multiple Mental Occupancy, the previous few hours, and the memory spells she'd cast on her friends during Discord's brief return to full power, Twilight was becoming rather familiar with the mental plane. This particular experience, delving into Trixie's memory to find something to break the showmare free of Discord's influence, was fairly unique though. When using the spell to restore her friends, Twilight had simply inserted key thoughts that triggered happy memories of their growing friendship. For this, Twilight had to go deeper than the surface, deeper than she'd ever gone into another's mind. *This would be so exciting if it wasn't so risky*, she thought.

Her awareness of the world around her faded and she felt her sense of time begin to disappear as well. In no time, all there was was her, the magic, and Trixie. Soon, though, a new world formed around Twilight, a world made up of shadows and light. She was standing on a street made of soft golden light surrounded by the barely-visible shadows of buildings in styles reminiscent of Ponyville and other smaller towns in the Everfree region. One house stood out from the rest, being constructed of wood and stone with a roof of thatch. *Or rather*, Twilight thought as she approached it, *the memory of wood, stone, and thatch...*

Home. The word echoed through the air, coming from all directions at once. Twilight paused for a second and looked around. When nothing new appeared, she continued toward the house. She came to a stop at the foot of a cobblestone walk that curved ever so slightly as it crossed through a small yard on its way to the front door. On the lawn lay a sapphire-blue unicorn mare watching a pale blue filly trying to lift a trio of pebbles with her magic. The little pony's face was scrunched up in concentration as the aura around her horn sputtered and sparked. After several seconds, the aura stabilized and the pebbles rose gently into the air, suspended in a matching glow. The filly opened her eyes slowly, and then she beamed at the mare. "Look mama! I did it!"

"Yes you did," the mare said proudly, standing up to walk over and nuzzle the filly, "My little Trixie, you're becoming so powerful." Twilight couldn't help but smile at the tender scene, but it suddenly froze and lost all its color before fading into the shadows.

She spoiled me. The voice was filled with anger, and to Twilight it sounded almost like Trixie, but with a strange artificial twist to it. The buildings shifted around the unicorn, moving her to a point just outside the ethereal town. Before her was the familiar form of Trixie's original stage-wagon, and the showmare herself was sitting in the open door looking out at the town, her coat devoid of color. Around Twilight appeared the shadows of several ponies, who looked at Trixie and then turned away and walked toward the buildings, fading away with each step. Trixie watched them go with an unreadable expression, and then stepped into her wagon and closed the door. *Did anypony come to see me off when I set out on my own?* The Trixie-voice asked sardonically.

"Trixie!" Twilight called out, running toward the wagon, "Wait!" The wagon turned grey and vanished along with the town, leaving Twilight temporarily alone on a disk of light. "This... this feels wrong," Twilight said, "I mean, sure I don't actually know what your fillyhood was like, but I'm sure it's not as bad as you're thinking right now. I bet your mother was there when you left. She loves you. She has to."

Oh go away Twilight, the voice said, starting to sound more like Discord than Trixie, *You have the most annoying habit of sticking your nose into our business.*

"I'm helping a friend," Twilight replied, narrowing her eyes as she looked around for something to glare at.

"Did she ask for your help?" An image of the Spirit of Chaos appeared in front of the unicorn, arms crossed as he looked askance at her. "Has she ever asked you to help her, or did you just keep pushing until she relented?"

"Of course..." Twilight began, but then stopped as her mind failed to conjure up a moment when Trixie had actually requested help from her. "I..." she stammered. Discord smirked and started to turn away. "That shouldn't matter," Twilight said firmly, rallying her thoughts, "A good friend can tell when she's needed even without being asked."

Discord leaned forward and looked Twilight in the eye. "You just assume she thinks of you as a friend," he said, and then adopted a mocking, sing-song voice, "Oh look at me! I'm the Element of Magic! And since Friendship is Magic, every pony in the world will want to be my friend!" He glowered at the unicorn. "Why don't we just see how good a friend Trixie thinks you are?" He vanished from view and a scene began to emerge. Unlike the ethereal town, this scene was full of color, although it was muted and translucent. A quick look around told Twilight that she was standing in the main square of Ponyville. A starry expanse overhead set the time at some point after sunset, and the location of Trixie's wagon gave the unicorn her final clue as to what was about to unfold.

