

Of Mares and Magic

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 *always* 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 too 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 winced 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 nopony 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...”