

Of Mares and Magic

By GanonFLCL



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Chapter 1

Revelations and Machinations

It was just past daybreak in Canterlot, and Celestia's sun cast a dull orange glow over the entire city. As the light continued to peak its way out over the horizon, it stretched outward over the hills, rivers, fields, and forests that lay below, and eventually touched upon the little village of Ponyville off in the distance. From the main road leading into the city, a single unicorn with an ice-blue coat gave the tiniest snort of disgust as she saw Ponyville come into view.

"It looks even more pedestrian from here," she said to nopony in particular, "If only she had known what would happen, the Great and Powerful Trixie would have avoided that backwater little village!"

She made no attempt to hide the bitterness in those last words. It had been a long walk from Ponyville to Canterlot, and a lonely one at that. Without her stagecoach - the destruction of which she continued to lament - there was nothing to keep her company except the skies above and the ground beneath her hooves. She thanked her lucky stars that the weather was scheduled to be clear these past few days, because without her illustrious cape and hat - the two most prized possessions she had owned - she had little in the way of protection from the elements. Her mane and coat had lost some of their luster and gleam, and though she still felt she was the most elegant and graceful pony in all of Equestria, even she had to admit it might be difficult to convince other ponies.

As Trixie finally made her way into the city limits, the warm feeling of nostalgia began to wash over her. She had enjoyed her experiences here, and though she had only left a scant few years earlier, it felt like it had been the longest time since she graced the city with her presence. As much as she wanted to see what had changed, if anything, these few years, Trixie had a purpose here, and she was determined to follow through on that task. She made a beeline for the corner of the city where Celestia's School

for Gifted Unicorns resided, and knowing the route there by heart only made her journey all the quicker. She lamented the pace she had to maintain, knowing how she wished she could dilly-dally in the familiar streets of the city, taking in the sights and reliving fond memories.

It was barely past the early-morning hours when she arrived at the school's entrance. The staff had just begun trickling in, and it would be only a short time before the eager young students began to pour through those gates, making Trixie's chances at getting any privacy all the less likely. She hurriedly made her way to the Resources Department, and found a unfamiliar face sitting there at the reception table. Trixie sighed - she knew they hired student workers for many of the positions throughout the school, but she'd been hoping for someone familiar with her, if only to make her task a little easier. The previous secretary had been well known to her, but Trixie guessed he had likely graduated as well by now. Undaunted, Trixie stepped to the counter and, with her best showmare's grin plastered upon her face, made her presence known.

"May I help you?" the blond-haired green unicorn said, not bothering to look up from the book she was reading through.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie requires some assistance, my dear mare," Trixie said with the tiniest bit of annoyance, "If you could direct me to the student registry?"

The blond unicorn, again not bothering to look up from her book much to Trixie's continued aggravation (*How dare she not pay any attention to the Great and Powerful Trixie*, Trixie thought), pointed a hoof towards the hall to her right.

"Straight down the hall, second door on the left. Please be sure to return any items you browse through to their proper locations when you're finished."

"Thank you for your...most courteous assistance," Trixie said without attempting to hide any sarcasm that slipped through.

Trixie found the room she sought quickly enough, and set about her browsing.

Now then...that accursed lavender unicorn...let's see, what did her friends call her? Twi...Twi...Twi-something. There can't be that many Twi-somethings in here, can there?

Trixie had one task in mind, and one task only - finding out who the unicorn who had upstaged her so spectacularly was. Trixie knew one thing about herself that she could claim without any hint of exaggeration - she had been the best student at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns in probably the entire past century. She even proved it to herself by pulling out her own student records so she could use them as comparison later if her suspicions proved correct. Here they were, all of her acclaimed achievements, all of the most prestigious awards the school had to offer, all of her perfect marks, a list of her impressive selection of extracurricular activities, the whole shebang. If a student with *her* record wasn't the most gifted unicorn in all of Equestria, then whoever was must have had something particularly special on theirs to make them better; Trixie was bound and determined to find out what made that other unicorn stand out.

"Tweed Jacket...Tweetie...Twiddle Dee...Twiggy Sticks...aha! *Twilight Sparkle*..." Trixie chuckled, "What an abhorrent name. Certainly no Great and Powerful Trixie, that much is certain."

Trixie brought Twilight Sparkle's record over to the table she'd left her own records on, and began the arduous task of comparing the two together for any discrepancies. To her annoyance, she discovered a few very distressing facts: First, she and Twilight Sparkle had indeed been going to school at the same time. Compounding on this fact, Twilight Sparkle had somehow taken every single class that Trixie herself had taken, unit for unit, in the exact same time frame. If Trixie didn't know any better, she'd say these documents were false!

"How could we have been taking Advanced Teleportation 202 together? There was only one course offered that semester, and there were only seven students signed-up - I would have remembered her if she was in *that* class at the very least, it's hard to forget one pony out of seven." Trixie grumbled, "This doesn't add up...not at all..."

Upon further examination, Trixie found that Twilight too had all of the same awards and honors that she herself had, with only one series of exceptions - she had no extracurricular activities at all, not even *Magic Club* for Celestia's sake, a club that every single unicorn on campus was practically forced to be in. Trixie had not pegged Twilight Sparkle as a total recluse, but if the horseshoe fit. Then, Trixie found what she was looking

for, and the look on her face took on a very odd appearance. If one could describe it, she looked dejected, horrified, enraged, and impressed all at once. The last page of Twilight's record was unique, and bore the personal coat of arms of Princess Celestia herself in the upper left corner. If Trixie was reading this correctly, and she never doubted her ability to read before in her life until this moment, Twilight Sparkle was...

"Princess Celestia's *personal protégé*," Trixie said through clenched teeth, "That little *saboteur* is the personal student of the Princess herself?!"

Trixie slammed her hoof on the table in disgust.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie wondered why, with all of her talent and raw magical power, she was never approached by the Princess to study under her as her student. It all makes sense now - this...this *Twilight Sparkle* had a helping hoof throughout her entire student career, that's why she's capable of such powerful magic. How is the Great and Powerful Trixie supposed to compete with that?!"

Trixie slumped her head down on the table and used her horn to levitate the damning page in front of her face. She stared at it for what seemed like hours to her, trying to pick it apart and find some way she could turn this around.

Maybe now that she doesn't have Twilight Sparkle around as her protégé anymore, the Princess needs a new one? No...that won't work. What would I say? 'Greetings Princess Celestia, the Great and Powerful Trixie would like to be your personal student so that she may show-up your other personal student'? The Great and Powerful Trixie would be laughed out of court!

"Excuse me, miss?"

"Huh-what?" Trixie mumbled.

"Miss, it's getting late. The offices are closing now."

Trixie chanced a glance over her shoulder and saw the blond unicorn from earlier. At least *now* she was paying attention to Trixie, and not her book.

"Yes...yes of course. How foolish of the Great and Powerful Trixie, not minding the time like that," Trixie said with some disappointment. Her journey seemed to be in vain, her quest to surpass her would-be superior turned from a simple task into a mountainous expedition beyond what she

could hope to complete in any reasonable time frame. A great weight now rest upon her shoulders...

Back on the edge of the city limits, Trixie looked out over the mountains of Canterlot and could see all the way down to Ponyville again. It was a different sight from this distance at night. *Almost soothing*, Trixie thought, *It almost reminds me of home*. She sighed dejectedly for a moment, then turned back to town and sought out a hotel to spend the night. What few bits she still had on hand would have to last until she could get herself back together and set up another stage coach and start traveling again.

"Run! Run away! It's an Ursa Major!"

Ponies of every kind fled from the sound of the most hideous roar anypony had ever heard. It was the kind of roar that could chill a pony to the bone, and it served as a herald for the doom of the tiny little village of Ponyville. Trixie did not bat an eyelash as she walked with confidence and poise *towards* the source of the hideous noise, rather than away. Familiar figures scurried past her - a cyan-colored pegasus with a mane the colors of the rainbow; an orange earth pony wearing a cowpony hat; a white unicorn with a regal purple mane. It was no surprise that they would flee from the Ursa Major - they weren't Great or Powerful, and certainly not both as Trixie herself was. Trixie did not buckle as the houses before her were thrown aside like a foal's toys, revealing at long last the creature that was making the blood-curdling roars. Trixie had never seen an Ursa Major before, but it was as she had imagined it to be - a larger, more ferocious Ursa Minor. Ugly and brutish, it towered above her more than the Minor did by any stretch of the imagination, taller than the tallest tree, as tall as the skyscrapers of Manehattan. Trixie did not show fear, and instead she stepped forward with confidence and courage and began to unleash a barrage of magic that would vanquish this horrible beast forever.

Nothing worked. Her best magic fell effortlessly upon the creature's hide, and the Ursa took no time swatting away what it considered at best nothing more than a loathsome pest. Trixie collapsed in a heap beneath a large tree, the pain making it impossible to move. As the Ursa Major

stomped its way noisily towards her, Trixie's courage began to wane, and she felt true fear. The last thing she would ever see would be the Ursa Major's paw coming down to crush her.

But it never came. She found herself instead encased in a magical bubble that deflected the beast's attack. The bubble disappeared as soon as the Ursa Major's massive paw lifted away, and Trixie opened her eyes to see a lavender unicorn standing strong in front of her, having just teleported in from parts unknown to her. Twilight Sparkle...here again to save the day and to rescue Trixie from yet another problem she'd gotten herself into. With another flash, the Ursa was gone. Just like that, without a trace - gone. Twilight Sparkle turned around and gave a sickeningly bright smile; Trixie seethed in anger, but could not find the energy to show it.

"It's easy being the Princess's pupil! Defeat an Ursa Major? No problem at all!"

"I-impossible..." Trixie groaned, "I am the Great...and Powerful...Trixie. I'm the most...powerful unicorn...in all of Equestria"

"Oh don't be silly, Trixie. Everypony knows I'm better than you. They should give *me* that title instead."

"No...I'm the best...the title is mine."

"Sure you are. Except that I'm better."

"No...I am..."

"Nope, heh, it's me."

"No!"

"NO!" Trixie awoke with a start, "I *am* the Great and Powerful Trixie! There is *no*pony better than me!"

Trixie panted for breath and glared at the window. It was still the middle of the night, and she figured she couldn't have been asleep for long. She laughed to herself, and for the first time in what felt like ages, a legitimate, real smile appeared on her face.

"I *am* the best - I always have been! So what if she can beat an Ursa *Minor*. That's just *one* thing she can do better. That doesn't make her superior, that doesn't even make her *equal*, that just makes her *lucky*. She's *lucky* she got a free ride through her education! I earned all of my

marks, I didn't have the *Sun Princess herself* holding my hoof! I *am* the best, I am the Great and Powerful Trixie, and I am going to prove it!"

Trixie sprung from the bed and swayed a little. Struggling to keep her balance, she rested herself on the small writing table by her bed.

"Um...maybe after some sleep first..." she yawned, "Can't be Great and Powerful without a little rest..."

Trixie carefully looked herself over in the bathroom mirror, double checking every part of her new magician's outfit to make sure it was perfect. While they were certainly no replacement for her originals, this new flowing black cape complemented by a black top hat certainly did have a nice appeal to them; she felt almost like the stage magicians she'd seen as a filly, those who had inspired her to her great aspirations of being the greatest unicorn in all of Equestria. A small frown appeared as she once again remembered her lost possessions. They weren't just material losses - they'd been quite important to her, far more than anypony could possibly imagine. She shook her head - there was no time to think about that now. No, now was the time to return to Ponyville and get her life back on track.

"After all," Trixie mused aloud to no pony in particular, "I *am* the Great and Powerful Trixie. My life means nothing if I can't live up to my own name."

The route from Canterlot to Ponyville was shorter than she remembered it being coming the opposite direction; she allowed the possibility that it was downhill this way, rather than climbing one of the tallest mountains in Equestria. She was making good time, and she was already wracking her brain on how exactly she was going to go about her plan. Without her stage coach it would be difficult to attract any attention, so perhaps she would have to be more direct - a crowd would eventually form on its own, something she learned from personal experience. All it needed was something to spark it, and a real, true magic duel between two powerful unicorns would be nothing short of the event of a lifetime for the simple ponyfolk of Ponyville. This would all work in her favor as she upstaged Twilight Sparkle in front of everyone, and did it completely fairly and through pure technique and skill - no tricks, just pure magic. *Then* she

would have the respect she deserved, not just from the Ponyville citizens - she could hardly care about their opinion of her anymore - but mostly she would respect herself again. She wasn't really there to prove to *them* she was the best, she was there to prove to *herself* that she was, and Celestia help anyone who tried to stand in her way...

Chapter 2

Acclamations and Actuations

Trixie was not at all surprised at the reactions she was getting as she strolled into the streets of Ponyville. She could see some ponies hurriedly whispering to one another in hushed voices, ponies pointing at her with looks of surprise, mocking, or awe, some ponies even ignoring her. The mixed reception was to be expected - she hadn't left Ponyville on the best of terms, and anyone who had witnessed the Ursa Minor events firsthand likely had some ideas as to why she was here; those who hadn't likely had no idea what was going on, and their curiosity was about the only positive attention Trixie seemed to be getting. Two colts in particular drew Trixie's attention, and she shot them the most menacing glare she could manage when she recognized who they were - what were their names again? She didn't think she had even bothered to learn the names of her "most enthusiastic little admirers" as she had once called them and now she wish she had, at the very least so she would know whose names the curse for starting all the trouble in the first place. They shied away from the look she gave them, knowing full well that if anypony in Ponyville should stay away from Trixie, it was *definitely* Snips and Snails.

Trixie reached the town square, the same spot she had previously set up her stage coach and performed on her last visit here. Again, not surprising her in the least, she wasn't attracting as much attention as she would have liked. She wanted *somepony* to at the very minimum confront her, so she could find out where to locate Twilight Sparkle and begin putting her plan into action. She sighed, figuring she would have to take the direct approach and just *ask* somepony. Settling on a nearby pink earth pony who seemed somewhat distracted by the sky for some reason, Trixie put on her best game face.

"Pardon me, my dear mare, but the Great and Powerful Trixie is seeking the residence of one Twilight Sparkle. Would you happen to know where I may find it?"

The pink pony took her attention away from the sky for just a moment and looked at Trixie with great excitement. Trixie was slightly put off by the pony's cheeriness.

"Oh! Hi there!" the pony piped with what Trixie considered too much pep, "Of course I know where Twilight Sparkle's house is, she's one of my bestest best friends in all of Ponyville! But who's the Great and Powerful Trixie? Are you a friend of hers? Did she ask you to find out stuff for her? That is so cool, I wish I had somepony to do things I asked like get baking ingredients and help with chores and stuff. Can I meet the Great and Powerful Trixie if I help you?"

Trixie blinked, "I...what? I'm the Great and Powerful Trixie. Me."

"Oh silly, you can't refer to yourself in the third-pony. Ponies will think you're *crazy*."

Trixie didn't bother hiding her scowl.

"Oh! Um...if I were you, I'd get under something," the pink pony said all of a sudden, looking up at the sky again, "My tail's a-twitchin', and you know what that means!"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie does not have time for these antics!" Trixie said with annoyance, "Where is Twili-"

And suddenly Trixie found herself slammed to the ground, pinned there by a cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane. *Oh great*, Trixie thought, *Just what I needed - an interruption*.

"You..." the pegasus growled, "You've got a lot of nerve showing up again, after what you pulled, *Lame* and *Powerless* Trixie."

Trixie huffed, "The *Great* and *Powerful* Trixie does as she pleases. What was your name again? Rainbow...*Crash* was it?"

Rainbow Dash glared down at Trixie, "Say that again. I dare you. Twilight told me not to go after you last time and give you a good flank-kickin', but she's not here to stop me now."

Trixie smirked, "As much as the Great and Powerful Trixie would *adore* dealing such a *tactless* and *talentless* pegasus such as yourself, she is not here for *you*." Her horn glowed and puff of smoke burst forth from

her, driving Rainbow Dash off in a coughing fit and letting Trixie get to her feet.

The pink pony from before made her presence known again, "Ooooooh! She does cool magic like Twilight does! Well, I suppose all unicorns do magic like Twilight does, but-"

Rainbow Dash shot an accusing look at the other pony, "Pinkie Pie, her magic is *nothing* compared to Twilight's, I've seen it myself. Just a bunch of tricks and illusions, nothing special."

Trixie stifled a laugh. Such ignorance, it was actually quite amusing.

"Now then, where were we? Ah yes - where is Twilight Sparkle? The Great and Powerful Trixie would have *words* with her."

The pink pony, now identified to Trixie as Pinkie Pie, bounced eagerly and pointed off in a direction, "Oh! She lives at the library on the other side of town. I'll take you there!"

"*Pinkie Pie!*" Rainbow Dash hissed, "Don't *help* her, she's not Twilight's friend. She probably just wants to do something awful to her!"

Trixie smiled, "The Great and Powerful Trixie appreciates your help. At least *some* ponies around here have proper manners."

Trixie began to trot away, but Rainbow Dash cut her off and stood firm.

"What do you want with Twilight?" she demanded, "If you're trying to get some petty revenge or something I'll-"

"You'll *what?*" Trixie gloated, "The Great and Powerful Trixie has already proven she's more than capable of handling *you*, so if you're honestly trying to stand in her way you're not very intimidating. Besides, revenge as you believe it to be is far beneath the Great and Powerful Trixie's magnificence - I just want to have a little...*chat*, is all."

Rainbow Dash took the tiniest of steps backwards, remembering getting whirled around by her own rainbow a little too well. And the lightning bolt to the flank. That had hurt a lot more than just her pride, and her earlier confidence found itself faltering.

"Now then," Trixie continued, "If you're quite *done*, the Great and Powerful Trixie has someplace she needs to be. Good day to you, Rainbow *Crash*."

Trixie strode right around Rainbow Dash with a gloating smirk, satisfied that her last taunt had been all the intimidation she needed to rid herself of a bothersome pest. Rainbow Dash swore and stomped her hoof before taking to the air and flying off in the direction Pinkie Pie had pointed earlier, obviously intending to inform Twilight of what was happening. To Trixie's mild annoyance she was not making the journey to Twilight's home alone, as the pink earth pony was now bouncing happily at her side and asking her all *sorts* of questions, but mostly just yammering on and on *and on*.

"So where'd you get that name huh? Great and Powerful? Sure sounds fancy, I wish I had a title like that. Ooh! Like the Grand Mistress of Parties Pinkie Pie! That sounds pretty! I like your cape and hat, they're so cool! I have a pair that look kinda like them, I only wear them for special occasions though, like giving out singing telegrams! I got a matching set for my pet alligator Gummy. Hey! I know! I'll throw a party to celebrate Twilight Sparkle's new friend! A Great and Powerful Party!"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie is *not* Twilight Sparkle's...*friend*," Trixie bitterly spat.

"Oh, really? You seem to know her pretty well and all, so I just assumed you were friends. But if you're not her friend, then how do you know her? I don't think I've ever seen you in Ponyville before, in fact when I first saw you I was about to go **GASP** and rush off to throw a party for you, but then you started asking about Twilight so I figured maybe I just hadn't met you yet so I didn't **GASP** and then when Rainbow Dash knew you I knew I just figured I must have missed your last visit or something, like maybe I was busy that day making cakes and sweets and stuff!"

She never stops talking...

"Speaking of which, Rainbow Dash sure didn't seem to like you, but don't worry! She's a bit of a Crabby McCrabbypants sometimes, but she's got a good heart and it's in the right place - she's helped me get through some tough times, and now we're super-duper close! I'm sure she'll come around and you and Twilight Sparkle can be friends with you just like me! And then we-"

"Oh thank Celestia we're finally here!" Trixie gasped as the library tree finally came into view. Eager to get away from the bouncing,

hyperactive pink pony, Trixie barely restrained the urge to break into a gallop and clear the rest of the distance. But that wouldn't look very dignified, her running towards Twilight Sparkle's home desperate to get away from a pony that in all honesty she felt she should've bound and gagged at some point on the way here; it was a shame Trixie had to rely on the pony to get her to the library in the first place.

Not to Trixie's surprise, Twilight Sparkle was at the door already, waiting for her to arrive. Rainbow Dash was nowhere to be seen, and Trixie could only guess that she'd gone off to gather up those *other* two inferior ponies. *Trying to even the odds, as if I were here for some sort of brawl. How uncivilized*, Trixie thought, *Not that they'd be able to overpower the Great and Trixie...*

"Trixie, I'm surprised to see you," Twilight Sparkle said. Trixie could not help but notice that there was no negativity in the greeting at all, almost as if Twilight Sparkle had been *glad* she'd come. *Of all the nerve*, Trixie thought, *She probably wanted me to come back so she could gloat about the Ursa Minor some more. Well...we'll see who's laughing after all this is over.*

"Twilight Sparkle," Trixie said politely, though with a hint of condescending, "I suppose your pegasus friend has told you what little she knows about my visit, though I'm certain you've guessed why I'm here."

"In all honesty, I haven't the slightest idea," Twilight frowned, "But I suppose I'll find out soon enough, won't I? Come on in, I was just about to put on some tea."

Trixie glowered at the thought of sitting around for tea when she had much more important things to consider. But it couldn't be helped, she wanted to do this right and make sure everything went perfectly. If that meant playing along, then so be it. To her continued annoyance, Pinkie Pie made to follow them in, until Twilight stopped her.

"Pinkie Pie this is likely going to be a private matter," she said kindly.

Pinkie frowned for the tiniest fraction of a second before beaming up again, "Sure thing Twilight! I know, when you two are done catching up and stuff, you can come over to Sugarcube Corner! Trixie gave me some *great* ideas for some treats, I know you two will just love them! See you later!"

Trixie breathed a sigh of relief as Pinkie Pie sprinted away. It was the first time she was grateful to Twilight Sparkle, but she shook that thought away as quickly as it came - it would hopefully be the last time she was ever grateful to her as well.

She took an offered seat as Twilight set about making the tea, and used the time to examine her surroundings. Did Twilight Sparkle really live here? In a library? Trixie remembered that Twilight had mentioned researching the Ursa before, and now realized how she'd managed that in such a short time. *Perhaps she's not as powerful as I thought*, Trixie smiled, *Maybe her talent with magic comes from being such a bookworm. She certainly owns more books here than I've ever read...*

"Do you like them?"

Trixie was startled out of her focus by Twilight's reappearance. Twilight used her magic to set the tea tray on the table and began serving them. Two scoops of sugar for herself. Trixie declined the offer for any in her own, and cleared her throat.

"You certainly do have a wide collection - I'd say it rivals the student library at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns."

"Oh? Have you visited that one before? I worked there while I was a student at the school myself," Twilight said with some uncertain pride. It was a strange tone, Trixie thought, to sound proud of having been so well-read but at the same time ashamed.

"I was also a student there," Trixie said with a glint in her eye.

"Really?" Twilight beamed, "Wonderful! So we do have somethings in common."

"Oh yes, I know all about *that*," Trixie frowned, "Imagine my surprise, when I pulled your files and found that save for one *minor* detail, we have the exact same magical qualifications! Top honors in all of our classes, majored in Applied Magic, finished our schooling in record time, etcetera. If I didn't see it for myself I wouldn't have believed it either - we seem to have a lot more "in common" than just going to the same school."

"You...pulled my file?" Twilight blinked, "Why?"

"My *dear* Twilight Sparkle, I-"

The door of the library burst open, and suddenly the little private conversation had become a group effort as Rainbow Dash came barging

into the room with the familiar orange earth pony and white unicorn. Trixie frowned at the intrusion, as she'd been hoping to keep Twilight Sparkle alone for this discussion so her friends couldn't try and coerce her out of any of her suggestions. She couldn't recall the names of the other two - she didn't think they'd even introduced themselves when they'd come up on stage to try their luck at besting her. All she could remember was what she could hear from the stage while they were in the crowd, certainly not much to go on. Trixie did notice that Twilight was slightly annoyed at the intrusion as well, but quickly dismissed it.

"Told ya!" Rainbow Dash spat as she pointed at Trixie, "See? She's back and she wants some kind of sick and twisted revenge on Twilight!"

The white unicorn glared at Trixie and flicked her mane, clearly remembering what Trixie had done there, "Good heavens Rainbow Dash, they're just having *tea*. You made us think Trixie had barged in here like some sort of mad sorceress pony, flinging spells around and all that nonsense..."

"Maybe the tea's been *poisoned*!" Rainbow Dash yelled, rushing down and grabbing Twilight's teacup, "Don't drink it Twilight, you don't know what she's put in there!"

"Rainbow Dash...I made the tea myself," Twilight frowned, "And you just spilled my cup. Thanks."

"Oh. Um...oops?"

The orange earth pony stepped forward and pointed an accusing hoof at Trixie, "Now I don't know why you came back missy, but I believe y'all owe everypony here an explanation. Twilight's our friend, and whatever business you have with her, you have with us."

Trixie glared at the other ponies. *So much for doing this the easy way...*

"Well then, enough with the pleasantries," she snorted, "The Great and Powerful Trixie has returned to Ponyville with one purpose and one purpose only - regaining her honor by proving herself superior to Twilight Sparkle."

The other three ponies just groaned, and Twilight Sparkle sighed.

"Y'all can't be serious," the orange pony sighed, "After all that happened, you're still hung up about that?"

"Yeah! Twilight beat you fair and square," Rainbow Dash gloated, "Kicked that Ursa Minor right out of town, better than anything *you* could hope to do."

Trixie turned her head to face Twilight and shot her an accusing glare, "Fair and square seems to be a rather empty phrase nowadays. Had the Great and Powerful Trixie known she'd be competing with Princess Celestia's *star pupil*, she would have prepared herself better."

Twilight frowned, "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It means that the Great and Powerful Trixie was merely caught off guard. She is still the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria, and she is here to prove it."

The white unicorn made a mocking noise with her mouth, "Please. Haven't we had enough of your empty boasting and your lying? And even if you *had* known Twilight was here, the Ursa Minor incident was something you just couldn't have accomplished. Or do you mean you wouldn't have lied about it and risked one showing up?" The unicorn smirked at her own rather stinging insult.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie's boasting *isn't empty*, and the Ursa was just a *minor* oversight, if you'll pardon the pun," she spat in the unicorn's direction, "Trixie has *earned* her title, and she intends on putting it on the line to prove that she *deserves* it."

Twilight cocked her head to the side and gave Trixie an inquisitive look, "Whatever do you mean?"

"Twilight Sparkle!" Trixie said with authority as she pointed a hoof in her direction, "I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, challenge you to a Magician's Duel! The prize is the right to call oneself Great and Powerful, having earned the distinction of being the most magical unicorn in all of Equestria!"

Everyone in the room stared blankly at Trixie, before Twilight finally spoke.

"You're serious. Aren't you?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie is never anything less," she glared.

"Why are you doing this? Being the best at everything isn't-"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has her reasons, she doesn't have to explain them to anypony, least of all *you*. You have been challenged to a Magician's Duel - do you *accept*?"

Rainbow Dash stepped forward, "What makes you think you can come in here and demand to fight against our friend?"

The orange earth pony followed suit, "And what if she refuses? She's already proven herself better'n you, she ain't needin' to go through any hoops to make it clearer."

Twilight Sparkle spoke up, "Girls, it's more complicated than that..."

They turned to face her, and at the same time asked, "Complicated?"

Twilight Sparkle sighed, "A Magician's Duel is an official procedure that binds all graduates of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. Celestia herself instated it when the school was founded."

"Dear, what does this...*Duel* require from you?" the white unicorn asked.

"Graduates from the school often compete against one another as a means to improve their magic. Magician's Duels are meant as friendly competitions between unicorns to help them find where their magic is weakest, so they can improve upon it. But since graduates have supposedly brought their magic to its full maturity, Magician's Duels between graduate students are done more for serious competitions, usually for pride or honor. If Trixie is serious about this..."

"Which she is," Trixie reminded her.

"Then because she's challenging me, I have to accept or I automatically forfeit."

"So?" the orange pony spoke, "Who cares? You ain't gotta prove to nopony that you're better than Trixie, we all know ya are."

"Like I said, it's more complicated than that - she's offered a condition, and it's not something I can just consider lightly..."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes, "The title of Great and Powerful? Geez, Twi, I knew I had an ego but I didn't think you wanted to walk around calling yourself the Great and Powerful Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight blushed, "I...I don't. But if Trixie is willing to put that title up for grabs, it means she's considering giving it up if she loses."

"Yes, that is correct," Trixie snorted, "The Great and Powerful Trixie has always been capable of proving herself deserving of her title. She has defeated all comers that have challenged her. If you must know, the Great and Powerful Trixie intends to *keep* her title, but only if she *deserves* it. If Twilight Sparkle is indeed more powerful than myself...then...I am willing to accept defeat."

The other ponies eyes opened in realization.

Twilight Sparkle sighed, "I really had hoped it wouldn't come to anything like this. But...I suppose I have no other choice. She's not just putting her title on the line, girls - she's putting her pride and honor there too, and if I forfeit, it would be insulting and disrespectful."

"And I suppose you're better than that..." the white unicorn sighed, "Bless your heart, Twilight."

"Then it is settled," Trixie grinned widely, "Twilight Sparkle, you have accepted my challenge to a Magician's Duel, so we now have an accord. Seeing as we are partaking in this exercise in Ponyville territory, I will leave it to you to choose a time and location."

"I'll do that," Twilight nodded, "We'll begin first thing tomorrow morning, continuing through until the following week."

"WEEK?!" Rainbow Dash blurted, "This thing's gonna last a *week*?!"

"Usually a duel against the Great and Powerful Trixie wouldn't last nearly that long, but given that Twilight Sparkle is on roughly the same level as herself, Trixie supposes that is an accurate assumption," Trixie smirked.

"Magician's Duels of this level are very exhausting on unicorns who participate," Twilight explained to the others, "They must use the fullest of their magical powers in every event, usually enough to use up all of their day's allowance of magic expenditure. Think of it like those Iron Pony competitions you and Applejack always get yourselves into, only much more demanding."

The pegasus and earth pony looked at each other and winced. Trixie now guessed the earth pony's name was Applejack.

"And the location?" Trixie asked.

"Hmm...someplace far enough from city limits that we don't cause any accidents - things happen, you know?" Twilight mused, "I'll have to figure

something out. Meet here in the morning, I guess, then we'll head over to the spot?"

Trixie gave a small nod, "It seems all is in order. Very well, Twilight Sparkle, the Great and Powerful Trixie shall see you in the morning. Now then, I must be off - I need to secure lodging for the duration of my stay in this *backwater* little town. If somepony here would be so kind as to direct me to an inn or hotel." The other ponies all looked at each other with mixed sheepishness and insult. Trixie rolled her eyes, "Come now, don't tell me none of you know where any are? Trixie took you for simple folk, but that's just a level of ineptitude she did not expect." Rainbow Dash made to charge right at Trixie, but Applejack was able to grab her tail in her mouth and hold her back.

"To tell you the truth," the white unicorn spoke, "Ponyville...*is* a little out of the way, and we don't get much in the way of visitors - our town doesn't really have anything of the sort, as far as hotels go."

Trixie blinked and fought the urge to let her jaw drop, "You're kidding. You're kidding, right?"

Rainbow Dash smirked, "What's the matter, afraid of sleeping under the stars or something? Can't you just magic up some sleeping arrangements, or is that too difficult for you?"

Trixie glared at the pegasus, but kept her cool. Twilight spoke next. "Rarity's telling the truth," she said with concern. *Ah, and that would be the unicorn's name*, Trixie noted to herself, *I guess it's fitting they didn't introduce themselves and had to let somepony else do it for them.*

Cowards. "When we get visitors here, they usually lodge with somepony they know - I'm the first stranger to come to town for an extended period in years, if Mayor Mare is to be believed, and getting arranged at this library was all Princess Celestia's doing. So other than us, who do you know around here? You could always stay with me," she blushed very slightly. Trixie didn't notice, "At the library, I mean...if you want."

Trixie fought the sensation she was getting in her eyes - they wanted to twitch so badly, but Trixie had to keep appearances up. *Wonderful*, she thought, *Lodging with somepony I know. Well, I refuse to lodge with Twilight Sparkle, and I highly doubt any of these three would let me lodge*

with them. Which leaves...oh no...no no no no, I refuse! Absolutely not! I will not seek the help of that...that...

"Pinkie Pie..." Trixie sighed, "This really...wasn't necessary..."

"Of course it was, silly! I *never* get to have roomies, except for the times when my sister Octavia comes to visit but that's only like once a year for her birthday because she lives in Canterlot see and she knows it's hard to come visit her but it's much easier to visit me. And so, whenever she comes to visit I throw her a little Roomie Party to celebrate sharing a room together just like when we were all little fillies on our parents' rock farm! I just figured to myself, 'Pinkie, you've got yourself a brand new friend and a new roomie for the week! You know what this means? PARTY!' And so here we are, *Roomie!*"

Trixie sighed as Pinkie Pie popped yet another set of streamers that landed on the brim of her hat. She was absolutely amazed at how quickly the pink earth pony had managed to throw together even this tiny private party for just the two of them like this. Rainbow Dash, who seemed to be close with this pink-maned lunatic - as she had said earlier, Trixie reminded herself - had zoomed off to let her know about her having a roommate faster than Trixie could reconsider saying her name. In the fifteen minutes it took to get from Twilight's library to here, the pink pony had apparently set up banners, balloons, streamers, punch bowls, the whole shebang. There was even a personalized cake there that Trixie was baffled by the mere existence of - how could the earth pony have made a cake that matched her coat and mane colors and had the words "Welcome Great and Powerful Roommate!" on it, all in the span of fifteen minutes? Trixie growled to herself as Pinkie hit the turntable in the corner and started bouncing to music.

This... she thought, Is going to be a long week...

Chapter 3

Benedictions and Initiations

Trixie grumbled to herself as she rose that morning. Pinkie Pie's spare bed was comfortable - too comfortable, she felt - and she had to fight the urge to crawl back under the covers and sleep just a few more hours. It was just after daybreak, still much too early to think about getting the events of the day started, so for now it was just getting ready she had to worry about. She slumped into Pinkie Pie's restroom and began the time-draining task of perfecting her appearance. She wanted to remain as impressive and imposing as she had felt she'd been the day before, and that meant looking her best, not that there was any other way for Trixie to look. She was somewhat disappointed by what she had to work with - Pinkie Pie had very, *very* few grooming materials (*How does she maintain that bizarre mane-style with this limited selection?* Trixie thought), so she was forced to use what she had, as unsatisfactory as that was. She carefully groomed her mane until it shone like silver, brushed her coat until it would gleam in the sun, and made sure her makeshift new attire was perfectly coordinated and clean.

Leaving the restroom, Trixie finally realized that Pinkie Pie herself was nowhere to be found and she was greatly relieved for that fact. It was much too early to deal with the pink earth pony, who Trixie had a strong feeling was actually insane. Her stomach growled, and Trixie frowned at how unattractive that sound was. Nevertheless, she was hungry and she knew it, so admittedly it would be better to just get it over with - Pinkie Pie was likely downstairs, and she'd have to deal with her sooner or later if she wanted breakfast. Sure enough, after walking downstairs there was Pinkie Pie, carefully getting a table set up with several baked goods, all of them muffins.

"Oh hi!" Pinkie Pie piped when she saw Trixie coming down the stairs, "You're up early! I thought I was the only pony who got up this early in the morning, except for Applejack of course, since she's such a hard worker you know and has pretty much that entire farm to handle all by herself except for her big brother and all. Oh! And one of my other friends too, she should be here soon, we always have breakfast every morning before she starts work, she has such a demanding job, but she loves it so much and she makes a lot of ponies happy because she's so good at it!"

Much too early... Trixie sighed.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie must admit she *is* hungry. As...*unique* as that cake was last night, Trixie feels it wasn't exactly the best choice for her only meal that evening."

"Glad to hear it! I always bake plenty of muffins in the morning, it helps to have lots and lots of them for the day and in all sorts of different flavors. Here! You've *gotta* try the apple bran muffin, it's everypony's favorite."

Pinkie Pie didn't hesitate to grab one of the muffins on the table and shove it unceremoniously into Trixie's mouth. Trixie made to protest until she began to chew. *Oh my*, she thought, *This...this is good*. She noiselessly chewed her way through the muffin and swallowed it. Seeing Pinkie's expectant look, Trixie gave a very tiny smile.

"Well? Best muffin in the whole wide world of Equestria, isn't it?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie admits...it was quite an experience. Though I suppose it is to be expected for a pony who lives above a bakery to be good with baked goods."

Pinkie clopped her hooves together in approval. A knock came at the door, and Pinkie Pie gave an excited giggle and rushed over to the door to let whoever it was in. Trixie took this time to grab another muffin and take a seat at the table - she hungrily took a big bite of the muffin, blueberry this time, and savored the feeling of having food in her stomach again. She'd been living off the land for so long she'd forgotten what real food tasted like. When Pinkie Pie returned, she was followed by a grey pegasus mare Trixie hadn't remembered seeing in town before, which Trixie found decidedly odd - she was sure she'd remember *this* pony, after all, who could forget those...eyes.

Pinkie Pie pointed to her friend, "Trixie, meet my friend Derpy! She's the mailpony for Ponyville, and she's like, one of my bestest best friends ever. Derpy, this is Trixie-"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie, if you please," Trixie coughed, trying not to stare at their new guest's...unique eyes. It was one thing to have an attitude towards those that challenged her ability, but Trixie didn't want to be rude to a friend of her host.

"Oh right, I nearly forgot. I'm not used to putting titles and stuff before names. Derpy, this is the *Great and Powerful* Trixie, she's a magician!"

"Hi hi!" the pegasus waved with enthusiasm.

"Um...greetings," Trixie nodded.

Derpy took a seat across from Trixie and Pinkie Pie a seat between them, and everyone began to eat. Trixie found it increasingly difficult not to look at Derpy's eyes as her left one seemed to lazily move around in seemingly random directions. Pinkie Pie seemed to sense the mild awkwardness Trixie was feeling and set a reassuring hoof on the blue unicorn's shoulder. Derpy smiled as she took another big bite out of her muffin.

"Ya know, I bet you're wondering about Derpy's...um...eye condition," she laughed, "Don't worry, Derpy doesn't mind if you're curious. Actually, you're one of the first people I've ever met that didn't just sit there and stare, or shout something *super* obnoxious. Anyway, it's called...uh...Stab-something? Stab...Business?"

"Strabismus," Derpy said after finishing yet another muffin. Trixie was amazed how quickly the pegasus could down those muffins - she was scarfing them down at a rate Trixie had stopped bothering to measure. She felt mildly ashamed of herself for thinking it, but she was also relieved that the pegasus's eye condition didn't also correlate to any brain damage. Derpy pointed one hoof at her right eye, which was looking right at Trixie, "I can see fine out of this one, but-" and pointing to her left, which was looking at the floor beneath Pinkie's chair and slowly starting to work its way around to stare at the ceiling lamp, "I can't see out of this one though. I was born with this condition."

"I'm...sorry to hear that," Trixie frowned. She usually didn't concern herself with the affairs of other ponies, but she'd never met a pony with a

defect before, "But...wouldn't that affect your depth perception? How are you able to fly?"

Derpy blushed and looked sheepishly away, "Well...yeah I'm a little clumsy, but it's okay!" she grinned, "I've never lost a post yet! I'm still the most reliable mailpony this side of Canterlot!"

Trixie found herself smiling ever-so slightly. If a pony with a problem like that had so much confidence in herself, why, certainly she could be confident in her own abilities too. It was a strange feeling she got though, she hadn't been much for being so...personal with other ponies before. *These past couple of days so far have been a rather unique experience,* Trixie thought.

"Trixie's in town for some business with Twilight!" Pinkie Pie blurted, snapping Trixie's attention away from Derpy and her own thoughts for a moment, "They're having some sort of...what was it? Magician Duet?"

"Magician's *Duel*," Trixie smirked, glad to have the topic of conversation switching to her, "It's a test of our magical abilities and how they stand up against one another."

"Right! They're gonna have one of those later this morning, and all our friends are gonna come watch! It sounds like fun, getting to see Twilight and Trixie performing all sorts of magic acts together! I can't wait! Trixie said it's supposed to last all day...hey! Derpy, maybe you could come by after your shift is over! I just know you'd love to see it! We can cheer for Trixie and Twilight together!"

"Sounds interesting," Derpy smiled.

When all the muffins had been taken care of - Derpy having eaten the lion's share - Derpy looked at the clock on the wall and gave an audible gasp as she sprung into the air, "Oh! I've gotta get going! Thanks Pinkie! Nice meeting you Trixie!" she grabbed Trixie's hoof with both of her own and hurriedly gave it a strong shake, "Looking forward to later! Bye!"

Derpy took off and slammed face first into the wall next to the door. She dazedly stumbled away, shook herself off, chuckled, then ran out the door before taking to the skies outside. Trixie shook her head. She hadn't been expecting to become acquainted with so many ponies on this quest of hers. Obligated to her host, she assisted Pinkie Pie in cleaning up before they left for Twilight's library. Trixie noted with some...curiosity that Pinkie

had decided to wear the outfit she'd mentioned the day before that did, to Trixie's slight dismay, look almost exactly like her own. Luckily, she'd become used to Pinkie's chattering by now and was able to tune out most of it as they walked. When Twilight's library came into view, Trixie was not surprised to find Twilight Sparkle waiting for them.

"Twilight Sparkle," Trixie said flatly, "I trust the arrangements have been made?"

"Of course. There is a clearing about two miles north of here that is perfect for our needs."

"Wonderful, then let us be on our way. The sooner we can get started, the sooner I can get back to being the best unicorn in all of Equestria again."

"Before we go, I have something for you. Come on in," Twilight said with a smile.

Trixie huffed, "What in Equestria could you possibly have to give me?"

"It's a surprise," Twilight winked.

Trixie glared, "This had better not be some sort of trick."

"I assure you, it's not..." Twilight frowned, "Don't you trust me?"

Pinkie Pie pushed Trixie from behind and began to force her into the library, "Oh come on you silly filly, Twilight's not a Meanie McMeaniepants, she's not gonna do anything bad."

Trixie stood in the center of the library as Twilight went off into a side room to gather up whatever she had planned. Trixie was wary, but confident that if this was a trick, she could handle anything Twilight Sparkle had to throw at her. Twilight came to the door of the store room.

"Okay, close your eyes."

Trixie fumed, "Oh please, what manner of trickery-"

"Pinkie, a little help?"

"Okee dokee loki!" Pinkie Pie chirped as she placed her hooves over Trixie's eyes.

Trixie sighed, "Fine, let's get this over with. Now, what on earth do you have-"

"Okay Pinkie, let her see."

"-planned."

Trixie, for the first time in her entire life, could not force herself not to look *astounded* - not just surprised or shocked, but honest-to-Celestia *astounded*. Her jaw dropped, and she could feel a powerful warmth in her chest rise up and begin to fill her entire body. There, in front of her, Twilight Sparkle was levitating two *very* familiar items - Trixie's old hat and cape, in absolutely perfect condition. Trixie fought the urge to cry right now, but was not confident she could hold back for long.

"What...what is this?" she stammered.

"Well, when we were cleaning up your wrecked stage coach, I found these in the wreckage," Twilight explained, "I thought you might come back...someday...and so I had Rarity fix them up, good as new. She really is a marvel with fashion, I was surprised when they came out looking so good - it looks like its brand new! I was going to give it to you yesterday, but things kind of got out of control with all this talk of duels."

Trixie's eyes finally began to water as Twilight removed Trixie's current makeshift outfit and replaced it with her original. As Trixie's concentration on her own magic faltered, the old hat and cape she'd been wearing returned to their original forms - an ice bucket and pillowcase she'd borrowed from the hotel in Canterlot before her return here.

"There, now you're back to your old self," Twilight smiled.

Pinkie Pie gave a loud, "Awwwwwww."

Trixie sniffed, unable to fight back the tears, if only for a second. She shook her head to clear herself of these emotions. She needed to remain calm, composed - she couldn't show any hint of faltering in front of Twilight Sparkle, of all ponies.

"Do...do you need a moment?" Twilight asked.

Trixie snapped to attention and wiped her eyes, "The Great and Powerful Trixie...appreciates your gesture of kindness!" she boomed, trying to save face, "And while it is appreciated, do not think for a second that the Great and Powerful Trixie will go easy on you."

Twilight blinked, "Um...okay? Well then, we should get going. We've got a long day ahead of us, don't we?"

"Quite," Trixie huffed, "Lead the way."

Twilight Sparkle walked out the door of the library, Trixie following a few paces behind with Pinkie Pie by her side. Pinkie Pie frowned at Trixie for just a moment.

"You look great in that new outfit and all, but I'm kinda sad we can't be twins anymore," she then regained her happy tone and look, "But you do look great! It's so sparkly and pretty, Rarity sure did a great job on making it look as Great and Powerful as you! I mean, you must have been so impressed - it brought tears to your eyes!"

Trixie shot Pinkie a look of mild panic, "The Great and Powerful Trixie...wasn't crying."

Pinkie giggled, "Whatever you say! Maybe you'll tell your good friend Pinkie Pie what makes it so important later on," she then lowered to a whisper, "You seemed a little embarrassed to say why in front of Twilight, but you can trust me. I Pinkie Pie swear not to tell anypony. Cross my heart and hope to die," she started mirroring her words with her hooves "Stick a cupcake in my eye."

Trixie sighed, "I'll tell you later tonight then. I suppose if I don't, you'll never leave me alone about it."

"Yep" Pinkie smiled wide, "And I know where you sleep, so I can bug you and bug you and bug you and bug you and-"

"*I get it*," Trixie groaned, "I'm beginning to second-guess this whole ordeal..."

The clearing was, Trixie had to admit, perfect for their uses. Completely clear of trees, rocks, water, and everything else that could possibly serve to distract from a perfect Magician's Duel. The sky was perfectly clear, it was a warm, sunny day, and the gentle, flowing breeze was a welcome addition. Trixie found herself in some degree of comfort - it had been a long time since she'd taken the opportunity to enjoy nature, rather than spending all of her time performing in the big cities; or, as she had been doing for the past several weeks, cursing nature and her lack of travel arrangements. As she has expected, the competition between herself and Twilight had already acquired some spectators, though this particular crowd was tiny and limited, at least for the moment, to Twilight Sparkle's friends. They'd set up a small picnic area for themselves to be able to

watch from. The orange earth pony Applejack, Trixie now remembered, had brought along a whole bushel load of apples for everypony to share; Rainbow Dash was there too of course, and Pinkie Pie had come with Twilight and Trixie in the first place. There was another pegasus pony here too, a yellow-coated one with a pink mane - Trixie expected introductions would be taken care of eventually, not that she particularly cared. And of course, there was Rarity, the white unicorn. Trixie had no trouble recalling her name now, and she walked over to the purple-maned mare with a purpose.

"Ahem," she coughed to get Rarity's attention.

Rarity turned from her task - decorating their picnic table ever so delicately - and gave Trixie a curious glance, "Is there something I can help you with? As you can see I am a little busy...oh, Twilight returned your things to you, I see."

Trixie puffed out her chest, trying to get the courage to do something she really was not accustomed to doing with any sort of sincerity, "Yes, that's what I wished to speak to you about."

Rarity rolled her eyes, "Darling, I did it as a favor to Twilight, and I have no intentions of altering the design any if you're not satisfied with my handiwork."

Trixie coughed into her hoof, "That's...not what the Great and Powerful Trixie was concerned with. She...I...I wish to thank you."

Rarity blinked, "Beg pardon?"

"I wish to thank you...for fixing these up for me."

Rarity could scarcely believe her ears. Had Twilight cast some sort of mind-altering spell on the hat to make Trixie more courteous?

"These...mean a lot to the Great and Powerful Trixie," she continued, "I appreciate the effort you went through in fixing them. After what I...did to you, I wouldn't have put it past you to refuse, or even to purposely do a poor job."

Rarity found a tiny smile creep to her lips. This was sincere. How quaint!

"I did not expect such courtesy from you, Trixie. You're very welcome for the handiwork, but if there's anypony you should be thanking, it is

Twilight Sparkle. It was she who found them in the first place, and who was so insistent on getting them repaired, though whatever for I'm still not sure."

Trixie shot a brief, curious glance over towards Twilight, who was at the moment pacing back and forth nearby, apparently waiting for someone to arrive. She turned back to Rarity, "The Great and Powerful Trixie thanks you again Miss...Rarity. And apologizes for before...green really isn't your color."

Rarity nodded as Trixie walked away and muttered silently to herself, "Hmm...maybe she's not as stuck-up as we thought..."

Trixie approached Twilight Sparkle, only slightly irritated that they hadn't started yet, as it had given her the opportunity to speak with Rarity.

"Twilight Sparkle, whatever are you doing? I *thought* we were going to be starting our Duel at noon, and it already half past."

"I'm so sorry Trixie," Twilight nodded sheepishly, "It's just, Spike is running late and he's helping me double-check that things are going to be ready for the rest of the week. I want to make sure everything is set up before we get started...just a habit of mine, is all. Oh, what's taking him so long?"

Trixie was about to ask who Spike was, but got her answer when the figure of a purple and green baby dragon appeared just over a nearby hill, panting and out of breath. He bounded over to Twilight and took a moment to catch his breath. Trixie recognized him from before as the little *thing* in the audience that kept egging her on.

"S-sorry...Twilight..." he panted, "Some of the items...you requested...took a little...more work...than I...expected..."

Twilight pat the little purple dragon on the head, "Sorry about that Spike, but we had to make sure everything was perfect. Now, we'll be getting our shipment in promptly tomorrow, right?"

Spike saluted, "Yes ma'am! I ran into Derpy on the way over, and was able to ask her to bring it all straight here! We won't have to lug any of it over from the library at all!"

"Oh? Excellent, that certainly makes things easier. Good work my number one assistant."

"What is this all about?" Trixie interjected. Spike shot her a dirty look.

"Well, for a proper Magician's Duel we need certain materials to allow us to display all of our magical talents. With nothing more than an empty field, we can't really practice everything, can we?" Twilight said matter-of-factly.

Trixie huffed, "I'm used to performing Duels with what we have on hand. What sort of...*shipment* are you expecting?"

"Oh...well, I've never participated in a Duel myself before so...I did a little reading up on them, just to refresh what I learned in school," Twilight blushed. Trixie rolled her eyes, "And in the book it gave a list of material suggestions for practicing certain events. I had Spike look into ordering them for us. We'll get to start using them next time, so for today we can practice magic that doesn't require any outside materials."

Trixie nodded, "Very well. I suppose then, since you *researched* the Duels, you've probably got a pretty good idea in mind for what all of our tasks will be?"

"Of course! I made up the list just before I went to bed."

Twilight took a scroll out of her saddlebag nearby and floated it over to Trixie, who took control of it and unraveled it so she could read it herself. As she'd expected, the list was precisely by-the-book, just like she'd had to participate in back in school. Trixie nodded as she checked off each category, trying to remember how these events went when she was in the Dueling Club. Twilight had been very lenient on writing down any distinct details next to the tasks they'd be performing, no doubt hoping she and Trixie could come to an agreement on how to go about each one. Each category only had a brief description listed next to it - likely word-for-word copied from Twilight's book - about what it consisted of, in laypony terms.

Strength - A measurement of a unicorn's magical potency. Here the unicorns will battle each other directly to see which between them has the most pure strength in their magic. Warning: caution should be taken in this event, as accidents can occur that may end the Duel in with the severe injury or even death of one of the participants.

Technique - A measurement of a unicorn's magical style. Here the unicorns will perform magic in an attempt to be aesthetically pleasing to others; at least one Spectator must be present to gauge results. The

participants need not perform the same spells, and creativity is encouraged.

Endurance - A measurement of a unicorn's magical stamina. Here the unicorns will test how long they can perform continuous and strenuous spell-casting before they are unable to continue. Unlike a test of Strength, the unicorns are not directly engaged against one another, and it worth noting that Strength does not necessarily lead to Endurance.

Concentration - A measurement of a unicorn's magical focus. Here the unicorns will engage in an increasingly more complex task that requires them to divert attention to multiple angles until they are unable to retain their focus.

Accuracy - A measurement of a unicorn's magical precision. Here the unicorns will determine which among them can perform the same task more precisely; a Judge must be present to determine results, and the Task must be something that would require precision to be of significant importance.

Ingenuity - A measurement of a unicorn's magical creativity. Here the unicorns will be using well-known common spells to perform tasks beyond what those spells are normally used for. Both participants need not use the same spells, as that is part of the creative process; an Obstacle is typically required - something to present the challenge that must be overcome.

Influence - A measurement of a unicorn's magical charisma. Here the unicorns will determine which among them has the most inspiring presence; at least one Spectator must be present to gauge results. Victory in this event is not necessarily determined by numerical advantage.

Trixie grinned inwardly, That last event is tailor-made for a pony of my esteemed class. Perfect, I only need to surpass her in three other events then, and some of these look like a lock for a pony in my field of work.

"Does everything look in order?" Twilight spoke, breaking Trixie's concentration.

"Oh, yes of course. A tad droll if the Great and Powerful must say so herself, but it is to be expected if we are going to do this by the book. Now then, how shall we go about this first test then, hmm? I'm sure you and your friends wouldn't want to see you get that pretty face of yours get hurt."

Twilight blushed lightly at the last comment, but shook it away quickly and tapped her hoof to her chin, "Actually, I hadn't thought of anything to do with this one. Battling directly does sound...dangerous, and I don't want either of us to get hurt, you know? And with other ponies around we risk hurting them as well..." Twilight turned to face the picnic area, wracking her brain with thoughts of what they could possibly do. Everypony was waiting patiently for them, or at least as patiently as they could. Rarity was making a fuss because she had just finally gotten the tablecloth adjusted just right when Rainbow Dash and Applejack had, bored with the wait, taking seats on opposite ends and decided to fight the boredom by having a little competition of their own. Twilight sighed as she watched them arm-wrestle, something the two ponies were fairly evenly matched in.

Arm-wrestle?

"Aha!" Twilight brightly declared, "Trixie, how about that?"

She pointed Trixie's attention to Rainbow Dash and Applejack's personal test of strength. Trixie snorted.

"How uncivilized...but I suppose it *does* stand to follow with our intents and purposes. Very well, Twilight Sparkle, a magical *arm-wrestle* will be our test of Strength. This sounds awfully childish...but on such short notice it can't be helped. I *did* agree to let *you* make the decisions, after all."

Twilight clopped her hooves together, "Perfect. Shall we get started then?" Trixie nodded, and Twilight walked over to the other ponies to inform them. Trixie took her position and readied herself, mentally steadying her concentration. She removed her hat and placed it to her side, took deep breaths, and waited. The other ponies began taking seats to witness the event, and Twilight Sparkle took her position opposite of her. Trixie nodded to Twilight, who nodded in return, and the two unicorns began to focus their magic at long last to begin the Duel.

Their magics manifested in the forms of glowing arms and hooves, which used the ground beneath them as anchors. Trixie's glowed a brilliant silver, while Twilight's had taken up a deep purple. The two magically-created pony arms locked hooves, and the battle was underway. Trixie immediately sent a huge surge of power into hers, forcing Twilight's down nearly to the ground the second they'd begun. Twilight had obviously not

expected a display of strength so soon and barely recovered, keeping her hoof just above ground level. She steadily channeled more energy into her own magical arm, pushing Trixie's back towards their neutral position.

Trixie strained to keep Twilight's hoof down but could not find enough power to do so. She nearly panicked as Twilight suddenly began to slowly force her hoof towards the ground on the other side, and focused another surge of energy to push back. They remained locked in the neutral position again, though occasionally one of them would waver for a tiny second and be pushed towards the ground just slightly before pushing back again.

Trixie could hear the cheers from the minor crowd that they had, and knew quite well they were all cheering for Twilight - after all, they were *her* friends.

"Come on Twilight you can do it!" Rainbow Dash yelled, "Show that stuck-up lame-o who's boss!"

"We're all behind you darling, we believe in you!" Rarity shouted.

"You've got this Twi!" cheered Applejack.

"Woo-hoo..." came a tiny voice Trixie guessed was probably from the yellow pegasus.

"Yeah! Go Trixie! Woo! Go Twilight! Yeah! Trix-ie! Twi-light! Trix-ie! Twi-light!" yelled Pinkie Pie.

Trixie couldn't explain it, but hearing *somepony* from the sidelines - even if it was that irritating pink menace - cheering for her helped to raise her spirits. She was used to participating in these Duels, she'd been doing it for years, and had always been challenged by local would-be heroes in every town and city she'd performed in. Talentless, powerless, *useless* unicorns with barely enough magic to fit in Trixie's hoof, but they were all cheered on by all the spectators in every single occasion - the crowds were always eager to see the local colt or mare show up the fancy-talking, show-stopping powers of the Great and Powerful Trixie, no matter how hard they'd been cheering for her beforehand. But now...somepony was cheering for *her*.

Trixie's sudden burst of inspiration helped to fuel her magic, and she continued to push Twilight back towards the ground once more. The going was slow - Trixie found herself admitting that Twilight was indeed *very* powerful, and it was taking all of her concentration and energy just to move

Twilight's magic hoof a few mere inches. She was beginning to sweat heavily, and the perspiration was making her coat and mane feel sticky and wet. Inch by inch she moved Twilight further towards the ground and to defeat, and with every excruciating moment Trixie kept telling herself she was going to win this. But Twilight was not done, and focused up another surge of power in herself to steadily push Trixie back again. Trixie groaned inwardly as all of the progress she'd made was swept away once more.