"Nice choice Discord," Twilight muttered as she saw two small pony-shaped light blobs run up to the wagon and begin to pound on the door in a panic, calling out Trixie's name. The showmare stuck her head out the open top of the door and began to berate the pair for waking her up. As the Ursa Minor appeared and Trixie ran for her life, Twilight sat back with a thoughtful frown on her face. She knew this memory was accurate, she'd heard enough from Snips, Snails, and other ponies about what had happened before she'd entered the scene. The question was whether she'd be able to interact with the memory before she was supposed to be there. She still had that nagging feeling in the back of her mind that the earlier memories had been altered. On the other hoof, it wouldn't do Trixie any good to rebuild her confidence based on a false idea. With a defeated sigh, Twilight watched Trixie try in vain to drive off the Ursa, and then as an image of her ran up, talked to Snips, heard Trixie's confession of making

things up, and then began to calm and lull the oversize infant bear to sleep. The real Twilight shook her head and turned away from the scene. "Trixie doesn't hold any of this against me," she said, "She told me that herself. It took her a while to come to terms with it though." The scene abruptly changed and Twilight found herself at the foot of a stage made of rocks and dirt, while an angry Trixie yelled at another Twilight Sparkle who was backed up against a half-formed cage of dirt. A golden-yellow blur of light followed by smaller points of red and blue flew onto the stage and interposed themselves between Trixie and the Twilight image. The real Twilight turned away again and said, "She scared me when she was like that, but I understand why she did it now. The next time..." Her ears perked up as she recalled the last time she had been in Trixie's head. Smiling, she looked up at the shadows above her and said, "When Ashen Blaze was restoring us to our bodies, Trixie asked me to help her find Ash's mind so she could anchor to it like he told her to." Immediately she was inside the Ponyville medical tent, with gray-scale Trixie standing in front of her with a sad look in her eyes.

"Twilight," Trixie said, "I wish I had your strength. You... you never seem to falter."

Twilight chuckled and shook her head. "Trust me Trixie," she said, "I falter all the time. What Discord's done to you happened to me as well. I would have given up if it weren't for Princess Celestia reminding me what I was fighting for: my friends."

"It always comes back to your friends," Trixie said, scowling, "You drive off the Ursa Minor and your friends are there to congratulate you and praise your gift. I come close to losing control and doing you harm with my new earth powers and your friends come to save you. The very spirit of disharmony himself breaks free, and friendship gives you the power to stop him. I don't have your strength Twilight Sparkle. I don't have real friends." She dropped her gaze and Twilight stood in silence, trying to form an answer.

"Do... don't you think of me as a real friend?" she asked at last, "I... I hoped, after the MMO."

"Your friends are always around you," Trixie said, "Not even a day's trot from your door. I'm out here in Manehattan; the only pony I could consider

a friend here is Proscenium, and I work for him..." She sniffled and then continued, "Besides, some of your friends still don't like me that much."

"We all have times when we don't want to be around each other," Twilight said, reaching out a comforting hoof, but then paused and thought. "Have you even tried to make friends of your own?" she asked.

"No," Trixie said, looking up at Twilight, "I've traveled most of my life, and been an over-inflated braggart for most of *that*. I've never had the time or inclination to try. I was going to head back out on the road in a few months too. How can I have friends if I'm always on the move?"

"Take them with you?" Twilight said with a shrug, "I think I got off lucky; everypony I met on my first day in Ponyville wanted to be my friend right away. I can't promise it will be that easy for you, but why not start by forming a performance group? Find ponies willing to share the stage with the Great and Powerful Trixie."

"But I've always been a solo act," Trixie muttered, but then blinked as some color appeared in her coat, making her a dusty grey-blue. "Except that one week..." she mused, "When the Princess..." She trailed off and smiled as Twilight gave her a confused look. The showmare's full color flowed back into her coat and mane and the medical tent vanished to make way for the stage of the Silver Halter. "You should leave now Twilight Sparkle," Trixie said as her trademark hat and cape materialized on her, "The Great and Powerful Trixie requires privacy in her own mind."

"Ah, right," Twilight said, turning away. She'd nearly forgotten that she was simply a projection of her own psyche into the showmare's head. *That must be one of the biggest dangers of this sort of spell*, she thought as she began to pull herself out and returned to the real world. She put a hoof to her head as sensation returned and she found herself standing among her friend in Trixie's dressing room again. "How long was I in there?" she asked.

"Uh," Rainbow Dash said, "You were touching her for about two seconds if that's what you mean." Twilight raised a surprised eyebrow at the relative time dilation.

"It sure did the trick though," Pinkie said, still holding onto the limp Trixie. The showmare's color was flowing back into her coat and mane from the tip

of her horn outward. Once the change was complete, her eyes focused and she extracted herself from Pinkie's grasp, tossing her mane and brushing at her chest with a hoof before regarding Twilight with a small smile.

