

Of Mares and Magic

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 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....HMMMMMMMMMMMMM...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! Zooooooom!" 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! Wool!"

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, "Damn 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...