This continued for several hours. Trixie and Twilight were both at their wits' end, their magic slowly falling in and out of focus but neither one of them able to capitalize on it for long. The cheers of the crowd, even from Pinkie Pie, had long since died out; Trixie paid little heed to them anymore, it was taking all of her focus on Twilight Sparkle just to avoid having herself crushed to the ground. The sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon, and Trixie silently thanked Celestia for being so kind as to take that atrocious source of heat away, letting the cool early evening breeze refresh her. Trixie was most thankful for the soothing air because it helped her focus more on the fact that she had suddenly found herself *losing*. While she had nearly won at the beginning of the match, Twilight's magic only avoiding a loss by a few scant inches, Trixie had never found herself anywhere close to that position herself, until now. Twilight was focusing her magic with much more conviction now, and Trixie panicked again as she felt a surge of energy push her magical hoof more forcefully than she'd experienced all day. It was as if Twilight had suddenly found a massive energy reserve within herself, and Trixie was expending everything she had just to keep from getting slammed down as quickly as she'd tried to do to her at the very beginning.

The cheers picked up again now that the battle seemed to be moving away from the exhausting stalemate.

"Almost there Twilight! You can do this!"

"Just a little more, darling!"

"Come on Twi! Go! Go! Go!"

"Yay..."

"Okay one, two three!" Pinkie Pie shouted. Her voice was joined by another - Trixie recognized it as Derpy's (*When did she get here?* Trixie chanced a thought), "Gooooo TRIXIE! Gooooo TWILIGHT! Come on

everypony, do the Waaaaaave! Woo! What? No pony? You guys really need to attend more sports-themed parties..."

Trixie fought and fought to keep herself from collapsing under the strain, but it wasn't enough. Her eyes began to water as she felt her magic begin to flicker and wane. She shut her eyes and pushed with all her might against Twilight's force, and though she could almost feel herself pushing back, she couldn't maintain the upkeep any longer. With a mighty crash, Trixie at last ran out of juice and felt her magically-manifested hoof slam into the grass. It dissipated in a trickle of blue smoke and sparkles, and Twilight's followed suit in a similar cloud of purple. Trixie slumped to the ground, her energy completely drained. She breathed hard and could feel real tears form in her eyes. For the first time in a *direct* confrontation with another unicorn, she had lost. She could hear Twilight's friends cheer as they ran over to her and delivered their congratulations. Trixie struggled to get upright, and was surprised when two pairs of hooves helped her up - Pinkie Pie and Derpy had come to her much-needed assistance.

"There ya go," Pinkie piped with a grin, "You can relax now, it's all over."

Trixie groaned and rubbed her horn, her face wincing in pain as she felt the intense burning sensation. She'd never expended all her magic like that before, and it was not a satisfying experience. Especially not, as she thought, since she'd burnt through everything she had and still wasn't as powerful as Twilight was. Pinkie Pie and Derpy gave her a reassuring hug.

"It's okay Trixie!" Pinkie smiled, "You can't win all the time, you know? Hey, at least you still have six more events to go through right?"

Trixie sniffed and nodded, "The...Great and Powerful Trixie supposes so. Though she has never questioned herself more than she does now..."

Derpy picked up Trixie's hat and put it on her head, making Trixie smile ever so slightly. Something about having somepony reassure her in her time of need was comforting, something she hadn't felt in a long, long time - it was a new experience, losing, but if she could have somepony beside her to support her, maybe losing...wasn't so bad. Trixie looked in Twilight Sparkle's direction, and saw her leaning her weight on Applejack, using her friend for support. Rarity and the yellow pegasus that Trixie had not yet gotten the name of were laughing along with Applejack as they

talked, and seeing this made Trixie notice that Rainbow Dash wasn't gathered there. Trixie looked around a little, but only when she looked up did she see her. The cyan pegasus was glaring down in Trixie's direction...but Trixie for some reason couldn't help but feel like the gaze wasn't directed at her.

"Trixie..." a hoarse voice spoke. Trixie was shaken from her focus on Rainbow Dash to find Twilight Sparkle standing there, a tiny frown on her face, "Are you okay? That was quite an exhausting experience."

"Hmph. Save your sympathy for somepony more deserving, the Great and Powerful Trixie has no desire for any of it," Trixie replied, her head held up high, "Though the Great and Powerful Trixie admits you have proven yourself to have *stronger* magic than herself, she reminds you that this isn't over yet."

Twilight nodded slowly, "It's getting late Trixie. We should all start heading back for home and get some dinner. You're welcome to join us if you'd like?"

Trixie blinked in surprise, then regained her usual haughty scowl, "The Great and Powerful Trixie appreciates your offer, Twilight Sparkle, but wonders what sort of agenda you have."

Applejack huffed, "Now listen here missy, Twilight don't have no sneaky motives, if that's what ya'll be tryin' ta say. She's hungry, you're hungry, we're all hungry, and she's just inviting you to come along. I can't say I see eye-ta-eye with her on any of it, but she can be a might insistent when she wants to be."

Pinkie Pie patted Trixie on the back, "Come on Trixie! It'll be fun! We can treat it like a sort of mini-party there just won't be any cake or ice cream or balloons or dancing or playing or music or...okay this isn't sounding like a party at all. Well anyway, Derpy and I are going too, and I'd hate to leave you to try and fend for yourself..."

Trixie noted that Pinkie added that last bit with the slightest hint of a devious smile. She snuck her nose in the air, "Very well, if you insist...the Great and Powerful Trixie will join you."

Twilight smiled and looked around to her friends to make sure everyone was ready. She frowned when one pony was found missing, "Fluttershy, where's Rainbow Dash? She was sitting with you, wasn't she?"

"Oh...um..." the yellow pegasus - now known to Trixie as Fluttershy - peeped, "She said she had something to take care of...and she just kind of flew off..."

"She does that..." Twilight sighed, "Nevertheless, we should get going. Come on everypony, back to town we go."

Trixie admitted, to herself at least, that she'd made a wise decision in joining the others for dinner after all. The drain on her magic reserves was making her hungrier than she'd ever felt in her life, and she knew full well that she no longer had any bits to get any food for herself. Twilight Sparkle and her friends most graciously had agreed to pay her portion of the bill, even though they all knew she'd be eating at least as much as Twilight herself would. Trixie, overcome by the hunger pangs, couldn't help herself from ordering a feast's worth of food, and nopony made to object. This generosity was making Trixie feel slightly uneasy.

While they waited for their meals to arrive, the ponies took to talking amongst themselves. Trixie couldn't help but feel both relieved and alienated at the same time - none of the ponies were talking about her, but none of them were talking *to* her either. And once again, it was Pinkie Pie to the rescue, who had noticed that Trixie seemed to look and feel left out.

"So, Trixie," Pinkie asked loudly enough to ensure the others could hear, "I don't know much about you, other than you're Twilight's like, rival or something, but there's gotta be more to you than that. Tell me more about yourself! I mean I told you all about my old rock farm and about my sisters and about all the wacky adventures I've been having since Twilight came to town," she noticed a concerned look from the others, "Well, except one, but that's because I'm supposed to keep it a secret, super-duper-hush-hush and stuff, and I was threatened with being banished and put in a dungeon in the place where I was banished too and-"

"Okay Pinkie Pie, that's enough," Twilight sighed, "She does have a point though. I, too, would like to know more about you Trixie, and where you came from."

Trixie blinked, surprised at the sudden attention. The other ponies, hearing Pinkie Pie's loud request, had turned to face Trixie and expectantly awaited an answer - Trixie noted that only Applejack seemed less than

ready to give her full attention to the story. *Very well*, Trixie thought, *If they want to hear the Great and Powerful Trixie's story...so be it!*

Trixie was careful as she told them some of her life's story, avoiding any tidbits of information she found too personal or too embarrassing to divulge. She hastily skipped over the period of time she was at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns - Twilight already knew much of what school was like, and Trixie guessed that she'd likely told her friends all about that already. No, Trixie's main focus was on what she'd been up to *after* school.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie, having graduated with top honors from the most prestigious unicorn academy in all of Equestria, set out on a journey across the land to seek out knowledge and power, to prove to everypony she came across that she was the most talented and powerful unicorn who had ever lived! She had not earned her title of Great and Powerful just yet - titles are earned, not just thought up as many a neighsayer would have you believe. For most of this time, she was simply Trixie the Magnificent, the highest honorary title she had been granted from her school days. But Trixie knew that 'the Magnificent' was far too simple for her, and far too common - while few unicorns that graduated from Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns could claim that title, there are more than one Magnificent unicorn out there. Why, I'm sure Twilight Sparkle herself holds that honor, do you not?"

Twilight blushed, "Well...yeah...but I don't actually use it. I've always felt a little gaudy calling myself Twilight Sparkle the Magnificent..."

Trixie chuckled, "It *is* a most unfitting title, my dear - not for a pony that can compete against me on such even grounds - but it *does* attract attention and that was exactly what Trixie wanted. As Trixie the Magnificent traveled Equestria, she performed her magical feats before anypony who would witness them. Trixie started small, earning bits as she went to pay for the traveling fees to make it to the largest cities in all of Equestria! Why, if Trixie that Magnificent could perform at a theater venue in any of the major cities, her name would acquire a fame to it like no other! It took many long, gruelling months to earn enough to do it, but at long last Trixie could finally take her first step towards a more prestigious future."

"So that's when you started traveling through the bigger cities?" Rarity asked, clearly enthralled by the high class and sophistication that

came with those places, “Where have you performed? I haven’t traveled out of town in what feels like simply *ages*.”

“I have visited every single major city in all of Equestria! I’ve performed my great magical feats at the Bridleway Theater in Manehattan! The Hollyhoof Bowl in Los Mustangeles! The Celestial Theater in Chicacolt! There isn’t a single major venue Trixie hasn’t performed, with...one exception,” Trixie frowned dejectedly, “I’ve never had the honor of performing before Princess Celestia herself in Canterlot, and this is why Trixie fought so hard to earn herself a new title, to earn the recognition to be invited to perform at the Grand Royal Arena!”

“Yeah, so how exactly *did* you earn the title of Great and Powerful anyway?” Applejack asked, slowly becoming interested in the story.

“My dear mare, as I stated before - in order to receive a title like mine, you must *earn* it. It must be either bestowed upon you by a higher authority, or you must claim it by taking it from another...”

Pinkie Pie clopped her hooves together, “Just like you and Twilight are doing, right? So you did one of these duel things with another unicorn that was called Great and Powerful, and you got to keep it for yourself?”

“Precisely,” Trixie boasted, “I suppose it is to be expected for few ponies to have heard of the Great and Powerful Trixie - after all, she only earned the right to call herself that recently. But surely you’ve all heard of...*the Great and Powerful Paragon?*”

Applejack gave a hearty laugh, and some of the others looked around a little sheepishly, as if embarrassed just by the fact that Trixie had said what she did.

“I knew ya’ll were just pulling my hoof. Seriously?” Applejack snickered, “Paragon? That’s just a silly ol’ filly’s tale, Paragon ain’t real sugarcube, he’s a made-up pony.”

“I assure you, my *dear Applejack*,” Trixie smirked, “Paragon is very real, and until I had the pleasure of dueling him, he was the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria. In years to come, there will be stories written about the fall of the Great and Powerful Paragon and how he was defeated by the *truly* most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria, the Great and Powerful *Trixie!*”

Applejack snorted again, "Okay sugarcube...whatever you say," she leaned over to Rarity and nudged her with a grin, "I mean, that Ursa Major story she gave was pretty far-fetched, but come on, right?"

Rarity chuckled lightly under her breath, "Trixie certainly can spin a tale, can she not? I can see where that talent can come in handy for her shows."

"I thought it was a pretty story," Derpy smiled, "I always liked the Paragon books as a filly."

Trixie sighed. *I really shouldn't be surprised they didn't believe me...but I can't exactly tell them the real story...not yet...*

With dinner finished, all the ponies that had come along began the long walks back to their homes. Trixie and Pinkie Pie began their walk back to Sugarcube Corner in silence - Trixie had asked Pinkie Pie to allow her the short break so she could gather her thoughts, promising to tell her all about her coat and hat when they returned home. As the pair of ponies rounded the last corner, they suddenly stopped because of a most unexpected sight: the second-story lights were on - the ones in Pinkie's room - and the small door that Trixie still hadn't guessed the purpose for, was slightly ajar. Pinkie smiled and bounced forward, the surprising sight apparently welcome to her. Trixie, on the other hoof, was more cautious, and warily followed Pinkie Pie into the bakery and up the stairs to their shared room, only to find that it wasn't a burglar at all.

It was Rainbow Dash.

And she was *not* in a pleasant mood...

Chapter 4

Bifurcations and Captivations

"Hiya Dashie!" Pinkie bubbled, "I was wondering where you've been all night! You missed dinner with everypony, we all got to hear Trixie's super cool story about where she got her fancy-pants title, and how she visited all the big cities around Equestria, and how she is a super cool magician and stuff!"

Rainbow Dash glared in Trixie's direction, "More story-telling, huh? Did you tell the truth this time, or is that still too hard for you to do?" Trixie made to counter, but Rainbow focused her attention back on Pinkie Pie, "Pinkie Pie, I think you and I need to have a little talk."

"Um, okay!" Pinkie smiled, "What do you want to talk about? Is it about cupcakes? Because I've had a *really* big craving for some cupcakes all day and even though I really don't have time to make any since it's late and the bakery is closed I'd still really like one. But why would you want to talk about cupcakes at this hour, Dashie, that seems weird even for me."

"We need to talk *alone*, Pinkie..." Rainbow said sternly, turning her glance at Trixie again, "You. Out. Now."

Trixie chuckled, "Well, well, well, one does wonder where this sudden rush of confidence came from, thinking you can order the Great and Powerful Trixie around like you were anywhere close to her level." Pinkie nudged Trixie lightly and gave a concerned frown. Trixie found herself mildly intrigued by this whole situation, and with an inward smirk she thought of a fantastic idea. *Whatever they're talking about, it must have something to do with Twilight Sparkle and our contest. Perhaps there's something the Great and Powerful Trixie can gain an advantage from...*

"Very well, if Pinkie Pie insists, I'll leave you two alone. I'll just leave my things here for now then, and wait downstairs," she announced clearly, so that everypony present had no suspicions as to what she was doing.

Trixie removed her hat and cape and placed them upon her bed, and very discreetly fired a spell at her hat when Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie weren't looking. She then made a quick pace downstairs and, sure she was out of sight of the two ponies upstairs, channeled another spell and focused her magic on it intently. After a few moments of static and white noise, a clear sound began to flow magically through her horn and into her brain. It was a simple spell, easily spotted by any unicorn and certainly by anypony who had ever seen it before, but Trixie was confident that Twilight Sparkle was not the type of pony to take interest in eavesdropping on her friends; Trixie, on the other hoof, was *very* interested in eavesdropping on Twilight's friends.

"-et it Dashie, you seem all kinds of upset lately and you were really quiet today, well, not *really* quiet I mean I heard you cheering for Twilight and everything but you hardly said a word to me and then you just flew off and-"

"Pinkie Pie, please just...shut up for a second."

Pinkie Pie stopped talking. Trixie wondered if she could duplicate Rainbow's technique at will.

Rainbow Dash sighed, "Listen, Pinkie...I think you must have missed the memo or something, but you're *not supposed to be friends with Trixie*."

"Oh Dashie, don't be silly! Why aren't I supposed to be her friend?"

"Because she's the enemy! Don't you get it?!" Rainbow blurted, "She came to Ponyville for this little Duel of hers in order to get revenge on Twilight! Why won't anypony listen? I sure wasn't fooled by all that 'oh I just want to prove I'm better' nonsense. I mean, you'd have to be an idiot to-"

Trixie couldn't see it, but she was sure Rainbow had said the exact wrong thing, based on the sudden awkward silence.

"Pinkie...don't tell me you *believe* all that garbage? Not you too..."

"Hmph," Pinkie grunted, "Trixie may have made up some stories in the past about herself, Dashie, but everypony deserves a second chance to make amends. I mean sure, Trixie's a little bit of a Braggy McBraggerson, but well...so are you. Don't give me that look, Dashie, you know it's true! So yeah, I think Trixie deserves to be given a chance to make some friends. That's what Twilight would say, anyway."

"Pinkie, Twilight is so blinded by her cr-"

"ShhhhhhHHHHH!" Pinkie Pie hissed, "Dummy! Twilight made you *promise* never to mention that to anypony..."

"Pinkie Pie, you know all about it too..."

What? WHAT?! What do you two know about Twilight? Come on, this sounds juicy!

"So? She made you *Pinkie Pie Swear*, and you know you don't break a Pinkie Pie Swear, no matter what. Loose lips sink friendships, Dashie, they sink them forrrrEVER!"

Dash sighed, "Fine, whatever, but you have to know that Twilight's not thinking straight when that arrogant hack is involved."

"What have you got in for her anyway, Dashie?" Pinkie asked sternly, "You seem to give her a lot of flack for no reason! I mean, okay, I can admit I felt kind of the same way when Gilda came to town and I thought she was just a big jerk even though everpony disagreed...but really it turned out I was right all along, didn't it? Okay, bad example, Trixie's not quite like Gilda, at least I don't think she is even though you seem to...I'm just gonna stop now, I'm kind of digging myself into a hole here. I didn't even need a shovel!"

Rainbow Dash gave an exasperated sigh, "I'm just trying to look out for Twilight, Pinkie! I'm supposed to represent *Loyalty*, remember? I'm being *loyal* to my friend by making sure she's not taken advantage of by that no-good egomaniac. I *thought* I could count on the rest of you to get my back and help keep an eye on her, so imagine my surprise when *you* seem so eager to be her *friend*!"

"Everypony needs a friend, Dashie," Pinkie replied, "That's something else Twilight would say. You say you're super loyal to Twilight, Dashie, but you don't seem to be very loyal to her values."

Dash gasped, "Are you questioning my loyalty to my friends? You, of all ponies? If it weren't for me, we'd all still be enjoying the company of one *Pinkame*-"

"Don't you *ever* mention her..." Pinkie seethed.

Trixie wondered who this other pony was, but guessed from the tones of voice that Rainbow Dash must have stepped out of line mentioning her, so Trixie gathered that whoever it was probably wasn't the best to be acquainted with.

Dash grunted, "I'm sorry...I'm just...worried about Twilight is all. She's done so much for all of us, I just don't want to see her get hurt."

"It's okay Dashie...but...really, Trixie's not as bad as you seem to think she is. I don't get it. I mean, Applejack and Rarity didn't like her any more than you did when she came back. Rarity's warmed up to her a little bit more, and even Applejack is starting to come around, so why can't you?"

Rainbow Dash stayed quiet for a moment, then said sternly, "We'll see. I still don't trust her, and until I can get some proof that she's trustworthy, that's not gonna change. And it *doesn't* mean I have to like her, only tolerate her. That's all I can promise."

Pinkie sighed, "Fine. See you tomorrow?"

"Of course. Good night, Pinkie Pie."

"Good night, Dashie."

Trixie heard a soft sound come from the room, but she couldn't make out what it was; to her it sounded like a light 'smack', but that would be a strange way to end a conversation, Trixie thought. As soon as she heard the door upstairs clap shut, signaling Rainbow's departure, Trixie ceased the hold on her magic and allowed the silence of the downstairs bakery to wash over her again. Pinkie trotted downstairs and put on the best happy, smiling face she could manage.

"You can come back up now, Trixie! I think it's time you told me a bedtime story!"

Drat, Trixie cursed inwardly, *I had hoped she wouldn't remember...*

"Yes, yes, very well. Since you are so insistent. Why this can't wait until morning I can't imagine..."

Trixie followed Pinkie back upstairs, grumbling to herself about having to reveal one of her most well-kept secrets to somepony she had only met two days ago. She considered it a fair trade though, as the loss of sleep she'd get as Pinkie Pie likely bothered her at all hours of the night would not bode well for her ability to handle casting any sorts of powerful magic the next day. She shuddered to think about how Pinkie could prove to be *more* of a distraction than she'd come to know - she imagined Pinkie Pie quite literally being everywhere, whispering "Bother, bother, bother,"

over and over into her ears, and Trixie did not doubt the pink party pony's ability to keep up such an activity for hours.

Pinkie took an eager jump and landed in her own bed, and as quickly as she'd gotten there she was lying eagerly in wait for Trixie's story, her chin in her hooves as she lay prone across her mattress. Trixie sat back on the floor at the foot of Pinkie's bed, cleared her throat, and prepared herself to tell this story to somepony else for the first time; her treasured hat and cloak were already at hoof, to help present Pinkie Pie with some visuals despite not having a stage prepared.

"Ahem," Trixie coughed, "Well then, I suppose I'll try and keep this as toned-down as I can. The Great and Powerful Trixie has...never told anypony this story, so I trust you'll keep your promise not to spread it around?"

Pinkie nodded, and briefly sat upright and began wildly flailing with her arms in movements Trixie did not understand. This hadn't been the "Pinkie Pie Swear" she'd witnessed yesterday. When Pinkie was done, Trixie gave her a blank stare, "Does that mean 'yes'?"

Pinkie gave an exasperated sigh, "You really are *just* like Twilight, you know? You need to learn to follow along a little better. Okay? So, I take my promise and put it in a box," she used her hooves to put an imaginary object into an imaginary box, "I put *that* box inside another box," she mimed the motion, "I mail that box to Princess Celestia," she stamped what Trixie guessed was an address mark on the imaginary box, "With a note attached," she scribbled an imaginary note, "Saying to send the box to the moon," and she made her hoof take off like a rocket towards her other hoof, apparently representing the moon, "And then it floats off into space," she mimed the box floating along, "And that way I can never get to my promise so I can never break it! 'Cuz it's in SPAAAAAAAAAAAAACE! See?"

Trixie clutched at the side of her head, "By Celestia, I think you're giving me a migraine..."

"Oh don't be silly, you're not a bird, how can I make you migrate?"

"Enough! Enough," Trixie panted, holding her hoof out in a gesture telling Pinkie to stop, "Please. Let...let me just get started, okay?"

Pinkie nodded enthusiastically and took her former position again, ready to begin listening intently. Trixie cleared her throat, "Okay...so, you

want to know what's so special about the Great and Powerful Trixie's cape and hat, right?"

Pinkie nodded rapidly.

"They are gifts, bestowed upon Trixie by somepony...very close to her heart. You see, Trixie was not always the best magician in all of Equestria. Before she entered Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, Trixie was...somewhat of a delinquent..."

"Sounds an awful lot like Rainbow Dash," Pinkie chuckled, "I don't think she ever grew out of that though."

"Well, one day, Trixie had found herself in a bit of trouble. She has since learned to avoid biting off more than she could chew, as the saying goes, but back then the Great and Powerful Trixie was no more than a runt who often had to stand up for herself against other fillies for being a Blank Flank."

Pinkie's eyes opened, "Ooooooh, is this your Cutie Mark story?!"

"My Cutie Mark does play some role in it, yes," Trixie smiled, "Unlike other ponies, Trixie's Cutie Mark had a very unique trigger, one I'm sure you've never heard the likes of before. Trixie had gotten herself into a bit of a fight against a couple of colts that didn't like having Blank Flanks like me on their side of the playground. Even back then, the Great and Powerful Trixie was brave and always willing to stand up for herself, but...she *may* have been a little headstrong. Anyway, there she was, Trixie the Blank Flank against two of the biggest colts in the park. Trixie thought she was done for, when all of a sudden, the most terrifying sound Trixie had ever heard boomed into existence. Trixie was certain somepony had set off a bomb, or was releasing firecrackers just behind her - whatever the sound was, it was accompanied by lots of bright light of all the colors of the rainbow! Trixie is not afraid to admit the sound had frightened her, because that sudden fright triggered Trixie's magical reserves, and with a mighty blast of magic she knocked the bullies flying across the playground! With one little spell, Trixie had beaten two colts well over twice her size a-piece, and Trixie's confidence in her latent magical ability came to light. She knew now that she was a powerful magician deep down, and she wanted to find a way to tap into that power! Armed with new resolve, and a most exquisite Cutie Mark that represented her confidence in her magic, Trixie returned

home and asked, no, *demanding* her parents enroll her in Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns!"

Pinkie Pie tapped her hoof to her chin, "This story sounds familiar for some reason..."

"What?"

"Nothing! Go on, go on! I wanna hear where you got the fancy outfit, not your Cutie Mark, even though that was a great story and I'm really glad you told it and all, but-"

"Trixie is getting to that part," she said with a dismissive wave of her hoof, "You must understand that Trixie's parents were *very* accomplished magicians themselves. They were so disappointed in Trixie when she could barely cast a single spell throughout all of her filly days, but had never been prouder than on the afternoon Trixie, armed with a brand new Cutie Mark on her flank, barged into the dining room and wanted to attend their Alma Mater."

"Ooh! Who were they, maybe I've heard of them?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie does not reveal all of her secrets at once, my dear. But if you must pry-"

"I must! I must!"

"I will tell you some other time."

"Awww..."

"For now, all you need to know is that Trixie's mother was her greatest hero! Trixie knew that her father was the more magical unicorn between the two, but she was inspired by her mother's confidence in her powers in the face of a more powerful magician. My parents met when my mother challenged my father to a duel, you know? My father was captivated by her beauty, and fell in love with her at first sight. Trixie's mother had one gift that surpassed her father - while he was certainly the stronger of the two, my mother was the most elegant, beautiful, wondrous unicorn to ever grace Equestria with her existence. Tales tell of how her beauty even surpassed Princess Celestia herself!"

"Oooooooh..."

"And her beauty seeped into her magic, allowing her to command it with such style and grace that it was simply enchanting. Before she married my father, my mother was a traveling magician-"

"Just like you?"

"Yes, just like me. She was my inspiration to continue along that path, hoping to earn the same fame and recognition that she had aspired to..."

"So...the hat and cape?"

"Yes, yes, I'm getting to that," she said, annoyed at first. When she began to speak though, her voice softened and took on a more solemn tone, "These two items are...the only things Trixie has to remember her mother by..."

Pinkie gasped lightly and placed her hooves to her mouth.

"My mother passed away while I was in my second year at the academy. I got the message during the third month of the semester...my father's estate sent these," she gestured to the hat and cape, "in a package addressed to me, with a copy of a portion of my mother's will and the last letter she had written to me. She wanted her three most cherished possessions to at last be in one place. She said...she was so proud of me for doing so well in school...and...for always..." she sniffed, "I didn't even know she was sick..."

Pinkie Pie bawled loudly and brought a hoofkerchief (from where, Trixie wasn't sure) to her nose and blew just as loudly, "Awwwwww, you...you p-poor pony...I'm so s-sorry for your loss..."

Trixie chanced a grin, tears forming in her eyes as well, "Don't be sad for me, Pinkie Pie, my grief has...passed. My mother was always one not to impose on others...she was my inspiration...and I knew she wanted me to follow in her hoofsteps. After that, I pushed myself harder and harder every day, because I knew that one day I would do something that would allow me not to just follow her example, but to surpass her and become the *truly* most talented unicorn in all of Equestria!"

"Wow..." Pinkie yawned, "Oh my...it's getting late. We really should be going to bed, Trixie. You've got quite a day ahead of you!"

Trixie fought the urge to yawn herself, "I suppose you're right. Thank you for listening to my story, Pinkie Pie..."

"Thank *you* for sharing it with me. Though why you don't want to share it with anypony else, I can't imagine...it's such a beautiful story, maybe the other ponies wouldn't be hard on you if they just knew why you wanted to be so much better than everypony else?"

"Let's just say that the Great and Powerful Trixie's story has...certain complications. I did not reveal everything to you - like my parents' names - because you probably would not believe me if I told you everything there was to tell. Some other time, Pinkie Pie..." Trixie couldn't fight it anymore and let out a big yawn, "But you're right, now is the time for sleep. I am exhausted...good night, Pinkie Pie."

"Nightie night, Trixie!" Pinkie chirped before she snuggled under her covers. Trixie smiled warmly as Pinkie Pie fell asleep almost instantly. She couldn't explain it, but the pink earth pony was beginning to grow on her, and having told Pinkie about some of her more personal life experiences, it made Trixie feel...glad. She'd always held in the stories of her past life because they weren't as grand or exciting as the life she lived after she was finished with her schooling - they were all sad and depressing, and the last thing Trixie wanted was pity. Something told her that Pinkie Pie did not pity her, but that she wanted to be there to support her, and that this had only strengthened whatever kind of friendship...is that what this was? Trixie hadn't really considered that yet, but if Pinkie Pie was her friend, then maybe...no, there was no time to think on that subject right now. She had to focus on her competition with Twilight Sparkle, to do her best to ensure she won. Trixie smiled to herself as she got into her own bed and drifted off to sleep, eager to dream of a future where her goal had been reached, and she was hailed as the most powerful unicorn to have ever lived...

The morning passed by much as it had the day before, only Derpy hadn't been able to stay for breakfast - she was busy enough as it was, and had to help several other mailponies deliver a very large supply of rush-order packages directly from Canterlot, easily the largest delivery the Ponyville Post Office had ever undertaken. Twilight Sparkle's "material supplements", no doubt. Trixie found herself anxious to find out what sort of items had been procured by her rival; considering how excited Derpy was, many of them had apparently come directly from Princess Celestia's private collection as they bore her personal seal on the package information. And so it was that she and Pinkie Pie made for "the Spot" as Pinkie had come to call it. Applejack and Rainbow Dash had already arrived and were helping Twilight with unpacking everything - there was no sign of Rarity or

Fluttershy yet, but Trixie found that irrelevant for now. She was curious about what was in all the boxes.

"Hey Twilight!" Pinkie Pie bubbled as she bounced over, "You guys sure got an early start, huh? And wow, look at all this stuff! If these were all presents, this would be, like, the greatest birthday party ever! Ooh, what are all these things, they're all so pretty!" Pinkie Pie messily opened up and dug through one of the boxes, coming up with a small, perfectly spherical gemstone that glowed all the colors of the rainbow. Trixie's eyes widened.

"A *Prism Star*?" she blurted, "How in Equestria did you manage to get one of those, Twilight?"

"Princess Celestia has several in her private gem collection," Twilight smiled, "It should come in handy for today, don't you think? That's what the Princess said anyway, I'm not sure exactly how they work, it's been a while since I read up on any rare and magical gemstones. I'm sure Rarity would like to see it, that's kind of her thing. What's so special about it...apart from being really pretty?"

Trixie smirked and cleared her throat, temporarily shaking off her jealousy that the Princess had enough of these gems to just send one to her star pupil for use in a Magician's Duel, "A Prism Star is a rare gemstone brimming with every kind of Light magic - hence why it shines with all the different colors in the spectrum. If the lighting were well-adjusted, why, the magic inside could be channeled and manipulated into quite an impressive light show. If I'd only had one of these in my traveling days..."

Pinkie Pie continued diving through boxes in her attempts to help unpack - while she wasn't taking any time to organize things, much to Twilight's chagrin, it was admitted that she was unpacking significantly faster than both Applejack and Rainbow Dash combined. Pinkie Pie would probably attribute it to all her time helping to wrap, unwrap, and re-wrap presents for all the parties she'd ever held. Everypony else helped get things organized, Trixie becoming more and more fascinated with all the gadgets and magical items that Twilight had procured, though she was able to hide her jealousy well. Once everything was sorted, Twilight turned to the first pile of objects - it was organized to be all the items they'd need for today's event, the test of the two unicorns' *Technique*.

“Let’s see...okay, we’ve got that Prism Star,” Twilight mumbled to herself as she checked it off on her very large checklist. Trixie tuned out the rest of Twilight’s list, having helped get most of the stuff ready herself - she did have the most experience with these matters, and even Rainbow Dash had to admit this was likely not going to be an easy event for Twilight. Trixie’s jealousy of Twilight’s connections to get all these items on such short notice was matched evenly by her smugness at knowing this was an event that seemed *suspiciously* tailor-made for her. Even so, knowing that Princess Celestia herself knew that her star pupil was dueling against the Great and Powerful Trixie? It made Trixie slightly nervous. *I hope I don’t get banished for all this...or put in a dungeon or something...*

It was nearing the late afternoon when they finally got everything for today’s event organized - Rarity Fluttershy, and later on, Derpy, had arrived and helped out as well, a fact Trixie was most grateful for. This event wouldn’t take long by itself but the set-up required, she felt, was rather tedious. How she longed to have her coach back, or to be on a stage at the theater, where everything was already set up and only needed her guiding hand, not any of her manual labor. Still, this type of event worked better at later hours anyway - less natural light outside meant it would be easier to see the artificial lights generated by their magical spells. Their makeshift stage was larger than the one Trixie had used for her traveling act, and it had many more resources at its disposal. *Oh, if only I could get this thing set up for travelling...* Trixie thought, *I could show off some real magic then.* Trixie could hardly contain the urge to break out in some sort of diabolical laughter, certain that she would win this even if Twilight’s friends were likely biased. *This is going to be my best display ever. These simple ponyfolk will be talking about this for ages!*

At long last everything was ready. Trixie took her position to the far right side of the stage, just off to the side enough that she wasn’t in the way, as Twilight took hers at center stage. She and Trixie had come to the agreement that this event was going to be treated like a magic show in its entirety - sure, Rainbow Dash had argued it was unfair that Trixie had years of experience in the matter, but Twilight pointed out that it was likely to be the best way to judge whose *Technique* was better, who could make the most aesthetically-pleasing magic. No tricks like making flowers

appear, or cutting ponies in half, or making a volunteer from the audience disappear - just the the smoke and mirrors aspect of it. To say everyone was surprised that Illusionary Magic was a legitimate and respected field of magical study would be to say Pinkie Pie liked parties. Twilight cleared her throat.

“Ahem. Okay...um...this is the first time I’ve really had to *perform* this kind of magic in front of anypony. I’m fine with public speaking and all but...just...don’t laugh, okay?”

Trixie smirked over in her private corner, “Oh, this is going to be *good*,” she said quietly to herself.

Twilight raised her forehooves to the air, horn aglow, and began her introductory speech proper. Trixie had insisted that, in order to make this all look and sound authentic, they may as well go the full mile, boastful introductions and all.

“Come one, come all, and be amazed at the magic of Twilight Sparkle...um...the Magnificent! Oh wow that does sound terrible. Be astounded, as you witness the most extraordinary magic to ever grace Ponyville!”

The crowd below went wild as they cheered for their friend.

And Twilight’s Magic Show began.

A white cloud of smoke billowed forth from the stage floor, coating it with a thick fog and obscuring Twilight from everypony’s view. Bright purple and pink lights flashed from the Prism Star situated above the stage, rotating and highlighting random parts of the stage. A single firecracker fired off and exploded at center stage, and just as the light escaped from it and flew towards the crowd, it suddenly went flying straight up, each individual sparkle glowing a different color before exploding again in tiny sparkles far above them. The lights on stage turned white and all focused on center stage before turning red and fanning out. When the lights stopped at the front of the stage, huge flames erupted from the floor. The lights turned blue and the flames turned into spouts of water. The lights turned green and now the water was steam. The lights stopped and the steam died down. Now the entire stage was black, until the white light focused on a single spot on stage in the corner, where Twilight Sparkle stood; they focused on another spot, and there was another Twilight

Sparkle there too. Both Twilights' horns glowed brilliant purples and fired sparklers at one another, creating a brilliant light show on stage. At last, one of the Twilights was struck and disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving one Twilight on stage who stepped back to her original position.

She was met with great applause from her friends, and she took a well-deserved bow. Trixie approached her with the biggest, smuggest grin anypony had ever seen.

"Very well performed, Twilight Sparkle. A little standard, but I suppose it can't be helped. Let me guess - you *read* all about how these things are supposed to work?"

Trixie's sarcasm was missed, "Actually I just did a few of the more advanced techniques I remember from when I was in Illusionary Theory 103. I know it wasn't particularly creative or anything, but the Princess never really tested me on my creativity, only on my ability. She was right though, that Prism Star is amazingly helpful - having just one light that you can do anything with is much easier to handle than trying to manipulate light from many different sources. I think I did pretty well for my first attempt, don't you think?"

Trixie smirked, "If by 'well', you mean 'adequate', then yes, I suppose you performed above my expectations. Now then, if you'll allow the *real* magician to take her turn, the Great and Powerful Trixie will show you how it's done *with style*..."

Twilight nodded and stepped off to Trixie's former position as Trixie took center stage. Trixie wasted no time in starting.

"BEHOLD!" she shouted through a magical enhancement that made her voice much louder, "Watch in awe, my little Ponyvillians, as you witness the astounding, the inspiring, the jaw-dropping magic, of the ONE! The ONLY! The GRRREAT and POWERFUL *TRRRRRRIXIE!*" Trixie made sure to roll the 'R's - she felt it added a flair of wonder to her stage persona.

Pinkie Pie and Derpy applauded loudly and cheered; Rarity and Fluttershy politely clapped. Applejack and Rainbow Dash watched in firm disapproval, forelegs crossed.

And now, it was Trixie's turn.

Just to show them how much better I am than Twilight Sparkle, Trixie plotted, I'll perform her magic act, only it'll be one-hundred-and-twenty percent more spectacular!

Trixie disappeared from the stage in a furious explosion of smoke and sparks, and the smoke flowed quickly outwards to cover the entire stage. The Prism Star shimmered a brilliant pink and purple, coating the entire stage in a magnificent luminescence. Three firecrackers exploded forth towards the sky, following the same path in a straight line above the stage; the first one exploded, and as the multi-colored sparks fell they became magically glued to the other two firecrackers so that they looked like shooting stars. The second one exploded even more brilliantly, but only for the tiniest second as the sparks attached to the last one, making it shine nearly as brightly as Luna's moon. This firecracker screamed upwards ever higher, until finally it too exploded in a brilliant technicolor explosion that coated the entire sky in all the colors of the rainbow - even Rainbow Dash's jaw dropped at the resemblance it had to her own Sonic Rainboom. The rainbow-colored lights above trickled down, leading everypony's attention back to the stage, which was now glowing a brilliant red. Flames erupted from the front of the stage, and in one swift motion all of the flames coalesced together to form the shape of a fiery serpent. It roared and shot flame from its mouth as it flew laps around the crowd before returning to the stage; the water jets burst forth as the stage turned blue and, in much the same manner, they became a fierce water serpent. The two serpents had a mock battle together amidst a green backdrop before joining at center stage and erupting in a cloud of steam. When it cleared, a single spotlight shone at center stage to highlight Trixie. Two more lights, and on the far sides of the stage there were two more Trixies. The three Trixies began their own mock battle, launching beams of colored light at one another as if they were in a laser show. Every now and then their attacks would be deflected skyward, exploding in a shower of colorful sparks. The center Trixie vanquished the left-hand Trixie with a flurry of bolts, causing her to explode in a huge display of bright blue light that stayed suspended there; she did the same with the right-hand Trixie who exploded into a brilliant silver glow. The two lights converged together on the center Trixie's position, then exploded behind her to display a highly-decorated and

stylized banner reading “The Great and Powerful Trixie!!!” in golden neon. The entire stage went black, leaving just the banner, which then slowly blinked off one letter at a time.

When Trixie reappeared, she was stunned at first by the utter silence from the crowd. Then the applause came. It got louder, and louder, and didn’t stop coming. Trixie looked out with relief and some mild surprise as every single one of Twilight’s friends was applauding wildly; even Applejack and Rainbow Dash were applauding, though Rainbow was clearly doing so without too much enthusiasm. They’d seen Twilight do some incredible magic before, but they’d never seen a display like *that*. Pinkie Pie, of course, was cheering the loudest.

Twilight stepped up to Trixie’s side, “Wow...that was...I mean...just, wow. I’ve *never* seen anyone use Illusionary Magic so...*perfectly*.”

“Yes, well, it helps when that is your speciality,” Trixie said smugly, “That may have been my best performance yet, but it *was* on short notice. I suppose if I’d had a little more time to plan out a show, I could have *really* shown you all the true awesome power of the Great and Powerful Trixie. Perhaps another time.”

By now, the other ponies had joined the two unicorns on stage.

“Hmph, I still think all your magic talent seems to be with tricks and stuff,” Rainbow Dash frowned, “Even...even if it *was* impressive, it just shows you have more experience with that kind of thing.”

Trixie smirked, “Which is the point of a competition, is it not? Now then, it seems we are back to an even match-up, Twilight Sparkle. You put on an impressive display for your first time, but really, was there *ever* any doubt that the Great and Powerful Trixie would have been *better*?”

“I suppose not...” Twilight said with a tiny smile, “Well, it’s getting late. Care to join us again for dinner, Trixie? I want to hear more about you...I mean, I’m sure everypony wants to get to know you better.”

Trixie looked at Twilight Sparkle with curiosity, “What is this fascination with getting everypony to learn more about the Great and Powerful Trixie? Surely you all know that after this is all over and the Great and Powerful Trixie has proven herself the superior unicorn, she’ll be leaving again to return to her former life; she has had quite her fill of this cosy little town.”

Applejack stepped forward, "Ya'll got some nerve," she said sternly, "Twilight's just tryin' to be friendly with you. I suppose I can ask ya'll the same question - why do *you* have this fasci...fasten...this *thing* where you just don't want to associate with her?"

Trixie was taken aback. She'd told herself time and time again that all she wanted was to prove herself better; that was the only reason she was here, nothing else mattered. She was somewhat curious and confused by Twilight's odd desire to *befriend* Trixie. That's what Trixie now considered it - odd - given her own attitude towards Twilight this entire time. Why would she want to have been friends in the first place, considering the terms she left Ponyville on? Why did she *still* want to be friends, given how Trixie had been treating her?

"The Great and Powerful Trixie is...merely unnerved, is all," she explained with hesitation, "She has done nothing to hint at wanting to be friends with Twilight Sparkle, so it merely strikes me as...*odd* as to why she'd want to be mine."

Twilight blushed, "W-well, I was just hoping that, you know, if we were friends, maybe you wouldn't be so concerned with proving yourself better than me. Being the best at everything isn't that important."

Trixie frowned, "If you think that being friends with the Great and Powerful Trixie would make her second-guess this competition, you are sadly mistaken, Twilight Sparkle."

"That's not what I'm trying to do at all..." Twilight stammered, "I was just hoping that...y'know...maybe if we were friends you'd...stay in Ponyville."

Trixie didn't hear the last bit, "Well, whatever your motives are for wanting to get to know the Great and Powerful Trixie better, Trixie has already told you a great deal about her travels and her accomplishments. There is nothing else that she wishes to reveal just yet, not to you," she pointed at a few of the other ponies, "Not to any of you," she pointed at Pinkie Pie and hesitated for a second before pointing at Twilight again, "Especially not so candidly. As much as the Great and Powerful Trixie adores talking about herself, what you ask for is something I would only tell my friends. I'm not friends with you *yet*, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight's features brightened very slightly when Trixie said "yet".

Rainbow Dash coughed, “Do you even have *any* friends, Trixie? With your attitude I’d be surprised if anypony would ever consider you just their *acquaintance*.”

Pinkie Pie made to step forward, but Trixie spoke first, “In all my years at the academy and in my travels, I have never had a need for...*friends*. Who has the time for friends when you’re trying to surpass your own talents and abilities on a daily basis?”

Pinkie Pie frowned heavily, as did Derpy. This look was not missed by either Rainbow Dash or Trixie. Rainbow Dash gave a stern look to Pinkie, as if to say, “See? Told you she only cares about herself.”

“However,” Trixie continued, “I must say these past few days have...changed my opinion of the matter. Perhaps I *could* find time to maintain a...friendship. After all, I *am* going to be in town a while longer, I don’t suppose there is any harm in trying to get more acquainted with other ponies. Even if they *are* inferior in talent to the Great and Powerful Trixie.”

Pinkie Pie beamed and leaped forward to give Trixie a nearly bone-crushing hug. Rainbow Dash was actually shocked to hear Trixie give a sincere answer.

“See, I knew you weren’t just some Grumpy McLonerpants, you just needed someone to help you open up and be more friendly and stuff!” Pinkie Pie gleefully giggled, “Oh we’re going to be the bestest best of friends, you and I. Ooh! I am so gonna throw just the hugest of huge parties for after tomorrow night’s little duel thingy, and everypony’s invited! There’s gonna be cake and streamers and balloons and punch and pie and cupcakes and muffins and-”

Derpy stepped forward and sheepishly fiddled with her hooves, “Um...Miss Trixie...I’m your friend too, right?”

Trixie smiled, “Well, the Great and Powerful Trixie *supposes* she could find the time for another friend,” then she looked sternly at the other ponies, “But the rest of you haven’t given me much reason to think otherwise just yet,” she chanced a glance at Rarity and then Twilight, the latter of which she did with some hesitation, “Small favors aside. If you’re all so keen on getting to be friends with the Great and Powerful Trixie-”

“Hey, don’t include me in all this,” Rainbow Dash scowled, “Right, AJ?”

"Now hang on, sugarcube," Applejack said quickly and quietly to Rainbow Dash, "Let's hear what she has ta say first. We're doin' this for Twilight, remember?"

"Hmph, whatever..."

"As I was saying," Trixie huffed, "If you're all so keen on becoming *my* friends, well, I suppose a little bit of fair treatment is in order. The Great and Powerful Trixie has told you a little about *herself*, what say you all tell *her* a little about you? What exactly do all of you do around here?"

"Well," Twilight started.

"Not you," Trixie said flatly, "I've read all about your school days and know all about your library and your precious *teacher*, I don't care to learn more just yet, if there even is anything else to learn. I want to know about *them*," she gestured to the other ponies, "Since they seem so keen on supporting your intent to become friends with the Great and Powerful Trixie, it is only fair that they are more well-known to her as well. So how about you," she turned to Rarity first, "I've gathered as much that you're good with fashion, what with trying to show me up last time I was here my turning my stage curtains into a dress. Normally I would be rather upset that I haven't gotten those back, but...well, let's just say you've absolved yourself of the responsibility," as she nudged her hat back with her hoof, "Not that it would matter much anyway, not having a coach to attach them to."

Rarity, while not quite as full of herself as either Trixie or Rainbow Dash, smiled and fluffed her mane in a clear false modesty, "*Good* with fashion is a bit of an understatement, darling. I am probably one of the most prestigious fashion designers in all of Equestria. I've done personal designs for some of the most well-known fashion pioneers, you know? Hoity Toity carries some of my dress designs in his boutique in Canterlot, I designed the outfits that Sapphire Shores is using on her current tour, and have often been commissioned for designs for the Grand Galloping Gala for celebrities and members of the royal court, and that's just what I've done this past year. *Good?* My dear, I am *fabulous*."

Trixie grinned, "Well that *is* impressive, I must admit. Perhaps the Great and Powerful Trixie will commission you for an outfit to use in *her* stage performances. How about you," she turned to Applejack, "I'm guess

from all the apples you've been bringing, you must be some sort of apple farmer?"

Applejack tilted her hat and nodded politely, "That's right, I co-own the Sweet Apple Acres orchard on the opposite side o' town, along with my big brother Big Macintosh. Nothin' fancy to say, no braggin' necessary here. Just a simple farmer makin' an honest livin', not at all used to seein' all these fancy-schmancy bells 'n' whistles like you and Twilight just threw out there at us," she added with sarcasm.

Trixie next looked at Fluttershy, who hesitated for a moment before meeting her gaze, "How about you...Fluttershy, was it? I don't believe we've even met."

"Oh...um...no I suppose not..." Fluttershy peeped, "Twilight told me all about you though...and I approve."

Trixie raised an eyebrow, "Approve? Of what?" She didn't notice Pinkie Pie behind her wildly flailing her arms and shaking her head.

"Oh! Oh...um..." she looked sheepishly around for something to distract her, "N-nothing. I like your hat."

"My...right, well. What do you do around here? You're a pegasus so I assume you must be a mailpony or on the weather patrol?"

"Oh no...I could never hope to...control any of the weather, all that lightning and those rain clouds and all the wind and cold...that and I'm not a very good flier..." she said nervously, "And...I'm not very strong, I...d-don't think I'd be cut out for delivering mail...like Miss Derpy."

Derpy smiled, "And if you ever change your mind, there's always a spot open for my Shy-shy."

Fluttershy blushed at the pet name, "Um...so...I take care of the animals around Ponyville, both the native ones...and ponies' pets."

"Ah, a veterinarian?" Trixie smiled.

"I...guess you could call it that," Fluttershy said as she shifted her hooves around, "I don't really have any kind of formal training...just experience..."

Trixie made to continue, but decided against it when the pegasus shrunk further under Trixie's contemplative look.

"Hmm...well then last but...well, *probably* least, how about you?" Trixie pointed at Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow puffed out her chest and put on her best smug grin, "I'd bore you with how I'm the *lead* Weather Pegasus here in Ponyville, but it'd be more impressive to tell you I'm the running for a spot to join the Wonderbolts. Only the best fliers in all of Equestria manage to get in, y'know, not exactly an easy position to hold. Yeah, I'm kind of a fan favorite, so to speak, pretty much the coolest pony ever. Twilight and I crunched the numbers, turns out every other pony is maybe about eighty percent as cool as I am."

"You? In the Wonderbolts?" Trixie smirked, "That's rich. While the flying I saw you perform was *mildly* impressive, it certainly wasn't anything that the Great and Powerful Trixie would write home about. Certainly nothing that the true *best* fliers in Equestria would be impressed with."

Rainbow glared, "Well then, it seems like a demonstration is in order."

"Oh please, I really don't care," Trixie laughed, "If you feel the need to validate yourself in front of *me*, then perhaps I misjudged you."

"Huh?"

"My *dear* Rainbow Dash, I think even *I've* learned something so far from all of this," Trixie turned and looked directly at Twilight Sparkle for just a moment, "Proving yourself to other ponies is great and all, but you have to learn to respect yourself above all others. Wouldn't you agree? I mean, you don't *really* care whether the Great and Powerful Trixie thinks your flying is impressive, do you?"

Rainbow Dash was caught off guard, "No...I...guess I don't really care what you think. I only care what the Wonderbolts think, so I can be accepted into the group. And myself...and my friends."

"Well, and the Great and Powerful Trixie is being honest here, but she is not here to prove herself to any of *you* either. Trixie lost a great deal of her self-worth after her visit here, and she is merely seeking to redeem herself in her own eyes. So all of you," and she made sure to look at Rainbow Dash especially, "Can stop assuming I'm here for some petty revenge on Twilight Sparkle. I'm here to prove I'm better than her, yes, but only really for myself. If our little contest didn't require other ponies to keep measurements and the like, I'd have preferred to keep this entire ordeal just between the two of us."

Pinkie Pie smiled and nudged Rainbow, "See Dashie, I told you she wasn't all bad," she whispered.

"Hmph!" Rainbow snorted, "I've still got my eye on you, Miss Great and Powerful. One step out of line, and you're out of here, got it?"

Trixie nodded, and offered her hoof to Rainbow Dash, "While we may not be friends, I'd like to think we're not exactly enemies anymore."

Rainbow Dash looked at Trixie's hoof with caution. Was this some kind of trick? She slowly extended her own and took a firm grasp. She smiled when nothing happened, and then shook with some effort.

"Right," she said, "I'm just looking out for Twilight. Somepony has to, she's so worked up about all this hooey."

Trixie nodded, "Well then, now that I've gotten to know everypony a little better, let us be off! I certainly don't feel as exhausted as yesterday, but if I'm not hungry then I'm not the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

Dinner had been quite a different experience, Trixie thought to herself later that night. Now that everypony was there and they were all on more or less friendlier terms, they all had a great deal more to talk about. Everyone seemed more interested in learning more about *her*, something she still found odd considering how sure she was that at the very least Applejack and Rainbow Dash were still a little wary of her; Pinkie Pie and Derpy, her new...*friends* - Trixie couldn't get over how different that felt, to refer to another pony as her friend - had the excuse for wanting to know more about her, and her about them. She planned on finding out from the two, at tomorrow's breakfast, what made them *really* consider her as a friend in the first place. Nevertheless, she was always glad to talk about herself and her exploits more, and now that everypony was certain that Trixie had not only come about her title honestly (even if they all still were skeptical about *how* exactly she'd done it, what with the Great and Powerful Paragon still being considered a myth and a legend to all of them), but that she was as skilled as she boasted when it came to many aspects of magic, they were all eager to hear more about one another.

Trixie was not surprised that Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy had been to Cloudsdale - that was to be expected of any pegasus. She was not surprised they'd all been to Canterlot thanks to Twilight Sparkle's

connections, nor that they'd all traveled far, far west to visit Appleloosa, a tiny frontier town that Trixie had visited when it was just getting started. She was surprised to find out that of all the ponies, the only one who had visited any major cities outside of Canterlot was *Applejack* visiting *Manehatten*, probably the most unlikely of stories Trixie had ever heard, but Applejack had those honest eyes and didn't seem like the type to lie to gain Trixie's favor.

Trixie had heard all about their story of helping Princess Celestia get rid of a sleeping dragon (though she was doubtful of its truth when they told her that the timid Fluttershy had been the heroine at the end of the day), their encounter with some wild Diamond Dogs (creatures that Trixie had no experience with but some knowledge of), and how they'd "saved" Ponyville from a swarm of Parasprites (creatures that Trixie shuddered to think of; she was impressed to learn at long last the secret to getting rid of them from Pinkie Pie of all ponies, and wished she had known this technique when she was visiting the tiny village - former village, now - of Trottingham last year; she was glad she didn't pull a bone-headed move like Twilight had that changed around their appetites - she didn't want to think about a parasprite eating her precious cape and hat). Their experiences had bonded them together and now they were all very close friends, a bond that Trixie found she wanted with her new-found friends as well.

What is it about friendship that makes me feel so much better about myself? she wondered as she shifted in her bed, *What is it that makes me more confident in my magic? Today's magic display was certainly the best I've ever performed but...I don't think I could've had the inspiration to do anything of the sort before I came to Ponyville. It's as if...having friends is increasing my magic? Maybe that's why Twilight seems to be more powerful - she had friends there to support her and give her the inspiration and energy she needed. Well, Twilight Sparkle, I am armed with friends of my own now. Let us see how well we stand up to one another tomorrow...*

Chapter 5

Jubilations and Comprehensions

Trixie awoke with a groggy yawn and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Going about her now-daily morning routine, she couldn't help but notice how quiet the house seemed today - Pinkie Pie was usually making some sort of racket downstairs by now, or at the very least had given a much-too-perky "Good morning!", but Trixie had yet to hear a peep. Her mane brushed and coat shined, Trixie exited the restroom and went to grab her things before heading downstairs when she finally noticed the envelope. It was a bright pink color with frilly lace trim and Pinkie Pie's distinctive handwriting on the front, commanding Trixie to "Read me!" Trixie opened it and found a large letter inside, which she began to read.

Dear Trixie,

Good morning! Did you have a good sleep? I sure hope you did, I know I did because I was dreaming up all sorts of things I wanted to have at tonight's party that I just know you'll enjoy! Speaking of which, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to be there at the Spot today - when I woke up and started to look for party supplies, I noticed I was running really, really, SUPER low on, like, EVERYTHING! I know, right? How can the party pony extraordinaire possibly be out of party supplies? Well I must have just forgotten to re-stock everything what with all the excitement from having a new friend and all. So, for most of today I'm going to be out and about in Ponyville getting all the party supplies I need - streamers and banners and balloons and party favors and snacks and soda pop and punch and-

"Ugh...she writes just like she talks," Trixie sighed as she hastily skimmed over the rest of Pinkie's shopping list that she felt the need to include.

-and of course, music! So again, I'm sorry I can't be there for you today, but I have so much to do and so little time to do it, I just couldn't

throw you a half-flanked party, y'know? But don't worry, there's good news! Well, I mean the awesome party is good news too, but I mean, there's good news that has to do with someone being at the Spot to be there and support you. Today is Sunday, and I never got that name, I mean, the Sun is out very day, wouldn't every day be a Sun-day? Oh! That reminds me - ICE CREAM SUNDAES! Thanks for the tip! Anyway, yeah, Sunday - this is Derpy's day off, so she's going to be there for you all day today! She'll be over at her usual time this morning, I baked some muffins for you two that will be on the counter downstairs. Let Derpy know where I'll be today, in case I don't see her while I'm heading out. Good luck today, Trixie, I'm there for you in heart even if I'm not there in the flesh - which is a gross phrase by the way - so don't be discouraged!

If I finish my shopping and set-up before the event is over I'll stop by the Spot, otherwise you and all the others can head on over here to Sugarcube Corner when you're all done, I should have everything ready by then.

Good Luck!

Love,

Your Bestest Best Friend in all Equestria,

Pinkie Pie!

P.S. Let the others know where I am too! I'm sure they can guess on their own, they know me pretty well by now, but just in case they don't it wouldn't be very nice not to let them know where their favorite Pinkie Pie is. Thanks!

Trixie sighed and mused to herself, "Well, I suppose I should be happy - she *is* throwing this party for the Great and Powerful Trixie, after all. It...just feels disappointing, knowing she won't be there."

Heading downstairs, she found the big plate of muffins as Pinkie had promised. Trixie set about getting the breakfast table ready when a familiar knock came at the door; Trixie hurriedly answered it, glad to have some company again (*What has come over me, that I am suddenly now so fond and...wanting of other ponies' company?*). Derpy was there at the door, and gave Trixie a big hug and a heartfelt "Good morning, Trixie!" Trixie returned the hug, "Hey, where's Pinkie?"

