

Of Mares and Magic

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 horde 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.

"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 count 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 adamantly refused 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 now 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 here

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 is 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...