"Don't mention it," Twilight said, returning the smile.

"Very well," Trixie said smugly, "I won't. The Great and Powerful Trixie shouldn't need to waste her breath stating the obvious anyway."

"Yay, everypony's back to normal!" Pinkie declared, grabbing everypony in a big hug, "you know what this-"

"Party time," Twilight, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash said at the same time.

"Aw, you girls know me too well," Pinkie chuckled, releasing her captives.

"I know a good café," Trixie said, "They have a gelato that's second to none."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Pinkie declared, raising a hoof dramatically, "lead the way!"

Epilogue

Dear Proscenium Arch,

It is with reluctance and a heavy heart that I must inform you in this manner that I am leaving Manehattan. I am in dire need of new scenery and the excitement of the life of a traveling performer. I hope to find other ponies who share my passions and to form a troupe of actors and performers, and the best way to do so is to travel to where they are. I may return in the future, but it will not be to resume our current, or should I say former? – relationship. I will always be grateful for your patronage, and I hope you do not think too badly of me for breaking our contract. I must do this though.

If you desire to contact me, I will be heading to Hoofington for a few weeks before beginning my journey in earnest.

Greatly yours,

Trixie

Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student,

I am relieved to hear that you and your friends have survived your encounter with Discord and his unknown assistant. Neither Luna nor I have been able to discern the identity of the mystery pony; the only magic we have sensed around Discord's prison belong to Ashen Blaze and Soul Mage, who I assigned to gauge the new seal's strength. They'd previously reported that the seal seemed to have a minor imperfection, but that there was no danger of it growing weaker. For now I have ordered a regular watch over the statue to make sure there is no repetition of what happened to you in Manehattan.

I am concerned that there is a pony, or some other intelligent creature, who is able to help Discord's power circumvent the seal, and, worse, that he or she is *willing* to do so. Until their identity and location is discovered, I advise you to keep your guard up and your friends close. I will be sure to

inform you of any new developments, and I may need to call upon the Elements of Harmony to re-set Discord's seal in the near future.

Be safe my beloved student.

Princess Celestia

Dear Trixie,

I hope this letter finds you, and that you are well.

Do not worry yourself over your decision to leave the Silver Halter. I remember when I first met you, out on the streets performing slight-of-hoof parlor tricks for spare change. The light in your eyes was nearly gone, and I could tell you were continuing with nothing but sheer willpower and stubbornness driving your actions. I saw your potential though and gave you the chance to prove yourself on a real stage. You did not disappoint, and my fellows quickly grew envious that I had been the one to discover you. Recently though, I've seen that same lack of light in your eyes, which only returned when you spoke of your off-season travels and the friendships you forged in Ponyville.

So, not only will I not condemn you for breach of contract, I will provide you what assistance I can. Along with this letter, please find a list of theaters and performance centers operated by friends of mine across Equestria. Mention me to them and they should be willing to accommodate your shows. They may even have leads on performers who might be willing to make your acquaintance.

If you're ever in Manehattan again, the Silver Halter would be honored to have you grace its stage.

Sincerely,

Proscenium Arch

I should have known better. I mean, making a deal with a trickster spirit of that caliber, I must be insane!

Nonetheless, it seems to have worked out. My intention was to keep Discord's attention occupied while I tested a temporary patch to the imperfection in the stone seal. I have a suspicion about why the Harmony spell that sealed Discord in stone has that flaw, but I won't go pointing hooves, not even in my private notes. Those girls have enough problems without doubting the integrity of one of their own. Then again, if it is who I think... Not the point!

I fed Discord the idea of using the Element Bearers to obtain the ingredients because his thoughts were already, and predictably, leaning towards vengeance upon those girls. It was too easy to convince him to let me channel his power toward fusing them into pairs and managing the reality shifts to keep them inside the city and to prevent certain purchases. He was so focused on seeing the results of the excuse I gave that he didn't realize I'd talked him into using all the power that could leak out of the seal.

What I didn't realize was that letting that power flow out would widen the crack even after I applied the temporary patch. He got to Trixie before I could lock his mind away completely, using that attack as an excuse to "disqualify" him from the game. That chimeric nightmare may be the embodiment of chaos, but he's got a strong affinity to rules and consequences. Break the rules, and you're out, even if you're a dragonequus.

My tracks are covered, the seal should hold as long as nobody else tries to do anything with it (besides hitting it with the Elements of course), and, should my formula work, I've got the means to undo a tragic loss to the multiverse. There will be stinim!