"Good morning, Derpy," Trixie smiled, "I'm afraid Pinkie Pie will not be joining us today, she's out collecting party supplies for tonight. But don't worry, she said you had the day off, is that right?" Derpy nodded, "Well good, then you and I can spend some time together. The Great and Powerful Trixie wishes to get to know her friends a little better."

The grey pegasus smiled and happily trotted over to the breakfast table, wasting no time in grabbing hold of and devouring a chocolate muffin. Trixie joined her at the table and went about her own breakfast, starting with one of her favorite muffins in the batch: a big blueberry one. As they ate, Trixie planned to talk, and so she opened up the conversation with a rather forward question.

"Derpy, I have been meaning to ask, what exactly is it about the Great and Powerful Trixie that makes you want to be her friend? While she certainly *is* the most wondrous, talented, and marvelous unicorn in all of Equestria, those facts have yet to make her any friends as far as she is aware of. The rest of Twilight Sparkle's friends don't seem to eager to be anything more than acquaintances; what makes you so different?"

Derpy noiselessly swallowed the rest of her third muffin since they'd been seated (Trixie was convinced that Derpy was the only pony who could beat Pinkie Pie in an eating contest, but only if muffins were involved most likely), and gave herself a playful bonk on the head, "Pinkie Pie said it best when we first met, you weren't really obnoxious about my condition." Derpy frowned, and nervously twiddled her hooves, "I get those kind of reactions a lot, so when you didn't act all grossed-out and stuff about it, I just had a feeling you were special, just like Pinkie Pie is. Since I moved to Ponyville, there are a lot of ponies here that are really nice to me, but before I came here I didn't really have any friends..."

"Are you friends with Pinkie's other friends too?"

She tapped her hoof to her chin, "Well, nowadays yeah, I guess you could say I am. I don't hang out with them all that regularly, to be honest. Pinkie and I have breakfast together every morning, that's good enough for me; I visit Shy-shy...oh...um, I mean Fluttershy," she added with a blush, "I visit her a lot since she lives all the way on the edge of the Everfree Forest and doesn't get a lot of visitors outside of the others."

"And what about the others?"

"Oh, well I see Miss Sparkle a lot, she's always getting all sorts of deliveries from Canterlot's library, since she's trying to expand hers. We talk sometimes, she's really nice, but she's usually very busy. Rarity and I don't see each other that often, she's very fussy about making sure her fabric deliveries are always in good condition and I know sometimes I can be a little...clumsy. She doesn't mean any harm by it though, and she made me the prettiest dress for the Grand Galloping Gala. Um...I don't get to talk much with Applejack, she's not on my route...but she's real nice when I do get to see her, and I know she's as hard a worker as me. Rainbow Dash and I don't talk much either, she insists on picking up her own mail and she almost never gets any anyways, but...well, she and Pinkie Pie are super close, so I guess there must be something special about her that Pinkie likes."

Trixie's curiosity about what exactly "super close" meant was rising - it was the second time those exact words had been used to describe the two. She brushed it off for now, making a mental note to ask Pinkie Pie herself later.

"So anyway, yeah, you were nice to me right after meeting me, you didn't say anything mean or stare at me like some kind of weirdo, so I figured you were really nice deep down, even if other ponies might disagree."

Trixie smiled lightly, "I appreciate the honesty, Derpy. The Great and Powerful Trixie admits that her attitude might...discourage other ponies from wanting to associate with her. But she is glad that some ponies were able to look past that and want to get to know the real Trixie better. This is all sort of new to Trixie, to be honest."

When the tray of muffins was finally finished, Trixie and Derpy cleaned up and set out for the Spot to get ready for today's contest. *Endurance*, Trixie thought, *Similar enough to Strength that Twilight Sparkle may have an advantage, but different enough that the Great and Powerful Trixie may be able to circumvent it. Let us see what Twilight has in mind.*

The pair arrived at the clearing much as Trixie was used to already after having done so the previous two days. The stage from the night before was completely dismantled...somehow, though Trixie was unsure how it had been done so quickly and without any trace of it being nearby. It

was as if the entire stage had disappeared in the night. A most curious circumstance, but not one that Trixie felt was worth concerning herself with right now. No, right now she needed to focus on her contest with Twilight Sparkle, who was at the designated spectators' area with only Rarity accompanying her. There was no sign of Applejack, Rainbow Dash, or Fluttershy - Derpy frowned at the absence of the latter.

"Trixie, you're here early," Twilight smiled, "...where's Pinkie Pie?"

"Getting tonight's party situated," Trixie nodded, handing Twilight Pinkie's note, "I might ask you the same of your other friends - surely they will be here to show you their support?"

Twilight frowned, "Fluttershy was waiting for me when I got here, she said she had to take care of some baby bunnies that wandered onto her property, so she might be a little late; she insisted she could do it herself when we offered to help, but I think that's just her not wanting to impose on us. Applejack told me last night that she couldn't come today, since Applebuck season - that's the main harvest season," she explained at the sight of Trixie's confusion, "Starts today and she wants to make sure it gets as far along as she can before taking anymore time off - she doesn't want to put all the burden on her brother for the first few days of it. As for Rainbow Dash...well honestly I have no idea, it's not like her to not be here."

"If I didn't know any better," Rarity interjected, "Considering Pinkie Pie is getting tonight's party all taken care of, I would assume that she managed to enlist Rainbow Dash's assistance in the endeavor."

"Rainbow Dash doesn't seem like she'd be too interested in helping get a party intended for *me* set up properly," Trixie pointedly mused.

"Well, I wouldn't put it past Pinkie Pie to convince Rainbow Dash of anything, that pegasus is so tightly wrapped around Pinkie's hoof I'm surprised she can even fly," Rarity added with a laugh.

Trixie's brain was now cluttered with all sorts of mismatched imagery and ideas that she didn't know what to make of the whole situation. She made another note that she *needed* to find out what all this was about later, straight from the horse's mouth as it were. For now though, there was a contest to get taken care of.

"So, Twilight Sparkle, what sort of gizmos or gadgets do you have for today's event, hmm?" Trixie asked with mock concern, "Hopefully whatever it is doesn't require an entire day to get ready?"

"Oh, well it's nothing very big like what we had to get set up last time," Twilight explained, fiddling with her saddlebag, "Just a pair of...these!"

Twilight pulled from her bag with care a pair of tiny metal spheres, each barely larger than a marble. Trixie watched with curiosity as Twilight carefully lowered them to the grass below, as if they were extremely delicate.

"And what, pray tell, are *these*?" Trixie asked.

"They're Magically Accurate Weight Distributors - or, M.A.W.D., for short."

"That is the dumbest name for anything ever," Trixie said with a frown and narrowed eyes, "*Ever*."

Twilight blushed, "W-well, it's not like I named them, that's what they're called. It is a pretty accurate name for them, it says exactly what they do."

"So what is it they *do* do?"

Twilight motioned to Rarity, "Rarity, a little demonstration is in order."

"Me? Whatever for, dear?"

"They're designed exclusively for unicorn use, and since I don't want Trixie or myself to expend any magical energy trying to lift them before the event-"

"What, these little things?" Rarity laughed as she lifted one up. She noticed with some annoyance that it was heavier than it looked, so she pushed more magic into her spell to lift it. Doing so only seemed to make the object heavier, and as the four ponies present could see, the object became bigger as well. It was now the size of an apple, and grew larger as Rarity pumped more magic into her spell; eventually Rarity gave up and let go of it, and the instant her magic released, the sphere shrunk back to its original size and landed softly in the grass, "Good *heavens*, Twilight, what in Equestria are these?"

"Like I said, they're Magically Accurate Weight Distributors," Twilight smiled, "They absorb magic, and the amount they absorb is reflected in the

size and weight of the sphere. The weight is exponentially greater the larger the object becomes, so at this minimum size it weighs barely more than a marble, but as it gets bigger and bigger it gets heavier and heavier, so that apple-sized one would weigh as much as a boulder. They're really quite fascinating devices."

"So let me get this straight," Trixie sighed, "We're going to test our Endurance by holding these weights all day?"

"I believe that would be the most fitting, don't you agree? I figure if we both keep our objects at the maximum size we can handle, we'll see how long we can hold out."

"This sounds like it would be fitting for that Strength contest," Rarity pointedly said, "Only...well, I suppose you're not *directly* competing, which you said was required..."

Twilight frowned, "Well it is supposed to be a constant spell-cast. I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting the Strength contest to last as long as it did. Trixie certainly displayed a great deal more power than I anticipated."

Trixie scowled, "But apparently not enough, I suppose. Enough of this, let us get started, yes? This sounds like it's going to take all day - *again*."

"I certainly hope not," Rarity yawned, "I *am* looking forward to Pinkie Pie's party, it's not often she throws any that require as much preparation as it sounds like she's doing."

Trixie rolled her eyes, and took hold - carefully - of one of the spheres. Twilight took her own and they backed several yards away from one another, before Trixie channeled her magic into the ball. She kept pushing her magic until she hit a point that she struggled to keep the weighted object aloft, adjusted herself, and now comfortably held the sphere in front of her; it had gone from the size of a marble to the size of a refrigerator, if one could find a spherical fridge of course. Twilight's spell channeled much the same and she kept her own sphere near enough to Trixie's that they could be compared. Trixie noted with mild annoyance that Twilight's was bigger than hers by only just a small amount, enough to prove she was stronger if anything. Trixie wanted to risk making her own a tad larger just to prove a point, but second-guessed it when she knew showing off too much pride in this case might cause her to lose.

Minutes passed and turned into hours, and Trixie noted she was having a difficult time maintaining her spell. With a sidelong glance, she saw Twilight Sparkle's object now appeared just a tad larger than it had been, but Twilight herself was barely breaking a sweat. Trixie found this hard to believe - she had proven herself just two days ago to be nearly Twilight's equal in Strength, had she not? So then, how was it that Twilight could maintain such a draining spell - clearly using much more magic than herself - without being any worse for wear? Trixie's focus on her object was far lost - she only focused her magic there barely now, while her mind was busy trying to sort out this strange sight. Trixie narrowed her eyes and wracked her brain, and only one word came to her: *Suspicious*. Realizing that Twilight had this contest won, Trixie decided to conserve herself and acknowledge her loss - there was no longer any point in beating around the bush, she thought, so she may as well admit it. *Twilight Sparkle does have stronger magic than the Great and Powerful Trixie, that much is certain*, she thought, *But something seems...off. Just how much more powerful is she?*

Trixie dropped her spell unceremoniously, letting the rapidly shrinking sphere fall to the grass. Twilight noticed and followed suit with her own a moment later. Derpy ran over and gathered them up to put them away, worried that if anypony else attempted it, the spheres would just be a burden. As expected, they didn't weigh hardly anything at all in their default state.

"Twilight Sparkle, it seems that I must acknowledge your Strength as well as your Endurance," Trixie said with smug confidence, "But I have seen first-hand that it is not always power alone that proves one's worth - there are still four events left, and I don't plan on letting you win any more."

Twilight frowned, "I noticed that you just let your weight go. You didn't want to use all of your potential in this?"

Trixie scoffed, "You must take me for a foal. The Great and Powerful Trixie noticed that you were holding onto a far greater burden than her own, and that you didn't seem to be anywhere near as exerted as herself. So I figure, why should I waste everypony's time wearing myself out just to prove what I found out two days ago - I'm not as strong as you are, apparently not by a long shot. But I remind you, Twilight Sparkle, that there

is more to magical ability than strength alone, there is finesse and grace to it as well. Your friend Rarity would attest to that, I am certain; she said as much when she challenged me during my last visit."

Rarity coughed, "Yes, well...if we're all finished here, shall we be going then? It's not very late, no doubt Pinkie Pie is still preparing your party, seeing as she isn't here yet. Actually, I am a little worried about Fluttershy-"

"Yeah!" Derpy squeaked, "How could a couple of baby bunnies take up this much of her time? It's been hours since she was here, if you say she was waiting for you two when you two arrived."

Twilight Sparkle nodded, "Good idea. Maybe whatever problem she was having could do with some assistance from the most talented unicorns in Ponyville, hmm?" she smiled at Trixie who merely frowned at the inclusion of other ponies in what she felt was an exclusive club. Nevertheless, Trixie agreed that perhaps something was amiss, so they set about on their way to Fluttershy's cottage.

What they found there was of some surprise and distress - Fluttershy was nowhere to be found, and there wasn't any note or clue as to where she had gone. Derpy panicked as she searched everywhere she could think of for her favorite pony, her good eye moving almost as erratically as her poor one in her search. Twilight and Rarity fanned out to try and find if she'd gone far, while Trixie was left at the cottage to continue the search for clues. Trixie was most surprised when she got one from what she considered a very unlikely source - it was a little bunny rabbit with a pure white coat, and Trixie swore the little creature had a much higher-functioning brain than other rabbits just from its mannerisms. It got her attention with a completely not-at-all subtle carrot to the back of the head; Trixie gave chase, following the rabbit as it bounded and fled to the rear side of the cottage, mocking Trixie with rude gestures and faces as it went. Trixie had never been so angry at a *bunny* before. When she thought she'd finally caught up to it, she found a most interesting sight just beyond the tiny rabbit hole it had hidden in - it was a path, winding and tuning as it went past a chicken coop and some wire fences towards a place Trixie was not sure she wanted to even think about - the Everfree Forest. Now Trixie

was as confused as ever, especially when the little rabbit popped up out of the burrow and frantically began pointing at the path. Trixie ignored the earlier harassing, and observed the rabbit's game of charades - she admitted he was better at it than Pinkie Pie, when she had the chance to spare a thought.

"Let's see, two words," she said aloud to the rabbit as it went through the motions, "First word...two syllables," the rabbit began flapping its arms like wings and for some bizarre was able to keep aloft for a small moment, "Um...hover...flying...buzzing...aloft...raven...flutter," the rabbit frantically pointed at Trixie to signal a correct guess, before pretending to cower in fear at her, "Okay, I suppose this is obvious then," she sighed, "Second word shy, I get it - Fluttershy."

The little rabbit noisily bounced up and down and frantically pointed at the path into Everfree, "You're kidding, that little pony went into *Everfree Forest*? Oh dear, this is not good," she bent down and said sternly to the little rabbit as she handed him her hat, "Take this and find Twilight Sparkle and the others that came with me - Rarity and Derpy should be around too - and lead them to the forest as you have done for me. I'll head after Fluttershy for now, so go!"

The rabbit hastily nodded and bounded off while under Trixie's hat, making it look like the thing was moving entirely of its own volition. Trixie frowned as she looked at the Everfree Forest, "Well...if that scaredy-pony could buck up enough courage to go in there alone, I suppose it wouldn't do for me not to follow suit."

And with a gallop, she was off into a place she had never really ever wanted to go...

The Everfree Forest, Trixie admitted, was not as bad as she had been lead to believe from all the storybooks and tall tales and rumors. Sure it was dark, sure the creatures within made noises that made Trixie shiver at the thought of what the beasts who owned those noises looked like, and sure everything here just seemed so *wild* that it put her on edge, but it wasn't so bad...okay, Trixie thought, *It's spooky in here. Oh Celestia why did I come here, for some pony I hardly even know?*

Just then, Trixie noticed something moving just off to the side of the route - it appeared to be another pony, and it quickly ran off the path and into the woods beyond. Trixie didn't catch much of a glimpse of the pony's appearance, but made the quick assumption that it must've been Fluttershy - who else could it have been out here in the Everfree Forest all alone? Trixie made off after the pony, and found that there was an almost neatly-formed path winding its way through the trees. After walking quite a distance, Trixie found herself marveling at what appeared to be a *town* in the middle of the forest. *Well, at least it used to be a town*, Trixie noted - now, it was just a bunch of ruined homes with rotting lawns and gardens. *Is it suddenly much darker in here?* Trixie spared a thought, *It's almost pitch black all of a sudden.*

A sudden sound from the side startled Trixie, but she was not expecting the sound's source at all. Somepony...no, *something* was rising out of the ground, distinctly pony-shaped but obviously not at all a pony, at least anymore. Trixie backed away from it as it finally uprooted itself and looked straight at her with dead eyes. A voice, seemingly from nowhere and yet from everywhere, rang in Trixie's ears.

"You...you bEar the maRRRRrrrk..."

Trixie gulped and back away a little more, suddenly certain that the voice was somehow coming from this *thing*. As she stepped backwards, the ground rumbled behind her; she jumped to the side to see another one of the things crawling its way out of the ground.

"The marK...she beaRs the mArk..."

Trixie panicked as more and more of the things started to break free from the dirt. She fled back in the direction she had entered, more of the creatures rising up to try and bar her path. Horn aglow, Trixie used her magic to fight her way through them, blowing some apart with bursts of energy while flinging others to the side with her telekinesis. A light at the end of the path signaled that she was getting close to the rest of Everfree, and with a mighty burst of magically-boosted speed, she was back on the main path. She turned to face down any of the horrors that would follow, but none did. They appeared not to want to venture into the light, Trixie noted, as the burning red eyes just beyond the path faded away.

"This forest," Trixie panted, "Is *insane*. I am never coming back here again as long as I live. I certainly hope Fluttershy *didn't* come this way...but then, who was-" she shook her head, "Nevermind. I'd better just find her and get us out of this Celestia-forsaken place."

Gathering her resolve, Trixie continued on her search. Along the route was a huge patch of stunningly bright blue flowers; opting not to wander off the path again, she just walked straight through them. After many more minutes of walking along, at last she came upon another strange sight along the path - there was a house out here in the forest, built into a tree much the same as Twilight's was back in Ponyville. It was decorated with all sorts of masks and markings that Trixie didn't recognize, and she was a little put off by just the strangeness of such a place being here in the middle of Everfree. Curious, Trixie approached the house and looked into one of the windows to see if anypony was home, and her jaw dropped at the sight she beheld - Fluttershy was inside this house, sitting in a huge cauldron filled with a soupy mixture. Trixie panicked - whoever lived here had kidnapped Fluttershy, and was making her into dinner!

Trixie wasted no time in bursting through the door with ease, "Hang on Fluttershy, the Great and Powerful Trixie is here to rescue you!"

"Oh!" Fluttershy squeaked at the sudden burst, "T-T-Trixie? W-what are you doing here?"

"Fear not, my delicate friend," Trixie boasted as she used her magic to pull Fluttershy out of the cauldron, "You won't be getting turned into somepony's dinner tonight!"

"Oh, um...I d-don't think you-"

A noise from the next room made Trixie start. She jumped between the door to the room and Fluttershy, making to protect the timid pegasus from whoever was in there. A strange pony came from the room, one Trixie had never seen the likes of before; she tried to recall her studies of other equine species, but nothing came to mind.

"Back, fiend!" she commanded, "There won't be any Fluttershy soup for you tonight, I'm afraid!"

The striped pony looked at Trixie with an annoyed, but calm, stare. Trixie was slightly unnerved by the pony's demeanor.

"Um...Trixie that's-"

"Strange guest, please hear me speak," the other pony started, "I do not intend harm to the one so meek."

Trixie blinked at the creature's rhyme, but was undaunted.

"Trixie, this is Zecora," Fluttershy stammered, "She's a friend."

Trixie did a double-take between Fluttershy and the new pony, then shook her head, "But...the cauldron?"

"If you would let us have time to explain," Zecora spoke again, "You'll find that everything here is quite plain. There's nothing afoul here, you needn't worry, please rest a spell, there is no hurry."

Trixie looked at Fluttershy, "Perhaps you'd better tell me what's going on. Your pet rabbit pointed me here as if there was some kind of panic. I take it that is not the case?"

"Oh...Angel Bunny was probably worried because I'm running a little late," Fluttershy nervously said as she fiddled with her hooves, "I really didn't mean to..."

"Why are you even *in* the Everfree Forest?"

"Oh, didn't Twilight tell you about my bunny problem?"

"Sort of...but-"

"See, when I woke up this morning, there was a bunch of baby bunnies playing outside my cottage. They were just so cute, I wanted to give them all a hug. Um...but I knew it was strange for a bunch of babies to just come wandering around, so I decided to keep an eye on them until their parents came back. After telling Twilight about it, I came back and then, oh...the most terrible thing happened!," she sniffed, "A snake came by the cottage, and all the bunnies got scared and ran into the Everfree Forest. I tried to keep them from running, but there were too many and...I couldn't catch them all. I couldn't just leave them, this place is...d-dangerous for ones so little. Well, after I gathered them all up and sent them safely home, I sort of...tripped," she blushed at Trixie's 'you have to be kidding' look, "Like I said, I'm...n-not a very good flier. Um...and I fell into some Poison Joke - it's a flower that likes to play pranks."

"...what?"

"The Poison Joke is not a jest," Zecora interrupted with a grin, "Of this, I'm sure you would attest."

"Beg pardon?"

"Oh my..." Fluttershy gasped.

"What?"

Zecora headed back into the side-room and returned moments later with a mirror, "Perhaps it is best you see first-hand, the Joke on you the Poison has planned."

Trixie used her magic to hover the mirror over to her.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, and Derpy could've heard that scream from all the way near the edge of the Everfree Forest, and with them already deep inside it made it easy to tell where the scream had come from.

"That definitely came from the direction of Zecora's place," Twilight pointed, "That must be where they are."

Rarity breathed a sigh of relief, then chanced a grin, "Thank goodness, I was worried those two were in real danger. If that scream is any indication, I'd bet my boutique that Trixie has had an encounter with the Poison Joke."

"I certainly hope so," Twilight said, then hastily corrected, "Er...rather I hope that's *all* that happened."

The trio approached Zecora's tree-hut and hastily knocked. Fluttershy opened the door and was promptly tackled into the house by an over-excited Derpy. Twilight and Rarity entered the house as well; the latter could barely stifle a laugh as the Great and Powerful Trixie, in all her Poison Joke-inspired splendor, paced in a huff in the corner, anxiously waiting for Zecora to finish another batch of the antidote. Twilight Sparkle found it difficult not to laugh as well, but held her tongue. Trixie could feel them looking at her, and turned to face them.

"Go on, I know you want to!" she snapped, "Go on! Laugh at the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

"W-whatever do you mean, dear?" Rarity said with a hoof over her mouth.

"Y-yeah, there's nothing to laugh at here, no sir," Twilight said through clenched teeth.

"Trixie," Derpy asked with complete sincerity, "Why did you dye your coat? It was much prettier before, now you just look all...weird."

Trixie frowned, and looked back at herself in the mirror. Where once her coat and mane had been a marvelous, luxurious blue and silver, respectively, now they looked like something out of a circus act not at all befitting a unicorn of her talent and style. Before, her coat was a bright, icy blue. Now, it was a hideously garish technicolor abomination - sure, the rainbow motif worked well for some ponies' manes (Rainbow Dash came to mind), but this wasn't quite the same. The colors were all mismatched and it didn't flow together properly in the least; it looked like somepony had taken a paintbrush to her coat, but had forgotten to wash the brush between changing colors, so while it started off bright and colorful at her head (which was a bright tomato red), it slowly turned muddy and ugly as it approached her cutie mark, before just going into a sickly-looking brown as it passed her flank. Her mane, on the other hoof, was a bright neon green, clashing hideously with her new coat colors, though it would have clashed with anything else really.

Rarity regained her composure, "Oh darling, at least it's only temporarily. If I may be bold enough to make a joke, green is *not* your color either, it would seem," she said with a light giggle.

"Har har," Trixie mockingly laughed, "Zecora, *please* tell me that antidote bath is ready?"

Zecora sniffed her mixture and smiled, "I do believe it is now fit, for you to take a little dip."

Trixie wasted absolutely no time in diving into the mixture, removing her cape practically in mid-air. As she soaked, she could see the horrid colors from before wash away like ink, revealing her beautiful true colors return. Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned to the other ponies and glared, "Not a word of this to anypony else, understand?"

It was well past sundown when the quintet of ponies returned to Ponyville - Zecora had politely declined the invitation to join them at Pinkie Pie's party. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were waiting impatiently for them.

"Just where in tarnation have ya'll been?!" Applejack flustered, "I thought somethin' right awful happened, none of ya were at the meetin' spot when I got there."

"We had a bit of a distraction," Twilight explained, "It turned out to be a false alarm, nothing serious. Sorry if we worried you, Applejack, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash gave an impatient sigh, "Look, we'll talk later about all this, okay? Pinkie Pie's been all huffy and puffy lately since you're all late - she thought you weren't coming! You wouldn't believe how hard it was to snap her out of her...little fit, this time. I'll go let her know you're on your way," she said as she bolted off.

"Well then, we should get going," Twilight nodded, "Come on girls!"

The group headed for Sugarcube Corner, which Trixie found to be an odd sight, seeing as how it was completely pitch black inside. Was there really a party going on here? They entered the bakery and fumbled about a little bit in darkness. Trixie found her mind wandering back to her little adventure in the Everfree Forest, and was briefly worried about what was coming."

"Seriously, what is the meaning of all this?" Trixie asked, "Where is-"
"SURPRISE!"

The lights all came on at once, and Trixie was startled by the sudden bone-breaking hug she received from Pinkie Pie. The entire bakery had been decorated from top to bottom, with streamers of every colors, banners bearing her name, confetti strewn all over the floor, and balloons matching her coat and mane colors floating lazily about the ceiling. Several tables had been set-up with all sorts of food stuffs and treats, from apple-flavored desserts and snacks to muffins and cupcakes; on the center table was a huge blue and silver cake that had been decorated with tiny figurines of all the ponies present. Trixie could not believe her eyes - the tiny party that Pinkie had held just for the two of them on the night they first met was *nothing* compared to this.

"Do ya like it?!" Pinkie said with a great deal of enthusiasm, "I spent all day getting everything all set up and boy let me tell you it sure is hard finding some things on such short notice, but I won't settle for anything less than perfect when it comes to a party for my newest friend so here we are! Rainbow Dash helped me set up all the decorations since I can't reach the ceiling see, and she was a big help in carrying a lot of the stuff over since some of the boxes were *super* heavy, oh and I got us a really cool jukebox

so we can have all sorts of music and then we can dance and just have a super great fun time! So do ya like it, huh huh huh?!"

Trixie blinked, "This is...impressive. You threw all this together in just a few hours?"

"Yep!" Pinkie bubbled, "Come on, let's PARTY!"

Trixie admitted that she was enjoying herself. A lot, actually. The other ponies were all beginning to grow on her just a little bit, even Rainbow Dash and Applejack, who in turn were treating her with a lot more friendliness than they had been in the past. When everyone learned that Trixie had charged into the Everfree Forest, alone, to find out what happened to Fluttershy, they were both impressed at her bravery and thankful for her concern. Fluttershy herself was now a little more talkative, and Trixie found herself glad that the shy pony was opening up to her more - if this was what having lots of friends was like, then perhaps she could understand why Twilight Sparkle wanted to be friends with her, too. Trixie found herself considering if being friends with Twilight Sparkle wouldn't be so bad, but hastily shook that thought away as soon as it came.

"Come on, everypony, it's time to dance!" Pinkie Pie shouted, "Here, let me get some music on, oh you guys are gonna love my new jukebox it has all the classics and all sorts of newer stuff and it is just the greatest thing ever!"

Pinkie Pie turned on her new jukebox and began frantically hitting random buttons, trying to find a song that everypony could dance to.

"Let's see...hmm, this one?" *click*

Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you-

"Ha ha, no, um...let's try-" *click*

I see a little silhouette-o of a man. Scaramouche, Scara-

"No." *click*

ALL ABOOOOOOOOARD! HA HA HA-

"No. Hmm..." *click*

Baby, baby, baby oooooooooo-

"Oh Celestia no." *click*

E-ques-tria Girls, we're kinda magical, boots on hooves, bikinis on-

"Whoops! How'd *that* get in there?" *click*

You've got the touch...you've got the powaaaaAAAAAA-

"Come on! There has to be *something* danceable on this-" *click*

What is love? Baby don't hurt me. Don't hurt me. No more.

"Oh this is my *jam*!"

Trixie found herself and the other ponies hastily and forcibly huddled into the dance space Pinkie had cleared out, and within the frame of a few seconds she had gotten everypony to start moving themselves to the beat of the song. Trixie couldn't help but find the rhythm strangely catchy - addictive, almost - and found herself nodding her head in time with the tune. Soon enough, she was dancing along with the other ponies, and enjoying herself quite thoroughly.

After a few songs of dancing (Trixie noticed that Pinkie Pie was *really* good at picking dance tunes), they moved to the dinner table for cake and ice cream. Everypony got to keep the little figurine of themselves, and Trixie found it most charming that Pinkie had put so much effort into getting them made, though she was curious why her own figure and Twilight Sparkle's had been seated in the center of the cake in such close proximity. From the cake table they moved to games - first was pin the tail on the pony, a game Trixie had never played before and found herself most unfortunately not at all good at (and that Rainbow Dash really didn't like pins in the flank); then they played charades, and Trixie discovered that she at the very least wasn't the only pony who had *no idea* what Pinkie Pie's random gestures ever meant. Even more so, nopony could figure out how Pinkie Pie's logic worked when guessing clues either - every time she would guess something absolutely, completely, *amazingly* incorrect when given a fairly obvious clue that anypony else in the room would've gotten instantly. It was bizarre to watch, and everypony else got a good laugh at Rainbow Dash getting aggravated with her partner's...eccentricity.

"Pinkie Pie, you are the worst charades player ever! How is this," and she motioned with her hooves as if she were rowing a boat, "Ghostbusters 2?! What the hay *is* Ghostbusters 2?!"

Arguments aside, Trixie admitted that everyone was having a good time, and best of all *she* was having a good time. As the night wore on, some of the other ponies had to leave. Applejack still had Applebuck

season to worry about, and had to be up early the next morning to continue her work - she apologized again to Twilight that she couldn't be there in person to show her support. Rarity left soon after, claiming she needed her beauty sleep. Fluttershy and Derpy left together next, Derpy because she needed to be ready for her postal shift the next day, Fluttershy for...some reason, Trixie wasn't exactly sure, but she figured that she wanted Derpy to walk her home. Rainbow Dash left next, though she obviously was doing it with some hesitation at Pinkie Pie's less-than-subtle insistence. That left Twilight Sparkle, who to Trixie's consternation just was not leaving and did not seem like she was getting ready to leave anytime soon either. As the two of them helped Pinkie Pie tidy up, Trixie became slightly more annoyed that Twilight was determined to speak to her.

"Trixie, I was wondering...why exactly do you want to be the best at everything?"

Trixie sighed loudly, "How many times must we go over this? I am the Great and Powerful Trixie, and I wish to prove to myself and to all of Equestria that my title is deserved."

"But...I mean, that's just it," Twilight said with concern, "I've been thinking and...your story doesn't exactly add up."

Trixie glared, "Are you saying I'm lying?"

"N-no!" Twilight blushed, "Just that, I mean, why would you lie about this? It just seems a little...contradictory, if you don't mind my saying. If you got your title from the Great and Powerful Paragon like you say, then surely anypony who had been present would acknowledge your title and you'd be fully justified in having it...right?"

Trixie hesitated, "There were...not a lot of ponies present to bear witness to my acquisition of the title. And while the few who know of it would confirm my fair and just acquiring of the title Great and Powerful, there are still countless ponies who don't believe it to be true. As far as they are all concerned, the Great and Powerful Paragon still holds his title and the Great and Powerful Trixie is just a liar."

"I suppose that makes sense, it would be hard to believe that somepony like Paragon would give up his title so easily."

"So...you believe my story?" Trixie asked with a raised eyebrow, "Your friends all seemed skeptical of his very existence."

"I know that Paragon is real," Twilight nodded, "He was a student at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns a long time ago, so I guess any unicorn that attended there knows he's not just a fairy tale. No pony believed me either when I tried to convince them you were telling the truth about him."

Trixie mentally kicked herself for forgetting that Twilight would know he was real, wishing now that she'd altered her story if only slightly. *But that's all she knows*, Trixie thought, *She doesn't suspect anything else...does she?*

"At any rate," Twilight added, "I guess I can see how many ponies, especially those who had attended the school as we have, wouldn't believe that you actually beat Paragon in a Magician's Duel. He didn't come by that title lightly, you know, he-"

"I know all about how the Great and Powerful Paragon became so," Trixie interjected, "The greatest magician's title in Equestria, one only worthy of any unicorn powerful enough to nearly match the magical might of Princess Celestia herself. After these past few days I...have begun to question whether or not I *do* deserve it."

Twilight frowned, "Why?"

Trixie sternly looked at her, "The Great and Powerful Trixie has admitted you are stronger than she is, and even if she *is* more talented in other fields, it is worth noting that she would still not be worthy of being considered anywhere near the same levels as Princess Celestia. *You* were tutored by her privately, so it only stands to reason you would be nearly as powerful as she is."

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Trixie frowned, "After all this is over, when the Great and Powerful Trixie retains her title, she plans on going on a journey - rather than traveling Equestria in an attempt to prove to other ponies that she's as Great and Powerful as they say, she will travel to learn more about the secrets of Magic, to become more powerful. She will surpass *you*, and prove to herself that she *is* worthy of both parts of her title."

Twilight gave a hopeful smile, "You could always stay in Ponyville. I'm sure Princess Celestia would approve if you wanted to study under me."

"Study under *you*?" Trixie laughed, "While that is a *fascinating* prospect, Twilight Sparkle, you underestimate my tolerance for insults."

"Why would it be such an insult to learn from me?" Twilight frowned, "You said yourself I'm more powerful...why couldn't I teach you to wield that same power? I know I'd like to learn more about your technical skills with magic."

"Why would you want to?" Trixie asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I...well...um..." Twilight stammered, "I...suppose I should be honest..."

"It would be a nice start," Trixie said sternly, aware of the irony.

"I...just want to spend more time with you."

Trixie blinked, "...is this more of this, 'we should be friends' stuff? Because-"

"It's...more than that," Twilight said, taking a deep breath, "I...like you a lot, Trixie, even if you don't seem to like me at all."

Trixie was confused, "I've done nothing to make you think otherwise, which makes this all the more perplexing. All I've done these past few days, and even long before that, was consider you my opponent, nothing more. I can see why Derpy likes me, she told me herself; Pinkie Pie, I could never hope to guess and even if she did tell me I'd probably not understand, but I suppose she has a reason there somewhere as well. You though...why in Celestia's name do you want to be my friend?"

Twilight hesitated for a moment, "You're everything I wish I could be," Twilight said nervously, "All my life I've spent with my nose in a book, and back then I was content with that. But after Princess Celestia insisted I make friends, and after seeing how much the Magic of Friendship has changed my life, I've begun to think back on my past and wish I had done things a little differently. You, you're so confident in yourself and in your ability to present yourself to others. I don't quite have that same social adeptness...and I wish I'd had it while I was still in school. Maybe then I would've made more friends."

"Your friends would say I'm arrogant, not confident," Trixie pointed out.

"Well...yeah, you *are* a bit self-absorbed," Twilight blushed, "But you've proven that you're able to tone it down for the sake of your friends,

and...that just made you more attractive," Twilight turned bright red, "Respectable! Is what I meant to say. Um...right. I...respect you. Even if you're not as powerful as I am, you do try your best."

"Oh Twilight *just tell her already*," Pinkie Pie interjected.

Trixie and Twilight jumped at her voice, having almost completely forgotten she was even in the same building, let alone the same room. Twilight, as red as she'd ever been, coughed and nervously fiddled with her hooves.

"Tell me what?" Trixie asked, turning to Twilight.

"W-well...um...how do I put this?" Twilight gulped, "Well...the way I feel about you *might* go a bit beyond just respect and friendship. I...like you Trixie. A lot."

"You've said as much," Trixie sighed.

"No I mean...I...how did Pinkie put it? *Like* like you...I think."

Trixie just looked at Twilight like she'd swallowed a bug, "You...what?"

Pinkie Pie bounded over, "Twilight's got a bit of a crush on you," she clarified as she wrapped an arm around Trixie.

Twilight, now redder than ever, gulped loudly, "I can't really explain it..." she said hesitantly, "I have a lot of respect for your ability, and for your confidence and...um...I just feel a powerful connection with you, I don't know what it is; but whenever I think about you, I...well, it's just a really strange feeling. It's the same feeling I felt when I realized I had real friends," she smiled at Pinkie Pie, "Only it's much stronger. It's hard to describe, really."

"It feels like all sorts of bubbles and fire are filling up your heart and tummy," Pinkie giggled, "In a good way though, since I bet if someone lit a fire in your tummy it wouldn't feel good at all. You might explode!"

Trixie turned away from the pair and slowly walked away for just a moment. This was not what she had been expecting to hear at this party, not at all. But now, she had to admit, everything was finally starting to add up.

"Twilight Sparkle," she said wearily, "I need some time to think on this. For now...let's postpone our Duel. Tomorrow was supposed to be

Concentration, was it not? Well, I think *both* our minds will be on other things.”

Twilight frowned, clearly hurt by not getting the kind of response she wanted. At least it wasn't an outright rejection, she admitted, “Okay then...um...will I see you tomorrow?”

“Perhaps,” Trixie sighed, “For now...I think I need some sleep. Good night, Twilight Sparkle. Pinkie Pie.”

She climbed the stairs in complete silence.

I fear things have gotten more complicated than I would like to admit.

It felt like hours to Trixie before Pinkie Pie came upstairs, finally done with the cleaning below, or at the very least tired enough to put off whatever was left until the next day. Trixie was sad that Pinkie Pie did not seem her normal chipper self, and silently cursed herself for making the pink earth pony this way. Pinkie Pie did not head for her bed, as Trixie had expected, but instead came to hers. Trixie sighed as Pinkie fixated a pleading glance on her.

“Pinkie Pie, I understand you are upset,” she started, “But...you must realize this is a strange situation for me. Twilight Sparkle...in *love* with the Great and Powerful Trixie? Preposterous...”

“Twilight can't explain it,” Pinkie said softly, “None of us can understand it, either, but she's our friend, and we want to support her in this. We've all tried to do our part...to make her happy. And since I know *you* and the way you are behind closed doors, I think that this would make *you* happy too.”

“What makes you think that? Ever since I've met Twilight Sparkle, I've had nothing on my mind but coming back to Ponyville and proving myself the better unicorn. I want to defeat her...not be her...mate, I suppose would be the proper term.”

“You're obsessed with her,” Pinkie pointed out. Trixie was suddenly fixated on the fact that Pinkie Pie was now dressed in a turtleneck sweater and held a pipe to her lips. Pinkie Pie blew some bubbles from the pipe, distracting Trixie for a moment by just the absurdity of the whole thing, but she shook it off and chalked it up to Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie.

“I am not *obsessed*,” Trixie quickly said in her defense, “I just...know that if I don’t prove myself, my life has no meaning. I have to prove myself better than Twilight Sparkle, that’s all there is to this.”

“When you think about Twilight Sparkle, what do you feel?”

“Well...when I think about *surpassing* her and becoming the greatest unicorn in all Equestria, I do get that warm, bubbly feeling you described earlier...but-”

Pinkie held up a hoof to interrupt, “Love works in strange ways, Trixie - you never know who it’s going to be, or when or where or how it’ll come about. I’m sure by now you’ve noticed that some of Twilight’s other friends are in relationships too?”

Trixie tilted her head in thought, then began to put the pieces together.

“Well, Miss Fluttershy and Derpy seem to get along really well but...a couple?”

“Derpy first met Fluttershy when she was delivering a package to her, and, well, you know Derpy - she’s the most reliable mailpony in Ponyville, and she always gets her deliveries made on time. But, she’s also a little clumsy and has a hard time flying perfectly straight. Well, Derpy crashed straight through Fluttershy’s roof after a pretty nasty fall, and Fluttershy helped nurse her back to health. They’d never met before that, but that day, they knew what they felt for one another. It’s really sweet, don’t you think? I like those kind of stories, where the noble lord of the castle and the lowly maid fall in love at first sight...”

Trixie nodded slowly, “I guess I have a lot to learn about these sorts of things, I didn’t think of them that way at all. I suppose then...you and Rainbow Dash? Everyone says you’re ‘super close’ and I was meaning to ask you about it, but now that you’ve pointed this all out-”

“Yep! Me and Dashie are goin’ steady!” Pinkie smiled brightly, “She helped me through a really tough time, and stayed by my side through the whole thing until it was all over, and that’s when I realized that Dashie really cared for me for than any other pony - I don’t think she’d give any random pony that kind of caring treatment, and if were any of our other friends she’d likely go for help and talk about not being good at that kind of thing.”

“What happened?” Trixie asked. Pinkie frowned, and Trixie wondered if it had been the wrong question, “You don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to.”

Pinkie smiled lightly, “No, I should probably get it off my chest. You’ve been honest with me so far, right? It’s only fair if I’m honest with you. First, you have to understand something about me - I *love* parties and I *love* being with my friends.”

Trixie blinked, wondering if Pinkie was serious about her not knowing that, “I gathered...”

“Well one day - and it turned out it was my birthday - nopony seemed to want to come to my party that afternoon. Later on it turned out that they’d all just been *secretly* getting a surprise party ready for me on my special day, but I thought it was much worse than that - I thought they didn’t want to be my friends anymore, and they were bored with my parties and that they didn’t want to go to any of them ever again! Dashie was the one who came to get me for the surprise party, and while I did feel a lot better after I realized what the party was for, there was a little piece of me deep down that didn’t want to believe it, that was certain it was all just a trick. Dashie came and visited me later that night to talk about the...circumstances she had found me in, and helped me realize that deep down, none of my friends would ever abandon me, least of all her.”

“Circumstances?”

“Oh, I went a little crazy,” Pinkie Pie whispered, “Started talking to inanimate objects and making wild accusations. Dashie said I was referring to myself by my full name, Pinkamena Diane Pie, which is really weird since I haven’t called myself by that name since before my very first party that I held for my parents and sisters way back on our rock farm.”

Trixie nodded, “I suppose next you’ll tell me Applejack and Rarity are-”

Pinkie Pie giggled, “Oh ho ho, oh no, ha ha ha, noooooo no, wow, that’s just...that’s probably the silliest thing I’ve ever heard, those two? Ha HA, that’d be a laugh. Ahhhh, oh Trixie, you’ve got some crazy ideas.”

Trixie muttered something under her breath, but Pinkie didn’t hear it.

“So what makes you so certain that anything will come out of myself and-”

“Oh, I can’t tell exactly how everything is going to work out,” Pinkie giggled, “But ever since I saw you and Twilight together for the very first time, my tummy’s been all kinds of rumby, and not in the hungry way or the ‘oh gross those were some baked bads’ way, but in the super happy gumbdrop and butterflies way, and that’s when my Pinkie Sense tells me that two ponies are meant for each other...”

“Your...Pinkie Sense...tummy...what?”

“Long story short, I just *know* you two are going to be together in the end, my Pinkie Sense is never wrong!”

Trixie rubbed her temples, “Pinkie Pie, I really can’t fathom how anything you say or do makes any sense, and I really don’t want to try and start now.”

“Twilight would say the same thing,” she giggled, “I’ve said it before, you two have a lot more in common than you think.”

“Yes, I suppose I’ve noticed a few things myself...” Trixie mused, “I’m really just confused by all this. As far as I know, I’ve never had a pony be in *love* with the Great and Powerful Trixie before. I don’t know what to think...”

“Hey! You know what you *should* do? You and Twilight should spend some time together!”

“What? Why?”

“Think about it,” Pinkie Pie said as she tapped her hoof to her head, “You don’t understand why Twilight loves you, right? She said she barely understands it herself! And you don’t know whether or not you feel the same, right? Well, if you two get to spend some time together and get to know each other better, maybe you’ll *both* understand what it is you two feel about each other, and maybe you’ll find out exactly what it is you want to do with yourself.”

Trixie grumbled to herself, then sighed, “I suppose that would be a good idea. Can I trust you for your assistance in setting this up?”

“Of course! Your Auntie Pinkie Pie is on the job!”

“Auntie...what? I’m a year older than you.”

“Whatever, *Fluttershy*,” Pinkie rolled her eyes.

Trixie held her head in her hooves, “I think I need to get to bed, you’re giving me a headache again...”

“That’s the spirit! Rest up for your big day tomorrow, and let Pinkie Pie worry all about yours and Twilight’s *date*,” she added with a mischievous grin.

Pinkie bounded over to her bed and was almost instantly asleep. Trixie found herself relieved to do the same, but deep down she knew she was likely to have a difficult time of it. There was still this nagging in the back of her head, telling her that everything that was happening tonight was eerily similar to another story she’d heard, a long, long time ago...

Chapter 6

Fraternizations and Satisfactions

Trixie was glad she had gotten a full night's rest and was able to sleep in a little this morning - after the events of last night all added on top of each other, she felt she may not have been able to think as clearly as she would've liked. Her brain was going a mile-a-minute as she walked towards Carousel Boutique - at Pinkie's request - to get herself exquisitely groomed for the day's events. Now that she'd heard it directly from one pony, presumed to be hearing it soon from another, and indirectly from a third as she recalled her eavesdropping on Rainbow Dash two nights before, she was beginning to see a pattern. Pinkie Pie had not-so-subtly coerced Twilight into confessing her feelings; Rarity was going to be ensuring that Trixie looked her best so that today's 'date' - Twilight's first, she had been assured - would go perfectly; Rainbow Dash was looking out for Twilight's interests. She was sure the others - Fluttershy and Applejack - were likely doing the same, though she had yet to piece together how they were doing so. *Perhaps, she thought, Yesterday's Everfree excursion of Fluttershy's was just a ploy to get Trixie to impress Twilight with her bravery? Kind of a stretch.* Trixie was beginning to feel a might indignant - were *all* of Twilight's friends trying to play matchmaker for the two of them? Then, a realization hit.

You know, I could turn this entire thing to my advantage, she thought, Becoming friends with Twilight Sparkle means I would get to know her better, learn what makes her tick. What her strengths are, and more importantly, her weaknesses. With knowledge like that, winning my Duel should be easy... A devilish grin played across her lips, And come to think of it, isn't that exactly what they're doing anyway? Twilight Sparkle likely still believes if I was her friend that I would call this whole thing off, and we could be together forever and never fight again. Ha! Now it makes sense. She's just upping the ante by trying to upgrade 'friendship' to 'love', hoping to tug at the Great and Powerful Trixie's heartstrings. Well two can play at this game, Twilight Sparkle...

Trixie had never in her entire life received the kind of royal treatment she was getting at Rarity's insistence. The white unicorn, absolutely determined to make Trixie look her very best (despite Trixie's off-hoof comment that she *a*lways looked her very best), had sprung for a complete

spa treatment for her while she did touch-up work on her cape to make it look “splendid, spectacular, and as striking as yourself” she recalled. Trixie was hesitant to have her cape worked on after she’d been so lucky to get it back, but she trusted Rarity’s judgment in the matter. That was, until she got back from the spa. All the refreshing, stress-relieving treatment felt as if it went flying out the window entirely the moment she saw that her cape wasn’t so much a *cape* anymore than it was a *dress*.

“What...have you done...to the Great and Powerful Trixie’s cape?” Trixie demanded, eyes narrowed.

Rarity sensed Trixie’s anger and apprehension, and gave a smug grin, “Really darling, you don’t know anything about your ensemble, do you? Your cape and hat are made of a very unique fabric, you know. I must admit I am jealous you possess as much of it as you do, it is not easy to come by and is very expensive,” with a quick flick of her horn’s magic, Trixie’s new ‘dress’ suddenly transformed back into a cape.

Trixie was stunned, “How did-”

“It’s Arcanasilk,” Rarity smirked, “A magical fabric that remembers it’s ‘original’ design, as t’were, and can be returned to that state with just the teeniest bit of magic; you can even make it remember additional designs, so that you can use one single article of clothing to make several different outfits with ease. You can reshape it, recolor it, tear it, dirty it, even burn it, but it can always be made as good as new. I was fascinated to learn this when I did the touch up work on it at Twilight’s request,” she added with a sheepish smile, “So it didn’t take as much to repair it as you’d think.”

Trixie marveled at her new dress once Rarity turned it back, “I had no idea my ensemble was...well, *this*.”

“Oh? How did you come by it without even knowing what it was made of? Didn’t you wonder about the cost, dear?” Rarity asked with an inquisitive glance.

Trixie hesitated, “It was passed down to me by my mother. It’s been in her family for generations, so I never really knew much about it other than it being a family heirloom, so to speak. Now I can see why it was such a prized possession - I always did find it silly that my mother considered them so...precious to her,” Trixie shook her head, not wanting to delve any further into the past - it was time to think of the present, of *today* specifically, “Twilight is sure to be impressed by this dress you have made for the Great and Powerful Trixie, it is most astounding. You weren’t just blowing smoke when you said you were a talented fashion designer.”

Rarity chuckled, “I am glad you like it, darling. Twilight would be ever so pleased to hear it. She has her heart set on making sure your little date

goes perfectly - by the book, as t'were, she has a penchant for that sort of thing," Rarity rolled her eyes.

Trixie smirked, spotting an opportunity, "I have noticed that Twilight tends to do that a lot. Is she just really rule-focused? That would make sense, seeing as she was Princess Celestia's student."

"Oh no no no, darling," Rarity laughed, "She's just been so cooped up all her life, the poor dear really doesn't know much about the world except for what she's read in books. Did you know she entered the Running of the Leaves event last fall and read a *book* on the best way to go about running a race? Granted she did perform very well - fifth place, can you imagine? But that's Twilight for you."

"Right, well, the Great and Powerful Trixie does appreciate the talk," Trixie smiled, "But she really must be going. It wouldn't do to make Twilight Sparkle wait too long, now would it?"

"Oh my, yes, it is getting late isn't it?" Rarity said as she looked at the clock, "Those dinner reservations I made for you two are in half an hour. Go on then, you don't have much time. Remember - *Café de Tulipe*, it's just a few blocks from Twilight's home so it won't take long to get there. I put the reservation under *your* name, and remember to tell them Rarity sent you. I'm good friends with the owner, they'll treat you very well."

Trixie nodded and left the boutique, a smug grin on her face as she went.

So, that is Twilight's strength - power, she mused to herself, Nothing more. If she doesn't read about it in a book first, she's at a disadvantage. I bet if she had tried to face that Ursa Minor without doing any research, she'd have been as helpless as I was.

Trixie approached Twilight's door, having arrived at the library in good time, and delivered a resounding knock. Twilight was excitedly quick to answer, and Trixie noted that she was wearing a very exquisite dress; it almost looked like it was made *out* of stars, rather than just decorated with them. More of Rarity's handiwork, no doubt - that unicorn really *did* have a knack for this kind of thing. Trixie was glad she'd gone along with Pinkie's suggestion - if she'd just come along with her normal ensemble, she'd look *woefully* inadequate. Why Twilight was wearing a dress that Trixie felt more suited to a formal dinner than a casual...*date* (she still hated calling it that), Trixie had no idea. Perhaps the book Twilight had read about dates in was old-fashioned?

Then again, Trixie admitted, the restaurant was *extremely* fancy - *did a place like this really exist in Ponyville?* Trixie found herself wondering as they ordered their hideously over-priced meal - so perhaps their outfits

were suitable after all. Twilight had gone over the entire, piece-by-piece, detailed, laid-out, by-the-book Perfect Date plan on their way over, and Trixie was already beginning to wonder *what* exactly the book was trying to teach the girl. Dinner? Sure, Trixie thought, that was pretty normal for a date. Dinner and a *movie* though, that seemed to be a step up from 'casual' and up to 'romantic', making Trixie a little uncomfortable. She wanted to play along with Twilight's plans, to humor her fancy long enough to learn more about her and how to better combat her magic, but if this was what Twilight had in mind it was starting to get ridiculous.

At least she didn't suggest holding hooves and walking in the park or along a sunset beach too, Trixie thought.

Desperate to try and shake the thoughts from her head, Trixie started up a more personal conversation than the light-hearted small-talk she and Twilight had been engaging in thus far.

"So tell me Twilight, how exactly did you come about becoming Princess Celestia's star pupil?" Trixie asked, legitimately curious and taking advantage of the opportunity to ask.

"Oh, well when I was taking my entrance exam to enter into the academy, I was startled by a loud blast somewhere in the distance and kind of...lost control of my magic. Celestia calmed me down, and was astounded by the amount of raw magical energy I was capable of even from an early age. I got my Cutie Mark around the same time, and was so excited," Twilight restrained from breaking out into a bout of 'Yesyesyesyesyes', feeling the blood already rush to her face from the embarrassment of just thinking about it.

Trixie placed her hoof to her chin, "Pinkie Pie was right...that does sound...strangely familiar."

"Oh? To what?"

Trixie sighed, "Well I suppose it is only fair to tell you my Cutie Mark story, since you told me yours."

Trixie briefly went over her story from a few nights ago that she'd told to Pinkie Pie, taking care not to go into as much detail. She was willing to share this little piece of information, but she was not about to go into anything sentimental about her parents and surely not risk Twilight putting any more pieces of the puzzle together - she'd already figured that Paragon was real, she *didn't* need her finding out...more.

Twilight Sparkle's eyes opened wide as she analyzed Trixie's story, "So you got your Cutie Mark when a loud explosion startled you into letting loose some of your magic..." she tapped her hoof to her temple, "You say it was accompanied by a lot of bright colors too? You know what, I think

Rainbow Dash's first Sonic Rainboom was responsible for *you* getting your Cutie Mark as well!"

"Rainbow Dash?" Trixie raised an eyebrow, "Sonic Rainboom? What in Celestia's name-"

"It's like a sonic boom and a rainbow rolled into one," Twilight quickly explained, "Rainbow Dash is the only pegasus pony to ever pull it off, and the first time she did it was when she was just a filly - my friends and I later learned that we had all witnessed that event and it had inspired our Cutie Marks to appear in the process, so we all had this sort of...connection, even before we met!" she added with a wide grin, "Now I can see why I feel such a strong connection to you - you witnessed the Sonic Rainboom too, and even got your Cutie Mark because of it!"

Trixie's jaw dropped, "You can't be serious. Of all the convoluted, contrived, *confounding* coincidences, this one has to be the least profound, least precise, least *possible* possibility ever postulated by ponykind. It was just somepony setting off...a firework or something. Nothing at all like this...phenomenon you call a Rainboom. Puerile! Psychotic! *Preposterous!*"

Twilight couldn't contain her glee despite Trixie's, as she would put it, 'neigh-saying', "Yes yes yes yes yes YEEESSS!"

Trixie hid her face in her hooves, embarrassed to even be seen at the same table at this suddenly *extremely* over-enthusiastic mare. Did Pinkie Pie slip something into Twilight's drink from across town? Some of the other patrons had started looking their way and mumbled a little bit too; one mare nudged her coltfriend and said, "I'll have what she's having".

Oh Celestia why, oh why do you do this to me?

Twilight finally calmed down and excitedly tried to keep the conversation with Trixie going. Now, Trixie was having second-thoughts about this whole thing as the conversation slowly moved away from finding out more about one another's school days. Trixie found the fact even more disconcerting that, despite their differences in 'mentors' as it were, they really had had an extremely similar experience far beyond just attending the same classes and earning the same awards and honors. Neither of them had made any friends while in school, both much too occupied with what they considered important - the study of magic; while Trixie studied it for its personal uses and aesthetics, Twilight researched its theoretical limits and practical applications. After graduation, Trixie had left Canterlot and traveled Equestria in search of fame and glory, while Twilight had remained behind to continue her studies under Princess Celestia - about that time was when their two paths branched apart completely, until they crossed again in Ponyville. Trixie *still* marveled at the fact that in all her

time at the academy she had never once seen Twilight Sparkle in the flesh.

But no, *now* conversation was moving back to Trixie's background.

"So, what's the Great and Powerful Paragon like?" Twilight asked, "I never got to meet him, and I always kind of wanted to. Such a powerful unicorn; even Princess Celestia admired his strength!"

"Yes, well," Trixie replied with apprehension, "He was certainly an imposing figure, but the Great and Powerful Trixie was more than a match for him. Hence why she is so befuddled at your own magical powers, but I suppose now it makes much more sense," Trixie admitted, "I put a lot of blame on your strength coming from being privately tutored by the Princess, but I couldn't understand why she'd chosen you over someone like me. I *aced* my entrance exam, by the way," she gloated, "All with my own talent."

Twilight blushed, "I'm still a little shocked to learn I'm more powerful than even the Great and Powerful Paragon."

"More powerful, yes," Trixie reminded, "But much like how the Great and Powerful Trixie surpassed him, you do not compare to his complete and total magical talent."

"You know," Twilight mused suddenly, "Now that I think on it, nopony's heard from Paragon in years. He suddenly shut himself away a few years after I entered the academy and even Princess Celestia said she couldn't get much information about his doings anymore. How in Equestria did you manage to find him when nopony else even knew where he was?"

Trixie's concentration slipped momentarily, almost making her drop her glass. *Blast it, everything's starting to unravel itself before your eyes and all you can do is just sit there and look like a foal. Quick, before she starts asking more questions-*

"It...it wasn't so much that I found *him*," Trixie quickly, albeit nervously explained, "He found me. You see, Trixie *the Magnificent* at the time had made quite a name for herself and attracted the attention of all sorts of colts and mares seeking to challenge her power. Even pegasi and earth ponies, much like your friends Rainbow Dash and Applejack, dared to step to Trixie's challenges. The Great and Powerful Paragon sought Trixie out, eager to snuff out her boasting because he felt only *he* was worthy of being called the greatest unicorn in all Equestria. Well, I sure showed him...eh heh."

Twilight smiled, "That's very impressive, Trixie - drawing Paragon out from his solitude like that. I'm sure Princess Celestia would have liked to know more about it, it's probably the last time anypony has seen or heard of him in years. We should send her a letter after we-"

"No!" Trixie started, "Um...n-no, that's quite alright. Our Duel did not last long, I certainly proved myself to be more than a match for him in such a short time. He disappeared as soon as he had come, I haven't heard from him since. A most enigmatic pony, wouldn't you agree?"

Twilight looked at Trixie with mild apprehension, then let it wash away, "I suppose you have your reasons for not going into more detail, and I'll respect that. I'm sure your Duel together wasn't as elaborate as ours - you did say you were used to taking on many challengers every show, so I'm guessing this worked out the same."

"Y-yes, that's it," Trixie nodded, "Um...anyway, oh my look at the time!" Trixie hastily pointed to the clock on the nearby wall; it was nearing late evening, they'd been eating their lunch for more than an hour now, lost deep in conversation, "We really must be going, the movie Pinkie Pie has gotten all set up for us should be starting soon."

"Oh, right," Twilight smiled, "We wouldn't want to be late."

Twilight placed the bits to pay for their meal and a tip for their waitress on the table as they left, and the two made a brisk pace for the theater. They frowned at the massive line waiting outside the doors; they found, much to their mild aggravation, that today was the movie's opening day, so even with tickets in hand they would have a difficult time getting into the theater. Sure they had their seats reserved, but so did most of these other ponies, many of whom were just barely past filly and colt ages and were accompanied by their parents.

Trixie silently wished she didn't have to see this movie - she was not a very big fan of the Steelhorn series. She admitted a guilty pleasure in seeing them anyway - they were pretty big summer blockbusters that were fun to watch for the action scenes, but the plot was often pretty horrible, the acting was just *atrocious*, and she couldn't help but wonder if writer/director Baybreeze was getting lazy or just slowly going insane. She liked the actor that played Steelhorn himself, Comet Tail, he was always entertaining to watch and reminded her a lot of herself what with his sense for dramatic flair. But even *he* wasn't enough to make her consider these movies worthwhile - she'd seen the original and the first sequel, but the quality had dropped off steadily since then and she'd vowed never to willingly go to see any more; now, here she was, about to see Steelhorn Origins, the much-publicized prequel that detailed the events where Steelhorn got his powers.

Luckily for Trixie, the movie would not be seen tonight.

"Twilight!" came a call, familiar enough to Trixie to realize it was Applejack, "Twilight, there ya are, thank goodness I caught you before y'all got inside..."

The orange earth pony was out of breath and clearly not at all in a clear mindset.

"Applejack? What are you doing out so late? What's wrong?" Twilight asked.

"Twilight, you haven't seen Apple Bloom have ya?"

"Apple Bloom?" Twilight raised an eyebrow, "Can't say that I have. Is there something the matter?"

"Darn tootin' there's somethin' the matter," Applejack spat quickly, "That little filly was *supposed* to be spending the day over at Rarity's with her friends. So imagine my surprise when I go over to Rarity's to pick her up, when Rarity asks *me* where Sweetie Belle is. Those three young'uns pulled a fast one on us, and we can't find 'em anywhere."

"Why would they lie like that to you?" Twilight thought aloud as she tapped a hoof to her chin, "Well, no, I haven't seen her, or Sweetie Belle or Scootaloo either, for that matter. I was in the library all day until only a couple of hours ago, when Trixie came by to pick me up for our date."

"Dag'nabbit," Applejack swore as she stomped her hoof on the ground, "If'n I get my hooves on that little filly, I swear I'll...Twilight, ya'll gotta help me find those three. Rarity and I've searched Ponyville top to bottom, and we can't find hide nor hair of any of 'em."

"You don't think they maybe...went into Everfree again, do you?" Twilight said with apprehension, "This wouldn't be the first time they wandered in there without supervision."

Applejack's eyes widened, "Aw horseapples, I didn't think of that. Shoot...look, Twilight, I really hate to ask ya'll ta call off yer little get-together here, but I could really use yer help. You know the forest better'n anyone in Ponyville, 'cepting maybe Fluttershy, and we need to find those three, and pronto!"

Trixie coughed to make herself visible to the other ponies again, who had been ignoring her thus far. She was mildly annoyed at the concept of it, but seeing as some kind of emergency was brewing, she'd let it slide for now.

"Begging your pardon," she started, "But I don't suppose you need the additional help of the Great and Powerful Trixie, do you? She did, after all, brave the Everfree Forest alone just the other day, she could surely be of some great assistance."

Applejack hesitated for a brief second, then nodded her head, "Thank ya kindly, Trix, I could use all the help I can get. We don't right have time to be trying to find anypony else, so y'all two head for the forest while I go and get Rarity and Rainbow."

"Right," Twilight nodded as Applejack bolted off. She and Trixie immediately began a brisk pace for the edge of town and the forest beyond.

"I do so hope this is just another false alarm like yesterday was," Trixie said quickly, "Who are these three fillies we're looking for, anyway?"

"Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo - Applejack's and Rarity's sisters, and their friend, respectively. They...tend to get into a lot of trouble trying to get their Cutie Marks. I'm sure that's all this is, nothing more."

The pair of unicorns did not have to wait for long for the other two ponies to arrive. Rainbow Dash was strangely absent, Trixie noted, but that was quickly explained.

"Okay, Rainbow Dash is gonna stay in Ponyville and keep a lookout for if the three of them come back," Applejack said, "As for us, what's the plan?"

Twilight began to think, "Hmm...normally I would say safety in numbers is important here, but we need to find those girls and fast before something awful happens - it's already well past sundown, and the forest does tend to be more dangerous at night. Let's split up - Rarity, you and I will head for Zecora's. If we're lucky, that's where they went. Applejack, you and and Trixie take the other path," she pointed with her hoof towards the second path that didn't lead for Zecora's, "And see what you can find. If anypony finds them, or runs into trouble, send up a magic flare, got it?"

"Got it," Trixie nervously nodded. She was apprehensive enough about heading into the Everfree Forest at all, but now to be entering it at *night*, and with only *one* other pony for company instead of three. For the first time ever, she found herself *not* wanting to be separated from Twilight Sparkle specifically, and that made her worry. Where had that feeling come from? As she watched Rarity and Twilight head along the northern path, she gulped noiselessly and began to follow Applejack along the adjacent eastern path.

The forest was much different at night, Trixie worriedly admitted. She could just *feel* eyes on her from everywhere, and did her best not to appear panicked and start nervously looking in every direction. She needed to stay calm, to keep herself focused, and to concentrate on keeping her magic concentrated into her spell so that she and Applejack had light to guide them. Applejack was bent low to the ground as she walked along, hoping to find some instance of tracks. Trixie, uncomfortable with the silence, tried to strike up a conversation.

"So, this sister of yours...tell me, why would she and her friends think coming into this Celestia-forsaken place be a good idea?"

“Ugh, those three little fillies are far beyond help at this rate,” Applejack sighed, “They want their Cutie Marks so badly; they’re tired of bein’ the only ones in their class without ‘em. So they pull stupid stunts like this, tryin’ to force their special talents to appear.”

Trixie blinked, “They...know that’s not how it works, right?”

“Oh, they know. They’re just...slow on the uptake, is all. I can’t imagine why-” she stopped in her path so suddenly that Trixie nearly ran right into her, “Hang on. Trix, shine yer light down here a bit brighter, I think I see somethin’.”

Trixie nodded and brought her horn down closer to Applejack’s head. Sure enough, there was a set of tracks here - three to be precise, all of them filly-sized - that followed a route perpendicular to their current one. They came from the path further ahead and suddenly diverted into the forest itself at this point, almost completely at random. Trixie looked around and noticed that this path seemed eerily familiar. But she didn’t remember taking *this* route yesterday. Applejack motioned for Trixie to follow her, and they began to trail the fillies’ tracks into the forest as best they could. Trixie gulped as the feeling of déjà vu began to wash over her. The forest was getting darker and darker as they followed along, so Trixie had to keep the light going as strong as she dared. The narrow dirt path wound through the trees, and it wasn’t until much later - when the forest itself had now seemed to crowd all around them and prevent any more light from getting in other than that from Trixie’s magic - when the pair noticed anything different. Ahead of them was a light coming from a parting in the trees. Trixie noted that while up until this point she’d remembered taking this path in complete darkness, she did not recall seeing light like this.

“Is...is that a...*town* up ahead?” Applejack asked in confusion, pointing towards the light. Trixie squinted and now she too could see the houses off in the distance. She remembered finding an *abandoned* little village, so now she was sure this was a different location. Perhaps the ponies who lived here had once lived in that old village, and rebuilt it? *Curious*, Trixie thought. Applejack started for the light, Trixie following behind her and slowly letting her light spell go lax. To their surprise, as soon as soon as they walked into the town proper, the entire forest went *dark*, nearly pitch black, and the town seemed to magically vanish before their eyes, replaced entirely by a ruined, abandoned village. It happened so suddenly that neither of them had even had time to adjust their eyes to the darkness, so for now all they had to help judge their surroundings was their hearing. Luckily, that was all they needed for now.

“EE!”

Applejack's ears perked up, and she pointed in the direction she'd heard the scream, "That was the girls! C'mon, Trix, they sound like they're in trouble!" Applejack took a step forward, then suddenly stopped, "Do y'all hear somethin'?"

Trixie nodded nervously as she heard it too. There was that disturbing rumbling coming from the ground again. She let the magic course through her horn again to light up their surroundings, enough that she and Applejack could see the dirt ahead begin to shift as something crawled out of it. More of these things were clambering their way out of the dirt around the pair, until Trixie was certain they were surrounded. Trixie had been convinced this wasn't the same village as before, but now she reconsidered. The first of the creatures to appear stepped forward with a menacing gait, its sunken red eyes aglow with fire.

"They bEar the maRk..."

"ThE marK..." the other monsters joined in.

"What the hay is goin' on here?" Applejack gulped as she backed away only a single step, "Grrr, nevermind. Outta the way...uh...whatever you are! Y'all ain't gonna keep me away from my sis!"

She stepped forward and hesitantly got into an aggressive stance, clearly meaning to fight her way through if need be. Trixie cranked up her horn's light and fired off a magical flare into the sky above before stepping forward herself. The creatures, not intimidated, lunged at them.

Applejack was undaunted by any previous fear she may have held. These *things* were trying to keep her from Apple Bloom and the others, and no pony...no *thing* was going to keep them apart now. She bucked hard at the first of the abominations to come into range, knocking it flying. She was grateful to have another pony with her, since she quickly learned there were too many of them to handle on her own. Trixie let loose a barrage of light beams to strike the creatures away; they did not react well to strong light sources it seemed. The pair of ponies managed to fight off the small group of the creatures that had come for them, and breathed a sigh of relief. Their joy was soon replaced by fear and annoyance though, as more of the things started to rumble their way out of the dirt, and many of the creatures they'd already struck down began to come back together and repair themselves, ready for another round.

"C'mon!" Applejack shouted, "We ain't got time for this, we gotta get movin'!"

Trixie nodded and brightly flared her horn to create a bubble of light around the pair. The creatures seemed daunted by it enough to keep their distance and even move aside as Applejack and Trixie galloped forth. None

of the things gave them any trouble as they moved through the town. They found Apple Bloom and the other two fillies deeper in, near a cottage just on the outskirts of the town, unharmed and luckily not being disturbed by many of the monsters, at least not enough to give Applejack alone any trouble in fighting off. The three fillies quickly huddled around Applejack in appreciation.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack sternly said as she hugged her sister, "What in the name of Celestia are y'all doin' here? Have you three lost yer marbles?"

"It's a...long story, sis," Apple Bloom said nervously, "Y'see-"

"We can worry about that later," Applejack interrupted, "We need to get outta here, and pronto. Trix!"

"Right," Trixie nodded, "Just stay close to me."

The group moved back towards the rest of town and were met by a large congregation of the creatures.

"MarK beArers...yOu will noT taKe tHe liTtle onEs..."

"We wiLl keep You froM taInTing tHEm..."

"ThEy cAn staY sAfe wltH us...fOrevEr..."

The things lumbered forward, now unafraid of Trixie's light, and attacked. Applejack bravely came forward to help Trixie handle the creatures, but it was soon clear that they were far outnumbered. Applejack was beginning to tire from having to buck in such quick succession, and Trixie could feel her magic slowly draining as she flared her light more and more.

Trixie grit her teeth and turned to Applejack, "I'll distract them! You take the little ones and go on ahead, I'll cover you!"

"Are y'all crazy?" Applejack panted, "There's too many of 'em for y'all to handle yourself! I ain't good at no fancy mathematics, but even I can see that one pony, even you, can't-"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie will be fine," she said boldly, "We can't just try and hunker down here, we are at a disadvantage as long as we remain stationary. We need to keep moving, so c'mon!"

Trixie flared her magic brighter and blasted a large hole in the line of approaching zombies. Applejack quickly led the fillies towards it as Trixie followed closely behind, lancing spells into the weakened position and around herself as much as she could muster to help clear a path for them. They dashed through the town quickly, though Trixie was beginning to feel her strength falter. Just as they were approaching the town limits, she felt something grab her hind leg and knock her to the ground. She quickly blasted the offending thing away, and wearily stood to her hooves; she

wincing in pain, her back right leg having landed awkwardly - Trixie worried that it was probably sprained. Applejack turned at the sudden wobble in their light source.

"Trix!"

"Go!" Trixie yelled, "Get to the others, I'll hold them off here!"

"But-"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has spoken! Go!"

Applejack nodded with hesitation and led the three fillies forward, bucking her way through any of the scant zombies that sprung up ahead of them. Trixie turned to face the oncoming horde, backing away ever so slowly as she blasted away the occasional one that sprang at her. She couldn't run in this condition, and she could feel her magic draining faster than ever as she struggled to keep her protective bubble around her.

Worry not, a voice suddenly came in her head, Your friends are coming for you. Please, just hold out a little longer, and I will ensure they find you in time.

Trixie dared not lose her focus on her spell, and just chalked up the voice to hallucinations from fear or pain. As more the monsters challenged Trixie's barrier, she felt her magic begin to weaken; the weaker her barrier got, the more of the creatures came forward, and the more came the weaker her barrier got - a vicious cycle. Trixie grit her teeth and forced more magic into her spell, weakly walking backwards towards the forest. The creatures were endless - how many of them were there? She knew she couldn't keep this up much longer. What was keeping the others? Her magic was draining fast; she knew she had one chance at this, so it was time to take it.

With a great deal of effort she expelled what magic she could spare into a powerful burst of light, blasting most of the horde ahead of her away. She quickly hobbled away towards the trees, wincing every time her back leg took a step, and hoped she could get far enough into the forest and out of this ghost town to make it easier to find her. What little magic she had left was being used to knock aside the few zombies left that tried to bar her way - she found she didn't need it to light her way any longer, as the blackened forest now glowed a sickening red. Behind her, she could hear the scuffle of more of the creatures restoring themselves and giving chase.

Just a little more... she thought.

A rumble beneath her feet forced her to trip. The creatures had caught up to her at last, and her magic was thinned out considerably.

If this is going to be how the Great and Powerful Trixie meets her end...then she will do so in style!

She warily stood up, and stood firm. Pointing her horn at the oncoming horde, she fired off a blast that used up every last ounce of magic she could muster. It wasn't much - it managed to blow apart the lead few monsters in the way, but there were many more behind them. Trixie panted, and fell to her knees. *At the very least*, she chanced a thought, her body tired and her physical energy draining faster than her magic had, *At the very least...I helped those young ones escape. The Great and Powerful Trixie will be remembered as a hero...*

Her vision faltered, and the last thing she saw as she passed out was the horde descending upon her, followed by a bright flash.

All Trixie could see was white. She couldn't feel anything except a comforting warmth, and she couldn't move, but she soon found she could still hear, at least in her head.

Is this what death is like? she thought.

Not quite, a voice answered, *Death is much more cold. You are safe and warm here.*

Where is here?

This is the expanse of your mind. I am speaking to you here because you were close to death, close enough that one such as myself can do so.

And you are?

My name is Ruby, the voice answered. For a moment, Trixie could sense apprehension in the voice's being. In her mind's eye, Trixie could now see the source of the voice - it was a silver earth pony with golden hair and equally golden, pupil-less eyes. She bore a magnifying glass for her Cutie Mark

I remember you... Trixie said, *I saw you yesterday. You were the one that led me to that Celestia-forsaken place. Why?*

I am sorry, the mare said with a weak frown, *I was merely curious. The unicorn who helped that young filly before, she had much magical strength. I sensed much of the same in you...and wanted to see if you could help lift the curse of this place. Sadly it seems, nopony can...*

Why were those three fillies there? Why did you lead them to that place?!

Oh, they were in no danger, she smiled faintly, *Not at first, at least. The cursed ponies do not attack those who do not bear the Mark, not unless they...disturb the party. The young filly, Apple Bloom - she will explain to you why she returned. I owe her a great deal of thanks, for trying to help me as she has. Your friends are with you now, and I will allow you to return to them.*

Wait!
Farewell...

“Wait!”

“Whoa there, nelly,” Applejack jumped as Trixie’s sudden outburst caused her to jolt nearly into Applejack’s face, “Calm down, y’all are safe now.”

Trixie frantically looked around. She was in Zecora’s hut, and surrounding her were Rarity, Applejack, and-

“Trixie!” Twilight Sparkle worriedly started as she gave the blue unicorn a crushing hug, “Thank goodness you’re okay, you’ve been unconscious for a few hours already, and your were mumbled in your sleep...I was...we were *all* worried for you...”

Trixie rubbed her hoof to her temples. The pain in her leg was gone, but it was wrapped in bandages and she could smell a fragrant aroma coming from them - *Likely an herbal remedy*, Trixie thought, *Whipped up by Zecora, no doubt*. Trixie warily got to her feet. She was mentally and physically exhausted, but well enough to think clearly again. She was rewarded for her effort by getting a very strong hug from both Rarity and Applejack.

“Oof! Um...”

“Thank you...so much...” Applejack sniffed, “Y’all are okay with me, y’hear? If it weren’t for you, my little sis...I...I don’t even want to think about what might’ve happened...”

“You have my thanks as well, darling,” Rarity smiled, tears in her eyes, “I was so worried for little Sweetie Belle...”

“Yes, well,” Trixie blushed, finding herself suddenly humbled by the thanks of others, “All in a days work for the Great and Powerful Trixie! Ha! No horde of horrid abominations was going to put a stop to one as talented as myself.”

Twilight smiled brightly, “I knew I was right about you - you might like to boast and brag, but your heart is in the right place. I knew it when you stood up to the Ursa Minor that day, knowing you’d lied about defeating one before, and likely knowing you couldn’t have beaten it alone.”

“Hmph!” Trixie said, nose upturned, “The Great and Powerful Trixie would’ve been able to handle that Ursa Minor had she known it was just a baby *before* doing battle with it. But that is besides the point,” she looked at the others with some concern now, “The young ones, they are unharmed? I wish to speak with young Apple Bloom.”

“Apple Bloom?” Applejack said with a raised eyebrow, “What for?”

"To find out why exactly those three wandered into that Celestia-forsaken place."

The three looked at each other with confusion, then Rarity answered, "They told us they just wandered there by accident on their way back from Zecora's."

"I am certain there is more to it than that," Trixie said sternly.

Applejack nodded hesitantly, "Well that little sis o' mine sure likes to hide secrets at times. If'n you say she's got more to tell, I reckon we'd better find out. C'mon."

Applejack led Trixie and the others into the side room, where the three fillies were huddled around a map of Ponyville they'd made themselves. They were arguing about what they were going to be trying to do the following day, but their attention was diverted by the appearance of the four older mares entering the room. The three jumped to attention upon seeing Trixie.

"Oh! Miss Trixie is okay!" Apple Bloom excitedly said.

In an instant, the three fillies had crowded around Trixie and gave her a group hug. Trixie smiled at the gesture, and noticed Twilight's approving grin. That hastily made Trixie shake off her own and return to a stoic expression.

"Miss Trixie, you're amazing!" Scootaloo gushed, "That was so awesome how you blew away all those zombie ponies! You were almost as cool as Rainbow Dash!"

Trixie coughed at the thought that she somehow had been compared to the pegasus, wondering where that connection had suddenly come from.

"I wish I could use magic like that..." Sweetie Belle said in awe.

"Oh! Maybe that's what we should try next," Apple Bloom smiled, "We should try to do some magic tricks!"

"Apple Bloom, you and I can't use magic," Scootaloo pointed out.

"Aw yeah...so much for Cutie Mark Crusader Magicians..."

"Ooh, but maybe you too could help *me* be the magician, like be my assistants and stuff!" Sweetie Belle bubbled.

"So...what would that make us?" Scootaloo said as she tapped a hoof to her chin.

"Cutie Mark Crusader...Road Crew?" suggested Apple Bloom.

"Stage Masters?" Scootaloo asked.

"Oh! Maybe like, a variety show!" Sweetie Belle interjected.

"I'm liking this idea!" Scootaloo and Apple Bloom said at once.

"Yeah! I'd be the magic act, and Scootaloo can wow the crowd with her acrobatics, and Apple Bloom can be the host, and-"

"My little ponies..." Twilight said sternly.

"An' we'd have animals acts an' stuff too, I bet Fluttershy would be happy to help us-"

"Dears..." said Rarity.

"And a really big super cool elaborate stage! With like sparklers and lasers and-"

"Girls..." sighed Applejack.

"Cutie Mark Crusader Variety Entertainers! Yay!"

"LADIES!"

Everyone in the room stared at Trixie, "Ladies..." she continued, "I think we need to have a talk."

"Oh? About what Miss Trixie?"

"About why you *really* went into that village," Trixie said firmly, making sure she directed the question mostly at Apple Bloom.

Apple Bloom gulped. She somehow knew Trixie knew all about it, and figured there wasn't any point in hiding it.

"Well, y'see, my friend Ruby-"

"Who?" Applejack interjected.

"Not important," Trixie said with a sidelong glance, "Let her finish. Go on, Apple Bloom."

"Right...um...well, that there town is cursed, y'see, an' I figured I'd help Ruby try an' lift the curse. But I needed help, an' I knew no pony else would believe me when I told them Ruby was a ghost, so-"

"Oh Apple Bloom, there's no such thing as ghosts," Twilight chuckled. Apple Bloom gave Trixie a knowing look, and rolled her eyes. Trixie stifled a laugh.

"Anyway, I came an' told my friends here, an' we all agreed that lifting a curse would probably be just the greatest talent *ever*."

"Cutie Mark Crusader Curse Breakers!" the three cheered in unison.

"We couldn't agree what a curse-breaking Cutie Mark would be though," Scootaloo pointed out.

"So we came into the forest an' found the town," Apple Bloom continued, "An' I found Ruby an' she told us we'd be safe as long as we didn't go near her house - the curse is pretty picky, she said."

"But then the forest went all dark!" Sweetie Belle said, "We didn't even go anywhere near that cabin! We swear!"

Trixie nodded, "That would be our fault," she noted with a gesture to Applejack, "While very noble of you three to try and help Ruby, you really should be more careful. What would you have done if those *things* came after you and we weren't there to help?"

The Crusaders all looked a little sheepish, but nodded in understanding.

"Now then," Trixie sighed, "I really must get back. I am exhausted, and I need a good rest if we are to continue our Duel tomorrow, Twilight."

"What?" Twilight blinked in shock, "We're still-"

"You didn't think I'd suddenly cancel it just because we're all friends now, did you?" Trixie glared, "I know we didn't get to spend much time together today, but really Twilight, the Great and Powerful Trixie thought you would have figured out by now that once she sets her mind on something, she follows through on it."

Twilight sighed and nodded, "Right..."

The walk home had been interesting - the three fillies, who together called themselves the Cutie Mark Crusaders, had been nothing if not curious about Trixie. Unlike Twilight's other friends, these three had never met her before or heard about her from the others, so meeting her today was a first for them. They had been astounded by her magic and her bravery, and suddenly Trixie had a troupe of fans that were ever so enthusiastic about watching her do more magic. While she was much too tired to do any more tonight, she agreed to show them some another time; Applejack suggested they come and watch Twilight and Trixie's Magician's Duel for the next few days, seeing as it was summer and they didn't have school to worry about. When they arrived at Sugarcube Corner, everyone gave Trixie their thanks again for her help, and she found herself again being more appreciative of the entire group, from Twilight Sparkle on down to Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Everypony in their clique was now much more accepting and friendly towards her, and she admitted she liked the feeling of being appreciated and genuinely liked.

Pinkie Pie was waiting rather impatiently for Trixie in her room, and delivered a huge hug to the unicorn when she came upstairs.

"Oof! Pinkie Pie, calm down, I-"

"Oh you big Dumb Dumb Dummypants, you had me worried *sick*!" Pinkie started, "Rainbow Dash told me all about you going into the Everfree Forest and about you helping to look for the Crusaders and that you had your lovely little date interrupted and-"

"Pinkie Pie, it's okay, really."

"What happened in there? You're hurt!" she pointed as Trixie's makeshift cast.

"It's temporary," Trixie assured her, "Zecora said it would be healed up by tomorrow morning."

Pinkie demanded further exposition, so Trixie told her what had happened. Pinkie Pie gasped and 'ooh'd and 'aah'd at every other line.

"So...you're still going through with the competition, huh?" Pinkie frowned, "I thought-"

"Why does *everypony* here seem to think that I'd just up and abandon my quest to prove myself, just because she and Twilight Sparkle became friends? I do not give up easily, and I certainly do not half-flank my pursuit of my goals and dreams. The Great and Powerful Trixie is more determined than ever to prove she deserves her title."

"More than ever?" Pinkie Pie questioned, "Why's that? Did something happen? Huh huh huh?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has become aggravated with having to explain to Twilight Sparkle about her past over and over again. That unicorn is much too curious for her own good, and what she asks is something I do not wish to reveal to anypony, least of all her."

"Would you be willing to tell *me*, your bestest best friend Pinkie Pie?"

Trixie hesitated, "It is not something the Great and Powerful Trixie feels anypony needs to know. Not yet."

Pinkie Pie frowned, but nodded in acceptance, "Well, whenever you're ready to talk about it, you let me know, okay? I promise I won't tell anypony else if you want me to keep it a secret."

"I appreciate that, Pinkie. Right now though, I would really like to get to sleep. This has been a...most trying day..."

Chapter 7

Distractions and Expositions

Trixie's eyebrow twitched, and she was beginning to have a nagging thought in the back of her head that perhaps last night had been a mistake. They were enthusiastic, and yes, they were absolutely adorable. But Celestia-forbid they not be so *grating* on one's nerves this early in the day. Trixie was suddenly finding herself wishing Pinkie Pie were the one doing the talking - at least with *her* Trixie could tune out most of the inane chatter, but these three? Not so easy.

"Miss Trixie where'd you learn your magic?" asked Sweetie Belle, "You and Twilight have such cool magic, it's so much cooler than my big sister's..." Trixie suppressed a chuckle at the look of indignation on Rarity's face.

"Miss Trixie why do ya always wear that cape and hat and stuff? They're pretty an' all but other than my sister's hat I don't see ponies normally wear any clothes at all." asked Apple Bloom.

"Miss Trixie-" started Scootaloo.

"Ladies, please," Trixie said with as sincere a smile as she could manage, "The Great and Powerful Trixie-"

"Why do you refer to yerself in the third-pony?" interrupted Apple Bloom, "That's so-"

"Cool!" interjected Scootaloo, "She's got a title and everything like Princess Celestia does! Great and Powerful...that's almost cool as Rainbow Dash is! I bet Rainbow Dash could be like, twenty-percent cooler if-"

"*Ladies*," Trixie said with a stern glare.

"Oh...um...sorry."

"As the Great and Powerful Trixie was saying, she has a great deal of work ahead of her today. And as much as she would love to show off her

incredible talent to such enthusiastic little fillies, she needs to save her energy. Today's contest between myself and Twilight Sparkle is-"

"Ooh, a contest?" Sweetie Belle interrupted, "What kind of contest?"

"Like a race or something?" Scootaloo suggested.

"Maybe more like a talent show?" Apple Bloom said quickly.

Trixie raised her hoof to her face in exasperation, "The Great and Powerful Trixie does not have the patience for this..." she said quietly to herself.

"Hey Trixie!" waved Pinkie Pie over from the picnic area, "Come on! Twilight's here!"

Trixie thanked Celestia that Pinkie Pie had rescued her from the three over-inquisitive young ones and quickly rushed over to her friend, leaving the little fillies mildly disappointed. Everypony was here so far, *except* Twilight Sparkle, and Trixie found that particular fact most suspicious - every day so far, Twilight had been the first one here, sometimes with the others but certainly here before Trixie and whoever had accompanied her; the first day being the obvious exception since Twilight had to lead Trixie to the Spot in the first place. Applejack and Rarity had taken to getting a picnic area set up to get lunch for everypony, since it was nearing midday already and Twilight had still not arrived. While she'd wanted to get a chance to sit with everypony else and talk some more, mainly about Twilight Sparkle in hopes of learning more about her, the Cutie Mark Crusaders had made that quite impossible. Trixie took the lead and approached the lavender unicorn first, an aggravated look on her face.

"Twilight Sparkle," she started, a stern disappointment in her voice, "You're *late*."

"I'm sorry everypony, a letter from Princess Celestia came this morning and she wanted an immediate response. I didn't expect my answer to take so long to write out."

"Is somethin' wrong?" asked Applejack.

"Yeah, does she need anything from us?" asked Rainbow Dash.

Trixie listened intently. She figured the other ponies in the group were likely closer to the Princess than the average pony, what with being friends with her trusted pupil, but to be wondering if the Princess to ask them for favors? That was a little beyond what Trixie had been expecting.

"No, it had nothing to do with anything like that. It was more of a...personal letter. We've been having some correspondence over the past few days about...all of this, and she merely wanted an update on our...um...progress."

Trixie kept up her calm and controlled appearance, still slightly nervous about the Princess knowing about all of this, "I'm sure the Princess was delighted to hear that you're currently ahead in our little contest, but I assure you Twilight Sparkle, the Great and Powerful Trixie has no intention of letting that lead of yours hold for long. Now that you're *finally* here, I believe we can begin, yes?"

"Of course," Twilight nodded, "Today was...Concentration, wasn't it? I've been giving it some thought, and I-"

"If I may make a suggestion," Trixie interrupted, "I believe that the Great and Powerful Trixie has more than an ample concept for this event. Seeing as you've been so kind as to provide the tools needed for our last two contests, I thought it would be...fair of me to do the same for one myself."

"Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"Juggling."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Everypony, Pinkie Pie excluded, stared at Trixie as if she were the craziest pony in all of Equestria.

"You can't be serious," Twilight Sparkle said with a slightly nervous smirk, unsure as to Trixie's sincerity.

"Oh, I most assuredly am, Twilight Sparkle," Trixie smiled broadly, "I'd been giving it some thought, and it occurs to me that juggling is as true a test of one's focus and balance as any event *you* could have thought up, very suitable for our purposes here. I even took the liberty of procuring us the required materials."

With her magic, Trixie lugged over a very large box, about the size of a large refrigerator. The other ponies, Pinkie Pie excluded, had been wondering what was in the box since they'd arrived. When Trixie opened it, out spilled a very large collection of rubber balls - dozens, no, *hundreds* of

them. Smaller than tennis balls but large enough to have some heft to them; it wasn't the weight Trixie cared about - it was the quantity.

"How did-" Twilight Sparkle started.

"You're not the only one with connections, Twilight," Trixie said with a smug grin, "I must give my thanks to Derpy for helping me get all of these on such short notice; she is such a hard-working mare, very willing to help out a friend in need of a favor."

Twilight sighed, "Go on then, explain to me exactly *how* this is going to work. I've never really juggled before - sure I've seen it a few times, but-

"It's simple enough to understand, really," Trixie smiled, "Even for someone that's never done any...*research*. Normally I would suggest a solitary competition here, but that would be much too easy. A key factor of being able to focus and concentrate is not only to be able to handle your own task, but to be able to focus on one's opponent's actions - therefore, we'll have a little juggling contest."

"Like...competitive juggling? How would that work?"

"Think of it like a game of 'Catch' - you know what *that* is, don't you?"

Twilight nodded.

"Well, think of it like that - we each start with one ball and throw it to one another. The goal is to make the catch as difficult as possible without being *impossible*, but since we're using our magic it should be easy enough to catch a ball at nearly any speed and at nearly any distance, provided we're throwing them towards one another. We're not allowed to move from our starting position, understand?"

"I think so. Where does the *juggling* part come in?"

"Well first, we're going to be throwing these balls back and forth constantly," Trixie continued, "As soon as you catch the ball, you throw it again. If you hold it for too long, the next part becomes that much harder - you see, every few seconds we'll each be given another ball, and so on and so forth until there aren't any more to give."

Twilight's jaw dropped, "But...there's got to be a few *hundred* of them here..."

"Worried?" Trixie smirked, "Don't worry, the moment one of us drops a ball, we lose. Simple as that."

Twilight nodded, "It sure sounds simple enough, but in practice...I don't know..."

"If you're not up to it, you can forfeit," Trixie chuckled, "I won't feel offended if you don't think you're up to the task. I understand you've probably never done anything like this before, so it's okay if you want to admit I'd be better at it."

Trixie didn't bother hiding any smug confidence in her tone during the entire exchange. She was certain this plan of hers would work, but-

"Let's do it," Twilight said firmly, "I may be a little apprehensive, but I'm certainly not afraid to give it a try."

Trixie silently cursed, *Well, there goes that idea. Here I figured she'd be unwilling to try something so drastic without researching it a little; seems I underestimated her confidence. Great...and I just had to think of something really difficult too...*

"But," Twilight continued, "I have one tiny request, if we're going to go through with a contest entirely of your own devising."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"If I win," Twilight added with a confident smile, "The next stage of the contest, I get to decide the event myself, and you have to agree to go along with whatever that may be. If you win, then *you* get to design the next event yourself. Sound fair?"

"This sounds suspiciously like we're changing things around," Trixie raised an eyebrow, "Until now, the *loser* has been the one who designed the next stage - I lost the first, so I had the most input on the second; you lost that one, so you organized the third, which I lost, hence I designed this one. See where I'm going with this?"

"Yes, well," Twilight added with a smirk, "If you're not willing to up the ante, I wouldn't think any less of you."

Was...was that a challenge? Trixie thought to herself, restraining the urge to look surprised, *My, my...where did she get this sudden boost in confidence? First taking me up on my absurd event idea, and now issuing challenges and being a little, dare I say it, smug about it? Curious...*

"The Great and Powerful Trixie accepts your little wager," Trixie said with a confident grin, "And *when* she wins, you'll wish you'd just kept things as they were before."

Twilight and Trixie took their starting positions on opposite ends of the small field. At Twilight's insistence they'd even gotten a few more rules worked out - Trixie admitted they made things a little easier, so she didn't complain that her initial suggestion was being modified; she did note that the more things got organized, the less their event sounded like juggling and the more it sounded like just a really elaborate game of Catch. The two unicorns now stood in a rectangular 'box', fifty yards long with both unicorns at either end in a smaller box that represented their designated area. To their left, right and behind them, about five yards out, were bounding lines, with a similar line five yards ahead of them. The two had agreed upon three simple rules - if one of them stepped out of their smaller box, they lose; if a ball thrown to them landed in the five-by-five box surrounding them, they lose; if a ball *they* threw hit the ground but did *not* land in their opponent's box, they lose. It was typical, Trixie felt, for Twilight to turn a spur-of-the-moment contest into what could probably pass for a real sport.

Twilight and Trixie each held a ball with their magic just in front of them, ready to start. To Trixie's side, just past the boundary marks, was Pinkie Pie with a huge pile of the balls ready to be thrown into the fray; to Twilight's side, Applejack was ready to do the same. Trixie hadn't thought of a good method for introducing new balls into the mix, and admitted Twilight's solution was effective and simple. She'd chosen Pinkie Pie as her designated 'ball-passer' because she was certain her friend would make them easy enough to catch; Fluttershy would probably not throw hard enough, Applejack would probably throw too hard, and Rarity's own magic might make catching complicated. Rainbow Dash was not an option even if Trixie had been inclined to choose her, as she now flew overhead the field to serve as makeshift referee; she would be calling out for a new set of balls to be added every thirty seconds as well as watching for the first ball to hit the ground. Trixie and Twilight signaled that they were ready-

"Start!" Rainbow yelled.

Trixie flung her ball with all her might in a straight path at Twilight, hoping to duplicate her admittedly failed attempt at surprising Twilight into a quick loss during the Strength contest. Not surprisingly, this didn't work and Twilight caught it long before it came anywhere near her. Trixie caught the

ball that had been softly lobbed at her, and threw that one as well, then realized the flaw in her plan - she now had no balls of her own, but Twilight had *both*, a fact made apparent when Twilight very cleverly flung both balls at Trixie in curved trajectories from different directions, making her have to catch two at once. Not too difficult, but Trixie noted that if that sort of thing happened when they had more balls to worry about, things could get bad.

"New ball!" Rainbow Dash called from above, just as Trixie threw one of the two she now held.

Pinkie Pie carefully tossed a ball at Trixie, making it easy to catch and easy to throw. Trixie panicked when she noticed Twilight had made a very strategic decision in asking Applejack to be her ball-passer - Applejack bucked the little rubber object with all her might at Twilight, who just used her magic to whirl it around and fling it at Trixie without it losing any momentum, much harder than Trixie thought she herself could chuck one; Trixie barely caught the ball before it went flying past her with enough force to leave a painful bruise. *She's taking this extremely seriously. This isn't at all like she's treated the last few events...she must really want to win. What in Equestria does she have planned?* Trixie was beginning to question if she'd made the best decision in picking this particular event. She didn't peg Twilight Sparkle as a liar, so she *knew* the lavender unicorn had never done anything like this before, but here she was, seemingly almost *naturally* good at this. *Of all the bad luck in the world*, Trixie thought as she casually caught a small burst of multiple balls at once, *Why is it that I seem to have the worst of it? I think I gave her too much time to think about the contest, and she used it to develop this little plan of attack...*

It was now just over an hour after they began, and with one last "New Ball!" from Rainbow Dash, every ball available was now in use. It was quite a sight to behold, seeing a few hundred tiny rubber balls flying back and forth through the air propelled only by magic. Rainbow Dash was careful as she flew around the makeshift field, knowing that getting pegged with one of the balls could seriously hurt considering the speed at which most of them were moving. Trixie found herself struggling to keep up with everything happening all at once, and once more she cursed her own not-so-clever attempt to beat Twilight Sparkle at an event she was sure the lavender unicorn had no experience with. How in Celestia's name was she

so good at this? And how had she not noticed that Twilight was slowly but surely starting to hoard the balls to herself? She cursed herself once she noticed it - obviously her focus was too much on catching the high-speed throws Twilight was lobbing at her and trying to return them power for power, and not enough on what Twilight was doing; the lavender unicorn had obviously been very keen on keeping Trixie's thoughts distracted with many difficult-to-catch throws.

Trixie stood in mild awe at the sight of Twilight's magic being used to levitate nearly every single ball that was being used in the contest, just over her head and lumped together in a large ball of their own. Every now and then a few of the would shoot out at Trixie in order to keep her busy, but eventually Trixie ran out of balls of her own to throw and stood there with nothing to do but watch. Twilight Sparkle, Trixie noted, had a look of firm determination on her face, and...was that a hint of a smug little grin? *What is going on here...this is not the Twilight Sparkle that was so socially awkward yesterday. This is not the Twilight Sparkle who was so apprehensive about having this contest in the first place. This...is not good...*

Twilight lifted the large mass of tiny rubber balls high into the air, and with a great force of effort, the ball exploded into all of its individual parts that now came screaming at Trixie like tiny rubber bullets. Trixie put all of the effort she could muster into her magic and focused the best she could on creating a sort of shield in front of her that would catch any balls that fell in her box. She knew that her only hope of winning was that either her magic would hold, or that Twilight Sparkle's bombardment wouldn't be perfectly accurate and at least one would not land in the designated area.

By some miracle, Trixie thought with a sigh of relief, she had managed an incredible feat - she'd caught every single ball that had come her way, but now it took all of her focus to try not to drop any of them; how in Equestria Twilight had managed to hold this many at once was, she admitted, far beyond her understanding. She looked warily over at Twilight Sparkle, proud of herself for defending against her unorthodox, but very clever tactic.

"Ha! Ha ha ha ha!" Trixie gloated, "Nice try, Twilight! Close, but no-"
"Point!" called Rainbow Dash, "Ball on the ground in Trixie's field!"

Trixie's eyes widened when she saw Twilight standing across from her looking not at all concerned, a smile on her face as she pointed her hoof towards the ground in the very corner behind Trixie's left. One more ball had somehow escaped Trixie's watch, and sat there on the ground just *barely* in bounds - a few more inches, and it would've been Twilight who lost, not Trixie. Rainbow Dash was keen to point it out for everypony to see, a satisfied grin on her face. Trixie's focus snapped at the very sight of it, and let the mass of rubber above her just drop, pelting her softly as she looked on in despair.

I lost...I can't believe I lost again... she thought, That ball didn't get caught in my shield...she must've hooked it somehow.

Twilight Sparkle approached her, wading through the small sea of rubber, and with a smile, "That was very well done, Trixie, you should be glad you performed as well as you did."

Trixie glared at Twilight, "A clever strategy, Twilight Sparkle. Flinging *one* ball in a different direction from all the others so I wouldn't see it. I didn't think you had such a clever trick in your arsenal."

"Well if there's one thing I'm good at, besides magic and researching of course, it's strategizing," Twilight smirked, "Well then, that brings our contest to a three-to-one score, if I'm not mistaken? Wonderful, I only need one more to win. I certainly hope you'll be bringing your all for the next three contests, Trixie - you need to win three in a row if you hope to beat me."

Trixie was indignant. Was Twilight Sparkle...*taunting* her? Taunting *her* of all ponies?

The Great and Powerful Trixie is the one who should be doing the taunting... Trixie fumed to herself, Where did this sudden burst of confidence come from? Was it something in the Princess's letter? That must be it, the Princess said something to her so now Twilight is treating this contest seriously. Did the Princess threaten her if she lost? That wouldn't be out of place for a personal student would it? Wouldn't it be embarrassing if her prized pupil lost in a Magician's Duel? Even if she did lose to the one-and-only Great and Powerful Trixie, I cannot imagine she'd be too pleased with her pupil.

"Now then," Twilight Sparkle smiled, "I believe we had a little wager going - if I win, I get to decide the next event, yes?"

"Yes, yes, very well," Trixie said with an aggravated sigh, "Let's be on our way. I can't wait to hear it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why, I've already got the perfect event planned out," Twilight said with a broad grin.

Trixie eyed Twilight warily. Something was out of place here, and Trixie couldn't put her hoof on it, "Go on...what did you have in mind?"

"Well, tomorrow is supposed to be a test of our Ingenuity, correct? Well, if my memory serves, there was a bit in there about an 'obstacle' and I got to thinking - just one little obstacle wouldn't be much of a challenge, would it? After all, you and I have such a diverse collection of spells."

"True enough, I suppose..."

"So we'd need multiple obstacles, that was the first point. But then I got to thinking, how would we judge who had had the most clever solution? The answer was natural - speed. Whoever could solve the problem the quickest would clearly be the more creative and intuitive of us. So there was the second point - make it a race! An obstacle course!"

"...you're kidding."

"Not any more than you were with your little *juggling* idea," Twilight chuckled. Trixie hid her embarrassed blush well. Juggling had probably *not* been the best way to word her chosen challenge. It was a game of catch, for Celestia's sake! Just a very elaborate, intensive game of catch, perhaps with *some* elements of juggling. *Juggling*, Trixie thought, *What was I thinking?*

"Well put," Trixie admitted calmly, "Though, I see a little flaw in your plan: if you're designing an obstacle course, you'd have intricate knowledge of the obstacles involved. Knowing *your* studious nature, you'd have a superior advantage. I'm not falling for-"

"Oh, I didn't intend on designing the course," Twilight smiled, "For exactly that reason, in fact. For that matter, if *either* of us were to know anything about what was actually on the course, it would render the whole 'ingenuity' thing moot, wouldn't it? So *they're* going to be designing it."

Twilight pointed a hoof at the gathered ponies, all of whom were taken by complete surprise. Trixie could tell it was genuine - had Twilight

thought of this entire plan and not informed her friends? It must've been spur of the moment then, and Trixie felt that lent more credence to her idea that Princess Celestia's letter had been quite a motivating factor in Twilight's actions today. *What in Equestria was in that letter?* Trixie furiously thought, *What could the Princess have said that would influence Twilight's mannerisms so drastically?*

"What do you mean we're designing it?" asked Rainbow Dash, "I understand that *you* can't have anything to do with it, but-"

"You girls are the ones I feel we can trust to do a good job on such short notice," Twilight smiled reassuringly, "Rainbow Dash, you take place in races all the time - you'd be perfect for designing a race course."

"Well...yeah, I guess you have a point."

"And Rarity-"

"Me?" blinked the fashionista, "How would I be of any particular importance?"

"You're a unicorn yourself, and while your knowledge of magic isn't as vast as mine or Trixie's - no offense, you didn't have formal training after all," Twilight added, noticing Rarity's indignation, "You *do* have a pretty good idea of what sort of magic unicorns are capable of. Enough to provide us with plenty of challenges to overcome, certainly."

"Hmm...I suppose you do have a point, darling. And I could certainly add some flair to the track design as well..." she added, tapping a hoof to her chin as she began to dream up all sorts of ideas.

"Applejack is strong," Twilight continued, "And will certainly be of help in actually *building* the course. Derpy," Twilight motioned to the wall-eyed pegasus who had arrived just before the end of the event, "Has already shown great talent for procuring supplies quickly and in great abundance. So she'll be able to help get anything you guys need, I hope?"

"You can on me!" Derpy saluted happily, "The most reliable mailmare in all Equestria is at your service!"

"What about me, huh? HUUUUUUUH?" Pinkie Pie smiled broadly, "What super duper awesome skill do I have that'll help? Ooh ooh! I know, I can bring snacks! Or um...provide music? Yeah! Everypony works better with great music to listen to. I'm reminded of a song...how did it go? Um...ah! 🎵 *Whistle while you-*"

“Pinkie’s good at keeping everypony motivated,” Twilight interrupted, “And Fluttershy...um...”

“Oh...I don’t think there’s anything in particular I’d be helpful with. I’ll just...um...help where I’m needed...”

“Ooh, ooooooh!” Apple Bloom excitedly jumped, “Can we help too?”

“Yeah! I wanna see you guys do some cool magic and stuff, and it would be so *awesome* to get to help Rainbow Dash design a race track,” gushed Scootaloo.

“And if we help out, we might find out our special talents!” Sweetie Belle noted.

“You’re right!” Apple Bloom gasped.

“Cutie Mark Crusader Obstacle Course Designers! YAY!”

“Aw, geez,” Applejack sighed, “Here we go...”

“Ahem,” Twilight coughed, “Well then, with that out of the way, Trixie and I will take our leave and let you all to it. C’mon Trixie, I just got a new order of this *fantastic* herbal tea blend, I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Trixie blinked in confusion, “Beg pardon? Did you just invite me over for tea?”

“Well, I’ll be honest, we kind of *have* to keep an eye on one another,” Twilight added with a slightly mischievous grin, “Neither one of us can know what’s going on in the course design, and the only way to ensure neither of us learns anything, accidentally or otherwise, is to be in each other’s company until tomorrow morning.”

Trixie’s jaw dropped slightly, then recovered. Trixie was finding it harder and harder as the days wore on to hide the shock she constantly got from just being around these ponies - were they *all* as crazy and Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle? She certainly hoped not.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that,” Trixie said with mild annoyance, “I should’ve guessed this whole thing was just another ploy to get me alone with you so you could chat me up. Very clever, Twilight Sparkle...but I think I’ll *politely* decline your invitation.”

“Nope,” Twilight smiled, “You agreed to whatever terms I laid down in the course of outlining the next event, and one of my terms is that we don’t let one another have any interaction with our friends, to avoid risking information leaks. So-”

“You apparently didn’t hear me, so I’ll just repeat myself,” Trixie said with gritted teeth, “This time, allow me to *rudely* decline your invitation. I don’t know what sort of plot you’re planning, but-”

“You’re coming over to my house for tea and dinner, and that is *final*,” Twilight interrupted with a glare, “If you don’t want to follow my terms, then by the rules of the Magician’s Duel you automatically forfeit the round, just as *you* tried to get *me* to do earlier. And since I’m ahead three-to-one, if you forfeit a round, I win the entire thing.”

Trixie could *not* keep her jaw from dropping this time. The huge combination of factors slammed into her all at once and made her feel such a strong flurry of emotions that it stunned her into total silence, with only her thoughts to keep her company as she tried to piece together what exactly had happened in the last minute. Twilight Sparkle had put her into a corner, and she knew very well that she’d fallen into the trap the instant she agreed to Twilight’s terms. She’d let her overconfidence get the better of her, and now admitted that Twilight was, when she wanted to be, a *devious* schemer. And this sudden...*assertiveness*, a side of Twilight that Trixie had never seen before, it was so...

Enticing? It was not the word Trixie wanted to admit fit the feeling, but here it was. Trixie wondered if there other sides to Twilight’s personality that she’d yet to see.

“Trixie?” Twilight asked with concern - Trixie had been standing silent for over a minute now, “Are you okay?”

“YES! Um...yes...” Trixie blurted, “Right...so, it would seem I’ve been painted into a corner, as the saying goes. Well played, Twilight Sparkle. I appears I owe you more credit than I thought you were due. Very well, if those are the terms of the next event, upon your insistence I shall take you up on your offer. Let us be off then, so we can leave our friends to their work.”

Twilight grinned, “Good...we have a *lot* to talk about...”

Trixie was pleased when she found out Spike, Twilight’s ‘pet’ dragon, wasn’t at home - he was in Canterlot on official business and had been ever since the first day of their contest. Apparently, he was responsible for helping Twilight Sparkle with any material needs she’d need for their Duel;

it was he who had ordered all the stage materials that first morning in anticipation of the Technique contest - at Twilight's behest, of course - and it was also he who had sent the...*weights* (Trixie refused adamantly to call them by their stupid real name). She'd heard from Pinkie Pie that apparently Spike was also responsible for sending and receiving letters between Twilight and Princess Celestia through his magical dragon-fire. Trixie found herself a might jealous - how useful would it be to have a personal, traveling 'mailbox' of sorts, and one that also assisted you in your day-to-day business?

As they chatted over tea, Trixie found herself soothed into a sense of security and comfort - this tea really *was* a fantastic blend, the best she'd tasted in years. It reminded her oddly of home, a curious feeling. Trixie found it difficult to maintain her haughty attitude, and Twilight being so...*personal* made that fact even more clear. She'd expected the two of them to have more to talk about, and Twilight had insisted on going first. And here Twilight was, revealing all sorts of little tidbits of information about herself and her feelings that Trixie was beginning to understand...at least somewhat. And she had to admit, if Twilight *could* learn to have Trixie's talent with spells rather than just brute force, and if she had Trixie's confidence? She'd be in the running for greatest equine who had ever lived, right up there with Princess Celestia herself. It was...humbling, to say the least.

"...and then I said, 'We need to build an exact copy of Ponyville right over there. We have less than a minute!'"

"Ha!" Trixie laughed, "Who were you hoping to fool, the Parasprites or the Princess?"

"Maybe a little of both..." Twilight blushed, "So anyway, enough about me and my *crazy* adventures, I think it's time we dive a little deeper into the past of the Great and Powerful Trixie, don't you think?"

Trixie rolled her eyes and sighed, "You're so insistent, Twilight Sparkle...I'm beginning to find it more trouble to keep my mouth shut than to just indulge you. Very well, since this tea of yours has gotten me into a talking mood," she added as she took another sip, "What would you like to know? I warn you, I reserve the right to refuse to tell you anything."

“Well, yesterday I asked you about the Great and Powerful Paragon,” Twilight started, “And you kind of skirted around the issue. All you said was that he was...well, basically great and powerful, and that you beat him, and blah, blah, blah. Like I said, I admired the stallion - he was a role-model to many ponies, myself especially, and I want to get to know more about what he was like in person.”

Trixie shrugged, “Any pony who’s ever met him would likely tell you the same thing. Princess Celestia knew him on a pretty personal level, I don’t know why you don’t ask her.”

“I’m sure even *her* knowledge of him pales compared to yours. Trixie...” Twilight said with a serious look, “Please, tell me about your father.”

Trixie spit her last gulp of tea out and started coughing uncontrollably.

“M-my...w-what?” Trixie sputtered, “I...I’m afraid you’re mistaken, my dear. Ha, what a...p-preposterous idea.”

“I put two-and-two together, Trixie. It wasn’t that hard to do - you’re a good liar and all, but you can’t hold a candle to what I’m able to find out with just a little private research.”

Twilight pulled a small folder out from her desk and opened it, revealing a great deal of scraps, newspaper clippings, old photographs, and other memorabilia with the Great and Powerful Paragon in them. Judging from the condition these were all in, Trixie guessed they were likely from Twilight’s private collection - she *had* admitted to being a fan of his, had she not? Trixie frowned as she noticed that a lot of these photos were familiar, showing the stallion known as Paragon in very good quality. They were all old, to be sure - most of them were older than Trixie and Twilight were. But it was the most recent ones, photographs taken from the few years leading up to and after the year Trixie was born, that she new damned any hope of hiding the truth. While she herself wasn’t in any of the pictures, her *mother* was, that glorious cape and hat and all, and the most damning piece of evidence of all was one of them was from a newspaper clipping announcing their wedding.

“Where did you get all of these?” Trixie asked hoarsely.

“Most of them were in my own private collection, but a few of them I only got in the past few days from public records,” Twilight explained, “I wouldn’t have been so curious if you hadn’t mentioned him that night...”

“So you figured it all out...” Trixie sighed, “Fine...you caught me. I am the daughter of the Great and Powerful Paragon, and obviously my mother was Mirage the Magnificent. I should be angry that you went poking around my personal life...but I suppose I did the same to you, looking up your student file.”

Twilight looked on with sincere concern, “Why would you want to hide something like that from everypony? Your father is regarded as one of the greatest unicorn magicians to have ever lived, and for you to have surpassed him...well, it’s no wonder you have such confidence in yourself and your abilities. And you obviously get your talent from your mother, she’s easily as famous as he is - my parents were pretty big fans of hers before she retired, you know?”

“The Great and Powerful Trixie has her reasons for not being open about this,” Trixie said with a scowl, “And this is one thing you will not pry easily out of her. If you have something you’d like to ask about what my father was like, feel free to do so. I will not deny you the answers you seek, so long as that is all you wish to know.”

“Well...I was hoping you would just tell me more about him,” Twilight said with a small shrug, “I mean, I know all about his exploits and all, but I only know what everypony else knows. I want to know more about the stallion that helped make you who you are.”

“Hmph...very well,” Trixie said with nose uplifted, “He was a lot like you, truth be told. It is no wonder that you’d be a fan of his - he was a real bibliophile himself. Our private library at home was as large as the library at the academy, perhaps larger, and my father always kept it in fresh stock, only keeping those books he found particularly useful to have on hand, and donating the rest to libraries such as this one,” she gestured to Twilight’s collection of books, “But I suppose you knew all that.”

Twilight nodded, “I only know that he loved to read, and was always a firm advocate for the library’s expansion at school. He donated a wing, didn’t he?”

“That’s right.”

Trixie and Twilight spoke for hours, first over tea and then later over dinner. Topics changed from her father to her mother and to her home life and back again throughout the night. Trixie found it much like having a huge weight lifted off her shoulders, to reveal to *somepony* the one thing she always tried to keep secret. She felt a mild embarrassment that Twilight Sparkle was the first pony to learn of her connection with Paragon, and Trixie made a pact to herself to let Pinkie Pie know as well; it was only fair, after all. She knew she could trust Pinkie and Twilight to keep this a secret from everypony else - she wasn't ready to let Equestria at large know the truth, though she was certain enough that if Twilight had connected the dots, other ponies likely had as well.

The strangest thing about it all, Trixie found, was that getting to talk about this with another pony was more than just unburdening to her - it also made her feel a deeper connection with the pony she was revealing it to. Twilight had not changed her opinion of Trixie in the slightest after learning the truth - perhaps, Trixie thought, the only thing that had changed was that Twilight respected her *more* for being honest with her after all this time. And Trixie did admit that it just felt...right. It was hard to explain, and that worried her, but Trixie admitted that for some reason, it felt perfectly natural to talk to Twilight Sparkle about something so personal.

Even so, Trixie knew that she could not, *would* not, ever reveal her last secret to anypony, not unless she was absolutely, positively, one-hundred-and-twenty percent certain beyond any doubt that the pony she told would not think any less of her. And while she trusted Twilight Sparkle, well, knowing how much she idolized Paragon made it all the less likely that she would not completely change her opinion of Trixie in an instant. And while there were many ponies she couldn't care less about the opinions of, she found that her new friends were not included in that category - she did not want to lose their respect.

And now, she realized, she did not want to lose that respect most of all from Twilight Sparkle. For the first time in years, somepony else who knew about who she was and who her parents were did not look at her with *disapproval*. The Great and Powerful Paragon had been exactly as Twilight said - one of the greatest unicorn magicians *ever* - and her mother was famous as a performer, a beauty queen, and just an all-around

celebrity. How could she, Trixie, hope to live up to those expectations? It had been a burden on her for her whole life; and here, Twilight Sparkle did *not* think any less of Trixie. Trixie fought off most of the warm, bubbling feeling she got when she thought about it. It was a suspiciously familiar feeling, similar to how Pinkie Pie had described it. *It's just the tea...* Trixie thought to herself, not quite sure if that was at all true, *It'll go away...in the morning...*

Trixie yawned loudly, and in embarrassment apologized, "Begging your pardon, Twilight...but it getting late. We should get our rest for tomorrow's contest, I would not want to win because you're suffering from sleep deprivation."

"Oh my, you're right," Twilight said as she looked at the moon high in the sky outside the window, "I must've lost track of the time. Come on, I have a spare bed in my room."

For the first time in a long while, Trixie slept peacefully, untroubled by the thought of days ahead. There was only one thing in her subconscious mind that mattered now - proving herself worthy. Not so much of her title - that still mattered, but it was a lingering side-thought, something that could be accomplished over the course of the days to come. No, now there was one thing that truly gave her subconscious mind pause. She wanted to prove that she was worthy of the respect she was being given, not just by herself, not just by her new friends, but the respect of somepony in particular.

Twilight Sparkle's opinion of her somehow mattered now, and she now wanted to fight harder than ever to live up to her illustrious legacy.

The only lingering shadow that remained was a festering secret she feared would destroy *everything*.

She would not let that happen...

Chapter 8

Obstructions and Exhilarations

Trixie awoke with her usual groggy demeanor, mumbling incoherently to herself as she got out of bed. Noises from downstairs were making it impossible to keep up her attempted rest. *Blast it, Pinkie...* she groaned inwardly, *Can't a pony get any sleep around here?* She wearily walked towards the restroom, not bothering to open her eyes - she'd memorized the layout of Pinkie's room by now - but to her great surprise found herself falling down a flight of stairs instead. Well, she was awake now, that was for certain.

"You...uh...usually *walk* down stairs, Trixie," came Twilight Sparkle's voice, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine..." Trixie growled as she dusted herself off, "Forgot I was here instead of Sugarcube Corner. Now then, where is your restroom? I need to freshen up."

Twilight directed Trixie to the washroom, where Trixie could only frown at the horribly meager collection of grooming supplies. Twilight had less things available to her for keeping herself neat and tidy than Pinkie Pie, far less than she thought possible. How did Twilight keep that mane of hers so straight with *this* selection? With a heavy sigh, Trixie went about styling herself as best she could.

Upon exiting the washroom, Trixie was treated to Twilight's idea of breakfast. Trixie had to admit that she'd grown accustomed to a daily intake of muffins every morning, and since Pinkie Pie was such a skilled baker and, at least according to her, had such a wide plethora of recipes stored away in the limitless expanse that she called her mind, it never got boring or old having essentially the same thing every day. As Trixie took a bite of Twilight Sparkle's prepared daisy salad, she found herself missing those muffins. *Great Celestia, I believe I'm becoming addicted. I do hope I don't suffer any withdrawals...* she chuckled to herself semi-jokingly. She was slightly worried that all she could think about as she finished what was a

disappointingly light breakfast, was having a great big plate of muffins the next morning; she would ask Pinkie Pie later to make her a batch of blueberry especially.

Well, Trixie admitted as she took a sip of some of the finest coffee she'd ever tasted, Twilight's not much on making food, but she's remarkable with tea and coffee. I simply must find where she gets this roast from, it is simply marvelous.

A knock at the door removed Trixie from her inner thoughts and redirected her to the real world once again. At the door were Fluttershy and Rarity, who had come to let the two competing unicorns know the course was finally finished, a little early even - nopony expected them to be finished before late afternoon, and here it was only mid-morning. Twilight hid her mixed disappointment and pride well; she was glad her friends had turned out to be so reliable, but had had heart set on spending more time alone with Trixie. Trixie didn't need to be a mind-reader to see that.

If either Twilight and Trixie could see it, they would be awestruck at the sight of what had become of the Spot. Beyond all expectations, their friends had come through and built an obstacle course to their exact specifications in record time. Not just one - *two*, both of them perfectly identical to one another, side by side so that the same obstacles could easily be used for both courses, and separated by a wall large enough to prevent the competitors from being able to see what one another were doing. Of course, keeping in line with the rules of the engagement, neither of the unicorns were allowed to see the courses until they went through them themselves; Fluttershy and Rarity carefully led the two to the starting lines of the track, blindfolded, and got them into their starting positions. Next they found themselves being fitted with saddlebags, and both were curious as to exactly what lay ahead. They both heard Rainbow Dash's voice begin to go over what she'd planned out - Rarity had explained on the way that Rainbow wanted to make sure the two unicorns followed her course outlines to keep the contest fair.

"Okay you two, welcome to Rainbow Dash's Ultimate Unicorn Obstacle Course Deluxe, Mark Three," the pegasus said with flair.

"Mark Three?" Twilight asked, "What happened to Marks One and Two?"

"Hee hee," Pinkie Pie giggled from nearby, "There are no Mark One or Two, she just called it Mark Three because it sounds cooler."

"*Pinkie Pie*," Rainbow said with annoyance, "You're not supposed to *tell* anypony that."

"Whoopsie!" Pinkie laughed, "My mistake!"

"Ugh...anyway," Rainbow continued, "There are *rules* you have to follow if you're gonna race on *my* track, got it? The first rule of Rainbow Dash's Ultimate Unicorn Obstacle Course Deluxe, Mark Three is: you do not talk about Rainbow Dash's Ultimate Unicorn Obstacle Course Deluxe, Mark Three."

"Good heavens, with a garish name like *that*, who would want to?" Trixie chuckled, "Anypony with any sense would just ignore me halfway through the name."

"*Second* rule," Rainbow went on, a bitter tone in her voice, "You DO NOT talk about Rainbow Dash's Ultimate Unicorn Obstacle Course Deluxe, Mark Three."

"Where is she getting these rules?" Trixie asked Twilight with all sincerity and concern, "This sounds like a crazy pony's checklist."

"Why is the second rule the same as the first?" Twilight asked.

"It's not!" Rainbow insisted, "It's more menacing, since I shouted the 'do not' part."

"See? *Crazy*," Trixie smirked.

"Third rule!" Rainbow interrupted, "No teleportation spells - that kind of defeats the purpose of a race if 'poof' hey look I'm at the finish line. Fourth rule! If you step out of the boundaries of the course, you are *disqualified*; no questions, no arguments, *no exceptions*. This includes *height* boundaries - I'll be flying overhead to referee, and if you're at my altitude or higher, that's out of bounds. So no flight spells, got it?"

"Right, got it," Trixie sighed apprehensively.

"Fifth rule!"

"By Celestia's beard, how many rules *are* there?" Trixie blurted.

"Celestia doesn't have a beard," Twilight chuckled, "Where in Equestria did-"

"It's a figure of speech," Trixie sighed.

"FIFTH! RULE!" Rainbow shouted, "Fifth rule has been changed! It is now: *SHUT UP, and let me finish*. Geez!"

"I have a question!" Pinkie shouted from the back.

"Pinkie Pie, you're not even *in* the race! You don't get to ask questions! You helped *build* the dang thing! For the love of-" Rainbow cried, her head in her hooves, "Celestia, why do you do this to me? AGH! Sixth rule! You can use any spell you want or need to accomplish any task, so long as it does not break the third or fourth rules, and so long as it does not do either of the following: alter the course, or change the boundary lines. Rarity says this means you cannot manipulate objects on the course to bypass the obstacles, and especially don't *destroy* anything. Like, no blowing holes in stuff, no ripping up the fences to make like stilts or something, yadda yadda yadda.

"Seventh rule! Formerly the fifth, but hey, *things change*. Seventh rule! When you start, you'll notice the saddlebags we gave you are filled with assorted little knick-knacks and stuff like that - they're things that you'll need to get past the obstacles. Rarity insists on me letting you know it was her idea, and reminds you that anything you find in those bags can be used as you see fit, so long as it follows the rest of the rules. You can do whatever you want with them, even *nothing at all*, so don't feel forced to use very single tool we gave you if you can re-use them; Rarity also said," and here she made a mocking tone of Rarity's voice, making the white unicorn give a dignified snort in protest, "'It is a true sign of one's creativity if one can find multiple uses for the same tool', and all that junk. Got all that?"

"Yes," Trixie sighed, "We got it. Can we get started now? This blindfold is *dreadfully* uncomfortable. I think somepony put it on a little too tight."

Trixie felt a pair of hooves grab the blindfold behind her head and untie it, then hold it in place. Rainbow Dash counted to three, and the hooves and blindfold were now gone, leaving Trixie looking out onto the obstacle course at last. Not wanting to waste any time gawking at what the others had managed to put together in the course of *one night*, she hurried forward and began quickly taking stock of what she had in her supply pack.

“Strips of metal, small planks of wood, some rope, and a couple of sheets of cloth,” she checked off to herself, “Not a very robust list, but I suppose I’ll see what’s needed as I come to it.”

She ran ahead and eventually came to the first obstacle - a very large ditch. It was deep enough and steep enough that if she were to climb down and then over to the other side normally, combined with how wide it was, it might take her nearly a half-an-hour. Not an option. An idea struck Trixie, and she pulled the wood pieces out of her bag and took better stock of them. They were roughly hoof-sized and there about a dozen of them - they looked strong enough that they could support the weight of a pony if only just barely. Trixie flung a few out towards the ditch and used her magic to levitate them into a makeshift bridge that only went a few feet out. Stepping carefully onto the bridge, she used her magic to cautiously maneuver the rear pieces to the front, allowing Trixie to inch across the ditch. It wasn’t a very quick pace, but it was simple and easy.

After reaching the other side of the ditch, Trixie raced onwards - with the wall in the way she had no idea as to what Twilight’s position was nor what her solution had been. Trixie knew that was irrelevant and distracting; there was only time to think of her own solutions. The next obstacle was a few dozen yards ahead around the next bend - a gigantic wall. It must’ve stretched dozens of feet into the air, and Trixie frowned with disappointment. Without a flight spell, this might be more difficult. A thought came to her - the rope! Sure it wasn’t long enough to reach the top on its own, but with a little work here and there...

Trixie focused her magic intently on hurling two of the metal strips into the earthen wall as hard as she could, but with only enough force to make sure they only embedded themselves, not went flying through it. Standing carefully on the high fence that served as the course boundary on one side of her, she used her magic to swing the rope like a whip, jumped, and with all the accuracy and focus she could muster latched onto the nearest piece of metal. Her momentum carried her forward and along the width of the wall, her rump just barely avoiding scraping the ground as she came rushing towards the brick wall that made up the other boundary. She just *barely* was able to reach it, and used all of the physical strength she could manage to buck hard against it, propelling herself back in the

opposite direction. At the apex of her next swing, she deftly focused her magic as furiously as possible to multi-task her elaborate solution. First, she let the other end of the rope go loose from around the first metal spike, and in the very brief moment of freefall, she was able to latch it onto the next one higher up on the wall. Then, her magic snagged the last piece of metal she'd been using from out of the wall, and as she began swinging back towards the brick wall on the other side, she embedded that spike further up to use at her next swinging point. She repeated this several times, until at last she was close enough to the top of the wall that she embedded one of the metal strips vertically on top, latched onto it, and was able to climb over the rest of the way. She breathed a sigh of relief and exhaustion as she took a moment at the top to admire her handiwork.

Then, her heart sunk; at this height, she could see out onto the course ahead and see the next obstacle - the giant 'lake' the ponies had managed to make. The brick wall separating the two courses abruptly ended at the lake shore, though it started again at the other side, but it wasn't the lake that was the problem. Since the brick wall wasn't completely in the way of her vision at this height, she was able to make out Twilight Sparkle on the course ahead, having just arrived at the lake shore. She was *winning*.

Trixie swore to herself, genuinely concerned she was going to lose if she didn't think of something, and fast. Rushing down the incline that made up the other side of the giant wall obstacle, she eventually came to the lake and could see Twilight Sparkle already nearly a quarter of the way out. Trixie knew there was no point in trying to copy Twilight's solution (and admitted sourly that it was the one she had thought up on her way here); using the wooden planks as a raft, the metal as a mast, and the cloth and rope as a sail, Twilight was sailing along at a steady pace across the lake. A strong wind at Trixie's back - obviously of Twilight's concoction to propel her raft - made her glad she hadn't worn her hat or cape; they would've been more of a hassle than a fashion statement in these conditions. Trixie snapped to attention as she thought up her own little solution. She quickly took four of the remaining wooden bits she had left as well as four of the metal strips, glad now that she'd not abandoned them all on the course behind her, and with some deft magic fused them together to build

makeshift ice skates. Using her magic again, she blasted the lake water ahead of her and created a thin strip of ice, which she used to get the ice skates onto her hooves without having to awkwardly walk across the dirt and grass. Safely situated, she fired the spell again ahead of her, lengthening the strip of ice as she briskly began to skate behind it in its wake. It was physically and magically draining to keep a spell this powerful going and to move at the pace she was, but it was all worth it when she chanced a glance over to see that she the fruit of her effort.

There Twilight was ahead of her. Now she was passing her. And in the matter of a few seconds, Twilight Sparkle was now trailing *far* behind Trixie. Trixie's smug grin couldn't have been any wider as she saw Twilight's look of jaw-dropping awe as Trixie went skating past her across the lake. Focusing back on the race, Trixie knew she had to work harder to keep this lead of hers - Twilight was clearly doing her challenges faster somehow, enough so that Trixie thanked her lucky stars she'd thought of the ice-skating trick. Trixie thought for a moment as she came to the other edge of the lake and kicked off her skates, that perhaps she was being too "extravagant" with her solutions, and should do something more practical; scaling that wall like that was probably not a very wise use of her time. *What had Twilight's been?* she wondered. She hastily continued along the path until she arrived at the fourth obstacle - a door? A very lavishly decorated door, to be sure, but a door nonetheless. Trixie chuckled a little as she approached it, seeing a lock and a note right in the door's dead center. Curious, she opened the note before tackling the lock - the note wouldn't be here if it was something trivial, right? Trixie was astounded by the incredibly elaborate and exquisite hoofwriting - Rarity's, no doubt.

Greetings to whomsoever has arrived at this gateway! If you're here, that surely means you are on the final stretch of the race, with only a scant ways to go before victory!

"Oh come on," Trixie groaned as she skipped ahead, "Why does she have to write so *lengthily*?"

Getting to the point, you'll notice a lock on this exquisite little gateway to the finish line. Isn't that lock just the most devilishly gorgeous thing? It is magically enchanted to only open for a single key, a key that you will find at the very bottom of the lake you have just traversed. It is inside a waterproof

chest - why waterproof, you may inquire? Simple, my dear - the key has also been enchanted to be oh-so-sensitive to moisture. If it gets too wet, it will not work; you'll have to dry it somehow, and believe me it is a finicky little thing. A word of caution: if you try to brute-force your way through this lock, I will know, and it will count as a rule-infringement.

Best of luck!

Lady Rarity

Trixie folded up the note and put it in her bag, which she removed as she ran back towards the lake. Taking just a brief moment to take some solace that Twilight was still crossing the lake herself, Trixie dove gracefully into the freezing water (silently cursing herself for her ice-based solution) and began to swim hard and fast towards the lake bottom. She was not alone in this effort, as her horn was brightly glowing and briefly transformed her hooves into flippers and gave her gills - she'd be able to swim at a breakneck speed, but the spell would only last a few minutes; she knew if she took the time to fully form the spell it could last a few days, not unlike a flight spell she knew of that gave a pony the wings of a butterfly. Hopefully the lake wasn't deep. Luckily, as she'd expected, it wasn't; after all, how deep could they have made a lake on such short notice? There she found a pair of chests, beautifully decorated in gold and jewels, clearly designed to prevent the unicorns from trying to take the chests with them to keep the key inside from getting wet, at least without a great deal of effort. Trixie swore wordlessly as she gave a brief attempt to do so without her magic, and finding she couldn't even *lift* it physically, she knew how much magic she'd need to bring it to the surface - *far* more than she could muster. The locks on these chests were simple enough though that she could break them, and Trixie focused her magic as much as possible in another feat of multi-tasking: first, keeping her swimming spell active so that she didn't accidentally drown; second, focusing a shield around the chest, so that when the lock broke, there wouldn't be a sudden rush of water; third, breaking the lock proper. The latter was simple enough, and with a muffled *CLICK* the lock was cleanly opened. The chest opened itself with some help from Trixie's magic, and she shrunk her shield quickly around the key, letting the box fill with water and sink back down. Satisfied, she started to head back for the surface when she noticed the *other* chest - it was

surrounded in a telekinetic field and was slowly starting to move towards the surface. Trixie's eyes widened as she looked around and didn't see Twilight Sparkle anywhere - she was trying to bring the chest up to the surface *from* the surface! The amount of power that would require...Trixie was awed. She shook that off and began to swiftly swim back for the surface herself, noting with some relief that she was moving slightly faster than Twilight's box was, but only just.

Trixie broke the water's surface with a sporting leap, dropped her swim spell, and landed deftly on the shore of the lake with her reformed hooves, key held aloft and dry by her magic. A splash behind her signaled that Twilight's chest had just broken the water's surface. In a panic, Trixie bolted for the door and hurriedly unfastened the lock and burst through the door. There, in the distance - the finish line! All the other ponies were waiting eagerly there, cheering them on as Trixie began to rush quickly forward. A click just behind her on the other side of that now-accursed dividing wall - Twilight's door! It was now all down to a footrace, and Trixie knew she needed to put *everything* she had into getting to that finish line first, and since she had no idea how fast Twilight could run, she could not risk the lavender pony being some sort of champion sprinter. Trixie turned her back to the finish line and with every last ounce of magic she could manage, fired off a powerful burst of magical energy. It exploded just in front of her - and miraculously didn't damage the course around her - sending her *rocketing* towards the finish line at an incredible speed. With a resounding crash, she went screeching along the course, past the finish line, past a bunch of panicked and scrambling spectators, and careening into the stands they'd set up.

Trixie awoke to the huge, smiling face of Pinkie Pie. She herself was barely coherent - she figured she must've hit her head on something hard - and could barely get her words straight as she asked the all-important question, albeit in rather unique phrasing.

"A winner is me?" Trixie slurred.

Pinkie giggled, "Uh-huh! A winner is you!"

Rainbow Dash's face came into view, a mix between a scowl and a grin on her face, "That last little trick of yours was pretty gutsy there, Miss Great and Powerful. If you'd aimed that wrong you could've gone flying off

course, or buried yourself in the ground, or gone flying through the air. Don't worry though, I would've caught ya. And then disqualified ya."

Trixie, with a small smirk, struggled to her feet but couldn't find the coordination. Pinkie Pie looked on in worry.

"Oh no...you think she hurt her head?" Pinkie asked.

"Well, she did go flying rump-first through a really big set of wooden bleachers," Rainbow sighed, "Better safe than sorry. Hey, Trixie, how many hooves am I holding up?"

Trixie frowned at Rainbow Dash, who was *obviously* holding up-
"Six?"

"Six...huh," Rainbow Dash carefully counted the *two* hooves she was *actually* holding up, "Um...wow, I don't think you're *that* bad at math, even Applejack can count to two."

"Hey!" Applejack shouted from nearby.

"C'mon, we'd better get her to a doctor," Rainbow Dash said.

"Where...Sparkly?" Trixie asked.

"I'm here," Twilight Sparkle said as she stepped forward, a huge concerned frown on her face, "Trixie...oh...I'm so sorry..."

Trixie grinned, "Why come?"

"I pushed you so hard...I...I..."

"C'mon Twi, give her some room," Rainbow said sincerely, "We're gonna get her to Fluttershy's, it's closest. You can visit her later. C'mon Fluttershy, I need an extra pegasus for this."

"Oh...um...okay," squeaked Fluttershy.

With some effort, the two were able to lift Trixie up between them and carry her as they flew low and with a steady pace towards the edge of the Everfree Forest. Trixie kept herself from falling into unconsciousness, but was unable to maintain any sort of coherence. She could barely make out what the ponies were saying anyway, and her head felt like it had been split open.

"Couldn't I just teleport her there?" Twilight asked with insistence.

"Twilight, you know what happened *last time* you tried to teleport somepony else?" Rainbow chanced a look, "If this is as bad as it looks, you'd just make it worse."

"Don't worry dear, I'm sure she'll be fine," Rarity assured her, "She's

a lot tougher than she looks. Just let them take her, it'll be safer that way."

Twilight made to protest, then gave a dejected nod as she watched the two pegasi carry Trixie away.

Trixie did not protest as Fluttershy tended to her injuries - she actually found it quite relieving that somepony was knowledgeable enough about medical treatment that she wouldn't have to visit a doctor or something; she *hated* the doctor's office. Wincing as Fluttershy rubbed some sort of herbal ointment on her cuts and scrapes, she was slowly beginning to feel the dizziness and pain drain away. She could smell some sort of pleasant aroma from nearby; incense, perhaps? Trixie couldn't tell.

"Phew," Fluttershy breathed as she wrapped the last bandage around a particularly nasty cut on Trixie's right hind leg, "There we go, you should be as good as new in no time, Trixie."

"I certainly hope so..." Trixie groaned, her head still pounding, "You don't have anything for a headache, do you?"

"Try some of this herbal tea," Fluttershy said as she nudged a cup forward, "It doesn't taste very good...but um...it's a very good reliever of stress and pain."

Trixie nodded and tried to lift the cup with her magic, but found it somewhat difficult and just settled on doing it the non-unicorn way. Glad she wasn't completely useless without her magic, she managed to get the cup to her lips and use them to hold the cup steady as she took a sip. She barely stopped herself from retching from the smell of the stuff alone, and cursed the pony that thought this stuff was potable at all; it tasted like she was drinking garbage water that had been sitting outside in the sun for a couple of weeks, then mixed with stagnant bathwater that had been used by somepony that liked to roll around in a swamp. In other words, it tasted *terrible*. Trixie's sneaking suspicion as she sipped it and felt her headache melt away and the remaining pain from her other injuries follow suit, was that the pony drinking this stuff would be so focused on not throwing up that they couldn't spare any thoughts on whatever else ailed them.

"You have to drink the whole thing," Fluttershy said with concern as Trixie went to stop drinking after only a few light sips, "Otherwise it's pretty much only a short-term cure."

Trixie couldn't argue this point when, almost as soon as she stopped drinking, her head began to pound again.

"There are little herbs that sink to the bottom," Fluttershy explained, "You have to ingest those with rest of the liquid."

Trixie nodded and took a deep breath, deciding to buck up the courage to down the whole cup in one go. She wasn't about to look like a coward in front of Fluttershy of all ponies. With one furious sip, she slurped up every last drop of the foul stuff, and felt the tingling feeling of the herbs hitting her throat as well. As soon as she did so, she almost completely regretted it as she felt her stomach lurch.

"Oh my..." Fluttershy peeped, "P-please, hold it in? Um...otherwise you'll just have to drink another cup..."

Trixie nodded her head furiously and held her stomach, fighting the aches. Then, a moment later, they all went away and she felt supremely calm, painless, and focused. Whatever those herbs were, they made her feel...*refreshed*.

"W-what was in that tea?" Trixie asked, "Because...wow...I feel...so relaxed."

"It's called 'Elixiroot'," Fluttershy smiled, "I get it from Zecora. It's a powerful remedy for most minor and even some major injuries, and can be mixed up in a lot of different ways. The ointment I rubbed on your wounds was made of the same stuff, so they'll be fully healed in a matter of hours; the tea is used for pain and headaches, and works almost instantly."

Trixie gave a relieved sigh, "Is there anything that Zecora can't do with these natural remedies? First that cure for the Poison Joke...now this? I always used to think stuff like this was a bunch of...well...*horseapples*."

"So did Twilight," Fluttershy smiled, "So did all of us, actually. We're lucky to have a friend like Zecora, these magical herbs only grow in the Everfree Forest, and are easily just as potent if not more-so than most modern medicines."

"Hmm...I will need to remember to thank her someday...if she comes to town that is," Trixie hastily added, "I'm none too keen on venturing into that awful place anytime soon..."

Fluttershy laughed, and Trixie found herself unable to resist joining

her.

“Golly, what’s so funny?”

Trixie and Fluttershy jumped at the sound and both of them delivered accusing glares at the sudden intruder. How Pinkie Pie had managed to enter the cottage without either of them noticing her, and better still how she’d managed to get *inside* the basket of bandages and ointments directly beside the table was an even greater mystery. How did she even *fit* in there?

“By Celstia’s sun, Pinkie Pie, what the *hay* is the big idea, scaring us like that?” Trixie snapped.

“Did I scare you?” Pinkie Pie smiled, “I didn’t mean to. I meant to just surprise you and all, since I love surprises, and if I’d been trying to scare you I would’ve yelled ‘BOO!’ or something and been wearing a sheet so I looked like a ghost! But really, I doubt I could’ve *actually* scared you anyway, since you two were having such a good laugh and you know as well as I do that laughter is the bestest best best *best* way to get out of a scary situation! Isn’t that right Fluttershy?”

“Um...y-yes I suppose,” Fluttershy peeped from under her sofa, “P-please never do anything I-like that ever again though...”

“Okee dokie loki!” Pinkie Pie saluted, “Hey! Is Trixie all better now? Huh huh huh?”

“Yes...I’m fine Pinkie Pie, thank you for asking,” Trixie smiled, “Where is everypony else? I thought for certain that at the very least, Twilight Sparkle would be here...”

“Well, see, we were all on our way here when - oh, you guys better get comfortable, this is a long story.”

“Oh...um...okay?”

“Anyway, so we were all on our way here, see, when Derpy came by looking for us! We were all a little surprised, since it’s still early enough in the day that she’d be working and not visiting, but then it turned out she actually *was* working and had a super fancy envelope for Twilight! Direct from the Princess herself! I guess they’ve been in pretty serious back-and-forth letter-sending and stuff since yesterday morning; Derpy delivered another one to her this morning and of course the one this afternoon, and Twilight acted as if she was expecting another one later tonight. I bet she

wishes she had Spike here now, huh? So anyway, the letter was super-duper *ultra* top-secret important and Twilight said she couldn't tell us what was in it since it was just between the Princess, herself, and *you*, Trixie!"

"Me?" Trixie asked, "What do I-"

"Uh *duh*, I don't have *any* idea! Didn't I *just* say she wouldn't tell anypony else anything? Well, she ran off in a super quick hurry to her house to write out her response and everything. Applejack and Rarity decided to go with her, since she looked really *really* concerned about what was in the letter, to make sure everything was okay and all. So I came here the rest of the way on my own, because I'm your bestest best best friend and wouldn't leave you to be alone when you're hurt and stuff!"

"Hmm..." Trixie frowned, "Here I'd been hoping the others *had* come around and...nevermind..."

"Oh don't worry about it, Trixie! They like you, it just that...well, Twilight seemed *really* out of it after reading Celestia's letter. I mean *really* out of it, like more than I've ever seen her look like before. I would've gone with her too, but somepony needed to come and make sure you were okay! I mean I know Fluttershy is really super good at taking care of animals and probably ponies too, but I wanted to make sure for myself y'know, that and make sure Dashie wasn't giving you a hard time. Hey, speaking of which, where *is* Dashie anyway?"

"She's upstairs sleeping," Fluttershy squeaked, "She hasn't slept at all since getting started on the race course, and I assured her I could handle caring for Trixie by myself..."

"Like Rainbow Dash would've been of any help in such a delicate operation anyway," Trixie chuckled, "Hmm...but now I'm concerned about Twilight Sparkle..."

"We can go visit her if you want," Pinkie Pie smiled, "I'm sure she'd be glad to see you're okay, she seemed really concerned about you, but the Princess's letter was urgent and stuff so...well, yeah. Besides, she has to tell you what you have to do with the letters, and you need to pick up your cape and hat and stuff, right?"

"Yes...now that I remember it, I do need to reclaim my things," Trixie nodded, "Very well then, let's be off. Coming, Fluttershy?"

"Oh...um...well...if you insist, I mean...if you want me to..."

“Of course we do!” Pinkie Pie grinned, “Twilight will want to thank you for taking care of Trixie so super good and all, right?”

“Come on then, let’s go,” Trixie motioned as she set off for the door, “I *am* curious about what all this letter business is about...”

Chapter 9

Confrontations and Expositions

"You know, now that I come to think of it," Trixie said calmly as they entered Ponyville proper, "Shouldn't we have left a note for Rainbow Dash?"

"Aw, don't worry too much about Dashie, Trixie," Pinkie Pie smiled, "She's a *super* heavy sleeper, I think she'll probably be asleep until tomorrow morning. Fluttershy will be there when she wakes up though, and will let her know if there's anything she needs to worry about though."

"Um...just, hopefully I won't have to wake her," Fluttershy peeped, "She doesn't like being woken up. Except when Pinkie Pie does it...then she's okay with it...sort of..."

"Ah, here come Applejack and Rarity," Trixie pointed, "Hopefully this means nothing is the matter."

The three incoming ponies met with the farmer and fashionista just a few blocks away from Twilight's house.

"Ah, thank goodness you're okay darling," Rarity said first, "We *are* terribly sorry to have rushed off when we were coming to see you. I do hope Pinkie Pie explained?"

"Yes, she did," Trixie nodded, "Nothing urgent after all, I hope?"

Applejack spoke next, "Nah, Twilight's just bein' Twilight again. She wouldn't let neither of us see that there new letter she got, or any of the others, but she told us all of 'em were just some real important curry...um...corral..."

"Correspondence," huffed Rarity, "Please, Applejack, at the very least try to expand your vocabulary just a *teeny* bit?"

"Right, uh...that," Applejack huffed right back, "Whatever, not like I need a fancy word like that'n in my line o' work. Anyway, Twilight's been having this...*correspondence*," adding the last word with as haughty of a tone as she could manage, "And she just says it's really important and that

it's just all about this here Duel y'all're havin'. I guess she's getting advice?"

Trixie smirked. She'd guessed the very same thing, and having another pony as simple as Applejack able to notice it meant her theory had to hold *some* water.

"Regardless, she wouldn't inform us about what was in them, and told us it was a private matter between herself and the Princess," Rarity added.

"Pinkie Pie tells me they concern me as well?" Trixie asked with curiosity.

"Hmm...well Twilight *did* say y'all were involved in the letters," Applejack said, "Not much more than that though. Why, you hopin' maybe Twilight'll let you see what's in 'em? I wouldn't hold yer breath, sister..."

"I merely hope to ask her a few questions," Trixie smiled, "I don't mean to intrude. Now, if I may be on my way?"

"Hang on there a minute, missy," Applejack said, "We ain't gonna stop ya'll from goin', but before you do...ah...I wanna say...well, I'm mighty impressed at how you did out there today. Twilight's a pretty quick thinker, even if some o' her ideas ain't too bright," she added, remembering what she'd been told Twilight's solution to the Parasprite problem had been, and only too well the trouble *that* had caused her personally, "And I reckon risking yer neck with that fancy trick at the end...well, that showed guts."

"Personally, I am more impressed with your solution to getting my lock opened," Rarity smiled, "I'd expected Twilight to just try a very direct approach, but I didn't expect to see such a diverse solution from you. I was unaware unicorn magic could do what you did, though...well, I suppose that *does* make logical sense, does it not? After all, if unicorn magic can give a pony wings..."

"Ah, the lock," Trixie smirked, "I do hope you'll give me a chance to examine it sometime, Rarity. While I didn't risk testing the lock's strength for fear of wasting time or becoming disqualified, I am curious to how well it would stand up to-"

"Oh darling, they were just ordinary locks," Rarity chuckled, "I made them look elegant to inspire some awe, and I cast a notary spell on them so I could tell if you'd broken it, nothing more."

"Clever..." Trixie smirked, "Devious, even. Well then, I believe I must be off. I simply *must* know what sort of plans Twilight has in mind for our

next event, and I am awfully curious about what she is talking about with the Princess. Ladies, I will see you all tomorrow. Fluttershy, thanks again for your tending to me. You really do have a gift, you know?"

"Oh...um...t-thank you, Trixie," Fluttershy muttered, "I-It was nothing...really..."

"See you back at Sugarcube Corner, Trixie!" Pinkie Pie waved, "I'll have a big batch of blueberry muffins waiting for you like you asked!"

Trixie smiled and suppressed the desire to lick her lips in anticipation. Waving her farewells, she walked the rest of the way to Twilight's home and knocked on the door. Twilight answered quickly, and seemed a strange mix of surprised, relieved, and...uneasy? Trixie found it hard to read Twilight's reaction to her appearance.

"Oh! Trixie! T-thank goodness you're okay. I am so sorry I couldn't come visit you, but the Princess-"

"Yes, yes, it is *quite* alright, Twilight," Trixie said dismissively as she entered the library, "Your friends told me you'd gotten an urgent letter from the Princess, and I do understand that the Princess takes a higher priority."

"Oh...um..."

"Now then, Pinkie Pie tells me these letters concern me? Pray tell, what *exactly* are you and the Princess talking about that involves the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

Twilight balked for just a moment, "P-Pinkie told you that?"

"She did indeed."

Trixie swore she heard Twilight curse silently under her breath.

"Whatever is the matter?"

Twilight looked at Trixie with trepidation, then gave a dejected sigh, "Well, sure...the letters are *about* you...but you weren't supposed to *know* that. All I said to the others was that the letters were about our Duel..."

Trixie narrowed her eyes, "So the letters *are* about me? Let me guess, the Princess is giving you tips on how to beat me in the Duel, is that it? A useless gesture on her part, I'm afraid - the Great and Powerful Trixie will prevail in the end, even if things are looking to not be in her favor at the time being."

Twilight winced slightly, "No...s-she was kinda...giving me advice on how to...well..."

"Come now, enough beating around the bush, Twilight Sparkle. Out with it!"

"W-well...she's been giving me advice on how to get you to...to like me better."

Trixie gave Twilight a blank stare, and they remained silent for what felt like several minutes.

"Seriously?" Trixie deadpanned, "You asked the Princess for *dating* advice?"

Twilight blushed a bright red, "K-kinda....yeah. The Duel is part of it, but that's only because that's our only major interaction together..."

"So let me guess...she told you to be more assertive?" Trixie scoffed, "To be more *aggressive*? Is that where all the taunting, and devious scheming, and confidence are coming from? Because while I admit, I *do* like this side of you a little better, I *highly* doubt all of that would make me suddenly fall head over hooves for you, Twilight Sparkle. And really, what sort of *Dueling* advice could she have possibly given you? All you seem to be doing is being more aggressive, a valid strategy but nothing particularly exciting - why, you saw just today that when I really set my mind and magic to it, I'm willing to take risks you'd likely be *far* too hesitant to take."

"Well, yes, she told me to be a little more aggressive," Twilight admitted, "And to stop holding back. She says I need to take this whole event seriously and to...Trixie? Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Trixie's face was white.

"Say that...again," Trixie breathed through slightly clenched teeth.

"Say...what? That the Princess told me-"

"That you've been *holding back*?!" Trixie snapped.

Twilight jumped back a little at the sudden outburst, "W-well yeah. Um...I mean, at first I kind of listened to my friends' advice, and they told me to try and be friends with you first, and I figured if I made you look...um...weak, that you'd be embarrassed or angry and wouldn't want to be my friend at all. I apologize for thinking that was the right way to go about it, but the Princess told me it was *more* insulting to you, and to the integrity of the Duel, if I didn't give it my all. Trixie? You...you don't look so good. Did Fluttershy find anything wrong?"

Trixie was taking extremely deep, almost silent breaths. It was taking a *lot* of effort not to just *explode* right now. *How dare she...how dare she...how DARE she!* she thought to herself in a panic.

"T-Trixie?" Twilight asked as she took a cautious step forward, "Are you okay? I...I am sorry about what I did. If you feel like I've insulted your pride or anything...um...I promise I-"

"My *pride*?!" Trixie blurted, "You think this is about my *pride*?! How dare you!"

Twilight looked at Trixie was surprise, "How dare I? Trixie, I think you're blowing this a *little* out of proportion."

"Blowing it out of proportion, am I?!" Trixie spat as she took a step forward. Subconsciously, Trixie's horn was brimming with magic, causing dust from around the room to vibrate slowly on the tabletops and windowsills, "Do you have any idea, *ANY* idea, how *stupid* you are?!"

"Hey now," Twilight frowned, "I'm sorry if I insulted you, but that's no reason to go calling me names."

Trixie seethed, "You *stupid, naive, foolish* little *imbecile*! You still think this is about *me* do you? That you insulted *my* honor? *MY* pride? *Idiot*! You say you call *my father* your role-model, your *hero*, and here you are, insulting his *memory*. How dare you!"

Twilight's eyes widened, "His...m-memory? What?"

Trixie was breathing loudly, sparks popping from her horn as now the dust was not just vibrating on the tables, it was slowly *levitating* by just the force of the raw magic Trixie was exerting without her control.

"Trixie...your father...he's dead?" Twilight asked with complete sincerity.

"Don't act like such an *idiot* Twilight Sparkle!" Trixie snapped, "You said yourself you were such an avid researcher and investigated all into my personal life, you *have* to know he's dead. I'm sure the Princess told you herself in the letters!"

Twilight shook her head frantically, "I swear, I had no idea! The Princess never-"

"*LIAR*!"

Trixie's magic sparked and lashed out into the room, snapping at things and sending them flying about like toys - not just light objects either,

but entire tables, lamps, stacks of books. Twilight had taken notice of Trixie's lambent magic up until now, but it was only at this sudden display she realized that something was *seriously* wrong and that she would likely be in danger if she didn't calm Trixie down.

"Trixie...please, I didn't know...I...I swear I didn't know..."

"I won't hear anymore of your lies and deceit, Twilight Sparkle!" Trixie lashed out.

Trixie, now in complete control of her sudden surge of magic, flung a table lamp hard at Twilight's head. Twilight barely ducked out of the way.

"Please, Trixie, stop this! I didn't mean anything by it!"

Trixie stopped trying to talk, and instead let all of her rage and hatred rush outwards. More objects flew towards Twilight, who now realized she had no choice - she could not calm Trixie down; she'd have to subdue her instead. With a grim look of determination, Twilight used her magic in turn to deflect objects that came her way. Trixie stopped using debris to attack now, and instead used pure force of willpower to focus her magic into a weapon; Twilight defended herself almost effortlessly, and with a sorrowful look, used an incredible burst of power to crush Trixie into the floor. Trixie fought to regain control, but every ounce of magic she used just served to weaken her under Twilight's incredible grip.

"Trixie, please...stop!" Twilight pleaded, "I don't want to do this!"

"Go on!" Trixie spat, "Use your magic then! USE IT ALL! And don't you *dare* hold back!"

"Trixie...I-"

Trixie screamed and pushed back at Twilight with every single ounce of magic she had, and a lot of magic she *didn't*, fueling her spell with as much physical strength as she could afford. Twilight struggled against Trixie's sudden outburst, far stronger than Trixie's full magic could possibly amount to - she was using her *life force* to fuel the spell as well! Twilight panicked - if Trixie sustained that kind of magic, it could kill her. But if she fought back, she'd risk hurting Trixie severely. The choice was made in an instant.

Injury was a preferable alternative to death.

"AaaaaAAAAHHH" Trixie screamed in pain as her spell broke and Twilight's magic slammed her into the floor, *hard*. Trixie didn't feel any pain

in her body - the pain was all in her *horn*. Trixie felt the tears well in her eyes as the most intense pain she'd ever felt surged through her horn. She passed out almost in an instant. Twilight rushed over to her and quickly examined her.

"Oh Celestia...Trixie...w-what have I done?"

Trixie awoke with a start, and wished instantly that she hadn't as a surge of pain rushed through her horn. A pair of hooves grabbed her and held her back down into her bed.

"Easy, Trixie..." Twilight's voice came, "If you stress yourself, you just going to make it worse..."

"W-Where...am I?" Trixie blinked, "I remember coming to town with Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy...and meeting Applejack and Rarity...but after that it's kind of blank..."

"You're at my place, and you're hurt," Twilight said as she dabbed a washcloth on Trixie's forehead.

"Why does it look like your house got hit by a tornado?"

"You...kind of had a little...episode..." Twilight said nervously, "You were angry at me..."

Trixie thought, and thought, and now the memories flooded back in. She remembered the anger she felt, but realized now that perhaps she'd jumped to conclusions too quickly. How could Twilight have possibly known? How could *anypony* have possibly known? Even the Princess didn't know, as far as Trixie was aware of, and she'd even accused Twilight of learning it from *her*. Trixie felt a surge of regret flood her heart. Had Twilight not defended herself, Trixie knew she could have probably severely injured her. Or worse.

"Twilight..." Trixie winced, "I...I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry about it..." Twilight said softly, "I...I'm sorry too. I didn't know...I swear I didn't know..."

Trixie breathed in deep, and let it all out, "I believe you. I...*may* have overreacted."

"Trixie...why were you so *angry* about it though?" Twilight asked, "I...I mean, well, I don't mean to intrude. That's kind of what started this whole mess..."

"It's...quite alright, Twilight," Trixie frowned, "Keeping it hidden all this time...*that's* what caused all this. It is an extremely *emotional* subject for me...something I haven't told anypony about, *ever*. I should've been honest from the beginning...about everything...but I was afraid..."

"Afraid?"

"Of rejection," Trixie sighed, "I was afraid if anypony learned the truth, they'd *hate* me. You said yourself that my father was one of the most respected and loved magicians to have ever lived, did you not? Well...now I'm telling you that *lived* is the appropriate term - my father is dead, and it's all *my* fault...who wouldn't hate the pony that killed the Great and Powerful Paragon?"

"*What?*" Twilight looked aghast, "But..."

"Please...let me tell the story," Trixie said, "What I told you when we went on our little 'date'? About Paragon seeking me out and challenging me to see if I was worthy of his title? That was true - my father *did* seek me out to see if I was worthy of being called Great and Powerful. He'd gone into seclusion since my mother died - that's why nopony heard from him for years, even *me*. You know about *her* death, do you not?"

Twilight nodded, "Yes, I know that much. Hers was in all the papers but...his? I don't think *anypony* knows...even the Princess. She would've mentioned it...at least, I *hope* she'd say something about it..."

"Two ponies know for certain - myself, and my father's attorney, Penstroke; he had to be there as a witness to the transferal, *if* it took place. And *he* was sworn to secrecy of the whole thing by my father's last breath. If you insist that even Princess Celestia doesn't know, then I suppose we two really are the only souls who know...well, we *three* now..."

"You said it was *your* fault..."

"Well...one day he sought me out, claiming it was time for me to prove myself to him, to prove whether I was worthy of his great legacy. I was worried, Twilight - I knew I didn't have even a *fraction* of his power, and here my father was, insisting we compete for his title and that we'd do so in according to the more traditional *sparring* rules; he was old-fashioned, always doing things like they were done in *his* day, as he always said. But...when I fought him...I won. I *won*, Twilight, against one of the most powerful magicians to have ever lived, and I'd severely injured him in the

process. It...it was an accident. How could somepony like him *not* be able to...block a spell like that? You make it look *easy*, why couldn't he even at least look like was *struggling*?"

"Why didn't you get help for him?"

"My father made sure that we were out in the middle of nowhere, and even if I *could* have teleported us the distance necessary to get him to a doctor, I was worn out from our battle. I couldn't save him, Twilight...I...I *killed* my father...because...he held back against me. I *know* how much power my father had, Twilight...and he did not use it all to battle with me..."

Twilight spoke softly, "Do you think he lost...on purpose?"

"Don't be stupid..." Trixie snorted, "My father wouldn't tarnish the integrity of the title of Great and Powerful by *letting me win*. He held back his strength to test my power...and underestimated how much of it I had since I'd seen him last. He was careless, and it cost him...and me...dearly. It was an accident..."

They were both silent for several moments, then Twilight spoke.

"So...the reason you wouldn't back down from our Duel all this time..."

"If the Great and Powerful Trixie were no longer Great and Powerful," Trixie answered with as much confidence as she could, "Then...he will have died in vain. I *cannot* let that happen. I *will* win our Duel, Twilight, I assure you of that..."

Twilight nodded, "I won't let you win easily, either. I am sorry for holding back before. But...um...we *may* have to hold off on continuing our Duel, Trixie."

"Ah yes," Trixie winced as her horn flared in pain again just to remind her, "My magic. I may have gotten a little...carried away."

"If I had to venture a guess, based on how much magic you put out, I'd say you'll take about a week to recover," Twilight said matter-of-factly, "I sent a letter to Fluttershy to tell her what happened, she'll be coming by to do periodic checks on you."

"Coming by?" Trixie arched an eyebrow, "Surely you don't intend to have me as a houseguest after all of this?"

"I'm kind of going to have to..." Twilight said sadly, "As much as I like the thought of having you here...um...all to myself," she added with a blush, "I'd rather it be under different circumstances. I did a magical scan on your

horn, and you tore a Ley Line pretty badly. If you exert any magical energy at all, you run the risk of a pretty serious Ley Fracture; right now it's not too severe, nothing a little bed rest won't cure, but you need to avoid using *any* magic."

"And I'm restricted to your house because?"

"Oh c'mon, Trixie," Twilight said with a smile, "Do you really think you'd be able to go even an entire *day* without magic? Let alone a *week*?"

Trixie frowned and sighed, "Well, okay, I suppose you have a point. You'll be here to assist me through day-to-day tasks without my using magic, I take it?" Twilight nodded. Trixie sighed dejectedly, "I feel so useless..."

They were silent a moment, when Twilight spoke again, "If you don't mind...I think the Princess would like to know...about all of this. Paragon was a good friend of hers, I'm sure she'd want to know what's become of him."

Trixie hesitated, then nodded, "I suppose that would be the wise decision, loathe as I am to admit it. But...um...if you could avoid mentioning that I am fault for it? I...really would like to avoid-"

"Punishment?" Twilight smirked, "The worst the Princess would do to you is banish you, and then throw you in a dungeon in the place you were banished to."

"Not helping."

"It was a joke."

"That makes it even worse..." Trixie frowned, "Seriously, Twilight..."

Twilight nodded, "I promise. Though...I can't promise the Princess won't want to look into it on her own. If she finds out..."

"I'll take that chance," Trixie said quickly.

Twilight sighed and headed over to the desk nearby - Twilight's room hadn't been terribly affected by the scuffle, luckily. Trixie dozed off a little as she listened to Twilight dictate her letter to herself. She had to admit...getting that off her chest felt...relieving.

And then there was Twilight's reaction; that was what made Trixie feel the most at ease. Twilight had just learned a rather horrible truth - her idol had been dead for quite some time now without her knowledge, and the only pony who knew (and was allowed to mentioned it) was the pony

who'd killed him. And yet she did not blame Trixie, she did not hold her responsible, nor did she hate her or want to see her punished. Twilight seemed more concerned for *Trixie* and her well-being than anything else, and Trixie knew she only had herself to blame for that. She'd been so angry, and she couldn't control herself in her rage. She began to wonder though...what had really made her so *furious*? She was mad that Twilight was involuntarily making the same mistake her father had made, and was treating it was no big deal - but the more she thought about it...the less sense it made that she would believe Twilight had done it on purpose in the first place. There was something else there, and Trixie was worried that she couldn't explain it.

As she nodded off to sleep, the last words she heard were "Signed, Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle."

The next day, Trixie awoke slowly and noticed it was late morning. She'd been allowed a very long rest, and knew that it was because of her horn injury. Trixie found herself feeling rather helpless; no, useless; no, *weak* for most of the morning as Twilight Sparkle helped her go about her morning routine. She hadn't had to use her hooves to brush her hair or teeth or coat in *years*, and Twilight's insistence on helping made her feel even more inadequate. Twilight tried to tell her she wasn't meaning to make her feel like that, and Trixie knew that to be true, but she still felt a great deal of both gratitude *and* sobering vulnerability. It wasn't until late that afternoon that she would realize *just* how vulnerable she really was.

"Special delivery!"

"Derpy?" Twilight asked as the grey pegasus arrived at her door with a resounding knock, "I wasn't expecting you so soon. Did the Princess already send a response?"

"Yep!" Derpy saluted, "Got it all right here, along with a big box of yummy muffins just for Trixie. Hey Trixie! Sorry I can't join you for lunch, I've still got a lot of work to do! Pinkie Pie baked these just for you, they're your favorite, blueberry!"

"Thank you Derpy," Trixie waved from the dining table, "I appreciate it. How are you, I haven't seen you since before you started helping with the obstacle course. Twilight's not keeping you too busy, is she?" she

laughed.

“Not at all, Trixie!” Derpy smiled, “No such thing as too busy when it comes to me, I’m the most dependable mailpony in all of Equestria, remember?”

Derpy now just stood there, as if waiting for something. Twilight coughed, “Um...Derpy? Do you...need anything else?”

“Huh? Oh! No, but there was a note attached to the letter that was addressed to me, strangely enough!” Derpy said as she tapped her hoof to her chin, “It was from the Princess! I’ve *never* gotten a letter from *her* before! It told me - I guess she knew *I’d* be making the delivery, which is *weird* - that I should wait with you for a few minutes after I delivered your letter because it’d be important.”

“Um...okay?” Twilight shrugged, “Well, at any rate the Princess sure got back to me awfully quickly,” she continued with eager curiosity as she unraveled the scroll.

“What’s it say?” Trixie asked, “I assume it’s about what you wrote about last night.”

Twilight quickly read through the letter, her face slowly going from excitement to confusion, then anger and last, worry. Trixie couldn’t see what was in the letter itself, and since Twilight wasn’t reading it aloud or letting her see it, Trixie only had to go by Twilight’s face for any clues. Obviously, something was amiss.

“The Princess has summoned me to Canterlot,” Twilight said hesitantly, “Immediately.”

“What?” Trixie blinked, “But doesn’t she know that you’re taking care of-”

“She told me to ask my friends for help,” Twilight interrupted, “And that the chariot is going to arrive at exactly six o’ clock.”

Trixie glanced at the nearby clock - it was five fifty-five. The Princess obviously knew Derpy was reliable for a speedy delivery. And Trixie had a sneaking suspicion that the Princess didn’t want Twilight to have time to argue over details with Trixie; or, she worried, give Trixie a chance to figure out what was going on.

“Derpy, I guess this is what you were supposed to wait around for, since apparently I need to let somepony know to get over here to be

Trixie's...ah...*nurse* for the next week. I can't ask Fluttershy to be on watch all day every day..."

Trixie frowned. Here she was, getting used to having Twilight Sparkle taking care of her as she recovered. And so soon after becoming attached to Fluttershy's tender medical attention - she'd visited once today already to help confirm Twilight's diagnosis - she was now learning that the yellow pegasus would be unlikely to be here all the time. Who then, Trixie wondered, would be her caretaker? Rarity? That seemed the most likely choice - another unicorn, and she would certainly be gentle enough not to cause any undue stress.

"Derpy, please go get Pinkie Pie, and tell her to get over here right away," Twilight said, "If she says anything about work, tell her the Princess is giving her the week off for royal duties or something."

"P-Pinkie Pie?!" Trixie's jaw dropped, "You *can't* be serious? Surely...ah...Rarity would be a better choice?"

"Rarity's got a business to run and can't be with you here all the time," Twilight explained, "Same as why Fluttershy can't, Applejack can't, and Rainbow Dash can't, though I wouldn't think to ask the latter two anyway - they're not the tenderest of ponies, and you need more delicate care all things considered. Pinkie Pie can get time off at Sugarcube Corner any time she wants - Mr. and Mrs. Cake wouldn't mind getting her...um...off their hooves for a week."

"B-but-"

"And besides, she's your best friend in town, right?" Twilight asked, a very slight hint of disappointment in her voice, "Other than Derpy I suppose, but she's got her mail duties."

"Sorry," Derpy frowned.

"B-but...you said...royal duties? C-couldn't you have-"

"I couldn't ask Celestia to cover the costs any of the others would lose out if they left work for a whole week. Pinkie Pie works for room and board, and if she's not living there for a week, that'll lower her cost. I could probably pay the Cakes for a week of Pinkie's wages out of my own pocket, so to speak."

"I...b-but...Twilight, you...you *can't* leave me alone with Pinkie Pie for a week. She's...ah...a little overzealous."

“I’ve really got no choice, and I’ve got no more time to argue. Don’t worry Trixie, Pinkie will take good care of you.”

Trixie sighed, “Well, when you return, hopefully I’m still *sane*. How long are you supposed to be gone?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound like long,” Twilight nodded, “I don’t need to bring anything with me. So...I’ll see you when I get back. I’m sorry Trixie, I really don’t know what all this is about...”

Twilight gave Trixie a sincere and affectionate hug. Trixie found herself halfheartedly returning it, not sure why she felt compelled to do so. As Twilight and Derpy took their respective leaves (Trixie winced as Derpy took off while still in the doorway and slammed her head into the door frame. The pegasus quickly shook it off, giggled, and was off again; Trixie wishes she were made of as tough of stuff as Derpy was), Trixie decided that, since it was likely only a matter of time before Pinkie Pie arrived and began to worry about whether this week was going to be relaxing and give a chance to think...or cause her to slowly lose her mind. She loved Pinkie Pie dearly, she was the first pony she’d ever been able to call a friend...but Trixie admitted that the pink earth pony was perhaps a little *too* hyper.

Well, Trixie thought as she saw a familiar pink figure coming down the street towards the library, *Maybe it won’t be so bad*. Pinkie Pie had been the first pony to visit since Trixie’s injury, and other than Fluttershy’s checkup and Derpy’s work-related visit, she’d been the *only* pony so far. Had Twilight informed anypony else? Pinkie Pie had come by completely of her own volition, when Trixie did not return to Sugarcube Corner the night before. The only thing that made Trixie confused as Pinkie Pie came down the way and came further into view was the big box she was lugging with her. *What in Equestria...* Trixie narrowed her eyes, *What’s she bringing with her?*

“Check.” Trixie smirked as she used her hoof to delicately knock aside a white rook with her knight.

“Ooh...hmm, I didn’t see *that* coming...” Pinkie Pie nodded as she scratched her head, “Risky...risky risky risky...hmmmmmmmm....HMMMMMMMMMMMMMM...aha!” she grabbed her bishop from one side of the board and moved it to the complete opposite

end to take Trixie's knight, "Ha!"

Trixie wordlessly swept her rook across the board to take Pinkie's other rook, which the bishop had been blocking, "Check."

Pinkie frowned, "Grrrrr...time to play serious, Pinkie! Yeah! Zoooooooooom!" she swept her knight to block the rook, cleverly protected by her queen. Her proud grin widened as Trixie took the knight with her rook anyway, then Pinkie took the rook with aforementioned queen in one quick series of moves, "Ha ha! Fell into my-"

Trixie moved her other knight and took a pawn in the process, "Check."

"Hey! Quit doing that!" Pinkie frowned, "Hmph...okay, fine, my king's been getting fat and lazy anyway. Time to get him some exercise," and she moved her king one space forward to threaten the knight.

Trixie moved her queen along the side of the board so that it was threatening both Pinkie's king *and* queen, "Check"

Pinkie gasped, "Ooooooooooh, you...yooooooooou, GRRR!" and she took the knight with her king to get him out of check, as Trixie took her queen. Pinkie Pie moved her King again to threaten Trixie's other rook. Trixie moved her rook a single space upwards, "Check."

"Pfh," Pinkie Pie giggled as she took the rook. Trixie moved her queen across to threaten the king again, if only one of Pinkie's pawns wasn't in the way. Pinkie Pie grinned as she took her remaining knight, who'd been quiet most of the game except for a single move, and jumped it forward, "Ha...check!"

Trixie frowned. She'd forgotten about that knight, who's only available move had been threatened by the rook she'd just lost. She moved her king a single space away, then frowned again as Pinkie moved the rook in her back row that hadn't moved once all game and took Trixie's other bishop, putting her in-

"Check!" Pinkie smiled, "Horseshoe's on the other hoof now!"

Trixie grit her teeth as the game slowly unraveled ahead of her. One tiny, little, almost insignificantly small careless mistake, and Pinkie Pie had jumped on it like a parasprite on anything edible. Pinkie's only remaining pawn was able to safely get all the way across the board without a care because her rook prevented the only two pieces Trixie had left other than

her king from safely taking it. With a new queen in hoof, Pinkie Pie was brutal in cornering Trixie's king so that she could take Trixie's remaining knight, then with a heavy sigh, Trixie admitted defeat as her king got cornered too far.

"Checkmate!" Pinkie Pie cheered, "Uh huh! Oh yeah! Who's the chess *master*? Uh huh, you know it, it's Pinkie, go Pinkie! Woo!"

Trixie groaned into her hooves as she slumped forward. *I hope the rest of the week isn't all like this...*

"E-one,"

"Miss," Pinkie Pie smirked, "B...three..."

"Miss. C-six"

"...hmph...hit," Pinkie frowned, "J...seven?"

"...hit..." Trixie swore, slamming her hooves on the table, "Hit!"

Pinkie Pie pumped her hoof in the air.

"You sank my battleship..."

"Uh huh! Woo woo! I totally KNEW you put it in the J's!"

Trixie buried her head in her hooves, "How are you so *good* at these?" she seethed, "Darn it!"

"Years of practice, Trixie! You don't become the bestest best party pony in Equestria without knowing how to play games! I might be a little eccentric with Charades but really that's like, my *only* weakness."

"Urgh...just...just pull out the next game, Pinkie. I've got to be able to win at *something*..."

Trixie looked suspiciously around the table. She and Pinkie were now joined by everypony else from their group. It was night four of her week-long recovery, and she was beginning to admit it wasn't as bad as she initially believed. Pinkie Pie's completely inexplicable skill at board games confounded and annoyed her to no end, but now that everypony was here she could at least share in the misery of defeat with others. Currently, it was Trixie's turn, and she carefully had her back turned to everypony else. The game had been going on for quite some time now, and at long last the game had whittled down to just herself and Pinkie Pie - for once she was confident in her ability to win; nopony was a better master detective than

Trixie! Well, at least in the party present. Satisfied that she had the information she'd need, and taking a big risk because she was unsure of one final piece, she boldly turned around and made her accusation.

"I believe..." she started with dramatic tension, "Colonel Mustard did it...in the study...with the candlestick..."

Pinkie Pie frowned as she looked at her own notes, then reached forward to open the central envelope - since they were the last two players, they may as well reveal the information inside to everypony. If Trixie was right, she won; if she was wrong-

"Sorry Trixie, it was Professor Plum!" Pinkie grinned widely as she presented a card with a purple pony in glasses.

"I said Plum!" Trixie panicked.

"No way! You said Mustard!" Rainbow Dash called from the side.

"Shoot, and ah *knew* it was Plum, too! Dang it..." Applejack swore.

Trixie huffed and plopped her hat on the floor beside her, "Ugh..."

"Next game!" Pinkie bounced, "Next game next game next game! Ooh! What should we play next?!"

Week's end arrived at long last, and Trixie was glad Fluttershy had agreed to stay with her all morning to make sure everything went smoothly. Trixie took a deep breath as she slowly let some magic work its way into her horn. It still stung a little bit, but Rarity's preliminary scan had shown the Ley Line was healed and now, Trixie just needed to get the juice flowing through it again. With a little effort, she lifted a few light objects at Fluttershy's guidance. Everything seemed to be in order, and Trixie felt good to feel the rush of magic once more.

A knock at the door caused Trixie to break her focus and nearly drop the teacup she was holding. They hadn't been expecting visitors this time of day, and Pinkie Pie couldn't possibly be back from picking up lunch. But of course, Trixie really hadn't expected *Twilight* to be at the door when Fluttershy answered it.

"Twilight!" the yellow pegasus smiled, "You're back! Did everything turn out okay?"

"Yes, everything's great," Twilight smiled as she came into the library, "I am *craving* a cup of tea right now...though. Trixie! Oh, your magic...you're all better? I'm so glad!"

"One week, almost to the hour," Trixie nodded as she set the teacup back down, "Very astute of you, Twilight. How was your trip? Any news?"

"Lots, but I need to get some tea in me first, before I collapse," Twilight chuckled, "Fluttershy, thank you again for all your help."

"Oh...it was no trouble at all, Twilight," Fluttershy smiled, "Trixie is a very patient...um...patient. I'll leave you two alone then, I'm sure you have...a lot to talk about."

Fluttershy waved a quick farewell to Trixie as she left, allowing Trixie to focus her attention on the return of Twilight Sparkle. Twilight eagerly went about making herself some tea in the kitchen, setting down the only thing she'd brought along with her - a single bag that looked very lightly stocked, mostly with papers. Trixie's curiosity was piqued - what exactly had Twilight been up to this week? After Twilight came back into the library proper with a fresh pot of tea, she got everything all gathered up at the dining table, where she beckoned Trixie over to join her. Always glad to partake in Twilight's excellent tea, Trixie obliged.

After a few minutes of quiet, disturbed only by the clatter of teacups and spoons, Twilight cleared her throat, "So, I'm certain you're wondering where I've been."

"I take it you spent time someplace *other* than Canterlot..." Trixie raised an eyebrow, "Otherwise you wouldn't be acting so delighted about a simple trip."

"Princess Celestia and I did some traveling this week," Twilight explained, "See...she was more concerned about your father's death than I thought she'd be, so I insisted on trying to find where he'd been hiding out all these years. I don't think she believed your story..."

"I don't blame her," Trixie frowned.

"Well...I have some good news. We found it."

"Y-you did?" Trixie blinked, "You found where my father had been living all that time? Where was it?"

Twilight pulled a small map of Equestria out of her bag, and pointed out with her spoon at a very large expanse of desert to the far eastern edge

of Equestria territory, “The Eastern Rim. It’s a vast desert that functions very much like Everfree Forest does, only obviously a desert. Your father had some sort of hermit cave there, in a large mountain out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hmm...” Trixie frowned.

“Well...that’s not the good news, that’s just a little prelude to it,” Twilight smiled, “See, when the Princess and I looked inside, we found all sorts of things of his. The Princess collected most of it together to make a memorial for him,” and seeing Trixie’s sudden trepidation, “A private one...at least for now. She’ll respect his wishes not to make a public affair of his death unless you permit it. But *that’s* not the good news either. *This* is the good news.”

And she pulled a small envelope out of the bag and floated it over to Trixie. Trixie took it warily. It was sealed tightly with her father’s magical seal, a lock which only the original caster or anypony who they gave permission could open; Trixie had no doubt that even the Princess could not break the seal, even if she wanted to. Seeing her name in her father’s hoofwriting on the front clued her in that she was the only one allowed to open it. So she did so. Inside was a letter, and Trixie began to read with anxiety.

My Dearest Daughter,

Forgive me.

You must think me a fool, a terrible father who would hide this, his last letter to his only daughter, from the one pony who it was intended for. But you must understand, I could not let you read this letter until I was sure you were ready to see its contents. If you’re reading this now, it means I am long since gone from this mortal world, and that you have sought out my hiding place, hoping to learn the truth about our last encounter. I write this letter now, moments before I prepare to take my leave from this place to seek you out and challenge you to a Magician’s Duel.

Forgive me, my darling daughter. Forgive me for everything I have ever put you through. I am to blame for every single tragedy that has befallen our family. It is my fault your mother is no longer with us, it is my fault that I have left you alone for all these years, and it is my fault that I

now go to face you, seeking my death at your hand so that my title may rightfully pass to its newest owner.

Trixie, my dearest, I suffer from a terrible disease known as Ley Line Poisoning. It is a very rare illness, unique to unicorns, that corrupts the Ley Lines that make up our horn's ability to generate and channel magic, draining our very life force with every waking moment. Powerful unicorns such as myself can live with it...but for those without my level of magic, it is a tragically fatal disease at very young ages. I blame myself for your mother's death - I did not know the disease was contagious. I thank my lucky stars that you never contracted the disease yourself, or worse that you were born with it. My heart would not be able to stand losing both of you. It still weeps for the death of your mother.

But now, the disease has finally taken its death-grip upon me, and I am not long for this world. I remember well the doctors' diagnosis when they tried to treat your mother. A unicorn of her magic showed the symptoms of the disease entering its final stages only a mere few days before it claimed her life. That is why you never knew she was sick - it happened so fast, that by the time anypony knew what was happening, she was too far gone. It is my greatest regret that we agreed that we would not worry you, or call for you, so afraid we were of the disease somehow passing to you. Forgive me.

A unicorn with my level of magic should be able to live almost a week. I have spent this week, the last days of my life, lamenting my terrible decisions and hoping to make amends for them. I hope you will forgive me for putting you through what likely passed at the end of our Duel, for I likely did not survive it. As I write this letter, I have likely only a day left, but I do not intend to die sick and in bed. For if I did, the title of Great and Powerful would forever be attached to me, until news of my death were to spread - and then, it would be chaos, as unicorns from around Equestria struggled to compete for it. They do not deserve it. This title is yours by birthright, and I will ensure it is passed to you legitimately!

You likely believe I was holding back. I do not blame you. The disease saps most of my strength, and every ounce of magic I put into it just feeds it, speeds it up. That is why I am giving my all. I want you to beat me at the my fullest, whatever that may be, and I do not want you thinking

that I held anything back. I gave you everything I had, even if it was not the power I once wielded, many years ago; as of this writing, I am likely still at ninety-percent strength, but with every spell I cast against you that power will drop. If you are reading this letter now, you have defeated me fairly, fully, and should feel no shame, no regret, and no responsibility. I am the one who feels ashamed, for what I must put you through. I am the one who regrets that this is how it must be done. And I am the one who is responsible for all the hardships I have put my family through, because of my own carelessness.

My dearest daughter, please forgive me, for everything.

Love,

Paragon

Trixie could barely contain her tears. She was going to do her best to keep up her normal demeanor in front of Twilight Sparkle, but that would prove hard to do. As she spoke, she could feel her throat, dry from anxiety, make her voice crack ever so slightly.

“Why did you do this, Twilight Sparkle?”

“...is it...not good news?” Twilight said with worry, “It looked important...I’m sorry if-”

“It’s good news, I assure you,” Trixie said swiftly, “Very good, in fact. It would seem I am not responsible for my father’s death...”

“That’s great news!” Twilight smiled, “Isn’t it?”

“Yes...it is,” Trixie nodded, “But I want to know...why did you insist on doing this?”

“...do you remember...back at the party a while ago...when I told you what I felt?”

“I remember. You couldn’t explain your feelings then,” Trixie chuckled.

“Well...over the past week...and after seeing you the way you were...I realized exactly what I was feeling...”

“Oh?”

“It’s a...mixed emotion. On one hoof, there are so many things I dislike about you. I didn’t like them when we first met, and I didn’t like them when you first came back. But, I looked past that snobby, arrogant

personality you displayed hoping to see what was hidden underneath. I knew that deep down, you had a strong degree of bravery - you faced the Ursa Minor alone, knowing you couldn't defeat it. Sure, it was probably some misguided attempt to save face in front of all the townspeople, and to prove you were strong enough to do it...but now that I've gotten to know you...I know the reason you care so much.

"You admitted as much to me that night, one week ago - you're afraid, Trixie, afraid that ponies everywhere will hate you for what you did. You want everypony to treat you with the same respect they treated your father with, because you feel if they don't then you'll tarnish his memory. Despite the attitude you've chosen to display, it takes a great deal of bravery to face the world thinking what you thought. You're arrogant, and conceited, and self-centered, but you're also brave and...from what I've seen and heard from my friends about how you've treated them since coming back to Ponyville...you've got a good heart. Pinkie Pie wouldn't have picked you to be her friend if you didn't have a good heart..."

Twilight gave Trixie an affectionate hug. Trixie did not hesitate to return it, deeply grateful for what Twilight had done.

"Trixie...I did this for you because I...I wanted to help you. And I wanted to help you because...well...after getting a week alone to think about it...I realized that maybe...I *am* in love with you."

"Twilight..."

Twilight leaned in, eyes closed. Trixie hesitated for a fraction of a second...

...and then pulled away.

"Twilight...I'm sorry..."

Twilight opened her eyes in disappointed surprise.

"I...cannot say I feel the same for you...not right now," Trixie said as firmly as she could, "This letter...it has put me in a rather...emotional state. It would not be fair to you to admit any feelings I may or may not have...not right now. I need to think this over...we *both* need to think this over," Trixie walked with purpose towards the door, using all of her effort not to turn around and look at Twilight.

"Tomorrow," Twilight's voice came, slightly hoarse, "Our Duel continues tomorrow."

Trixie nodded, "Accuracy, correct?"

"I got something directly from the Princess that will more than meet our requirements."

"...thank you, Twilight."

"Of course..."

Trixie cried herself to sleep that night. They were mixed tears of happiness and grief. She was thankful to Twilight Sparkle for everything. Somehow, that one single pony had completely turned her life around in a matter of less than two weeks. Trixie could count everything about her very existence that had been drastically improved since meeting Twilight Sparkle, and with every point she was beginning to wonder if...maybe Pinkie Pie was right? Maybe the two of them *were* destined to meet one another?

When she first came to Ponyville, she was a boastful, arrogant, self-centered, loud-mouthed bully that was trying to *force* respect and awe out of every pony she came across, to live up to the illustrious title that her father had bequeathed upon her with his death, a death she blamed herself for; and this was her darkest secret, one she kept from everypony she met. She had no friends, nor did she care to make any, and she was convinced that she *had* to be the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria.

Today, she knew she *wasn't* the most powerful unicorn - that honor belonged to Twilight Sparkle. She'd learned the value of friendship and the joys that came with spending time with friends. She'd confessed her darkest secrets to not just one pony, but to others as well - it was only fair to tell Pinkie Pie too, after all - and learned that her friends were there to support her and to be her light even in the deepest darkness. And now, she learned that her darkest secret was all in her head - her father had died nobly giving her his title fairly, not lowering his potential and then being caught off-guard; sure, he'd been sick and unable to use the same power he was famous for, but he did not hold himself back, knowing it would cost him his life in doing so. She'd learned exactly how her mother had died as well.

And...it was all thanks to the efforts of Twilight Sparkle, who had admitted that she did it all because she felt that the strong connection

between them was meant to make them *soulmates*. That they were destined to be *together*, not just as friends, but as *more*.

Trixie could not fathom how she was supposed to feel about that.

She liked Twilight Sparkle. And with all the care, concern, and effort she'd put out to help Trixie through her darkest hour, she could not help but notice that the things she once considered *negative* qualities about Twilight Sparkle before, were now the things that made her the most attractive; and that they were similar to the same qualities that Twilight admired in her. Pinkie Pie was right - they were an awful lot alike. But she could not, in all honesty, say she was certain that she was supposed to say she felt the same way about Twilight that she felt about her. She needed time.

And with the last event only a little ways to go...there might not be much time left...

Chapter 10

Precisions and Valedictions

Trixie was not at all bothered by now as to what sort of things Twilight's friends could accomplish in such a short time span when they all worked together. She was even less bothered by the sort of gadgets that Twilight was able to get a hold of on such short notice. The combination of two had, over a week ago, managed to get a complete stage set up for a full-on magic show; today, they had managed to set up the collection of materials Twilight had had sent to Ponyville for this last contest; the final event, *Influence*, was next and would require *no* outside materials or any effort from either of the two competitors directly, and Trixie knew if she did not win this first event, then there wouldn't *be* another one.

She had to win, and she would use every last ounce of her power if she needed to. She did not fear injury or embarrassment so long as it meant victory. Luckily for her, this particular event was not one that required pure power or even quick thinking - *Accuracy* was all about finesse and technique, something she'd already proven herself superior at...but then she recalled Twilight's confession.

She knew now how obvious it had been that Twilight had been holding back in her *Strength* and *Endurance* challenges, but had she been holding back during *Technique* as well? Sure, that event was about creativity and skill, not power, but Trixie was unsure if that was *all* Twilight had been holding back. *No matter*, she thought with a shake of her head, *I must concentrate on my victory here today. I cannot lose to Twilight Sparkle. I will not lose...*

"So, if I am understanding this correctly," Trixie mused as she examined the strange machine Twilight had procured,

"This...*contraption*...will launch targets into the air for us to shoot?"

"Correct," Twilight nodded, "Princess Celestia loaned me one that she uses for the unicorn division of the Royal Guard for target practice. So

we have to be *very* careful with it."

"What are all these buttons and levers and screens for?" Trixie asked.

"They're what the machine uses to carry out actions and display results," Twilight explained as she motioned to each of the different adjustment tools. First, "The levers here control the speed of the launch. At the lowest speed it'd be like watching a lazily thrown Frisbee; at the highest, well...the Princess advised me not to let anypony stand in front of the launch mechanism..."

Second, "The buttons and knobs here vary the angle and spin. This little handbook she gave me gives the directions on properly increasing difficulty, so we don't have to adjust anything randomly. Rarity," and she motioned for the white unicorn to join them, "Is our Judge for this event, so she'll adjust the parameters and give us our readouts."

"Darling, I still don't understand why *I* am your...*Judge* for this occasion," the fashionista huffed, "Not that I'm complaining, mind, I do appreciate the fact that you consider me the most qualified...but why?"

"Well, the adjustments tools require some mechanical knowledge. The only two who work with machines on a regular basis here are yourself, what with all your sewing equipment, and Pinkie Pie," and Twilight leaned in to whisper the next part, "And we all remember the little...ah...*fondue* incident? Yeah...I'd rather not trust Pinkie Pie with something this delicate. No offense Pinkie Pie."

"None taken," smiled Pinkie Pie who had somehow joined the private huddle.

"Ah! Pinkie Pie, I *told* you about doing that!" Twilight scolded.

"Heavens, darling, you really *must* give ponies a warning before you do something like that, you're liable to give somepony a heart attack..." Rarity breathed as she clutched her chest.

Trixie rolled her eyes. *How in Equestria they haven't gotten used to it by now is beyond me...*

"Anyway," Twilight continued as Pinkie Pie bounced off, "The screens here will gauge our results - the targets are all enchanted to give pinpoint readings of our accuracy, and then send them back to the machine. Rarity will announce the totals at the end."

"All very fancy," Trixie huffed, "Let's get this started then, shall we? I am anxious to get this over with so we can continue on to the final event."

"That's *if* you win," Twilight smirked.

"I intend to."

Rarity coughed, "Well then, ladies, let's commence with the event! If you two will take your positions, I'll get the adjustments all ready for the first volley."

"Before we begin, a few rules," Twilight stated, "First, you get one shot per target, no more. Second, there will be ten rounds - the unicorn with the highest score at the end of the event is the winner."

"That's all?" Trixie raised an eyebrow.

"Did you want more?" Twilight returned the look, "I didn't think there would be any need."

"No no, that's quite alright," Trixie smirked, "Let's get this started then, shall we?"

Twilight nodded and signaled to Rarity for the first volley. She hastily adjusted a few of the levers and knobs, and the first target launched. It was a slow, lazy arc, and both Twilight and Trixie were easily able to strike it with a blast of energy; Twilight's struck with a resounding *PING* sound, while Trixie's created a brilliant flash of light and color - ever the showpony, Trixie could not resist at least making this event fun to watch. Trixie was surprised when the target didn't explode but continued along its path and lazily hit the grass. She guessed that they were made of something tough enough to resist their magic barrage. *Fascinating...* Trixie thought, *The Princess truly spares no expense in training her Guards.*

Next volley. This target followed a quicker forward path the previous one, and took a sharp downward angle that gave very little time to hit it before it would strike the ground. Neither unicorn seemed to have any trouble doing so either, and with a flashing, colorful, *noisy* display, the target had been struck and then continued along its trajectory to hit the ground.

Next volley. This target took a strange curving trajectory that made it lopsided as it flew. The bulls-eye on the front that was used to gauge point values was exceedingly smaller than could be seen without a keen eye, and both unicorns fired off their magic much as they'd done before. Trixie

found a smug smirk rise to her face as Twilight gave a tiny swear after her spell hit - she clearly didn't think the shot had been accurate enough, and Trixie was confident her own had been remarkably close if not spot-on.

Next volley. Trixie frowned as this one wobbled through the air in an extremely confounding motion - was it possible for any inanimate object to fly in that way? It looked like it was making tiny loops in the air as it flew, and Trixie found herself once again awed by the wonders that magic combined with technology could accomplish. Focusing her spell, she fired off a bolt that struck the target just as it swung for another loop, causing her shot to miss ever-so-slightly. Twilight smirked as she lined up her own shot, and even from here Trixie could see that Twilight's had been a little more accurate, judging by the fizzling purple spark it left. As the target hit the grass, Trixie found herself taking deep breaths - *time to focus, Trixie...time to focus...* she told herself

Next volley. This one rocketed across their field of vision so fast that neither unicorn had time to really *aim* so much as *pray*, and both fired blindly as best they could as the target slammed into the grass and buried itself in the soil below. Trixie gulped, confident that had anypony gotten hit by that, they'd likely be missing a few limbs...or a head. She exchanged a nervous glance with Twilight, suddenly glad that this was just target practice.

Next volley. This one arced high into the air, far beyond both unicorns' vision. Trixie wanted to risk firing at it as it went up, when it was slowing down, but she could barely make it out at this distance. They'd both have to settle for firing at it as it racing to the ground assisted by the force of gravity, and after launch their spells and both just barely hitting the target, Trixie began to wonder if all the Royal Guard unicorns could hit these targets perfectly. *Practice makes perfect, I suppose*, she thought.

Next volley. This one traveled a slow arc, but rotated semi-rapidly as it flew so that half the time, the two participants could only see the target's rear, which Trixie figured was worth no points. Timing her shot, she fired a bolt that she barely skimmed the edge of the target as it rotated, causing it to hit the slightly extended high-value area near the center. Twilight's shot hit near the same area as it rotated back around the other way.

Next volley. Trixie and Twilight stood in confusion as the target

moved quickly through the air in a soft arc, then *stopped* in mid-air, then *moved* again as if entirely of its own accord. Twilight risked a shot as the target stopped, and swore a little louder this time when the target started moving just before her bolt hit it, causing it to strike the low-value edge. Trixie timed her next shot carefully, and swore just as loudly when the random stopping caused her shot to hit the very edge of the target, barely worth any points at all. The target seemed to mock them by doing a little loop before it hit the ground.

Next volley. This target was luckily very straightforward compared to the last two, traveling a quick speed along a low trajectory. Both unicorns breathed a sigh of relief as their shots struck the high-value center.

Final volley. This last target combined multiple aspects of the other targets - it traveled high, was rotating around, and making little loops that made Trixie feel slightly dizzy. Twilight fired first - her shot hit it just as it reached the top of its arc, scoring a pretty decent hit. Trixie's shot fired too late, and she panicked as her shot *missed entirely*. She quickly focused a ton of magic into her spell to make her bolt of energy come screaming back towards her - she only got one shot, she may as well use it - and chase the target towards the ground. Timing her speed, she rushed the bolt towards the target's back just in time to hit the correct side as it was facing away from her. She had no clue how close she'd gotten the strike, but it was better than missing.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Trixie found herself quickly accosted by Rainbow Dash, "Hey! That's cheating! You only get one shot!"

Trixie let a smug grin creep onto her face, "And I only fired *one* shot, my dear Rainbow Dash. Twilight Sparkle never said that we couldn't do what I did with the one shot we were allowed. I merely had to employ a little curve to it to make sure it hit, that's all."

"Curve my eye! Twilight, are you-"

"If Twilight wishes to invalidate my final shot," Trixie said sternly, "I'll be more than happy to debate the fact with *her*. I admit I stretched the definition of 'one shot' pretty far, but I feel I am justified here."

"It's perfectly okay, Rainbow Dash," Twilight nodded, "Trixie's right, I didn't say anything specifically against it. I *suppose* that since the event was a test of Accuracy, perhaps Trixie was encouraging me to be more

accurate with my rules? So...I won't give any opposition to it..." she added with a grin, "On one condition."

"Here we go," Trixie rolled her eyes.

"Our last event, Influence - I want *you* to think of how to go about it."

"...what?"

"I've been thinking," Twilight said, "And the only idea I could come up with for judging our *Influence* on other ponies would be showing off to everypony and trying to impress them, and we already did something like that. All of the events should be unique for the most part, but I'm out of ideas that would be fair to us both, so I'm asking for your input."

Trixie thought for a moment, knowing that Twilight had every right to make her last shot not count for its full value, whatever that may be - she blamed herself for getting cocky and trying to mimic Twilight's impressive feat of hitting the target higher up than she could see. Trixie nodded, "Very well, I'll give some thought to it. I assure you, it'll be something that will truly test our Influence upon other ponies."

Twilight smiled, "Good. Now then, Rarity, do you have our results?"

Rarity sauntered over and gave a curt nod, "Yes, of course. Are you ladies ready?"

"Get on with it," Trixie huffed impatiently.

"Ahem," Rarity coughed with a stern look at Trixie. Adjusting her glasses, she began to read the printed sheets that the machine had produced, "Firstly, Twilight Sparkle! According to this delightful little machine's readings, you've measured in with a ninety-five point eighty-six percent accuracy. For this individual machine, at the very least, that puts you in the region of the five top performers."

Twilight clopped her hooves together, "Excellent! The Princess will be proud. She holds her Royal Guards in pretty high regard for their discipline and ability, and knowing that I'm in the realm of their top-tier members? Quite a feat!"

Trixie frowned, now suddenly worried about how accurate she had been, "Yes, well, if you're done feeling so *proud* of yourself, let's hear *my* results and see how proud you are then."

"Trixie," Rarity smiled, "I must say, I am most impressed, and you should count yourself lucky that Twilight Sparkle is willing to let your last

shot count - the machine says that you managed a perfectly accurate mark on it, which is impressive considering you did it from *behind* and while fighting gravity. According to the readings, you've measured in with an astounding ninety-eight point ninety-three percent accuracy, which *is* this machine's highest mark. I believe some congratulations are in order."

Trixie breathed a sigh of relief. She and Twilight were tied, and there was one event left. And it was *her* job to think of it. Now the relief turned back into tension. What kind of event would it be? Trixie hoped some inspiration would come to her before the next morning.

"Wow! Trixie sure is super amazing, huh?!" Pinkie Pie bubbled as she bounded over, "Hey! Tomorrow's the last event right? And Trixie's just come back from a really big three-to-one defi...defi..."

"Deficit," Rarity rolled her eyes, "Sometimes I think I'm the only pony around here with any sort of vocabulary. Ah...no offense, Twilight, darling," she smiled politely at Twilight's confused look.

"Right, deficit!" Pinkie giggled, "Sounds almost like another word that is about something completely different and not at all appropriate for saying around friends. Anyway! You know this calls for?"

"A par-" Trixie started to guess.

"A PARTY!" Pinkie bellowed, "Ooh I'm gonna need to get some cake and balloons and punch and-"

"Really, Pinkie Pie, you don't need to go through all that trouble," Trixie smiled, "Maybe save it for tomorrow, when I *win* the Duel."

"If," Twilight made sure to remind her. Trixie rolled her eyes - Twilight really was trying to get her out of the habit of getting cocky and making presumptions, and Trixie admitted it was probably something she needed to get used to.

"Whatever," Trixie dismissively waved.

"Pfh, of *course* I have to throw you a party *then*, silly," Pinkie Pie smiled, "Consider this a party to celebrate you recovering from your little accident. It's always nice to welcome somepony home after they've been away for a while with a big party to celebrate, and I know we didn't really have time to get anything together last night. So let's do it tonight! Yeah! Fun fun fun!"

Trixie rolled her eyes, "Fine, if you insist..."

Trixie looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought. The party had been an enjoyable experience, but it had gotten her to thinking. She still felt like the odd pony out when all the ponies in their little clique got together, having been the most recent addition to the group and the one with the most divisive opinions of her. She sympathized with Derpy, who had said that she always felt kind of the same way. Either way, Trixie was beginning to wonder who amongst the ponies were really her friends. Who amongst them were doing all this for her? Who was doing all this for Twilight? Did all of them actually want her to be their friend, or were some of them just putting up with her because of Twilight's feelings?

Trixie's face became a stern frown. She knew one way to find out.

"I'm sorry...say that again?" Twilight asked.

"The test of our *Influence* amongst other ponies will be, which amongst our friends can truly say they can choose between us?" Trixie said again with firmness, "The event is intended to discover which amongst the two ponies inspires the strongest feelings in the spectating ponies, is it not? Therefore, our friends will decide which of us they consider to be the 'better pony', as it were."

"Trixie..." Twilight said, "I really think you should reconsider. You know you're at a-

"Disadvantage?" Trixie smirked, "Well, I suppose I can see why you'd think that. I, however, disagree, and we'll soon find out whether or not my theory holds firm. Winning the Duel is important to me of course, but I've learned the value of making friends, and I feel it would be an appropriate test of how much I've grown as both a magician and as a *pony* to see what *our* friends think of us. Wouldn't you agree that that is a sound idea?"

"But-"

"If you've got a better idea, I'd love to hear it, Twilight," Trixie interrupted, "But you admitted yourself that the only idea you had was basically to repeat our performance from the Technique event. There is no better way to determine the influence and impact two ponies' magic has upon others than by making them decide between them. Since they've already seen all of our technique, our power, and all our other talents when

magic is concerned, I suggest that *they* make a decision - which of us is the better magician? Which of us is the better unicorn? The better pony? The better *friend*? That's what *Influence* is all about, if I am not mistaken?"

"If...if that's how you want to do this, then I accept your terms," Twilight nodded with a frown, "Very well, shall we do this...alphabetically?"

"That seems the most efficient way to go about it, yes," Trixie replied, "That means first is," and she pointed a hoof towards the orange earth pony, "Applejack. Make your decision - who is the better pony between myself, and Twilight Sparkle?"

Applejack looked nervously between the two unicorns, and with a heavy frown clopped her forehooves on the ground, "I'm washin' my hooves of the whole dang thing. I ain't gonna choose between the two of ya'll. Twilight's one o' my closest friends, so it'd be natural for me ta pick her, if that were all I was supposed to decide on. But Trixie...ya'll helped to save my sister from that there creepy village in the Everfree Forest, and I can't rightly say I don't owe you a great deal for doing somethin' that in all honesty you didn't have ta do, or didn't want ta do. I ain't pickin', not at all."

Trixie hid her smugness well. This was exactly what she'd hope would happen - that all of Twilight's friends, *her* friends, would be unable to choose between the two of them. It was risky...but she knew she'd made enough of an impact on the others to make such an outcome possible. There were a few wild cards here and there in the group, but not enough to make the risk worth fretting over.

Twilight nodded, "Thank you Applejack, for your honesty. If it had been Spike in danger, or any of you for that matter, I suppose I would feel the same way in your horseshoes. Derpy, I believe that puts you next."

Derpy instantly fluttered over to Trixie without a second thought, "As soon as Miss Trixie met me, she was really nice and didn't give me any trouble about my condition. I know that deep down she has a good heart, even if she does got a little...ah...attitude problem? Heh...sorry. Um...no offense meant, Miss Sparkle, you're really nice to me too and all, but...well, you were kind of anti-social when we first met and didn't really give me the time of day...though you're better about that nowadays."

Trixie smiled as she pat her friend on the shoulder. Everything was falling into place. She'd also expected Derpy to pick her for the exact

reasons the pegasus had stated, and this played along well with Trixie's expectation of what Rainbow Dash would do. At worst, Trixie figured they'd tie, but it couldn't possibly come to that.

"I understand," Twilight smiled, "I know it makes all of us glad you've made such a good friend. And thank you for taking today off to be here, I'm sure Trixie appreciates your support. Next, then, would be Fluttershy."

"Oh...um...I...I really can't," Fluttershy stuttered, "I'm such good friends with both of you...I...I just don't think it'd be fair to pick either one. Um...you're both really nice ponies, even if Trixie takes a little...prodding to get there...and I know that you're both really talented with magic...just in different areas. I really...don't want to choose. I don't have to choose...do I?"

"I don't believe either of us are forcing you. If you'd like to remain undecided, that's fine by me," Trixie smiled, "Next is Pinkie Pie, then?"

"Yup!" Pinkie Pie waved, "I'm gonna say the same thing Fluttershy did, only a lot more enthusiastically!"

"Wha?" Twilight blinked, "I thought...for sure you'd...but..."

"Oh Twilight, *you're* my bestest best best friend too! Everypony's my bestest friend here, I couldn't possibly choose one of you over another. Well, except Dashie, since she's *more* than a friend, heh," and she winked at Rainbow Dash, who turned bright red, "But really, between you two I've got nothin'. Twilight's all super nerdy and that's really cool, and she's so good with magic and she does all kinds of nice things with it that help everypony out! Buuuuuuuut, Trixie's really a big softie on the inside and I know she's really friendly when she wants to be, even if she does act like a super Arrogant McEgopants most of the time, or rather all of the time, and her magic is super shiny and flashy and super fun to watch and-"

Trixie hid her frown well. Her reaction had been pretty much the same as Twilight's - Pinkie Pie...wasn't going to choose either? *Well*, Trixie thought, *I can't say that comes as too big of a surprise...Pinkie Pie would never choose between any of her friends. Well, I guess that means I can expect what's coming next...*

"Okay Pinkie, we get it," Twilight smiled, "Which brings us to-"

"Yup, that'd be me, greatest pegasus in all Equestria, at your service," Rainbow Dash boasted as she flew over to Twilight, "I've got your

back Twi. Sure Trixie's got a lot of impressive tricks and all, and I've seen her do things these past few weeks that made me change my opinion of her an awful lot, but you're still my friend Twi, and she's just...an acquaintance."

"Thank you, Rainbow Dash, I appreciate your support. Well then, that just leaves Rarity," Twilight nodded.

Rarity fluffed her mane, "Well, as much as it *pains* me to see the two of you reach a stalemate of sorts, I'm afraid I must follow along with Applejack's example. I have grown to respect Trixie a great deal these past two weeks, and I've seen the kind of pony she could be if she just let up on her attitude a little...and I do owe her a great deal for her help with my sister, just as Applejack feels about little Apple Bloom. But Twilight, you're one of my closest friends, and I could never turn against you without good cause...and frankly this is not a cause worthy of taking somepony else's side. I am sorry...both of you...but I shall remain neutral as well."

Trixie and Twilight exchanged glances.

Trixie sighed, "So much for that, I suppose. That's just *wonderful*. Now what? What do we do when there's a tie?"

"I don't know, let me check the handbook," Twilight said as she quickly flipped the pages of *Magician's Duels: A Primer*, which she had brought with her to check up on how to go about the contest when it was finished, "Ah...okay, here's the section on 'After the Duel'. Let's see..." and she muttered to herself as she read, "Hmm...that's strange. There's nothing in here on ties."

"I'm afraid you won't find the rule you're looking for in that book, my faithful student."

Everypony present snapped to the voice, belonging to none other than their beloved Princess Celestia. Twilight excluded, they all bowed quickly in her presence. Celestia's perfect multi-colored mane wavered daintily in the wind, giving her just the imposing wonder and awe that made her loyal subjects all the more adoring of her beauty and grace.

"P-Princess Celestia!" Twilight gasped as she bounded towards her mentor, "W-what are you doing here?"

"My dear Twilight Sparkle, I have been watching your Duel from afar for quite some time now," the Princess began calmly, clearly hoping to

instill an air of semi-omniscience in the ponies present, "And I have been watching with far greater interest upon learning about exactly who your opponent was. You may rise, Great and Powerful Trixie."

Trixie nervously rose up, "G-greetings, your majesty. I...I-"

"Please, there is no need to say anything. Though it pains me to lose a treasured friend like Paragon, I can see that his daughter does live up to his expectations and certainly takes after her mother, which I'm sure he'd be proud of. I have known for quite some time that he has been gone from this world - I can feel the life force of all the ponies under my great will, and a unicorn as powerful as Paragon leaves quite an impact when he passes beyond. I must thank you, for being honest about what transpired in his last moments, though I do not think he expected me to be the one that found his letter to you.

"As for your Duel...it is most noble of you, Trixie, to put your title on the line, the one thing you have that connects you with your father, in order to defend both your honor and his memory. I have met far more powerful ponies than you who would have balked at the prospect of facing a unicorn with the kind of power my faithful student possesses. You do the legacy of your title proud...but sadly, I must say that that legacy draws to a close here today..."

"What?" Trixie asked, aghast.

Celestia used her magic to manifest a book - a *big* book, triple the size of the tome-sized 'handbook' Twilight had been using, "*This* is the complete rules for Magician's Duels - the *Primer*, which my faithful student possesses, is merely guidelines for starting a Duel and was never intended to be used as an end-all be-all for the rules of engagement proper. I'll be fair to the *Primer* - it was intended for use for smaller-scale Duels, but I cannot blame Twilight Sparkle for not knowing that. The reason that ties are not mentioned in it, is because ties typically do not happen. I believe the last time a tie was recorded was...oh...four hundred years ago, in transferring the title of Dragonsbane between the unicorns Fireproof and Single Spark. That brings back some pleasant memories...ah, I do miss those years..."

"So...what do we do in the case of a tie then, Princess?" Twilight asked, "You said the title's legacy ends here...what does that mean?"

"Yes, I am getting to that," the Princess smiled as the curiosity and impatience from all ponies present wafted over her, "In the case of a tie, the two unicorns are considered to be completely evenly matched, regardless of how that outcome came about; I know how that may seem illogical, given that Twilight's power is much greater, but Trixie I feel has shown great skill with her magic that power alone cannot match. Trixie's lessons about friendship and humility helped her learn that there is more to being a magician than magic, however, and that is likely what ended up helping her bring this contest to a close as a tie - I cannot say for certain that whatever Twilight Sparkle would've come up with would've been a losing event for either of you, but Trixie's solution to it helped prove just how far she's come as both a magician and as pony, that she was willing to let others decide her fate rather than trying to fight for it, tooth and nail. In the event of a tie, the title that was placed as the prize between the two competing unicorns becomes null and void - from this day forward, the title of Great and Powerful technically no longer exists."

Trixie turned white, "W-what? You...you mean I just caused my father's legacy...the legacy of hundreds of ponies over generations...to just...d-disappear?"

"I said *technically*," the Princess grinned, knowing full well that by slowly revealing the information in pieces, the present ponies could draw their own conclusions. It was always a good learning experience, "Twilight, my faithful student, if you would be so kind as to read from page four-hundred-fifty-seven, Article Ninety-Nine? Skip ahead to Section Three, if you please."

"Oh! O-of course, Princess," and Twilight opened the book and read aloud, word for word, from the book's contents.

Article Ninety-Nine - Post-Duel Matters

Section Three - The Subject of Ties in Regards to Title-Granting Magician's Duels

In the rare event of a tie over the course of a Magician's Duel, the Title that was placed as the prize between the two competing unicorns is rendered Null and Void (ref. Article One-Hundred-Seventy-One) for one full year as of midnight the night following the conclusion of the Duel in question. The competing parties are now considered to be Title-Bound (ref.

Article One-Hundred-Fifty) and they are the only two unicorns permitted to compete for the Title.

The rematch competition for the Title in question is to occur at exactly one year (three-hundred-sixty five days time, regardless of leap year) from the exact moment of the Title becoming Null and Void. This precise day is called the Conclusion Date, and both parties are bound to commence the rematch on this date at precisely midnight, else the Title's distribution shall be left to the rules in regards to Null and Void Titles. For Generic Titles (i.e. Magnificent, Extraordinaire, etc.), refer to Article One-Hundred-Seventy-One, Section One. For Class-Defining Titles (i.e. Lord, Princess, etc.), refer to Article One-Hundred-Seventy-One, Section Two. For Unique Titles (i.e. Great and Powerful, Supreme, etc.), refer to Article One-Hundred-Seventy-One, Section Three.

"And that's all that's here. Should I go to any of these references, Princess?" Twilight asked.

"That won't be necessary, those are filled mostly with legal jargon anyway - I'll save you the trouble. But I'm sure you understand the basic premise of what happens now?"

"So...the title is technically non-existent..." Twilight said.

"And we're to have a rematch for it, in one year *exactly* from midnight tonight?" Trixie continued with trepidation and some anger, "Why do we have to wait a year? N-not that I'm complaining..." Trixie added quickly, realizing that if the rematch were to commence right now, she'd be at a severe disadvantage.

"I decided on that stipulation because after witnessing enough Duels back when I was first beginning the tradition, I noticed that unicorns that ended up in a draw tended to be evenly matched, though I think that goes without saying. The year in between gives the two unicorns a chance to improve themselves, which is just as much of a test of one's magic and personality - how ell one can push themselves to be better is important too. Now, as to *what* that rematch consists of - a single event, between the two of you, to determine which among you is truly qualified for the title. Typically the ponies in question would spar for it...but I don't think Trixie would find that appropriate..." Celestia added softly and with sincere concern in her eyes, "So we'll decide on that when the time comes. If either

of you two were not to be here for the rematch, the title would default to the unicorn that *did* show up. If *neither* of you are here, I am forced to make the title a prize in a magic tournament in Canterlot."

"Wait...so...if my father had died, his title would've been up for grabs in a *tournament*?" Trixie said in confusion, "He wrote as if it was much worse..."

"Your father's case would've been unique. It has been a long time since a Unique Title Holder passed on due to natural causes, and in a case like that, the title no longer has any legal binding - in the case you two are involved in, for all intents and purposes *I'd* become the Great and Powerful Princess Celestia, and I'd *really* rather not be called that again, hence why I'd give it away in a tournament. In your father's case, the title is free reign, and I'd have no jurisdiction over it. Any pony who wanted to could call themselves Great and Powerful. Can you imagine a world where *everypony* is Great and Powerful? Ponies everywhere would be fighting over who is *really* Greater and more Powerful than the others. At least with one pony holding the title, it is up to them and them alone to defend it. I've seen the kind of things ponies will do to one another if they think they can further themselves by it - I am sure you have as well, Trixie, with ponies that have challenged you in the past? Well, imagine that on a much larger scale...it would not be pleasant.

"So...you two have one year before your rematch. You may use it any way you deem acceptable, but you are to return to this very spot in one year *exactly* from midnight tonight. We - and yes, I must be present as well, since I have made myself the official Overseer of this Duel - will decide what to do about that when the time comes. Understood?"

"Y-yes, Princess Celestia," Trixie and Twilight bowed.

"Good. Now then, my faithful student, I wish you luck in your more...personal endeavors..." she added with a wink, "And to the rest of you, thank you again for being supportive friends of Twilight Sparkle, and having open minds to accept other ponies into your midst who you may not like at first. And remember, Twilight...when this is all over, I expect a full report on what you've learned about the magic of friendship. And hopefully more?"

"Of course, Princess," Twilight smiled.

"You don't have to do this..."

"I'm afraid I do. I have one year to prepare myself, and I will not waste it...*lollygagging* around here. If I were to face you in a straight competition as I am today, I would have no chance. The Gr....Trixie *the Magnificent* has no desire to sit around for one year and hope that she's wrong. I am sorry, Twilight...but this is how it has to be."

Twilight frowned, "Please, Trixie...you can train here in Ponyville. I'll help you..."

"I appreciate the offer, Twilight Sparkle," Trixie smirked, "But it is time I went out and did some learning for myself."

"Are you sure you don't want any company?" Pinkie Pie asked as she hugged her friend goodbye, "I could always tell Mr. and Mrs. Cake I'm taking a year off to go on a big magical journey with my bestest best friend and that we'll have all sorts of adventures and-"

"No! No..." Trixie stumbled, "Thank you Pinkie, but no, this is something I must do myself. I appreciate all the help you and Derpy have given me in getting prepared...and you too, Applejack, Rarity."

Applejack nodded, "I know it ain't much, Trix, but if ya'll ration 'em, them apples'll last ya'll a long time. Just be careful out there, y'hear? I won't forgive ya if ya make Twilight sadder than she already is by doing somethin' stupid."

"Darling, please do remember what I told you about that *marvelous* cape and hat of yours," Rarity added, "With a little magic, you can turn them into any type of clothing you may need, and then back again when you don't. Always be sure you dress properly, and *do* try to do so in style, for my sake?"

Derpy ran up and gave Trixie a big hug, "I'm gonna miss you...come back safe, okay?"

"I will, Derpy. Nothing can stop Trixie the Magnificent, after all."

As Derpy broke off the hug and let Rainbow Dash in. Rainbow offered her hoof to Trixie, who shook it knowingly, "Trixie...like AJ said, you do

something dumb and make Twilight feel bad, and I'll deck ya'. Got it? I will find you, wherever you are, and I will make you regret it, and don't think I wouldn't do it. I'm the fastest flier in all Equestria, y'know? I'd be able to find you in ten seconds flat."

Trixie nodded, "I'm sure Twilight appreciates having a friend as loyal to her as you, Rainbow Dash."

Twilight stepped forward next and gave Trixie the biggest hug of all, "Please...reconsider...I don't want to see you go...not again..."

"I am sorry, Twilight...but I need to do this. I need to train myself and become truly worthy of the title, now that I know there is somepony out there that is stronger than I am. I can't let my father's legacy falter because I was weak..."

"Trixie..."

Trixie put a hoof to Twilight's lips, "Don't argue with me anymore, Twilight. When I return, I'll be a completely new mare, filled to the brim with more magic and talent than anypony as ever seen. Maybe then you'll realize I'm out of your league, and stop fawning over me, hmm?" she said with a joking grin.

"Don't say things like that!" Twilight sniffed, "Please...promise you'll write at least?"

"I already promised Pinkie Pie I would write letters to her, for the lot of you to read. If you're asking for something more personal, well...if I feel the need to include anything in them, I'll make a section just for you, and you can tell your friends not to read it."

Trixie turned her back on everypony and started walking on the path out of town, directly towards the Everfree Forest. She did not want to look back and see their faces again - it was hard enough as it was to leave them like this. She was having second thoughts, but knew she had to have the resolve to follow through. She meant every word of what she said - she'd come back stronger, and beat Twilight Sparkle fair and square.

One year...that's all it would take...

Day 15

Dear Pinkie Pie,

*It is hard to believe how quickly time passes one by when they are traveling like this. The Everfree Forest is significantly larger than I had even imagined, and stretches far beyond the reaches I expected. It really isn't that frightening of a place once you get used to it - I can see now why Zecora lives here, it is truly a marvelous wonder of the natural magics that are far beyond our own. All manners of creatures live in this forest as well, and I must say it was quite an experience to see some of them in their natural habitats - fear not, I was cautious not to instigate any trouble with anything, especially when I got to see what a *real* Ursa Major looked like! I doubt even Twilight Sparkle would be able to handle something like that on her own.*

*I am writing to you now from a tiny town on the opposite edge of the forest, called Greenville. It is much like Ponyville, but smaller, and no unicorns live here. The ponies here are friendly, and many of them have learned to work together with the natural magics of the forest to make their living - Fluttershy would like it here, and I have my belief that Applejack would as well. Though I don't know how well she'd get along with the farmers here - they grow *oranges*. Ha! That was a joke, in case Applejack starts getting mad after reading that.*

I miss you all terribly - I only now realize that I've been gone from Ponyville for as long as I'd been there in the first place, and it is lonely out here on the road. I take solace knowing that my letters will keep us connected, and I regret that I cannot remain in one place long enough to receive any letters in turn. I expect to hear stories when I return!

Always,

Trixie the Magnificent

Day 47

Dear Pinkie Pie,

Forgive me for the lateness of this letter, but much has happened to me these past few weeks. I have finally found a town where I can begin to learn some new magic, and it is from a most unique source - as I am sure you are aware, what with the very existence of Zecora and of that gryphon you all met...what was her name? Gilda? Well, there are other creatures like us out there in the world that are very different while being very similar

all the same. No, I did not stumble upon some village of Zebras, though that would be a pleasant experience if they are all as charming as Zecora is; and no, I did not find some gran city of Gryphons, though at times I wish I had - they're the only creatures other than Zebras I knew of before this that had any sort of communication with Equestria directly.

The village I have come across is the village of Elkswood, a city of Deerfolk that make their home in the most beautiful forest I have ever come across. The trees here grow taller than anything in Everfree Forest, helped along entirely by the nurturing magics of the Deerfolk, and it is by happenstance that I have become welcomed into their fold - the Deerfolk enjoy good entertainment, and if there's one thing Trixie the Magnificent knows how to do, it is how to put on a show!

Twilight Sparkle would be so jealous to learn that I am learning magic from Deerfolk, and that it will only serve to improve my already exquisite technique and finesse with my magic. When I return to Ponyville, I will put on a fantastic show for you all to show you what I've learned. Why, the things I've already been able to master after only a few days of their tutelage would bring the entire lot of you to tears, weeping gently like foals at the mere splendor of it all! Oh, it feels good to have such confidence in my abilities again...

The one thing about the Deerfolk that makes me sad is that they are very impersonal...and their lack of empathy towards myself and even each other makes me realize how much I miss having friends to talk to. I miss you all terribly.

*Always,
Trixie the Magnificent*

Day 68

Dear Pinkie Pie,

*More news about the fascinating creatures that live outside our borders! I had no idea as many of these kinds of creatures like us and yet not, even existed, and it is an enlightening experience to be able to learn from them and the ways they use magic in their culture. It is my theory that every creature in this world can use magic to some degree, they are just using different **kinds** of magic. Other than ponies, most creatures tend to*

have universal magic amongst their people. The Zebras, for example, have a strong connection to nature and that explains their natural proficiency with herbs, animals, and the like. I believe earth ponies are typically in the same boat, as the saying goes - Applejack is **naturally** a good farmer, because she is an earth pony. Certainly there are exceptions - yourself, for instance, Pinkie Pie, have some kind of magic that even the Deerfolk could not explain when I explained it to them; the most I could gather from their musings is that you operate on some different level of...I believe they used the word "frequency"...and that meant you could see the wall that separates us from the Deities and the Beyond. **No** idea what that means. Anyway, Fluttershy oddly enough exhibits traits that one would expect from an earth pony, while you, Pinkie Pie, exhibit traits typically associated with pegasi, i.e. your hyperactivity (it is something that Rainbow Dash and Derpy exhibit as well); I wonder if somehow you two have some connection and were meant to be other kinds of ponies? Though I'm certain Rainbow Dash would panic if she knew you were a pegasus...

I digress. The creatures I have met most recently live in the mountains beyond Equestria's borders. They are called Rams, and their horns are massive, curved things - it is hard to describe. They possess a great deal of magic, and use it to harvest gems, gold, and other precious metals from the mountains - I am sure Rarity would find herself at home here. Though if her tales of her experience with those Diamond Dogs still haunts her, it might not be for the best - the Rams have a trade alliance of sorts with them, trading their precious gems in exchange for the Dogs' hard labor. At any rate, the Rams have been teaching me a great deal about the intricacies of jewel-crafting and metallurgy, and this knowledge has given me a great deal of insight into how to use my magic in a more practical fashion.

I have been staying in a mountain village of the Rams that has been having some Manticore troubles lately, and I volunteered myself to assist them in ridding their village of the problem in exchange for some of their gems - while in Equestria, precious gems are considered less than valuable, apparently the opinion is not shared by other creatures; if Rarity were to travel abroad, I would suggest she bring all the gems she could find, and get herself treated like the royalty she fancies herself. At any rate,

Manticores are tricky beasts when they are angered, but I've learned a few lessons about dealing with wild creatures from Fluttershy - thank you, my friend, for your advice! I was able to subdue the matriarch of the pack without lethal force, and convince the creatures to take up residence someplace else; it was difficult, as I do not possess Fluttershy's unique way with creatures, but there is nothing that Trixie the Magnificent cannot accomplish!

*One day, I should take you and Derpy here - they have a tiny bakery that makes the most delectable homemade muffins I've ever tasted - if I can stop here on my return home, I will be certain to take a batch with me to bring to you. Oh, and let Fluttershy know that Manticore cubs are simply *adorable*, she'll likely want to find out more about what they're like.*

Always,

Trixie the Magnificent

Day 153

Dear Pinkie Pie,

*Forgive me for the large time between my last letter and this one - things have become quite complicated out here on the frontier lands of Equestria's borders and towns with postal services are very, *very* few and far between. I have learned much in these few months, from the Deerfolk back in Elkswood, from the Zebras of Haraze, the Rams of Deephorn and now I am even learning from the Bison in the far, far northern reaches of Equestria in their grand city of Asgald. I have come a long way to be here, and I am learning much from my travels and the trials I must overcome. It is harsh out here, far tougher than the average unicorn could hope to survive. But there is nothing that Trixie the Magnificent cannot accomplish!*

The Bison have the most fascinating culture, and I must say their unique and magnificent style of combining magic with science makes some of Equestria's greatest feats look like the work of foals! Their magic is filled with so much power and finesse, and it takes a great deal of magical strength to operate their heaviest machinery. My training here has been a trying ordeal, but with every passing day as I go to sleep more exhausted than I have ever felt in my life, I know that my magic is growing more powerful. Will I ever be able to surpass Twilight Sparkle? I do not

know...and I do not concern myself with that. I only need to equal her, or at the very least come near to her level, so that when next we meet I am not made to look like a foal trying to wrestle with an Ursa Major.

Please thank Rarity for me, for showing me how to modify my clothing to suit any purpose - it is freezing up here, and the ability to change my hat into a cloak and my cape into a scarf is most useful. The Bison have a fascination with it - apparently Arcanasilk is even rarer here than it is in Equestria, which is a great boon for me; I must apologize to Rarity now, as I had collected a respectable amount of it from the Deerfolk, but the Bison insist I trade it for further training. I will make it up to you Rarity, I promise you that.

*Oh, and one final thing - tell Rainbow Dash that the Bison have a very unique reverence for rainbows, and especially for their Deity that supposedly controls the weather and has a great rainbow-colored suit of armor. I'm sure she'd *love* it here.*

Always,

Trixie the Magnificent

Day 274

Dearest Pinkie Pie,

I am afraid this will likely be the last letter I send you. I am sorry. I may have bitten off more than I could chew, as the saying goes, and overstepped my limits. If anypony amongst you ever has the inclination to visit Dragon territory - don't. It is a miracle alone that I was able to find a town in this forsaken wasteland, and the creatures here come from all walks of life - there are ponies here such as I, and Zebras, and Bison, and Deerfolk, and even Rhinos, and Giraffes, and Buffalo. All here joined under one cause - hunting Dragons. I did not know Dragon-hunting was such an illustrious career, but it does attract an awful lot of attention. Perhaps I should have thought twice about all of this, for I am now on a hunting party, and we are off deeper into Dragon territory tomorrow. There is no way out of Dragon territory without a guide, else you risk your life just traveling the deadly terrain, and as I am on a hunting party I am not allowed to leave until I've slain at least one Dragon. Me and my big mouth...

I am afraid...but I will not let that stop me. My father told me stories of

Dragons that he had fought in his prime, before he met my mother and while he was still competing for his title. If my father had fought and defeated Dragons before...it would be only proper that I test the strength of the magic I have learned over these many months against the foes that my father once faced. If my father could do it, so can I! That is a promise to you all from Trixie the Magnificent!

In case this is the last letter I send to you, know that I love you all dearly. I have come to realize how good I had it, back in Ponyville, and as grateful as I am to every creature I have met along my journey, and every ounce of magic that I have acquired in my travels, it does not hold a candle to the feeling of being there with your friends and enjoying a day together.

I miss you Pinkie Pie, and your fun parties. I still have cravings for some of your delicious cake, and punch, and especially your muffins.

I miss Derpy, and her strength of heart in the face of adversity. I miss having a reliable friend around, somepony I can ask for anything and know they'll come through, because they're my friend and I'm theirs.

I miss Applejack and her charm. I miss Rarity and her elegance. I miss Fluttershy's tender mannerisms. I even miss Rainbow Dash's brutal honesty, and hope that someday we can become more than 'mere acquaintances' what with all we have in common.

Most of all...I...miss Twilight Sparkle.

The next part of this letter is just for her. Please see that she gets it.

Always,

Trixie the Magnificent

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I have kept silent from speaking to you directly until now, because over the course of my journey I have been conflicted in what I should feel for you. I am grateful for everything you have done for me, and while there were many times that your mannerisms and feelings towards me have made me wary of your intentions and even slightly anxious or disturbed, the time I have spent with other ponies and other creatures out here has made me realize exactly what I need to do. I learned a great deal more than magic in my travels - I learned how creatures interact with one another on a more personal level, and how many of them came to realize their own love

for one another. I have reflected upon what I remember learning from Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Derpy and the love they feel for their significant others.

*And it is with these thoughts, that now I finally have an answer for you. If I return...no...*when* I return, I will ensure you get the answer you deserve. Until then, wait for me.*

-Trixie

Chapter 11

Reunions and Resolutions

Ponies lined up along the streets of Ponyville in eager anticipation of the long-awaited return of Trixie the Magnificent. Twilight Sparkle and her friends had gathered the entire town here to witness her arrival, as Twilight was hoping the gesture would earn Trixie's praise and approval. Somepony near the front of the crowd yelled out as a figure crested the hill just beyond the outskirts of Ponyville.

"It's her! Trixie's coming!" cried a slightly nasal voice - Twilight identified it as Snips. He was joined soon by his close friend Snails, who joined in the cheering, "Everypony, let's hear a cheer for Trixie the Magnificent! Hip hip!"

"Hooray!" cried out several other ponies. Twilight was ecstatic that everypony had come to support Trixie's triumphant return, and that they were so enthusiastic about everything. As Trixie strolled into the town proper, the cheers grew louder; Trixie graciously accepted their applause and cheers, taking purposeful steps towards the town square, where Twilight and her friends eagerly awaited her. The crowd cleared a path for her leading to the steps of the Town Hall, and Trixie took great pride in walking up those steps and into the group of ponies she had come to call her friends. She gave a tender and appreciative hug to everypony in turn - first to Pinkie Pie, then to Derpy, then Fluttershy and so forth, until at last she arrived at Twilight Sparkle.

Trixie was as gorgeous as ever, perhaps more-so. Her brilliant blue coat shone in the morning sun like a glistening gem, and her lavish silvery mane flowed brilliantly like a pristine diamond.

"You have outdone yourself, Twilight," Trixie smiled, "This is quite a welcome-home party you've gotten together. I daresay Pinkie Pie couldn't have done better herself..."

"All for you," Twilight smiled back, not at all embarrassed, "I figured it

would inspire you, so that when we have our rematch tomorrow, you'd be in your best condition and in the proper state of mind."

"Oh, the rematch? That's not important to me anymore," Trixie smirked.

"What? But...Trixie, what about your title?"

"I don't want it anymore..." Trixie sad with a husky smolder, "What I really want, Twilight...is you..."

Twilight swooned, "Trixie...this is so sudden."

"Shut up, you fool. Shut up and kiss me."

Trixie leaned in, and Twilight closed her eyes in anticipation.

"Twilight..."

"Oh...Trixie..."

"Twilight..."

"Yes, my dearest?"

"Wake up, darling, you're starting to...ugh...*drool*..."

Twilight's eyes fluttered open and instead of Trixie's visage, she instead beheld Rarity's. A little too close for comfort.

"Aah!" Twilight gasped as she realized she had been dangerously close to giving Rarity a passionate, albeit sleep-induced, kiss.

"Really, darling...these dreams of yours have been getting more and more vivid since we got that last letter," Rarity said with concern, "You spend more time daydreaming than you do with your training, the training I remind you that *you* insisted upon in the first place. For Celestia's sake, Twilight, if you're going to ask me for my help, the least you could do is try to stay awake for *one* last session."

"I apologize, Rarity," Twilight sighed as she shook off her mid-afternoon stupor, "I'm just-"

"I understand that you're really hoping she'll come back with what your dreams and your heart desire, but honestly, Twilight...I'm a little concerned about you. Please...at least try and make it through this one more day? You've got to be ready for if she-"

"*When*," Twilight corrected with a slight scowl.

"...right, of course. You need to be ready *when* she returns, to give her a challenge worthy of the power you hope she has achieved. I haven't

spent this past year giving you lessons every day, just to have to skip out on one last session because you want to dream the day away."

"Right...you're right..." Twilight nodded, "Carry on, Rarity."

"Hmph...as I was saying earlier, now that you've learned about the intricate details of how colors work when combined with light, I believe it is time you tried for yourself to see the sorts of things you can do with it."

Rarity produced the Prism Star they still had on loan from Princess Celestia, and set it in the center of the room. Rarity preferred to use the Princess's over the few she had in her own collection, as she used those for her fashion shows and could not risk anything happening to them; well, that and Celestia's was easily triple the size of the biggest one Rarity owned, allowing for it to produce much more obvious results for a beginner such as Twilight. Drawing the curtains closed and shutting of the lights, the entire room became as dark as it could possibly be in the mid-afternoon. Twilight and Rarity never let the sight of the magical gemstone cease to amaze them - a small, round gemstone, barely larger than an apple, shining with every color of the rainbow. With a little work, the powerful light magic within could be manipulated in any way imaginable. Twilight had been hard at work learning how to take the light magic inside and do the kinds of things with it that she'd seen Rarity and Trixie do in the past; she remembered well her severe loss in the Technique portion of the Duel over a year ago, and could still clearly recall the reactions of Hoity Toity upon seeing Rarity's fashion show before the Grand Galloping Gala so long before.

If there was one thing Twilight Sparkle was good at when it concerned her magic, it was the pure *force* she held, but where she felt she fell short - far too short, in her opinion - was in wielding that power with finesse and style, rather than strength. This entire year had seen her training every single day with Rarity to brush up on making her magic aesthetically pleasing. If the rematch that she was expecting to begin in less than twelve hours was to end up anything like the full Duel she and Trixie had participated in, then she'd need to at the very least make Trixie *work* in that category, rather than just wipe the floor with her without using a portion of her talent. As Twilight recalled how she'd felt when Trixie completely trashed her in that single event, she knew how Trixie felt when

she discovered that Twilight had done exactly the same in the prior Strength one; she just *knew* that Trixie hadn't pulled out all the stops on that show she'd put on, and Trixie had even admitted as much immediately afterwards.

With some focus and a great deal of magic, Twilight began to whirl the light inside the gemstone around to begin truly experimenting with what she could do with it. Her simple idea during the Duel had been to simply create spotlights; Rarity had used the same magic to create fascinating backgrounds that were thematically centered around her friends (though Twilight knew that the intricacies of Rarity's backgrounds owed a great deal to having multiple Prism Stars - it was through this that she could admit that Rarity and Trixie shared a lot in common magically, insofar as they were both weaker than herself, but much more stylish); Trixie had used this same Prism Star and her own magic to literally turn the *entire* stage they were on a different color, from the wooden floorboards to the great curtains, even extending out into the audience. And so, Twilight made her attempt to recreate those effects, and as she reached her magic out into the light, she was able to generate a soothing purple glow that permeated and flowed throughout Rarity's bedroom until everything from the ceiling to the floor was colored. Even Rarity's white coat had been tinted enough by the light that the fashionista, for only a moment, panicked at the thought of her coat changing color without her approval.

"Fascinating..." Twilight murmured as she let her mind and magic wind through the light magic of the Prism Star, "It feels as if I'm controlling the power of Celestia's Sun itself...there's so much magic in this tiny little gemstone...and there is so much one can do with it..."

"Let the magic fill your thoughts," Rarity advised, "And let your mind flow out into the magic in turn. Then your spells can create in reality what you can see in your mind's eye, no matter how complicated. Try to use two colors together, darling."

Twilight nodded and let her essence flow into the Prism Star, seeping it with her magic. The lavender glow of the room began to fade in and out, until at last Rarity was able to see that it was being slowly replaced by a brilliant red.

"Wonderful, Twilight," Rarity praised, "Normally, if one were to simply

change colors the effect would be instantaneous and rather glaring in lack of style. You're changing the color gradually...not an easy feat, and certainly more elegant. Now, try to create shapes with the colors and light."

Twilight closed her eyes and focused, willing the light within the gem to focus into tiny light beams that projected into the very space of the room - not on any surface - her own name in brilliant gold letters, as she'd remembered Trixie doing. It was still a fairly simple effect here, so she strove to discover the intricate details of the spell to make the lights do exactly as she wished. So, she made the letters dance.

"Marvelous! You're coming along nicely, dear," Rarity smiled, "I knew you'd be able to handle the complexity of this kind of magic if you merely studied it before you put it into practice. If I do say so myself, if you take some time to practice on your own, you'd likely be able to do quite literally anything that your heart and mind can put into it. Why, you might even be able to put *me* to shame one day."

Twilight smiled lazily as she fluttered her magic into the gem some more to make the light form the shape of two cartoon-ish unicorns, one blue and one purple, with a bright pink heart between them. She even sighed dreamily as her mind began to wander again, causing the image to distort and falter.

Rarity sighed, "I think we're done for the day, Twilight. You've got something...er...some*pony* else on your mind right now, and I doubt I'll be able to divert your attention much longer. If you wish to head off to your usual spot, I won't stop you. Just...well...do take care, Twilight."

Twilight nodded enthusiastically, "Thank you again, Rarity, for all your help. I'm sure Trixie will be surprised to see what kind of finesse I can wield my magic with now."

Twilight eagerly left Carousel Boutique and headed for her usual spot - a tiny hill that overlooked the road leading out of Ponyville and into the Everfree Forest. Every day for the past two months, Twilight had come to wait on this spot whenever she had any free time. Between lessons from Rarity, helping her other friends with occasional errands, friendship reports to Princess Celestia, and dealing with all the bizarre happenings that seemed magnetized to herself and her friends, she usually only got an hour or so during the day, and she always made sure to spend an hour here

every night before she went to sleep. Her friends' opinions of what this...*obsession* implied were mixed. She remembered their words well as they gave her their two bits.

"Awwwww, it's really super sweet that you're so dedicated to waiting here for Trixie. I have all the confidence in the world that she'll be back when she's good and ready, and I don't really have time to wait what with all the work I've been getting lately since this summer is a super party season! Don't ask me why, but business is up and Mr. and Mrs. Cake need me at Sugarcube Corner almost full-time and I get in a lot of trouble if I eat anything that's not for me, so that's why they give me lunch breaks and insist I take them out of the store! I usually go spend it with Dashie but every now and then I come and see if you're here and want some company, since I know you'd really like some even if I'm not the pony at the very, very tip-top highest point on your list of 'Ponies Twilight Sparkle wants some alone time with' but I don't think I can compete with the pony that is there. Don't worry, Twilight...she'll be back. You'll see!"

"Darling, you really must take a break from this once in a while. While it is a romantic gesture, you must admit that...it's worrying. To us, I mean. You spend all your free time here, Twilight...it can't be healthy. What if she...doesn't come back?"

"Sugarcube, ya'll are really startin' to worry me. I hate seein' ya'll in such a rut...and I'll be honest when I say I don't know how to get you out of it. I ain't gonna lie, Twilight...as much as I want her to come back...even I'm startin' to have mah doubts..."

"Um...if you don't mind my saying so Twilight...you really shouldn't obsess over this. Trixie won't let you down...she's...she's tougher than Applejack and Rainbow Dash give her credit for. She'll be back...I hope...oh, um...that probably didn't sound very confident. I meant to say, I'm sure she's fine...she's just...taking a while..."

"If you ask me, I still don't see what you see in that egomaniac, but then you'd just call me a hypocrite or something and Pinkie Pie tells me that you've got kind of a point, so I'm not gonna give you the chance. And...I kind of went off my train of thought there, but...well, I'm just worried about you, Twi. I don't like seeing you like this...it's kind of...you know what, I'd better just get going, before I say something I'll regret. Please,

Twilight...just...promise me whatever happens, you won't let it get you down. Okay?"

"I wish I could say I have a letter from her...but I don't. I always got giddy when I opened up my workload and saw a letter from her right on the top of the pile. It's been...sad...not seeing her. I miss her too, Miss Sparkle...I miss her so much. But I know she'll be okay...she has to be..."

Twilight sighed as she looked out over the hill one last time. The sun was just beginning to settle over the horizon, and she knew she needed to get home and tend to a few more things before it got late. Midnight...she wasn't looking forward to it. Trixie was running out of time...

Twilight eyed the tiny watch she'd gotten as a birthday present from Rarity. The minute hand clicked again. Eleven fifty-seven. Looking out over the hill, she barely noticed the hoofsteps behind her.

"Twilight Sparkle...my ever faithful student," came Celestia's pristine voice, "Don't you have someplace else to be tonight? Time is running short, but you can still make it to that Spot of yours if you hurry, and now."

"I'm not going..." Twilight said firmly.

Celestia eyed Twilight with much contemplation, "If you don't mind, I'd like to know why."

"I'm not going to the Spot until Trixie comes back," Twilight answered, "I refuse to take her title from her like that. It feels wrong..."

"Twilight, my most treasured pupil...surely you must realize how silly that sounds? If you do not take the title, then I am forced to give other ponies the opportunity to win it. How do you think Trixie would feel if somepony else were to take that title from her, somepony other than you, who I can only assume she considers her greatest rival?"

"At least they will have earned it," Twilight frowned, "I don't feel right taking Trixie's title like this. I have done nothing all year, but remain here in Ponyville and do some light refining of my magic. Trixie is out there somewhere, seeking her true potential, trying to become powerful enough to earn the title from a pony she has admitted is better than she is...was. I don't feel right being *given* the title...I want to *earn* it..."

"I see. So then...I take it you're settled on this decision, Twilight Sparkle? As honorable as you make it seem, you must understand how

foolish it makes you look."

"Trixie would likely be doing the same for me, were she in this position," Twilight answered, "I am doing as she would do. She would want to earn the title, not get it as a gift because I was off on some crusade. When she comes back, she'll want to find whoever has the title and take it from them legitimately. She has every right to do so."

Celestia frowned, "Twilight...I understand that you miss her, and wish to give her a chance...but I must say that I am worried for you. I know all too well the feeling of loss for a loved one, to believe that they are beyond your help and that nothing you do will change the cards that fate has dealt you," she added with a smile up at Luna's moon, "And I also know that with that feeling, one makes many irrational decisions. It takes a great deal of heart to be able to move on from that loss...and to live a full life again. Trixie would not want you to squander your power by waiting here for her the rest of your life, never knowing if she will ever return..."

Twilight's eyes shot open, "Princess...you said that you can sense the life force of every pony under your influence. Surely you can sense Trixie's? Please...tell me at least that she is okay..."

"...I...am afraid that is beyond me, my faithful student," Celestia sighed, "I can only recognize the ponies that belong to these powers if they are powerful enough to make an impact, and if I knew their aura on a personal level. I knew Paragon well, and so I knew when his life force was cut off from my vision. I do not know Trixie enough to differentiate her from others, as I can with you...and she has complicated issues if she has left Equestria, as you said. Once a pony leaves Equestria, they are no longer able to be seen under the scrutiny of my gaze. I can tell for certain if a life force is extinguished within my borders, but not if they leave my borders physically. I am sorry, Twilight...but there are things beyond even my power..."

Twilight frowned, "I am sorry, Princess...for assuming. I still stand firm though...I refuse to be given the title as a prize for *attendance*."

"You have little choice now, it is well past midnight," Celestia sighed, "I must now grant the title properly to another pony. There will be a grand tournament for it in Canterlot by this week's end - you are welcome to attend, or even to assist in organizing it, if that's what you'd like?"

"I appreciate the offer, Princess...but...I had other plans..."

"I expected as much, my faithful student. And...I wish the best of luck to you..."

"I still can't believe you're doing this," Spike said indignantly as he helped Twilight finish getting ready, "I couldn't believe it when you told me last week after coming home and saying you'd willingly forfeited getting Trixie's title. I couldn't believe it even when I coughed up your entry application. I couldn't even believe it when you insisted that Rarity prepare your...ugh...*costume*. And now that I'm helping you get everything together, I *still* can't believe it."

"I understand your trepidation Spike," Twilight smiled as she eyed herself in the mirror one final time.

"How can you?" Spike angrily frowned, "I still don't even know how you can feel anything but disgust with that ego-trip of a pony, after that last letter of hers. You're so blinded by your stupid *feelings* for her that you're completely ignoring the fact that she's likely been killing *Dragons* in her spare time. You know, Dragons? My race? Being treated like animals and hunted for sport? I can't believe it..."

"Spike, I'm...sure that is all just a misunderstanding," Twilight said, still trying to convince herself it had to be. There was no proof Trixie had killed a Dragon or anything of the sort, and even though her wording had made it seem like that was what she'd be doing, Twilight had done her fair share of looking into what exactly Dragon-Hunting was...and found no record of it. This just made things more complicated. Was Trixie lying about fighting Dragons? Was she telling the truth, and she would return to Ponyville a murderer of other intelligent creatures? Or was this all a big miscommunication, and something else entirely was going on? She just couldn't imagine Trixie killing anything.

"Pfh...whatever. If it turns out I'm right, Twilight...I really hope you think about what's important to you..." Spike added with a glare.

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Just that you'd better be sure you know what real friendship is in the long run, and you start thinking with your heart, not your...*libido*."

Twilight turned bright red, "Heavens, Spike...where in Equestria do

you get these ideas?"

"None of your business. No time to explain anyway, you're supposed to be in the waiting area in five minutes."

"Fillies and gentlecolts!" came a voice over the loudspeakers, "Would all contestants please head for the designated waiting area within the next five minutes - the Great and Powerful Magician's Tournament will be starting shortly. I repeat-"

"See?" Spike said pointedly, "Go on, get going. I'll head up to the stands, and I'll still be rooting for you, even if I have a *lot* against this idea."

"Thank you, Spike. Let the others know I thank them as well for their support. Try not to bother Rarity too much, okay?"

Spike frowned, "Oh, I doubt *that* will be much of an issue..."

"Beg pardon?"

"Nothing. Anyways I gotta get going. Later, Twilight! Good luck!"

Spike bolted off, leaving Twilight to walk alone for the waiting area. Following the posted signs, she eventually reached it, and was surprised by the grand scale of the room - it was a miniature convention center, snugly fitted underneath the stadium itself. She was not surprised at how many unicorns there were here to compete, but she was left a little nervous at how large the crowd actually appeared when all gathered together. Seventy unicorns in total, Twilight remembered hearing. Seventy unicorns from all walks of life, the best of the best *of the best*, all here to compete for the grandest title that could be held by any unicorn, falling just short of the Princess herself. Twilight was, of course, most surprised by a familiar face waiting for her near the entrance.

"Rarity?" Twilight blinked, "You...you're entering too?"

"Why of *course*, darling, I wouldn't dream of letting you go through with this without any support. I know our friends are all out there in the crowd to cheer you...well, *us* on, but I figured you could use a voice closer to you to give you the encouragement you need. This is a noble thing you're doing here, Twilight, even if it still does confuse all of us just a little. We thought you didn't want the title!"

"I don't," Twilight explained, "But when Trixie gets back, I want her to have a real challenge to get it, not having to compete against *just* another pony. Sure, the winner of this contest is technically considered the Greatest

and Most Powerful unicorn in all of Equestria - that's what the title is all about - but I couldn't risk them being a pushover compared to myself. Trixie deserves better than that. I just didn't want the title to feel cheapened by being given to me without any effort."

"Hmmm...I suppose your ideal makes sense. And my my my...your outfit certainly *does* look absolutely *divine* now that you've got it on. I was worried it would appear a little gaudy, since this is my first time actually *making* anything with Arcanasilk rather than just modified an existing outfit. But it turned out just wonderful!"

Twilight twirled around to give Rarity a good look at the whole ensemble she'd crafted for her. Twilight wore a collared cape that flowed out just about to her flank, colored a deep midnight blue and glittering with starlight and the faint glow of a setting sun, looking every bit like the twilight she took her name from. Upon her head she wore a custom-made tiara, decorated with lavish gemstones that Rarity had painstakingly cut into star-shaped splendor; the central one glistened with a deep purple - an amethyst - while the diamonds that lined up beside it gleamed a brilliant white. The tiara itself was made of a most brilliant silver, almost white in its splendor. *What had Rarity called it?* Twilight thought, *Mithril?*

"Really I *am* glad I had some assistance this whole week from Fluttershy," Rarity said with an exhausted sigh, "So many orders for so many custom outfits. To think that having an elaborate costume was a *requirement* for being Great and Powerful! I always just used to think Trixie kept it solely for it's personal value, not because it was an excellent means to an end as well. I must say that designing outfits meant to impress *and* be functional was quite a task - I'm used to designing for fashion, not capes and cloaks and hats and things like that, meant for *this* sort of thing."

"I don't really see the difference," Twilight shrugged. She looked around her and noticed all the different unicorns - mares and stallions alike - were wearing elaborate yet practical clothing; dressed to impress and inspire wonder, but meant to be efficient when undergoing magical and physical exertion. Rarity's own outfit was a lavish cloak that draped around her shoulders and flowed behind her, colored bright regal blue and royal purple, decorated with golden trimming and silver sequins. She wore a simple horn ornament, a solid golden ring decorated with tiny Prism Stars

that she'd precisely cut to fit the teeny-tiny little slots that circled around.

"*You* wouldn't," Rarity chuckled, "But I assure you, dressing to impress is a different story between attending a ball or a gala or a dance, compared to putting on a play or a concert. Showponyship is the name of the game here, Twilight Sparkle."

"Right..."

"Fillies and gentlecolts!" called a voice from the back end of the waiting area - it sounded like it came from the speaker system, and was a soft-spoken mare's voice, "The competition is now starting. Please move in an orderly fashion to the starting gates. The announcer will call your names in alphabetical order - for the first unicorn, when your name is called, you will step out into the arena and move to the designated starting zone. Every pony afterwards is to form a line to the right of the pony before you, leaving a gap in the designated area in front of the gates. Good luck out there, unicorns!"

Twilight and Rarity looked at each other, and with a firm nod, shook one another's hooves.

"May the best unicorn win," Twilight smiled.

"Oh, I certainly *would* like to," Rarity joked with a haughty laugh, "But I'm sure the honor will be all *yours* in the end. I'm behind you all the way, darling. Best of luck to you..."

Out in the crowd of the arena, Pinkie Pie and the others eagerly began to applaud as a musical fanfare began to play and a small platform raised from the center of the arena floor. Everything was decorated in a very magical, yet technological fashion, giving off an impression of just how much power it took to give this crowd a truly entertaining show. The five ponies, and one dragon, were glad that as two of their friends were competitors, and that one of them was Twilight Sparkle herself, they were given free tickets by Princess Celestia so that they could be there to support their friends. While Rarity had done a good job at keeping her own entry a secret from every *pony* else, Spike knew all about it and was mildly disappointed she wasn't seated next to him instead of...*ugh*...Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Still, getting to see her perform amazing magical feats and hopefully show up a few lesser ponies along the way would be a most

exciting sight, and as much as he loved Twilight Sparkle, he knew deep down he wouldn't mind seeing Rarity win.

"Ah...the Great and Powerful Rarity," Spike swooned as he remembered well her ecstatic daydreaming, "She'd have all the business in Equestria if she had a title like that..."

"Don't get yer hopes up too far there, loverboy," smirked Applejack, "Rarity may be talented an' all, but all o' us know Twilight's got this here tournament beat harder than I've ever done bucked a tree."

"Yeah yeah yeah, I get it," Spike waved dismissively, "I still want her to at least get far in the standings. Imagine the publicity she's going to get from all this! I know she's here to support Twilight, but you all have to admit this is a pretty convenient way to go about it."

"I just think she didn't want to sit in the stands," Rainbow Dash chuckled, "I'm surprised she even wants to compete, and *isn't* worried she'll, like, chip a hoof or something."

"Ooh! SSSSSHHHHhhhhhh!" Pinkie Pie loudly hushed from the other side of the group, "It's starting! It's starting! Oh I'm so excited! I haven't been this excited since we all went to Cloudsdale to watch Dashie do a Sonic Rainboom and she went all 'whoosh whoosh vrooooooooooooooom BANG', that was so much fun and I was so excited and everything, even though Fluttershy kind of drowned out everypony else's cheering so Dashie couldn't hear us or anything but anyway, I am so excited! Are you guys excited? Because I'm excited."

"Are you excited, Pinkie?" Spike sarcastically quipped, instantly regretting it.

"Ah *duuuuhhhhh* didn't I *just* say I'm excited? I mean, 'hello!', come on Spike, open up those ears of yours you silly filly! Er...well, not silly *filly* since you're a dragon...what exactly are young dragons called? Dragonlings? Drakes?"

"Whelps," Fluttershy explained.

"Whelps? That doesn't rhyme with anything funny!" Pinkie Pie blurted, "Yelp-y whelp-y? Pffff...no, not even close. Kelp-y whelp-y? Sheesh, see what I have to work with here?"

"Pinkie, hush, it's gettin' started," Applejack said sternly.

The announcer flashed onto the podium in a modest display of

teleportation magic, clearly hoping to give the crowd a little taste of what was to come. Nothing special, and nothing like what he expected to be displayed by some of the competitors, but after all, he wasn't competing. He was a bright gold unicorn with shining a blue mane and tail, and he wore a very elaborate suit - black, very fancy - complete with tie. He didn't need to use a microphone, his magic was enough to make his voice flow throughout the stadium. Everypony felt as if he were right next to them, talking to them and them alone.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, welcome! Welcome to the Great and Powerful Magician's Tournament!"

The crowd cheered and applauded loudly.

"My name is Bright Voice, and I will be the voice of the tournament - and by extension, Princess Celestia herself - for most of today's competition. For the benefit of those in the audience who are in the dark as to what exactly this tournament is all about, I shall give a very brief exposition. As the name of the tournament suggests, the unicorn title of Great and Powerful has become detached from its previous owner, who some of you may know - the Great and Powerful Trixie, daughter of the prior holder, the Great and Powerful Paragon!"

Some murmurs amongst the audience could barely be heard. Clearly some ponies had heard of her, or at the very least were curious about who she was. Most of them were more concerned that Paragon had somehow given up the title - clearly his death had not been made public yet in the entire past year.

"As per the rules of Magician's Duels, where unicorn magicians battle one another for fame, glory, and for the exchange of titles such as these, the title of Great and Powerful is now up for grabs to the winner of this officially sanctioned tournament! All the unicorns present will be seeking to prove to each other, to all of you in the audience, and to Princess Celestia herself, that they deserve the title of Great and Powerful more than anypony else. He or she who holds this title is considered to hold the greatest honor in all of Equestria, and everything that goes with it - the fame, the fortune, the glory, the honor, and the prospect of defending their title from all comers. They are encouraged to use their absolute fullest magical power and technique in every single event this fine summer's day,

and this is all possible thanks to our sponsor, Etherium Energy Drink. Etherium - it's a drink that gives you the energy and magic to accomplish even the most impossible of feats!"

After he spoke, the gigantic arena monitor rolled a commercial for Etherium. A unicorn was busy using his magic to move a pile of boulders out of the way of a train path as he and his fellow ponies were building a railroad. Exhausted, he chugged down a bottle of Etherium, and then proceeded to use his magic to literally lift the entire mountain out of the path.

"Pfh, I'm sure even Twilight couldn't do *that*," Rainbow Dash scoffed at the commercial, "How many unicorns do you think it took them to get that done? A hundred? Two hundred?"

"I think it's just a super fancy special effect," Pinkie pointed out, "It looks like they just added, like, *digital* effects to make it appear like it was a real mountain, when it really wasn't. I can tell from some of the pixels, from seeing quite a few digital effects in my time."

Rainbow Dash looked at Pinkie with befuddlement, "The *pixels*? What?"

"Nevermind," Pinkie chuckled.

"Pinkie Pie...you are so-"

"Random, yeah yeah, I get it," Pinkie shrugged.

"Our competitors," continued Bright Voice, "Will be participating in an elimination-rules tournament. We will be starting the first event shortly, and it will begin with exactly *seventy* of the finest unicorns from all over Equestria. We have entrants from the furthest reaches of Equestrian territory, many of whom you may recognize, whether they be friends, family, loved ones, or some of our celebrity entrants! As the events are completed, you may direct your attention to the giant arena screen behind me," and he gestured to it, so that the audience could see him in the picture gesturing to himself in the picture, ad infinitum, "Our top experts will be measuring and grading the performances of the unicorns and giving them scores that will be displayed here - the lowest half of any event's competitors will be *eliminated* immediately upon the conclusion of the event. So, for our first event, seventy unicorns will enter, and the lowest-scoring thirty-five will be going *home*. There will be six events in total! Our

first event is a judgment of the *Power* of the unicorns present, using this wonderful device that our technicians are currently setting up in the center of the arena floor."

He gestured to the ponies that were busy putting together a large machine. It was a series of smaller machines and monitors all wired up to a small target-like object.

"We will go over further events as we come to them, so for now, without further ado, let us introduce our competitors! In alphabetical order, based on the first part of everypony's name, not including titles, professional or otherwise, our first contestant, hailing from the sunny beaches of Miamare: April Showers!"

A bright yellow unicorn mare was the first step out of the gates, her shiny blue hair in a sleek ponytail that bobbed behind her as she walked towards her designated starting position. The arena monitor's resolution was just enough to make out her cutie mark - a series of raindrops falling from a cloud.

"Ooh, she's pretty," Pinkie Pie piped, "Look at that super cool outfit! So much pink! I love pink!"

"Yes, I'm sure you do," Spike groaned, "Crud, Twilight and Rarity are so far down the list, it's gonna take forever to get to them..."

"Aww, don't sweat it, little guy," Applejack joked, "It's not like we gotta pay attention to every single pony in the first few events anyhow, most of 'em ain't gonna last long enough to really worry about it, apparently."

"Yeah, we already just missed two of 'em," Rainbow pointed out to the arena, where now the third unicorn - a dull green stallion with a red mane - was hastily strutting out.

"Um...we should at least try to pay a little attention," Fluttershy peeped, "What if somepony we know-"

"Next, fillies and gentlecolts, I present to you a unicorn that is well known amongst the most prestigious circles of Canterlot's most elite nobility and royalty. Prince Blueblood!"

The gathered ponies - and dragon - sans Derpy who had no idea what the big deal was, all collectively let their jaws drop as the glorious white stallion strode out of the gates with purpose and flair, his extremely lavish black cloak and shining silver crown making him look the part of a

magical prince looking to prove himself superior to everypony present. A few cheers went out here and there amongst the crowd, but it was mostly silent. Blueblood didn't look like he even cared.

"You're kidding?! He's in this tournament too?! I don't want to go out there! You can't make me go out there!"

"Was that Rarity's voice?" Spike perked up, "Oh man...she sounds mad..."

"I would be too, if I saw what I'm seein' now and were in her position," Applejack gulped, "How'd he even get into this thing anyhow? I figured he was just a lame dud of a unicorn, too frilly and fancy to bother getting his hooves dirty doing his own work..."

"Well, apparently not," Spike growled, "Ooh, I sure hope Rarity and Twilight get a chance to show that prissy sissy-pony that he doesn't belong in this sort of thing."

More ponies were announced, and none of the collected group recognized any names for quite some time. Then-

"Next, hailing from nearby Ponyville, Lyra!"

The ponies clapped excitedly, and even began searching around in the audience for Bon-Bon; Pinkie was able to point her out several rows in front of them, cheering madly and applauding as loud as she possibly could.

"I didn't know Lyra was entering into the tournament too," Rainbow Dash said thoughtfully, "She never seemed particularly powerful, but I guess there's a lot we don't know about some of the ponies even in our own town."

"Awwwwwww, Bon-Bon looks so proud," Pinkie Pie pointed.

More names were announced, and finally the 'Q' section was done. Spike expectantly got to his feet, and the other ponies followed suit. And barring having to wait for one more unicorn, a mare with a bright blue coat and shiny gold hair named Radar, they were ready to cheer for-

"Our next contest, also hailing from Ponyville, needs little introduction to those in the audience who consider themselves amongst the fashion elite! From my understanding, many of our competitors' outfits were even designed by her! Presenting fashion-designer extraordinaire, Rarity!"

The group went wild with applause, none more-so than Spike. Rarity

daintily left the starting gates and walked with perfect poise and grace to her starting position, taking every opportunity to relish in the excited applause from the audience, especially the loudest section she could hear.

"Oooooooh, she looks *gorgeous*," Pinkie Pie cooed, "That outfit is so super pretty and it looks like she made it out of, like, royal banners or something! Did anypony see that cool little decoration she got for her horn? That's so neat that unicorns have an extra little thing that they can dress up, kind of like pegasus wings!" she added, taking the time from the last bit to stroke Rainbow Dash's wing, making the cyan pegasus turn red, "Ooh! I wonder if they're just as sensitive as wings are too!"

"P-Pinkie Pie, s-stop making jokes," Rainbow shuddered, "And s-stop doing t-that...we're in p-public for Celestia's sake..."

"Ahhh, she looks just like a princess..." Spike swooned, "So regal...so elegant...so *beautiful*."

"Settle down there, lover boy, 'fore you break somethin'" Applejack chuckled as she pulled Spike back down to his seated position so that he wouldn't fall over the next row of seats - he was leaning on the seat ahead of him and in danger of toppling over it, he was so enraptured with Rarity's appearance.

More unicorns were introduced, and as before with Rarity, the group eagerly awaited the next name on the list as the 'T' section began to dwindle. Following a striking gold mare with shiny blue hair named Treasure, the announcer readied himself for who was likely the most anticipated entrant in the tournament, at least from the perspective of those who knew her.

"And next, introducing a unicorn who really should not need an introduction at all! Hailing originally from Canterlot but now residing in Ponyville, she holds the honor of being the personal protégé of Princess Celestia herself. She is one of the highest-marked students in the history of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. She is partly responsible for the very existence of this tournament today. She is, Twilight Sparkle!"

The collected ponies, and several other individuals from throughout the audience - clearly other citizens of Ponyville that had come to see the tournament - erupted into a roaring applause and cheer that was quickly joined by the rest of the crowd. Twilight entered the arena and sheepishly

waved to the audience, not knowing quite how to deal with unexpectedly being a fan-favorite.

Only one unicorn separated Twilight Sparkle and the next megaton announcement.

"Hailing from Manehattan, this unicorn is amongst the most popular radio celebrities of her time. She is well known throughout the music scene as an artist far beyond her years, and as a personal fan of her work both in radio and in her music, please join me in welcoming the one, the only, Vinyl Scratch!"

Vinyl strut out of the starting gates with absolute confidence, relishing the uproarious cheers. Almost everypony in the crowd was chanting her stage name - DJ PON-3 - making for a very interesting sound that wafted through the arena and echoed off the walls. Vinyl had taken to providing her own music thanks to her ensemble - while her cloak itself was simple and practical, she'd elected to wear her own customized set of headphones that were even now glowing a bright neon red, generating music out into the audience and amplified by her magic. Her trademark sunglasses reflected the light of hundreds, thousands of camera flashes and she took a well-deserved bow to the audience before pointing at a certain gray-coated mare sitting in the front row and blowing her an over-the-top kiss. Pinkie Pie began wildly cheering as she looked on the video screen.

"Hey hey hey! It's Octavia! Hey sis! SIIIIIISSSSSS! HEY! Look up here! HEY! HEY LISTEN! OCTY! OCTY! HEY! LOOK UP!"

Rainbow Dash put a hoof over Pinkie's mouth, "For Celestia's sake, Pinkie Pie, keep a lid on it, okay? Yeesh, you can see her after all this is over."

The introductions continued until at last there were seventy unicorns, all of them talented and powerful in their own rights and manners, were gathered in the arena - all the way from April Showers to Zig-Zag. So it was only natural that, immediately following the last unicorn's intro-

"And with that, fillies and gentlecolts, we have everypony present and ready to begin! The first event will test the *Power* of these unicorns, and will begin immediately. April Showers, if you would please stand in front of the device and strike the target with *all* of your magic in one solid hit; then, you may return to the waiting area and await the results. There is Etherium

back there for you to recharge your magic, free of charge and provided by our very generous sponsor. You may begin when ready."

April Showers came forward and eyed the strange device carefully. She was unsure how exactly this thing was going to measure her magical strength, but she figured to give it a try. Focusing every ounce of magic she could muster, she slammed a huge amount of energy all at once into the target, causing a rippling crashing sound to echo throughout the stadium. Immediately afterwards, she stumbled warily back and made her way for the waiting area as the announcer began to get the results and properly present them.

"If I may direct everypony's attention to our lovely scoreboard, you'll see that our expert staff has already completed the measurements on Miss Showers' attempt. Displaying now we can see she has a Magical Potency reading of...six-thousand, five-hundred, thirty-eight!"

The giant scoreboard flickered as numbers began to manifest themselves besides April Showers' name. To everypony in the audience, the scoreboard read

April Showers 6538 MP

Mild applause sprinkled out from the audience, though a few unicorns here and there did clap loudly - only unicorns knew how exactly MP was measured, though for the benefit of the non-unicorns in the audience, the Bright Noise made a quick notification that it represented, quote, "the rate of which the energy from the magic of the unicorn was transferred into the target, causing a force displacement that can be measured to give an accurate measurement of how much magical energy they initially released". Since almost nopony in the audience understood what that even meant, he simplified it - "the unicorn's spell leaves an impact on the target, and that impact force is used to measure their energy output. It's science, ponies!"

When Blueblood's turn came up - seeing as he was fourth - Twilight, Rarity, and their friends were most surprised at his surprisingly *high* showing. None of them pegged Blueblood as having that much magic - the scoreboard now displayed, besides his name: **7488 MP**. Rarity glared as she began to think that she wouldn't be getting rid of him that easily.

Unicorn after unicorn took their turns, and the little clique in the

audience cheered for their favorites whenever they came up. Lyra made and impressive showing, **6969 MP**, which by the time her turn arrived put her pretty squarely in the top half of the competition. Rarity, although hesitant to use so much brute force, knew she had to do so in order to have any chance at placing high; she was glad she'd been training with Twilight Sparkle this past year - the constant use and display of her magic at higher levels allowed her to work-out her Ley Lines a bit and improve her own magical power. She struck the target with a great "OOMPH!", and sluggishly hobbled off the field as the audience was given her reading. She would later read it on the waiting room's private scoreboard, and she would both be pleasantly surprised and mildly disappointed by her results: **7487 MP** - exactly one less than Blueblood by all the coincidences and luck, bad or good, in the world, but at the very least this put her in an extremely comfortable position in the standings. Only twelve ponies had higher scores than her at this point, and the highest was sitting comfortably at only a few hundred higher than herself: **7981**; she noted that the MP-variance was actually pretty small, what with Lyra's score still being in the top half, but only just barely now. That wasn't important at the moment, she instead was watching the private monitors in the waiting area, gently sipping down her bottle of Etherium (and enjoying the unique rush of having magic flood her body again with every drop she imbibed in); Twilight Sparkle's turn was up. *This would be a show.*

Twilight stepped warily forward, and decided to treat this entire event as if she were still keeping her pact with Trixie and choosing not to hold herself back in the slightest. She fueled her horn with every last ounce of magic she could muster and struck the target. *Hard*. A resounding explosion of sound rocked the arena, and Bright Voice found himself stumbling over himself as the vibrations caused by the impact even shook the arena floor.

"Whoa!" he shouted into his headset, "By Celestia's Horn, *that* was quite a display! Tech, what kind of reading did you get on her Magical Potency?"

A bright orange earth pony wearing a hard hat, identified as Tech, quickly scanned the readings he was getting, and gulped audibly enough that Bright Voice could hear him, "S-sir, she dang near broke the machine!

Our measuring system can't read an MP level this high..."

"How high is it, Tech? What does the system say about her MP level?"

"It's...got to be over nine-thousand sir, that's the cut-off point and-"

"WHAT?! NINE-THOUSAND?!"

"Y-yes sir!"

"Fillies and gentlecolts, an amazing announcement for you all here today! Until this precise moment, the record for the highest Magical Potency in a single unicorn was an honor held by the unicorn known as Premier the Supreme, setting said record over two-hundred years ago, and even with our rudimentary techno-magic back then, his magic was able to be measured at an MP of eight-thousand, nine-hundred, forty-five! Twilight Sparkle's reading is officially off the charts, and while we currently do not have a completely accurate account, it is confirmed that her level is *over* nine-thousand! Twilight Sparkle has set a new Equestrian record for Magical Potency!"

Twilight came into the waiting area to find everypony present giving her much-deserved applause and praise, a few 'neigh-sayers' and loners excepted. Prince Blueblood did not seem to see the need to communicating with a 'common' pony, even if she was Celestia's assistant. Neither did a few other ponies, but that was of no concern to her. What mattered to Twilight (besides chugging down a few bottles of Etherium) was the praise and support of her friend Rarity.

"Twilight, *darling*, that was the most impressive display I've ever seen! I knew you had power, but by Celestia...that was a *lot* of power!"

Twilight blushed slightly, "R-really, it wasn't anything special. I mean, I broke their machine's calculation functions...I hope it doesn't affect anypony else's score out there."

Twilight and Rarity relaxed as the remaining unicorns finished their attempts, and then as Bright Voice's voice came over the PA system to announce that the event was complete and that scores were being tallied, the pair rushed over to the least-occupied scoreboard in the waiting room they could find. The massive list of seventy quickly shrunk down to thirty-five, and they browsed through the list to see who managed to stay, and

who had to go...

Twilight Sparkle	9001???
Enigma	7981
Star Burst	7678
Corona	7603
Hot Rod	7559

Twilight didn't feel like reading through the whole list, so instead she and Rarity began their search for familiar faces - they knew the two of them, and to Rarity's continued annoyance, Prince Blueblood, had not been eliminated, so at the very least they'd see if anypony they knew would still be competing.

"Hey, Vinyl Scratch did pretty well," Twilight pointed out, "Does she power her radio station herself or something? Huh...who knew? Ha, she just barely beat out Prince Blueblood, too. I bet she's happy about that. Sorry you can't say the same, Rarity..."

"Oh nevermind that, darling, look, Lyra's still in too - she's in twenty-ninth place. Phew, I was hoping she'd get to stay a little longer. I wonder if Bon-Bon is out there? I bet she's pretty proud of her."

"Oh! And Moondancer managed to make it through as well. I should go congratulate her, we used to be classmates. I wonder how she's been these past couple of years...time certainly does fly..."

"Fillies and gentlecolts," came a soothing voice that they'd heard when they were asked to line before the first event - it wasn't Bright Voice, so the contestants knew it was likely a private announcement just for them, "If you haven't already, please direct your attention to the scoreboard. If your name is not on the list of remaining competitors, that means you have been eliminated. Please exit the waiting room via the marked doors on the south end of the room, where you will be escorted to the VIP lounge to watch the rest of the event if you so wish, and be treated to a dinner buffet courtesy of Princess Celestia. We are sorry you didn't make it further in the contest. Thank you. Once again, if you haven't-"

Twilight and Rarity watched as a great deal of saddened unicorns left the waiting room for the large double doors they'd come through initially. Twilight was sad to see so many ponies have their hopes crushed like that, but she knew it had to be done. Once those eliminated ponies had

removed themselves from the waiting room, the remaining contestants were treated to another announcement.

"For those of you remaining, congratulations on making it to the second round. When the starting gates open again, please return to your original position that you lined up in during the first event. The second event will commence shortly. I repeat-"

Pinkie Pie was a blur as she stuffed her face with all sorts of assorted snacks and drinks that she'd bought during the lull between events. A few things here and there had been graciously shared with everypony else, though none of them were coming close to Pinkie's abundance of foodstuffs. Derpy was disappointed in the lack of any sort of muffin vendor, and had to settle on popcorn. Applejack passed on the sweets and stuck with her apples she'd snuck in from the farm - she'd be darned if she was going to pay the ridiculously high prices of stadium food for something she could get for free at home. Spike too had brought his own food, but hadn't needed to sneak it in - nopony questioned anyone bringing a sack of diamonds into the stadium, and Spike was treating himself to a smorgasbord of his favorite gemstones provided by Rarity to keep him quiet about her entry until she could make it a surprise. Rainbow Dash simply shared with Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy elected to pass on everything except a lemon-lime soda.

"Dish shtuff ish da besht," Pinkie Pie said through a mouthful of cheesy nachos. She swallowed the whole mouthful in one gulp, "They have the best snack foods here, with the exception of desserts, they don't have much of those besides ice cream, and I know ice cream is fun and good and all but it doesn't compare to a bag batch of homemade cookies or cupcakes or-"

"Shh, Pinkie Pie, the next event is starting soon," Rainbow said as she grabbed another hoof-full of popcorn, "I wonder what they're gonna have to do next?"

Bright Voice returned from wherever he had disappeared to, in a brilliant shower of sparks and smoke. Still trying to impress, though by now he knew that was a rather difficult task what with everypony in the crowd rumbling and murmuring about Twilight Sparkle's display. As the competing

unicorns exited the waiting room and took their positions in the arena proper, one would likely hear many voices excitedly pointing out the unicorn that had just quite literally *shattered* the previous power record. Twilight felt herself growing nervous at the thought of everypony in Canterlot and from all over Equestria watching her perform.

"Fillies and gentlecolts! It is now time for the second event! This event will be a test of the competitors' *Accuracy*, a true test of how well they can place their magic precisely where it needs to be. The target our technicians have set up for this event," and he gestured to the large bulls-eye in the center of the arena, resting against a hastily constructed yet durable metal wall. It was hooked up to machines much as the last one had been, "Will gauge the competing unicorns' spell with one-hundred percent pinpoint accuracy - our machine is more precise than even the ones our own Royal Guards use for training exercises. Our competitors get *one* shot, and are encouraged to use all of the magic necessary to fire the most accurate shot they possibly can. From this event onward, the turn order will be determined by the scores of the previous event - the lowest scores will take their turns first, the highest will go last. So without further ado, let us begin the second event! The first unicorn up is Blue Ribbon!"

A deep blue stallion with light blue hair stepped up and carefully gauged his shot. With a grunt, he fired a single bolt of magical energy that struck near the center of the target. He breathed deep as the shot's accuracy was recorded, and began heading back for the waiting room as they'd all done before.

"And Blue Ribbon scores a remarkable ninety-eight point seven percent accuracy - a mighty fine display for the first unicorn out of the gate! Next up-"

"What order was everypony else in?" Applejack asked as she leaned over to Rainbow Dash.

"It's up there on the scoreboard," Rainbow pointed. The monitor had adjusted itself so that now the order was reversed from it's earlier display of the winners of the previous event. They could see Blue Ribbon's name at the top with his score displayed to side in much the same way as before, followed by other pony names that none of this particular group cared much for. They did point out that Lyra was coming up soon - she'd landed in

twenty-ninth place, so she would be going seventh. As Lyra approached the designated firing position, the group cheered loudly for their fellow Ponyvillian. Lyra breathed deep and fired off a shot. As she walked off the arena floor, her score displayed on the board - ninety-nine point thirty-eight percent. She was the highest so far.

More ponies took their turns, and eventually it came down to Rarity. She felt slightly nervous - she was almost precisely in the middle of the higher-scoring unicorns and the lower-scoring ones from the previous event, placing her almost smack dab in the middle of this event's turn order. She knew she had to beat sixteen other unicorns to proceed in the tournament, and more than that had already taken their turns and only a few less than that still had turns to come. With a deep breath, Rarity took aim and fired an elegant pink bolt of magic that poofed into sparks as it struck the target. She breathed a content sigh of relief as her score was announced - ninety-nine point eleven. This put her in the top half of the ponies who'd already taken their turns, giving her a relatively safe position. Every single remaining unicorn would have to beat her score to eliminate her. Lyra, the lucky devil, was still comfortably in the lead. Rarity and Twilight Sparkle shared a similar theory, suspecting that Lyra's talent with her lyre was helpful in keeping her mind and her magic nimble, easily enough to give her some rather deadly accuracy.

Prince Blueblood came immediately after Rarity, and carefully fired off his own shining blue lance of magic that struck near where Rarity's had. He ended up measuring out with a ninety-nine point two. Rarity swore when she saw it on the scoreboard, cursing her luck as the insufferable narcissist remained in the tournament quite comfortably. She was even more aggravated when Prince Blueblood approached her after finishing his turn.

"I say, a fine display you put on out there, milady," Blueblood said with what Rarity knew was an extremely false modesty, "I don't believe I've introduced myself properly. I am Prince Blueblood. What is your name?"

Rarity looked at Blueblood with a stunned silence. With every millisecond that the last bit of that conversation wound its way around Rarity's brain, the angrier she got. And the angrier she got, the shorter and louder her breaths got, making Blueblood raise an eyebrow of concern and

take a step back.

"I say...are...are you alright?"

"Of all the charmless, idiotic, stuck-up losers in Equestria, why is it that I had to run into *you*?!" Rarity seethed, "How *dare* you act like you don't remember me! You're incorrigible!"

Blueblood's eyes opened in recognition, "Y-you! Ah! The mare from the Gala two years ago! Stay away! You'll ruin my perfection with your...your *commoner* filth! How did I ever let myself associate with you in the first place? What a disaster, do you have any idea how long it took to get that cake frosting out of my coat? Of all the nerve!"

Rarity's horn started glowing and she was absolutely enraged, until Twilight came and grabbed her and took her away.

"Let me go, Twilight! Let me show that *loathsome* stallion a good what-for!"

"Sorry Rarity, can't let you do that, no matter how much you want to," Twilight said as she calmed her fashionable friend down, "If you go starting fights with anypony, you're liable to get disqualified, and how would that make you look? Really, I know he makes you mad, but don't lower yourself to his level."

"...you're right, Twilight. How silly of me, to lose my head like that. Really, we should be focused on the tournament, and I know the best way to make him pay for his...his *repulsiveness* would be to make it further than he does. Come then, Twilight, let's see how everypony else did, shall we?"

The two of them wandered over to the score board, and Rarity looked at it with a proud smile. While her own score was nothing special, she was glad she'd at least beaten Blueblood's score; Lyra's lead had finally been toppled and she now sat in third-place, beaten by only two ponies...and that's where Rarity's expression grew concerned. Yes, Twilight was one of two - a perfect score of one-hundred percent, even! - but the other pony hadn't just beaten Lyra and gotten a distant second to Twilight. No, this pony's score was *tied* with Twilight's.

"Good heavens, this Enigma unicorn is certainly making a fine showing," Rarity pointed out, "Second place in power, and they managed to match you perfectly in Accuracy? Oh, darling, if only it were possible to score higher than one-hundred percent, then I'm *sure* you would've won."

"It's not a problem, Rarity, I'm just glad I don't get to waltz into the tournament and take the title without any effort. Some of these other ponies are putting on quite a display, if I do say so myself. I mean, look at Lyra - that's an impressive score! Up until Enigma took their turn, Lyra was the one I was worried about for that last event."

"Fillies and gentlecolts," came the familiar soft-spoken voice, "Your scores have been tallied and the scoreboard has been adjusted to show the ponies that have been eliminated. If your name no longer appears on the scoreboard, please head for the VIP room as the other eliminated competitors have done. I repeat-"

Twilight and Rarity quickly scanned the list to see who else had managed to make it through. There was Blueblood just behind Rarity, the two of them making up tenth and eleventh place; Vinyl Scratch had managed to make it into sixth place with a ninety-nine point twenty-seven; Moondancer, the only other pony that Twilight was concerned with, managed to barely hang on in that event - her score was precisely seventeenth place, only point one percent higher than the pony she beat. Twilight did not wonder what would happen if those two had tied - if her own score tied with Enigma's was any indication, then Moondancer would have been eliminated, since Twilight was still considered first-place because of her score in the premier event. Moondancer was barely hanging on, but Twilight was proud that she was at least making a strong showing.

How Pinkie Pie had had enough bits to pay for all the souvenirs and other items she now carried would remain a mystery to everypony present for a great deal of time; her huge foam finger with a big black "#1" on it was being waved wildly as she cheered for Twilight and Rarity, and she'd passed around similar items to the others; noisemakers, rally flags (and how she had rally flags with Twilight's and Rarity's Cutie Marks was an even greater mystery), even little bobble-heads (and seeing Twilight Sparkle and Rarity bobble-heads made the others in the group suspect that Pinkie had made these herself). Spike casually twirled his noisemaker as he looked at Rarity's strong showing, proud to see she was doing so well.

"Fillies and gentlecolts!" boomed Bright Voice, "It is now time for the third event! This event will test the *Reflexes* of the unicorns' magical and

physical ability! Our technicians have set up a great deal of these fascinating spell-launchers," and he gestured to the cannon-shaped objects that had been set around in a circle, all of them facing the center where a smaller circle was, "To serve as our test. They fire low-energy magical bolts, and it is our contestants' jobs to avoid getting hit for as long as possible. They may either physically dodge or use magic to assist them, though naturally the latter would be the preferred method as these magic spells are being fired very fast, and the longer the unicorn lasts, the more spells the launchers will launch. The longest time allowed is one minute exactly, at which points the machines shut off and the unicorn will receive that as their score. We have yet to have any pony last longer than forty-nine seconds, so for all intents and purposes, that is the score to beat! As stated last time, the lowest scoring unicorn from the previous event will take their turn first. That means our first competitor is...Moondancer!"

Rarity sat daintily in the waiting room after taking her turn, making sure not to direct her attention anywhere near where Blueblood was. She was rather proud of her score, having placed with thirty-two point fifty-six seconds. She'd heard her friends wild cheers as she wandered off the arena floor - Rarity's score placed her extremely solidly in second place, just behind Moondancer and just ahead of Blueblood, who were currently in first and third, respectively. However, Rarity's pride in her score steadily fell as the other remaining unicorns took their turns. Here came Vinyl Scratch's score now - thirty-two point sixty-one. And now came Lyra - thirty-two point seventy-seven, taking the lead over even Moondancer who had thirty-two point seventy-four. She breathed a sigh of relief as all the other unicorns left didn't come close to her score, or to her aggravation, Blueblood's either. She now sat comfortably in fourth place, with Blueblood in fifth and another pony named Silvertongue in a safe sixth place. The only two ponies left were Enigma and Twilight Sparkle.

And here came Enigma's score - Rarity's eyes went wide as the mystery pony completely shattered her expectations. Where everypony else was getting eliminated just over thirty seconds in, Enigma defied the norm and managed to last almost a minute, just barely under it - fifty-nine point ninety-nine seconds. No pony bothered to wander over and

congratulate the strange unicorn as he/she wandered into the room and sat in the far corner. Rarity was beginning to get suspicious of this pony, whoever they were...

Twilight Sparkle stepped into the starting circle, and prepared herself for a test of her reflexes. As a magical bolt came from behind her, she flicked her horn and reflected it away with a magical shield. Twilight grinned as she recalled playing Catch with Trixie over a year ago - that would serve her well as thoughts for how this event would work. Another bolt from the side - she blocked it again. Seconds passed and the bolts were coming faster. Easily enough, she deflected them all. Fifteen seconds - dozens of spells were being launched by the machines, and Twilight was having no difficulty keeping up. Thirty seconds - here was the mark where most of the other ponies began to have trouble. Twilight did not share that concern, as even with the large amount of spells flying about her, she was able to easily focus her shield spell enough to deflect them all. While a nearly full-body shield like this would be extremely draining on any regular unicorn, Twilight was far beyond that level of ability. Forty-five seconds - she was nearing the old record, one that had already been beaten today. She wondered how Enigma had managed to do so well with such an unorthodox tactic - while she herself was merely holding a shield up that rotated around most of her body, meaning she only needed to adjust its speed and angle to avoid getting struck, Enigma had settled on a stranger one. Enigma wielded her magic from her horn in the shape of magical swords, and she was literally putting her effort into blocking every single bolt as it came towards her. Twilight, and the entire crowd, was heavily impressed.

DING

Twilight dropped her shield as the machines stopped firing their bolts - she'd lasted the full minute. With a heavy breath, she walked off the arena, glad to no longer have to maintain such a spell - she hadn't expected the barrage of bolts to pick up as it did, and she'd expended too much magic in blocking them all. But it had served her well - she'd gotten first place in this event, by only by the barest skin of her teeth.

Rarity mentioned her suspicions about Enigma to Twilight Sparkle

when she returned as well, especially upon noticing Twilight's score just *barely* winning out at precisely one minute, and only likely not getting higher than that due to the machine's programmed one-minute limit. Enigma had gotten snagged at the last possible hundredth of a second, costing him/her another tie, but he/she didn't seem all that bothered by it.

"Twilight, darling...are you as concerned about this...*Enigma* unicorn as I am?" Rarity said with concern as they sipped their Etherium. They ignored the usual announcements about eliminated unicorns - they were both still very comfortably in the tournament and didn't need to concern themselves with those matters, "I mean really, this pony comes into the tournament and just...makes a fool out of all of us. I know, I expected to see you up there in the top scores, but...I did not expect to see anypony else with that kind of showing. If I'd known there was another pony out there with that kind of skill, I'd have trained myself a little harder, so I wouldn't feel so embarrassed."

"Don't feel bad, Rarity - you're doing extremely well!" Twilight proudly said, "Think about it - you've made it this far, right? That means for all intents and purposes, you're one of the now eight most talented and powerful unicorns in all of Equestria."

Rarity smiled, "Well, when you put it that way...I suppose you're right. I should really just focus on doing my best. I want to be here to support you as long as I can."

"Fillies and gentlecolts, it is now time for the fourth event!" boomed Bright Voice, "This event will be a test of the unicorns' *Ingenuity* with their magic. Our technicians are setting up our test in the central arena, and our competitors will be stepping out one at a time to solve the test as quickly as possible! The test will then be reset, and the next unicorn will step out and solve it, and so forth until all eight of our remaining contestants have completed their attempts. The four fastest solvers will continue on into the semi-finals! The others will go home with the knowledge that, at the very least, they made it this far! As before, the competitors will be ordered from lowest score to highest, meaning our first competitor is Lord Silvertongue!"

Rarity's turn arrived, and she stepped gracefully out of the starting

gates and into the designated starting area. Here, there was a giant box that concealed the test object inside, and as soon as the box was dropped away, her timer would start. Lord Silvertongue had severely botched his attempt, coming away with nearly seven minutes. Blueblood had made his attempt look graceful, pristine, *perfect*, and come away with just under two minutes. She didn't know what either of their attempted solutions had been, because the arena cameras had been cut for this event in the waiting room, and any unicorn would be just *beyond* foolish to tell the others what they'd attempted, for rather obvious reasons

Rarity gulped as she realized that, this time around, there were enough competitors left behind her that she could easily be eliminated if she performed poorly, and her fears were greater exacerbated when the box dropped and revealed the test that all of the unicorns were being given.

It was a single, tiny, golden-colored gem. Rarity eyed it curiously, and glanced at the timer on the board. It hadn't started yet. *Strange*, she thought. But it was no concern, perhaps when she actually began to interact with the test object it would start? So she latched her magic onto it, and gave an audible gasp as she felt her body lurch forward toward the gem, and get sucked into it.

She looked around her in a panic. She was inside of the little gold gem! Behind her was a massive door with a single lock, and Rarity got the strangest sense of Déjà Vu when she saw a note upon the lock. Looking in front of her, she was even more surprised to see a massive lake. And as she read the note, Rarity laughed haughtily as she realized exactly what was going on.

This was *her* test, the one she'd designed for Trixie and Twilight so long ago - had Celestia been inspired by her creativity? Better yet, had Celestia used this test specifically because herself and Twilight Sparkle were competing? Even everything in the note was exactly the same, except it was much less elegant and more to-the-point.

At the bottom of the lake is a key

That key will open this door.

You may acquire it by any means necessary.

Rarity grinned as she approached the edge of the lake, but then began to worry. She remembered well what Twilight and Trixie's solutions

had been - she did not have the power to lift the key straight up from the bottom, and she did not know the intricacies of the spell for making herself aquatic. She cursed herself for not looking into it, as she had wanted to do so but couldn't find time for it. A giant timer in the sky above her was letting her know her time was ticking.

"Ooooooh, think, Rarity, think!" she huffed loudly to herself, "Think think think! Ohhhhhh...hmm, well, I guess I'll give it a try. I *am* glad that Arcanasilk is waterproof..."

Rarity charged her horn and formed an air shield around her head. Her solution would be the same as Trixie's had been so long ago, only she lacked the benefit of faster swimming, and she had not been given the tools to make anything makeshift for that purpose - if she'd had those metal strips, she thought, she could perhaps make a propeller system. Nonetheless, she swam and swam as hard as she could, and at last saw the shining key below her. The air bubble she'd created held firm, and so she risked using more of her magic to save her some time, latching onto the key with her magic and bringing it to her. She swam upwards with the key behind her, got out of the water and in an aggravated huff, elected to just open the door and be done with the test before she tried to spruce herself up. She chanced a glance at the timer as it made a loud *BZZZT* noise - she'd taken four minutes, thirty-seven point eighteen seconds. Well, she hadn't beaten Prince Blueblood...but at least she wasn't in last place.

Going through the door, she found herself back in the arena with her body none the worse for wear and not at all wet. Had the entire test been in her mind? No, surely not - how would they be able to record the event for the other ponies to see? A different dimension? Perhaps some sort of teleportation? Such elaborate magic, she thought as she left the arena, chancing another worried glance at the scoreboard.

The fourth event was over. Before the final tallies were given out, the arena cameras displayed exactly how all the unicorns had made their attempts.

Silvertongue had attempted to drain the lake. It took him far too long to do - six minutes, fifty-nine seconds exactly.

Blueblood's had been quite creative, and Rarity cursed herself for not

thinking of it - he'd used his magic to part the lake waters before him, and simply walked to the bottom of the lake, grabbed the key, and walked back. One minute, fifty-two point eighty-six seconds. He was in fourth place. Rarity bemoaned her poor luck as her solution displayed on the screen, and she sighed as she watched herself not at all come close to the others. And of *all* the ponies to keep going instead of her, it just *had* to be Blueblood, didn't it?

Vinyl Scratch came next, and she'd done much the same as Blueblood had done, only her slightly higher MP score showed its true worth as she was able to punch through the waters significantly faster. One minute, thirty-seven point two seconds. Third place.

Despite them also losing, Rarity and Twilight were interested in seeing Lyra and Moondancer's solutions. Moondancer was first, and she'd done much as Rarity had done, only she swam the entire way. Rarity was glad she'd elected to use her magic to grab the key near the end - it had saved her a great deal of time, even if now that made little difference.

Lyra's surprised both Twilight and Rarity - she knew that aquatic transformation spell! Rarity watched in awe as Lyra, flippers and all, did the exact thing she had done, including using magic to save time on getting the key, and had therefore done it significantly faster. Rarity was, however, saddened that she'd still lost to Blueblood, even if just barely - One minute, fifty-nine point one seconds.

Now came Enigma's turn, and everypony present was surprised to see her solution. Like Silvertongue, she drained the lake. Unlike him, she did it all at once - first, with a fierce burst of explosive magic she literally evaporated the entire lake in a single go, then magically brought the key to her and to the door without needing to fight the water pressure whatsoever. Thirty-seven seconds exactly.

Twilight's solution was the same as Enigma's, only she didn't bother to *blow up* the lake first, taking the direct route and lifting the key from the bottom straight away, as she'd done the last time she'd attempted this test. The fact there was no chest to weigh it down made it even easier, and all she had to fight was pressure. Thirty-six point eighty-nine seconds, mainly due to actually having to find the key without being able to see it in all that water. Again, she'd come dangerously close to tying or losing to Enigma. It

was worrisome...

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Spike cried, "Rarity lost...dang it...dang it dang it dang it..."

"Awww, don't worry little guy, she made it this far, didn't she?" Pinkie Pie soothed, "I mean she's gonna be super famous and popular after all of this, what with being one of the eight best unicorns in all of Equestria and being super pretty and fancy and all, huh? At least Twilight's still in there though, and that's who we all really came to support anyway, right?"

"I guess..." Spike sighed, "I still would've liked to see Rarity make it to the finals at least..."

"Speakin' of which," Applejack pointed, "Looks like the semi-finals are gettin' underway. Look at that there stage they're settin' up. It looks familiar, don't it?"

"Ooooh!" Pinkie Pie giggled, "I bet they're gonna have to put on a super fancy magic show, just like we did! Only with a lot more stuff to work with and a lot more ponies to watch and give a really good response to everything, right? I bet there's gonna be music and fancy lights and smoke and-"

"Shhhhhh, Pinkie Pie, it's getting started," Rainbow Dash said, "Oh this is gonna be so cool, I bet Twilight's thought of a lot of things that could make her show better from the last time she tried. Not that I wasn't impressed but...well, Trixie did kinda kick her flank..."

"I bet you're just looking forward to seeing DJ PON-3 put on a show," Pinkie giggled again, "How many fan letters do you send her a year?"

"P-Pinkie Pie, quiet!" Rainbow shushed, "Don't go spouting out stuff like that."

"I'm not jealous, Dashie! Besides, Vinyl Scratch is really super duper talented with all these kind of things, I bet she'll put on the best performance. Maybe."

"Fillies and gentlecolts!" Bright voice boomed again, "Welcome now to the semi-finals of the Great and Powerful Magician's Tournament! We are in the last stretch of the competition, and not a moment too soon - if everypony would please direct your attention skyward, you'll see that Princess Luna has given us a truly fantastic nighttime with which to

conclude our final test of magic!"

All the ponies in the audience turned their eyes to the stars above, and were taken aback by the glorious sight of a perfectly laid out night sky. The sky was clear and one could see every single star above as clear as if they were Celestia's own sun. The moon shone bright and all on its own illuminated the stadium, no need for any of the skylights that circled the perimeter. Princess Luna had specifically made this night to be of the absolute highest caliber she could provide, to give the gathered ponies that were still awake tonight for this tournament the chance to really appreciate how much work she put into the night sky.

"The semi-finals," Bright Voice continued, "Will be a test of all the competitors' *Style* - that is, the amount of flair, class, wonder, and awe-inspiring majesty they can build into their magic. This is the event in which *you*, the audience, will be the judge! When all of our participants have finished their displays, we will request that you cheer for the ones you want to support the most. Cheer as loud as you think they deserve, and our technical staff will measure your applause and cheering and give us a precise readout as to who deserves the best score. Each contestant will have five minutes to give us the best display they can provide.

"Our stage," Bright Voice added, gesturing to the large stage in its final stages of construction around him, "Is fitted with all of the best resources that could be provided by the Royal Techno-Magic Academy, many independent contributors, and even Princess Celestia herself. Our competitors will have everything they need to turn this arena into the greatest show in all of Equestria, *four times over!* The semi-finals will begin shortly, and our entrants are being encouraged now to begin planning out their showcase. We wish them all the best of luck, and remind everypony that this is the final test of their magic!"

Bright Voice left the stage in a burst of smoke and sparkles.

"See, it's just like ours was!" Pinkie Pie smiled, "Oooooooh, I can't wait!"

"Fillies and...gentlecolt," came the voice in waiting room, making sure to address that Blueblood was the only remaining stallion in the group. Twilight chalked up the fact that Enigma was female, something she and

Rarity, and likely everypony else in the room, were unsure of. Whoever she was, she kept herself hidden well and did not want to associate with anypony else. Twilight had already learned that personally, when she tried to wish her luck and got no response at all. *Well, Twilight sighed, I can at least conclude that she wants to remain focused on the tournament. I haven't seen anypony so focused since...no, it won't do me any good to think on it.*

"Prince Blueblood, you are the first unicorn in the next event. Please proceed to the stage. You have five minutes to show-off your magic to the crowd. When you finish, do not return to the waiting room - all competitors are being asked to go backstage after their turn to await the judging. Good luck," finished the voice.

"Yeah, you're gonna need it," mocked Vinyl Scratch from nearby, "Try not to chip a hoof!"

"Hmph," snorted Blueblood, "When I'm finished, all you silly commoners will get a real look at how talented the royalty of Canterlot is when magic is concerned. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a crowd to regale. Ta."

Vinyl Scratch stuck out her tongue in one last mocking gesture as Blueblood left the waiting area, then came to Twilight Sparkle's side, "Hey, Miss Sparkle, what say after all this tournament business is over, you come on down to K-COLT Studio and give me and Octy a little interview, huh? After this all blows over, you're gonna be a real celebrity, and we *love* having celebrities on our show. Did you know we interviewed Princess-"

"Yes, I heard your show," Twilight chuckled, "You're...a brave one, Miss Scratch."

"Pfh, I'm only Miss Scratch to the authorities. Just call me Vinyl."

"Right," Twilight chuckled, "Well, I suppose if you really want an interview...I guess that'd be okay. What if I don't win though?"

"Ah, who cares? You're famous enough from this whole thing today, what with that display of power earlier. Besides, if you don't win, you'll at least be getting interviewed by the Great and Powerful Vinyl Scratch, yeah? *Wow that title sounds so cool...*"

Twilight smirked, "I suppose. Best of luck to you, Vinyl."

"Right back at ya, Sparkle."

A loud buzzer rang through the arena, signaling that Blueblood had finished his turn.

"Vinyl Scratch," came the voice, "You're next. Good luck."

Vinyl Scratch adjusted her glasses and made sure her whole outfit was as perfect as could be, then strolled out into the arena and up on the stage. Twilight elected to watch Vinyl take her turn, since the only pony left in the room was Enigma, who wasn't talking to anypony and had been sitting in the furthest corner the entire time.

Twilight was, to say the least, impressed. Vinyl Scratch took center stage with the provided turntable (which was only supposed to be used to provide ambient music for the displays) and turned the entire arena into a massive, stadium-sized rave. The whole arena bounced with an eclectic beat that Vinyl was steadily making entirely her own, using her hooves to control the record's occasional scratches while quickly switching records using her magic. All the while, the multiple Prism Stars - each one as large as a coconut, all of them clearly extremely rare and valuable - shone with multiple colors and provided the audience with an extremely colorful laser light show. Vinyl had exactly time enough for one full mix, before the loud buzzer sounded and a magical dampener shut off everything on the stage, ending her show just as she finished her music. While Twilight had barely heard the reaction from Blueblood's performance, a fact she supposed might have been because she was busy talking to Vinyl Scratch, she was able to hear the crowd going ballistic for the DJ's high-quality and short-notice rave concert. As the camera panned over the crowd, Twilight chuckled when it briefly took a clip of none other than Rainbow Dash banging her head and wildly waving glow-sticks around in her hooves. The others near her, Pinkie Pie excluded (since somepony had to join in with her, *obviously*), watched their pegasus friend with some anxiety. Another swivel of the camera caught Octavia in the crowd politely clapping, though Twilight could see the proud glimmer in her eyes.

"Enigma, you're on next. Good luck."

Enigma strode past Twilight without a word or a second glance. Twilight, determined to at least elicit *some* response, shouted, "Good luck!"

Enigma briefly stopped, and Twilight could see her nod her head as she left the waiting room proper. Twilight now directed her attention to the

monitor, and would later on be glad she had done so, so that she would know just what she was up against. Enigma elected for a brilliant fireworks display, and Twilight's jaw dropped as she made the fireworks into her minions, obeying her every command and giving the crowd a show unlike anything they had ever seen before.

The first large collection of fireworks - blues and whites - exploded over the north end of the arena, and the sparks coalesced together to create a shining comet that blazed a trail around the stadium, sprinkling light and colors down on the crowd below. The comet's tail dragged lazily behind it, jolting every now and then to send sparks flying as if it was a pony's tail flicking off dirt. With a resounding explosion, the comet shook itself into a million tiny sparks as it collided with another firework fired from the stage, sending a shockwave of color and light through the crowd.

Another series - red and green this time - exploded above and combined together to create a fierce dragon made of fire, and another of neon green light. They battled one another fiercely in the air, the red dragon's flaming breath made of sparks and smoke, the green's of a sickly neon orange. The red dragon struck the green one down, causing it to sink to the arena below and explode in a shower of colors; to celebrate its victory, the red dragon swept down towards the crowd, then soared up and over it and high into the air, before exploding in a corona of light and color that spread across the night sky.

More fireworks - greens and pinks - burst just over the stage and formed the shapes of flowers and ivy as the sparks traveled across the stadium floor like creeping moss. The sparks cooled and fizzled as they reached towards the crowd, and the flowers burst into great rosebuds of whites and pinks. The green vines popped and died away, leaving the flowers to float up and into the cool night air and burn out like tiny stars.

Another volley - purples and blues and all the other colors - rocketed into the sky above and exploded in a massive sonic boom of color and light, coalescing into a shining ball of light that shined brighter than Luna's moon above, bathing the entire stadium in a aurora of colors before exploding again and trickling sparks down onto the crowd like fireflies.

As her time began to run out, Enigma used her magic to literally launch every single last firework from the display, all of which exploded in a

bright and extremely *loud* display above the stadium. The buzzer sounded, and the fireworks fizzled out as Enigma left the stage to deafening cheers.

Twilight gulped. She now had to compete with a fireworks display to end *all* fireworks displays, a rave concert thrown by one of the most famous ponies in all of Equestria, and *whatever* it was that Blueblood had done, in the category that she had the absolute least amount of confidence in herself. She took deep breaths as she well remembered all the training she'd done with Rarity. She'd already decided to do this last event much as Rarity had presented her fashion show so long ago, essentially dedicating it to her friends and displaying all of their uniqueness, giving them recognition and flair.

"Twilight Sparkle, you're up. Good luck."

Twilight shook away her anxiety.

It was time to go to work.

"Here we go, everypony," Applejack said with all firmness to the friend gathered around, "Twilight's gonna need all the support we can give, I reckon. After what them other three unicorns showed off, I think she's got her hooves full. We all ready to cheer her on?"

"Of course," Rainbow nodded, "As cool as DJ PON-3 is, I won't hesitate to support my friend as hard as I can. Right, Pinkie Pie?"

"Uh huh! Oh boy, I can't wait to see what Twilight does."

"I hope she doesn't decide to go by the book," Spike frowned, "She needs to be creative here. None of the unicorns in the crowd are gonna be impressed at all if she does tricks she learned in school."

"Let's hope Rarity's trainin' paid off, then," Applejack nodded.

"Um...I'm sure she'll be fine..." Fluttershy peeped, "She's got all of us here to support her...right?"

"Yeah!" Derpy smiled with a wild flail of her hooves, "C'mon Twilight, c'mon Twilight, let's go, let's go! Woo!"

"Woo!" Pinkie Pie joined in, "I think your cheer-writing needs some work, Derpy. Um...how 'bout this? 🎵 *Twilight! Twilight! She can do it, watch her fight! Twilight! Twilight! She could win this every night!* 🎵 YEAH! Do ya like it, AJ?"

"Nah," Applejack shrugged.

"Awwwww..."

"Here she comes!" Rainbow pointed, "Go Twilight! Woo!"

Twilight stood just at the back end of the stage, and with a complicated display of magic, she began to weave the light of the dozens of Prism Stars into a complex tapestry of images. First, she would pay tribute to her friend Applejack, who had always been by her side with a honest opinion of what she was doing. The stadium was filled with the visage of apples. Tons upon tons of apples, flowing from the center of the arena and bathing the crowd with their image and...their smell? Rarity, in the VIP lounge, marveled at the display - the amount of magic it took to create *scents* was extraordinarily complicated, but always added a pleasant touch to a show; she'd found it particularly useful for food-based themes, much like Applejack's dress had been. The crowd was engrossed in the display, many of the ponies licking their lips as their very subconscious minds were flooded with the desire to snack upon all sorts of apple treats. Applejack herself sat in the audience, a light trickle of tears in her eyes as the smell of fresh-picked apples and thought of her farm back home filled her soul. Twilight's magic was affecting some ponies in the audience on more than just a visual level, a truly unique display of skill.

The visage of apples fluttered away and was replaced instead with the sight of a bright green forest, filled with the wonders of nature. The scent of pine trees filled the arena as illusions of trees and bushes and flowers sprung up around them, making the ponies become enraptured in the feeling of traveling some forest in the great reaches of Equestria, surrounded by animals and plants and the feeling of wonder. Fluttershy felt the tears running her face and wiped them away with her hooves as the experiences of nature that even she had been unable to duplicate flooded her mind and soul, helping her to relive all of her most touching moments with her animal friends. She could see Angel as just a baby bunny, and that was when she was at her absolute happiest in her life.

The greens of the forest exploded into a clear blue sky, and the sounds of thunder and the smell of rain wafted through the arena. Twilight's magic created a dull, gray storm cloud in the night sky that coated the stadium's open top, before the Prism Stars caused the hues of the rainbow

to burst through in a glorious display of magical colors and light that made everypony in the audience 'ooh' and 'aah' in awe of the sight. Rainbow Dash fought her own tears as the memory of her very first Sonic Rainboom flooded her mind, feeling a pang in her heart at the pride she felt for herself. Strong gusts of wind blew the clouds away so that the audience could see an aurora of color that coated the night sky, all the colors of the rainbow.

As the rainbow dimmed and died out, the entire arena turned *pink*, as all the Prism Star brightly burned that hue. The scent of sugars and candies bombarded the senses of the audience, and Pinkie Pie found her mouth beginning to water. Tiny fireworks burst away from the stage and exploded not into sparks, but into confetti and streamers and covered the crowd in party favors. Even the music was joining along, playing a charming polka mix that made even the most stuffy ponies in the audience bounce along, if only just a little. Some of the pinks died down enough to let the Prism Stars create spot lights of yellow and blue and panned throughout the crowd at random, and the crowd members they stopped on were unable to resist the urge to stand up and cheer, or do a little dance, or wave wildly to the rest of the audience.

The pinks faded, and the arena turned their attention to the stage as white glow erupted forth, bathing the entire audience now in regal whites and purples. Flowers and diamonds decorated the arena, and the sounds of an elegant piano's tune wafted softly out through the crowd. Rarity felt prouder of herself, and of Twilight, than she ever had before as the light carefully created sparkly, smoky images of fashionable dresses that walked through the aisles without the assistance of any ponies inside them.

A buzzer sounded. Twilight's illusion vanished in an instant, and with a bow she stepped off the stage. She was more nervous than she had been before. Her display had been heartfelt and emotional, but not too flashy, and it had been sadly cut off much too early - she'd taken too long, and hadn't gotten to pay tributes to Spike or Derpy, or worse yet, Trixie. She knew she was risking a lot to rely on the audience's feelings and connections to the energy in her magic, as opposed to their desire for flair and bravado.

Bright Voice stepped out onto the stage now, and addressed the audience, "What fine displays of magic! Now, it is your turn, audience, to

tell us and our competitors what you thought of their displays! When I call the name of the unicorn, everypony cheer as loud as you want in support of them. Your reactions will be measured by our expert team to give us a quantifiable reading of who had the best performance. Scores are displayed as a measure of sound waves generated versus the amount of ponies in our audience this evening - if everypony present, all thirty-thousand of you, were to cheer at your absolute loudest, our technicians approximate we'd get a reading of about one-hundred-fifty Decibels. So let's get to cheering and make some noise! First up, Prince Blueblood!"

A mild cheer went out from the crowd. Blueblood, backstage, looked aghast. Vinyl Scratch laughed maniacally as his measured score posted itself on the scoreboard - **91 Decibels**.

"Ha ha! Oh wow that's rich," Vinyl chuckled as she slapped Blueblood on the back, "Your crowd sounded like traffic on a busy day. That's not a good sign, for you anyway."

"Hmph, it sounded fine to me," Blueblood lied, "Let's see how they react-"

"Next, Vinyl Scratch!"

And the crowd went ballistic.

"-to...you..."

110 Decibels. Vinyl laughed loudly again, "Haaaaa ha ha ha! In your *face* Blueblood!"

"Next, Enigma!"

149 Decibels. Even backstage, everypony had to fight the urge to cover their ears - it sounded like an extremely fast pegasus pony had just taken off just a few meters away.

"Holy Moly, folks, now *that* is what I call cheering!" Bright Voice boomed, "Last but not least, Twilight Sparkle!"

118 Decibels. Twilight appeared quite proud of herself - clearly her emotive display had pleased the audience enough to garner their praise more than a rave concert...though she was slightly miffed that a massive fireworks display had struck her down. Granted...it was extremely skillful and loaded with all sorts of flair - Twilight was almost ready to dare herself to think that Enigma could've shown even Trixie a thing or two, but she fought that feeling - but she felt that her own had more heart and soul in it.

Well...maybe that's not what the ponies out there wanted for entertainment? At least she was still in the running though...only one more contest left...

As the stage was quickly dismantled, Twilight Sparkle and Enigma stood centered in the arena, only blessed by the company of Bright Voice, who had begun to call out the commencement of the final event.

"And now, fillies and gentlecolts...our final event. It has come down to two unicorns, who as far as we are all concerned, are both the Greatest and Most Powerful unicorns in all of Equestria. But only one amongst them can truly live on from today with the right to call themselves as such, and so it is without further ado that we welcome the Judge of the final event, who will determine which amongst these two unicorns *truly* deserves the title. Fillies and gentlecolts, please welcome, Princess Celestia!"

The Prince floated down from her private box in a glowing sphere of light and magic, and the entire crowd, and both competing ponies and Bright Voice, bowed deeply in her presence. Celestia trotted slowly over to Bright Voice's position as he graciously moved out of her path.

"You two have done much to prove yourselves here today...and it is with great pride that I look upon you both to decide which amongst you two truly deserves the title of Great and Powerful. This final test of yourselves as unicorns will be a test of your *Inspiration* - a test of which amongst you has the most inspiring tale to regale us with, to convince us that you live up to the title's name. You have both already proven yourselves both Great and Powerful with your magic...but you must be able to inspire that same kind of awe without the use of your magic at all. It was a dear friend of mine, once a holder of this very title you now battle over, who said to me when I presided over him having it bestowed upon him, 'A good magician relies entirely on his magic to get him through life; a *great* magician need never cast a single spell'. What say you two, then? Do you think you have what it takes to call yourselves Great and Powerful?"

Twilight Sparkle nodded, and Enigma followed suit, though hers was so curt that it could barely be seen.

"Very well. Twilight Sparkle, since you scored lowest in the previous event, you are to take the first turn. Tell me, my faithful student...tell me,

and this crowd around us tonight, why you think you deserve the title of Great and Powerful."

Twilight faltered for a second as she thought. The story needed to be inspirational. It needed to prove to everypony present that she was Great and Powerful both in her magic, and her character. Twilight could only think of one thing, and it was why she'd entered the tournament in the first place.

"I wish to use the title as a reminder...a keepsake, if you will, of the memory of its previous holder, a unicorn who I dearly loved and miss terribly, whose disappearance causes me much grief and whose losses in her life inspired me, in turn, to help her become a better pony. The Great and Powerful Trixie held a mighty spot in my heart...and I wish to have something to remember her by, something to remind myself that there is somepony out there for everypony. I do not know, *if* she returned, whether she was going to tell me she felt the same...but I like to think it. I want to think it. I do not need her title to remember her by...but I want her title, so that it may live on in a pony that truly loved her, like her father did; and I can only hope that, someday, I can find another pony that makes me feel as Trixie did, and that will feel the same for certain."

Celestia smiled, and gave a deep nod, "A touching story, my faithful student. The love of another, and the loss of that love, is a feeling that many a pony can relate to. If you were to hold the title, it would inspire others to not give into grief and depression after a loss, but to fight those feelings and to live on. Thank you, for bearing your heart here for us today."

Celestia turned her attention to Enigma, "Now then...Enigma, was it? According to your application, you are mute? I would ask my advisors to provide us with some writing utensils that you may write your speech...but something tells me that will not be necessary..." she smirked with a knowing nod, "You don't have to pretend anymore."

"So...you've figured it out, have you? I suppose I cannot say I am surprised..."

Twilight's eyes widened at Enigma's voice. *It...it can't be.*

Enigma exploded into a flash of light and smoke, and when the mist cleared away, standing in her wake was none other than-

"*Trixie?!*" Twilight gasped.

Trixie stood with an air of supreme confidence, and had the look to show for it. She was not the mare she was when she left Ponyville over a year before, and her new regalia showed off just how much she had come across in her travels. Upon her hooves she wore some solid golden boots decorated with gemstones of all colors. Her glorious cape had been modified, as was expected of Arcanasilk garments, from a simple cape into a high-class, high-collared, long, flowing cape, colored a lavender shine and sparkling with stars that made Twilight's comparable cloak look almost pale in comparison. Upon the right of her face over her eye she wore a solid gold mask that covered what appeared to be some sort of injury, and the eye there was a fiery purple, filled with much more life and seemingly magic than her normal one. Upon her head, her hat had become so elaborate and extravagant that it almost bordered on silly, but on a pony of her esteem it looked imposing. Her coat still shined a brilliant, icy blue; her glorious silver hair flowed wildly behind her, hardly contained in her usual hairstyle except for a few shocks of white here and there that formed her bangs. Her body was more toned than before, as if she had been through Hell and back again. She looked every bit as Great and Powerful as the title she was attempting to earn.

"So tell me, Trixie...what makes you think that *you* deserve the title of Great and Powerful?" Celestia smiled, "What have you learned in your year's absence that makes you think you deserve it now, more than ever?"

Trixie cleared her throat, and with some overly-active hoof wave, gestured out towards the crowd, "When Trixie came to Ponyville once, long ago, she was convinced that she was the most powerful, most talented, greatest pony in all of Equestria! She had shown as much to everypony that dared to cross her, and in her heart she knew that she deserved her title, a gift given to her by her father as a dying wish that his daughter carry on his legacy with a title that she so richly deserved! And it was until Trixie came to Ponyville, that she believed there was nopony alive, barring the Princess herself, that could possibly hope to challenge her!

"But then, that fateful day, she met Twilight Sparkle," and Trixie chanced a glance to Twilight, "A unicorn so powerful, as even all of you have seen here today, that she made Trixie look like a *weak* little *foal* in comparison. At the time, Trixie chalked it up to happenstance, and even as

she returned to Ponyville nearly a year later, all she could think of was revenge! Twilight Sparkle had embarrassed Trixie, made her doubt herself, and made her question her father's decision all those many years before. She would *not* let that stand! So she challenged Twilight Sparkle to a Duel, to prove to herself that she was deserving of her title, to prove that her father had not been wrong in choosing her!

"But even then, Twilight was still the better unicorn. And the only thing that saved Trixie from a most humiliating defeat was...her friends. Trixie had learned the value of friendship over her weeks in Ponyville, and had come to conclude that there was more to life than power, more to life than fame and fortune! But it was not enough - for even though Trixie had friends, and even though Trixie had learned humility, she still lacked the self-respect she so dearly needed. She still questioned whether her father had been right in his choice, and still questioned her ability; she was given a chance to Duel with Twilight Sparkle again, but was unconfident in her ability to produce results...so she left Ponyville one year ago. She had set a goal, to return to Equestria more powerful, more talented, and greater than ever before!

"And it was during this journey that Trixie learned something - even if she *was* the most powerful *unicorn* in Equestria...Equestria is only a tiny piece of a far larger world. She has traveled the forests of the Deerfolk, and seen the pure finesse their magic is capable of, crafting things of such wonder and beauty that even the most talented pony could never hope to duplicate; she has traveled deep within the mountains of the Rams, and seen their precision with gem workings and the power they wield to burrow through mountains of the most solid rock in all the world, and realized that even the most powerful unicorn's power - even *Twilight Sparkle's* - was dwarfed by theirs many times over; she has traveled the lands of the Zebras and the Rhinos and the Giraffes, and learned that no magic in all of Equestria could hold a candle to the magic that is contained within the very world beneath us, and that even the most talented unicorn could never hope to reach the same level of connection to that natural magic that our own Earth Ponies are capable; she has seen the lands of the Bison, and learned that even our greatest scientific minds could never hope to accomplish the feats that these creatures are capable of, and that the most

talented unicorns could never hope to do with wind and weather what our feathered friends, the Pegasi, find so natural.

"And through all of this, Trixie learned that there are creatures out there that make the most powerful Ponies, Deerfolk, Rams, and others, look pale in comparison to the luster of their magical strength - the Dragons. Her journey has taught her that she is truly weak, and that there should be no hope for her to achieve the greatness she aspired for.

"But.../ strove on, / continued, and / fought to accomplish my goal! I learned through my travels that life and the world around you will put challenges in your path that will make you feel weak, make you feel worthless, and make you feel like there is nothing you can do. But it takes a strong heart, body, mind, and soul to continue to face that adversity, and to fight for your goals no matter what obstacles life will throw at you! I am living proof that if you set yourself to a goal, no matter how impossible, you can still accomplish it, but only if you put in your entire self-worth, and that you never doubt yourself! You may come to rely on others - friends, family, lovers, even complete strangers - but their support only helps to make you *stronger*, not weaker. I may not be the Greatest or Most Powerful *creature* in all the world, but Trixie believes that she have proven today that she is certainly the Greatest and Most Powerful *Unicorn*!"

The crowd erupted into applause. Twilight Sparkle's friends found themselves all clapping (though Spike noticeably less so) with enthusiasm. Twilight Sparkle wiped a tear from her eye as she began to applaud as well.

"A very inspirational speech, Trixie," Celestia spoke at last, drowning out the crowd, "It would seem that you learned a great deal this past year. I would like to hear more about your travels, personally - it would be a great boon to hear tales of our many neighbors from a pony that has visited their lands and lived amongst them for even such a short time. Your tale is a inspiration to others, that they can accomplish their goals, no matter how challenging, as long as they are willing to put in the effort and rely on their friends when they are in need."

Celestia turned to the crowd, "My little ponies...it is a great honor of mine to call this tournament to a close. Both of our contestants have gone through a great deal here today, and these two specifically have dealt with

a great deal themselves in the past year - Trixie has traveled to the ends of our world in search of herself and her true potential; Twilight...I believe you have learned to have the heart to face the world after a great loss, something that very few ponies have the ability to do. I only wish that I had had that power in myself over one thousand years ago, when my dear sister succumbed to her loneliness.

"It is a difficult decision, which of you two truly deserves the title. A unicorn known to Equestria as Great and Powerful should not only be able to live up to that title's namesake in their magical power, but their personality and their interactions with others. They should be an inspiration to everypony around them, that those they meet in their travels can accomplish things Great and Powerful themselves. And while the amount of heart it takes to live on after a loss is a great testament to your personal resolve and power, Twilight Sparkle, so much so that I find it very personally inspiring, I cannot let my personal bias blind my judgment. Your tale, your motivation for this title, is something that anypony in your situation would find inspirational. Trixie's tale, on the other hoof...she is an inspiration to anypony, anywhere, that has ever set a goal in their life and had to struggle to accomplish it.

"Trixie...it is with great honor and esteem that I bestow upon you the title of Great and Powerful. Wear it proudly, my little pony...and remember the struggles you overcame to achieve this goal, always."

Trixie bowed graciously as Celestia used her magic to ceremoniously transfer the title's influence over to Trixie, and when she was allowed to rise, Trixie found herself unable to hold back her tears.

Trixie found herself feeling lonely again. They'd moved all of her things out of her little private room in the tiny hotel she'd been staying at to avoid attention, and now all of her things were stored in her private VIP suite at Canterlot's most prestigious hotel, the Seventh Star; it had been given to her as gift, not by Princess Celestia, but by the hotel itself, so eager to be the first place in all Equestria where the newest holder of the title of Great and Powerful was spending a night. All the publicity of being officially recognized by all of Equestria as the true Great and Powerful title holder was overwhelming, not at all what she had expected. Had her father

dealt with this kind of celebrity swarming when *he* first got the title? She certainly hadn't, and now realized that was because it was a private affair. No *wonder* nopony ever believed her when she called herself by her title - they expected some grand ceremony to change the title over, as her father had done, and as she had just done today.

It was getting late, and her friends had still not arrived. She'd made sure the hotel staff knew they'd be coming, but she was beginning to worry. She knew they'd be here....they'd have to be. Everything had happened so fast after the event ended, she hadn't even gotten a chance to speak with Twilight Sparkle, though that she was moderately glad for; they had something private to work out between them, and the less company they had, the better.

She jumped upright when a knock came at her door, and bolted over to it to open it.

"Room service," drawled the service pony, an orange earth pony with brown hair.

"Oh...right, thank you," Trixie frowned. She'd been getting food trays of snacks for the last few hours now, all sent from other ponies in the hotel as congratulations and gifts. This one was the least fancy of the bunch, which actually made Trixie quite glad - maybe it was something simple? The service pony left, and Trixie lazily opened the lid on the food tray...

"SURPRISE!"

Trixie leapt backwards several feet in utter surprise and shock, only realizing a second later that she'd been gone far too long, and forgotten how...*random* Pinkie Pie was.

"You scared me half to death, Pinkie Pie..." Trixie breathed, "And believe me, I know how that feels. How have you-"

Trixie was interrupted by a colossal hug from the pink earth pony, a hug she eagerly returned.

"Trixie...we missed you so much..." Pinkie sniffed, "Why didn't you write...and let us know you were back?"

"What, and miss the chance to reveal myself in the most dramatic way possible?" Trixie smirked, "I'll admit I'd understand if any of you were upset...but I arrived late, and couldn't rightfully just show up, say 'Hey everypony sorry I'm late, what'd I miss?' and then prepare for the

tournament."

"Oh, I knew it was you all along," Pinkie Pie winked, "I mean really, *Enigma*, the mystery pony who is *somehow* on the same level as Twilight Sparkle in all things magic, just less powerful but more stylish? Ah *duuuuuuhhh*, c'mon. But hey, thanks to you, Rainbow Dash owes me fifty bits!"

"I do not!" Rainbow blurted from the doorway, "We didn't shake on it!"

Trixie was glad to see Rainbow Dash, and the others as well, all coming in to her private suite. There was more than enough room for all of them. Twilight Sparkle, she noticed, was taking care to avoid eye contact. Trixie knew why, but decided that that could wait until later. Everypony else was eager to hear about her travels...even...Spike?

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Spike growled as he stepped forward, "How anypony here can act like nothing is the matter when you were out slaying Dragons - *my people* - is beyond me!"

Trixie's eyes widened, "Ah, I see. It would appear there was a little bit of a miscommunication. I'll say first that I thought the same thing as you, Spike - we were going to be killing Dragons? Intelligent creatures? Why, that would be akin to murder! Ha, imagine my surprise when that all turned out to be just a bit a misunderstanding. See, Dragon Hunters don't *kill* Dragons, they merely challenge them to tests of strength and power. It takes entire groups of creatures to equal the power of a Dragon, and the Dragons are in on the whole thing - it's all treated like a sport, really. Sure, creatures get hurt every now and then...but the Dragons' magic is truly far beyond any mortal creatures, maybe even on par with the Princess. They can cure quite a lot of injuries with their own magic and understanding of the natural magic of their realm, and are quite impervious to most injury themselves. Imagine my surprise when I fire off some magic missiles and the Dragon just scratches at it like a bad itch!"

"So wait, you were just...fighting Dragons? Like a sport? No killing?" Spike blinked, "Why'd you make such a big deal about it, like being afraid and all that stuff?"

"At the time I wrote the letter, I hadn't the foggiest idea what I was getting into, but I knew my father had traveled into Dragon territory and Hunted as well, so I figured if it was something *he* had done, it must've

been okay. I didn't imagine we would actually *kill* anything...though the worry of that did cross my mind. I am sorry you assumed as much, I blame myself for not learning more beforehand. Though I must say, I'll remember well not to anger or upset you enough that you want to harm me, aha, Dragonfire is *not* a pleasant experience."

She stroked her mask as she said this, and removed it to show everypony her injury. It wasn't as bad as they thought it'd be - her coat had started to grow back, and the little bit of skin underneath that could be seen didn't look too singed.

"That doesn't look so bad," Rainbow snorted.

"It's been healing for months," Trixie quipped as she replaced her mask, "If you'd seen it when I got it, you would probably need a bucket. Believe me, I did. Oh, to explain the mask - obviously that's to hide the injury, but it serves a secondary purpose - gold apparently is a natural remedy for Dragonfire burns, that's why they use it to build their nests. A strange world we live in, is it not?"

"And *look* at all that gold you have," Rarity said in admiration, "Those boots are simply *gorgeous* darling, you simply must tell me who made them."

"Oh, I got these from the Rams," Trixie smiled as she showed one of them off, "Fashionable and functional, as Grimhorn - the Ram King - told me. As for my cape and hat, I learned a great deal about fashion from the Deerfolk - Rarity, you simply *must* visit them someday, you'll come back to Equestria and nopony alive will be able to compete with your skill in fashion design. And their city is to die for, made entirely of gold and crystal, you'd love it."

"You sound like you've been through a lot," Pinkie Pie smiled, "When we all get back to Ponyville, I'm going to throw you the hugest party *ever!*"

"That sounds wonderful, Pinkie Pie. I am looking forward to it."

"I reckon you have more stories to tell us than what ya'll wrote in just them few letters," Applejack mused, "I'd sure like ta hear 'em."

"Yeah, me too!" Rainbow smiled, "Like that Deity you said was just like me! I want to know if the Bison would start worshipping me if I took a little flight out there and all."

Trixie smiled, "I'll be sure to regale you all with my tales, I didn't have

much time to mention my travels through the Great Veldt, and my encounters with the Zebras, Giraffes, and Rhinos that make their homes there. And there are so many individual creatures I must tell you about that I made friends with during my travels, all of them were so wonderful to me during my stays in their homes. I do wish I could find a way to get all of us together, I'm sure you'd all enjoy their company well. But...for now, I am very tired. It is late, and the tournament has exhausted me. Do you all have rooms nearby?"

"We're stayin' at the palace," Applejack stated, "It ain't too far, so we can come visit again tomorrow, if ya'll want?"

"Lovely," Trixie nodded, "I will see you all tomorrow then. I have many gifts to bestow upon you all when I get the opportunity."

The ponies - her friends - took their leave with waves and farewells. Twilight Sparkle remained behind, "Go on ahead without me, girls. I have some private matters with Trixie."

"Oh...of course, darling," Rarity nodded, "Don't be too long, though."

Now, Trixie and Twilight were alone. They stood in silence for a great while, it felt like hours to either of them. Trixie attempted to speak first.

"Twili-"

And was interrupted by a desperate hug. She returned it gingerly as Twilight sobbed into her shoulder.

"I was so worried...I was afraid you were...gone forever..." Twilight sniffed, "Why would you do that to me? When you know how I feel...why would you make me worry so much?"

Trixie stood silent for a great while, then broke the hug and walked to the open window, looking out into Canterlot with some trepidation. Twilight eyed her with curiosity and anxiety.

"Twilight...what do you know about love?" Trixie spoke at last.

"What?"

"What makes love different from friendship, enough so that you're convinced you're in love with me?"

"...I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Twilight...over the course of my travels I have seen a great deal of the world, and learned that if there is one thing across all cultures that binds us together, it is how we express our love for others, and how we

treat our friends, family, and loved ones. There is something, though, that makes one feel different between what they consider love for a friend, and who they would consider one that they are *in* love with. They are both expressed differently...and I want to know for certain if what you feel in your heart is really love. What makes how you feel about me different from, say, Rainbow Dash?

"Is it because you want to do anything for me? To make me feel happy? That is something I am sure anypony would say they feel about their truest friends. I know I like to see Pinkie Pie, and Derpy, and Fluttershy, and *all* my friends happy; I know that, if I can do something that will make them happy, I'd do whatever was in my power to make them so. Surely you can agree to that, yes?"

"I...suppose so," Twilight nodded.

"Then what makes you so certain that you're in love with me?"

"I...I can't explain it..." Twilight said slowly, some concern in her voice, "I don't know why...just...I feel that same feeling, like you said, only it's...it's so much stronger. I want to see you happy, even at my own expense. Though I suppose you can say the same thing for friends too...but it's...it's just different. I can't explain it!"

"That," Trixie pointed, "Is what makes love different. You can't really explain love as different from friendship, it just *is*. But you're always able to *feel* that friendship is different from love, as I'm sure you are aware? You *know* that you feel different about me than you do your other friends?"

Twilight nodded, "And I always felt that strange sensation, right from the moment I realized how much I wanted you to come back to Ponyville, so long ago. I couldn't explain it then...and I can't explain it much better now. Is love that difficult to explain?"

"That's what the Deerfolk say," Trixie nodded, "Even they, with all of their wisdom and elegance, cannot find a true way to describe how love works, or how it manifests itself. But...they do agree with the other creatures of our world on one thing, and it something that you must be made to understand - true love between two creatures, as soul-mates, is different from the love between friends. And as much as I am sure you love me as the former," and she took a heavy breath, letting it out in a deep sigh, "Twilight Sparkle, I cannot say I feel the same for you. I am sorry...but

you are my friend and...nothing more than that. I am not in love with you, Twilight Sparkle...and I am sorry..."

Twilight looked sullen and remained silent for a great deal of time, then turned towards the door, "I'm sorry too, Trixie...for all I've put you through because of my...*obsession*. I forced a great many of your recent hardships, thinking that if you confronted them, you'd be happy. Because I wanted you to be happy. And...if it makes you happier to admit that you're *just* my friend...then...that makes me happy too."

"You don't need to lie, Twilight," Trixie frowned, "I know this must hurt you...and I am sorry...but I need this to be clear."

"It's clear," Twilight nodded, "And yes, it hurts. But...I've already learned to move on once, when I thought you were gone forever. Now, I simply need to move on, knowing that I can't be with you to the degree I wish I could be. I suppose this is a good lesson on the magic of friendship...that when a pony wishes to be more than friends with somepony else, they should learn to accept rejection with dignity and grace..."

Trixie sighed, "I am sorry, Twilight...please...I hope this does not-"

Twilight smiled, but it was a mixed expression. She did not look either happy, or sad, but a neutral mix between the two, and that made Trixie feel all the sadder, "We're still friends, Trixie. I wouldn't want to lose that...for anything..."

"Thank you, Twilight," Trixie nodded, "For understanding."

"I doubt that I ever will be able to," Twilight admitted, "But I can learn to live with it. I'll see you tomorrow, Trixie...and I am eager to see what sort of gifts you brought us..."

Twilight left the room, leaving Trixie alone. Trixie remained by the window for a great deal of time, and watched far down below as Twilight Sparkle left the hotel and called for a cab. Sure that Twilight was no longer able to disturb her privacy...

Trixie used her magic to levitate one of her bags over to her. Inside of it was one of the few keepsakes she had managed to keep over her entire journey, a single photograph of all her friends and her, together, that they had taken during her last night in Ponyville so long ago. She rubbed it with her hoof, and began to cry.

“Forgive me, Twilight...” she sniffed, talking only to herself, “I did not want to hurt you...but you could never be happy with me...one day, you’ll find another pony...and they’ll make you feel happier than I ever could...as happy as you made me feel...”

She looked out into Luna’s night and sighed. Fumbling in her bag, she pulled out several dozen letters to Twilight Sparkle specifically, that she had meant to send, but couldn’t find the courage to do so. Most of them were very short.

Twilight Sparkle,

The things I have learned on my journey...are far beyond what sorts of magic I can learn. I have learned the value I placed upon my friends and how much I miss them terribly. I miss you most of all...and I cannot explain why. It makes me feel...frightened. Is this the feeling that Pinkie Pie spoke of? I’ll have to look further into it. If this is the same feeling that you feel...well...

I don’t know what to think.

-Trixie

Twilight Sparkle,

Forgive me for this long awaited letter, but things are complicated out here and mail is often difficult to send. If I remember right, your birthday is coming soon - Rarity mentioned something about it when you were gone for that week so long ago. I cannot send anything physically significant to you, so I do hope that this makes amends for it:

I have looked further into this strange longing for Ponyville...our friends...and you. And...I seem to be able to confirm that my longing for you specifically is because, I know that as much as I miss you, you miss me just as much, and that makes me sad. I do not want you to be sad, Twilight...and that is something that makes friendship different than love.

For a friend in pain, you feel sympathy. Compassion. You want them to feel better, because you don't like to see them like that. For someone you love...you can feel their pain. You hurt when they hurt. I can only hope your feelings for me are genuine enough that you are suffering the same anguish as I am...though that sounds kind of cruel, wishing pain upon you. Perhaps I worded that wrong.

I am sorry if I worry you. I will hurry back to Ponyville, when I have completed my journey.

-Trixie

Twilight Sparkle,

I must apologize. I have been selfish these past months, blurting out my feelings for you. I know I didn't send any of the other letters, and I am now glad for it...and I doubt I'll send this one either. I'm writing to myself at this point. I must be going crazy. But I have come to accept my feelings for you, and it because of that that I realized a great...flaw, in our possible relationship.

*As much as you...as *I* would like us to be together...it won't work. It can't. I know you want me to remain in Ponyville, but...if I hold the title of Great and Powerful again, I will be forced to travel. It's part of the job, unfortunately. I know I never told you exactly how that kind of thing works...but it would explain why nopony questioned my father's disappearance outside of a few small number, such as yourself - we traveled so much, and I am certain I heard a few rumors here and there from ponies that believed he had traveled, alone, beyond Equestria's borders. The Great and Powerful Trixie...would not be able to stay in Ponyville with you. Did you really think I traveled Equestria *just* for fame and fortune? I had all the bits I'd ever need, my father's credit covered almost everything, and now that his death will likely soon be made public, if it hasn't already, his estate is now mine, further making it a non-issue. Fame? I was the daughter of Great and Powerful Paragon and Mirage the*

*Magnificent, what more fame could you ask for? I didn't want any of *their* fame, I wanted to make my own!*

But I can't ask you to leave your friends. I can't ask you to leave your duty to the Princess. You need them all, you can't abandon them for me. And I can't let you have the title now, not when I know how much pain it would cause you to leave your home behind, to leave your friends, even if I did travel with you. I will return, Twilight Sparkle, and claim my title to save you the burden of that kind of life. I will take it upon myself, and as much as it will pain you to see me go, it pains me even more to know it is my idiocy...my selfishness that causes that pain.

-Trixie

As Trixie read the last letter, the cruel irony of the whole thing seeped in. She'd been late arriving home...and she feared that Twilight had been given the title. When she heard about the tournament, her heart had leaped for joy - Twilight would not have the title, and neither would she! They could be together, as she'd wanted. But then she caught word of Twilight *entering* the tournament - rumor mills were a helpful thing, sometimes. No...no that wouldn't do at all.

So she entered, and she fought tooth and nail to win. It would not be long now before she'd be getting all sorts of challenges for her title, now that ponies knew who she was and where she was and just how illustrious her legacy was - it was why her family traveled so much, because staying in one place just made it so that every other day there was a unicorn on their doorstep asking for a Duel. That and all the business offers and the bookings for magic displays and requests for party appearances - the busy life of a celebrity. Trixie had learned to live like that at a young age, up until she was enrolled for school in Canterlot, and those few years at the academy had been the only quiet reprieve she'd been able to enjoy...until her second trip to Ponyville. Twilight could never live that kind of life. Her mother already did, that's why she was so perfect for Paragon.

But Twilight was not Mirage. She could not handle life forever on the road, and she could not handle being constantly accosted by other

unicorns who wished to challenge her, as foolhardy as that might be. And so, Trixie would take up that burden, alone, because she was already used to that life. Alone again, on the road...with nothing but fond memories to live by...

If you truly love something, you must learn to set it free.

Epilogue

Reciprocations

A knock came at the door. Trixie, startled at having a guest at this late hour, hastily put away all of her things and wiped the tears from her eyes. She was expecting perhaps room-service again. Or perhaps somepony else coming for an autograph? Of all the possibilities Trixie entertained, the only option she did not fathom was that the one pony standing there could be.

"T-T-Twilight?" she balked, "But I...you just...I saw you...I-"

"Please, Trixie," Twilight smirked, "Don't tell me you can't spot a Duplication spell, even from this height. I'll admit, it was difficult getting my copy to hail a cab, but well...I don't like to brag, but I *am* the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestira. Uh...just not *officially* I suppose?"

"Hmph..." Trixie coughed, hoping to all the powers that be that she didn't look like she'd been crying, "I suppose then, you're going to tell me what you're doing back? Did you forget something?"

"No, I didn't," Twilight smiled, "I think you did though. A lot of things, actually."

Trixie eyed Twilight with contemplation, "Oh, of course - I forgot to...ah...give you your gift. I did promise everypony I was going to be giving them things, but other than yours, their gifts are all much too large for me to expect them to carry all the way to the castle. Yours though...ah...much easier. Hang on a moment, and-"

"Really, Trixie, you know by now that there's one pony that you can't lie to, and that's me," Twilight said with a knowing grin.

"...very well. What is this about then?" Trixie narrowed her eyes.

"Did you know, that when I write my letters to Princess Celestia, even when I'm not dictating them to Spike, I am in the habit of dictating them? I dictate all my letters, even when I read them. It helps me imagine the other pony's voice, even if it's my own."

"Fascinating information. I suppose you have a point?"

"Well, imagine my surprise - *so do you*."

Trixie turned white, "W-what?"

Twilight paced around Trixie, "When were you planning on telling me, anyway? I'll admit, your tirade earlier was pretty impressive. I *almost* believed it! Believe me, it was pretty hard to keep up my act, and I'm pretty

sure you can say the same."

"Y-you...knew?" Trixie asked, "How? How is that possible?!"

Twilight used her magic to fumble with Trixie's bag, and pulled out the photograph that Trixie had been fawning over earlier. With a snap of her horn, the picture took on a very dull aura that could not be seen by the naked eye - but *Trixie* could see it, because she was a unicorn. And at that moment, she cursed herself for underestimating Twilight Sparkle's ingenuity - it was the exact same spell she had used so long ago to spy on Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, back before she was friends with everypony and least of all friends with Rainbow or Twilight. She did not peg Twilight as the type to use that kind of spell *then*, but it sort of made sense *now*, even it was mildly insulting.

"You were spying on me?" Trixie glared, "How long?"

"Spying?" Twilight huffed, taken aback, "I was merely using it to keep watch over you, in case you were any danger I didn't intend to hear...*all of that*. I couldn't figure out how to turn the stupid spell off, for months! But by then...well...ah...I kinda liked the things I was hearing."

"How long, Twilight?"

"...ah...the whole year..." Twilight blushed.

Trixie fumed, "For Celestia's sake, Twilight!"

"I'm sorry!" Twilight nervously stepped back, "I was just worried about you leaving...and...wanted to make sure you were safe. Please don't be mad..."

"I...I am *disappointed*, Twilight," Trixie sighed, "That you didn't think I could take care of myself..."

Twilight frowned, "That wasn't my intention...I only meant it for, y'know...just in case? I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to you."

Trixie shook her head in confusion, "So wait...you knew I was okay the whole time..."

"Yes."

"And that I was running late?"

"Correct."

"And that I was going to enter the tournament?"

"Er...no. Just that you were going to be there - I figured in the crowd or something, ready to challenge me the moment I got the title! You know, make a *really* dramatic entrance? Also, Enigma is a stupid name. I can't believe *Pinkie Pie* was the one who figured it out."

"Why didn't anypony else know?" Trixie said, changing the subject.

"I...didn't tell them," Twilight sheepishly admitted, "I know how much

you like dramatic entrances...I admit it was probably a little silly, but...well, you wouldn't believe how hard it was to even keep up the act in front of Princess Celestia. I mean...if everypony knew you were okay and were coming back and what-not...well, you would've found out I was spying. I didn't know what to do."

Trixie facehoofed "For Celestia's...whatever, you know what? I've learned that there really is no reasoning with you at times, you're just so...introverted, that you thought lying all that time was a good idea," Twilight made to interject, "Nevermind. So...you also know, apparently, that I don't *really* care about the title outside of as tribute to my father. You know what I feel for you...so why did you let me go through with this? Don't you understand? If I have this title, I can't be with you! And I don't want to burden you with-"

"Okay, Trixie, really - who *exactly* do you think I am? If I had the title, apart from you and maybe a few other ponies here and there, I doubt any challenge I received would last the better part of an hour. No big deal - I beat them, I move on," Twilight said with a dismissive tone, "It's nothing to brag about, but really...I think I proved to myself today that I really am a lot stronger than I thought I was..."

"But...Duels are supposed to take days! *Ours* took weeks! The tournament today lasting only a few hours was because of that energy drink, and you can't really expect to keep enough of that on hand for you and your challengers to get through the whole Duel in one sitting. Today was the exception, not the rule."

"Trixie...I think we need to talk," Twilight sighed, "I'll admit, I didn't know much about Magician's Duels when you first challenged me. But over the past year...I've had a great deal of time to study Princess Celestia's personal copy of the master rulebook, and...well, I can see now that *you* have some misconceptions as well."

"...how so?" Trixie raised an eyebrow.

"First of all, Trixie...apparently your father's idea of a Duel wasn't old-fashioned, *ours* was. That standard sparring match thing? That's how Duels are carried out nowadays! It's quicker, it's easier, and it let's everypony get on with their lives. A long time ago, when that *Primer* I have was first written, ponies had a lot more time on their hands that we just don't have the luxury of in this day and age. A Duel taking all week was considered *normal* back then - today it's supposed to last, at best, a few hours...even less time if one of the two ponies is particularly powerful. *Hint, hint.*"

Trixie looked embarrassed, "I...see."

"Furthermore," Twilight continued, "I discovered a few...ah...let's say, *loopholes*, in the rules that actually seem to fit our situation...pretty *conveniently*. I'm surprised your parents didn't know about them - I'm sure it would've saved all of a great deal of trouble."

Trixie's eyes brightened, "Go on...."

"Ahem," Twilight smirked as she pulled a few note cards from her cloak, "First, did you know that all Magician's Duels involving the transference of a Unique Title, such as yours, require a Sanctioned Judge?"

Trixie tilted her head, "So wait...our Duel wasn't official? But then-"

Twilight blushed, "Yes, well...that's kind of my fault. I asked Princess Celestia to provide us with a Judge, so that we could make it official, and...she nominated Rarity - it has to be another unicorn, see? Why do you think Rarity was insistent on being present for every event? If there had been any rule disputes that needed her interference, she would have, but luckily it never came to that. Mostly because I never mentioned it...since it never came up."

"Twilight...you really do keep too many secrets..." Trixie sighed, "Okay, so what? Rarity's a Judge, big deal."

"Well, that's the first point - if anypony were to Duel you for your title, they'd have to have a Sanctioned Judge in order for it to count, otherwise you could simply deny them. Of course, if they *did* have a Judge, you'd *have* to accept."

"Hmm..." Trixie said thoughtfully, "Well...that makes sense, actually. Affidavit must've been a Sanctioned Judge then, that's why my father insisted *he* be present."

"Second, it is at the Judge's discretion as to how long a Duel is supposed to last, or to the rules it is supposed to follow. The participants may state a bare-bones term limit and rules, but if the Judge wishes to dispute them, that is their duty. So not only do you have to have a Judge, but the Judge gets to decide, based on the type of rules, on whether the Duel might last for, say, an hour, or a week...or a *month*...or a *year*...or-"

Trixie's eyes brightened, "Wait a second...you're saying that-"

"Ah ah ah, let me finish," Twilight grinned, "See, the other two rules are pretty simple - one is that while two unicorns are engaged in a Duel, no other unicorn may make a challenge to either of them. That, I feel, comes pretty naturally - it'd be awfully hard to keep track of multiple Duels at once, unless it was like...well, a tournament. So my last question then is, Trixie - has anypony challenged you to a Duel since you received your title back?"

Trixie smiled as she began to understand more clearly where this

was going, "No."

"Then, the last rule I must point out is that that is because there is *precisely* a twenty-four hour grace period allowed between Duels. In...oh...about eighteen hours from now, your title is officially challengeable, but until then you're off the hook. I already took the liberty of making sure that, in that time, the only ponies that should be in your presence are your closest friends. And when that happens..."

Trixie managed to follow along, "*You'll* challenge me? And *Rarity* will be our Judge, and she'll just let us take as long as we want?"

Twilight smirked, "Precisely."

Trixie gave a squeak and hugged Twilight graciously, "Twilight Sparkle, you *are* a genius."

"I know."

"Wait though," Trixie hesitated, "Wouldn't this be like...cheating? Theoretically, this means I keep the title forever?"

"Well, the longest a Duel can actually last is one year exactly. After that year is almost over, we finish the Duel properly...think of it like...an *anniversary*, heh. Unfortunately, regardless of which of us won, there is a one-month grace period before either of us can challenge the other for *anything* again. So for one month every thirteen months...yeah, we'd have to deal with a bunch of overeager unicorns bothering us. But one month of hassle...compared to a year together? Don't tell me that doesn't sound perfect..."

"But...that still doesn't explain," Trixie scratched her head, "Why did you let me go through with all of this? What's the reason you let me...think I was doing all this to you?"

"Trixie..." Twilight sighed, "I needed to see exactly how dedicated you were to yourself...to your goals in life. I've told you...well, Celestia knows how many times...that the reason I love you is because of your bravery. You were brave enough to venture out into the lands beyond our borders in search of yourself, and you were brave enough to continue to fight for your goals despite the pain you felt in being away from your new home...your new friends...and me. I admit...I would have been happy at first to see you return at any moment...to have you give up and come back to me. But then...you wouldn't be the Trixie I love. You'd have given up on your life's goal, for what? Just to be with *me*? I've learned something about love too, Trixie - you can't depend on somepony else for your happiness. Do makes *you* happy *first*, and then find somepony that supports you.

"You never lost sight of your goals, Trixie - that is what I admire about you. And while I admit, it hurts to think that you were willing to sacrifice our

chance to be together because of your misconception of the rules...you've made it quite clear that you view holding onto that title as the only thing that remains of your father's legacy. I could never ask you to give that kind of connection to family up for me. What kind of pony would I be then, to ask you to give up a memory like that, for my sake?"

"Twilight..."

"Shush," Twilight smiled, "I'm pretty sure I've made myself pretty clear. All I want to hear is what those letters of yours made just as clear. You showed out there today with that speech of yours, that you're willing to do *anything* to accomplish your goals - so I ask you, Trixie...what is your goal in life now?"

"..." Trixie hesitated, "...I...find this harder to say with spoken words than I did with my letters..."

Twilight gave a devilish little grin, "Who said you had to say it with words?"

Miles away, at the Royal Palace, a pink earth pony suddenly began to get the shudders.

"Whooooooooooa! Whatever *that* was, it sure was a *doozy*!"

~~FIN~~