

# Of Mares and Magic

## Chapter 5: Jubilations and Comprehensions

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

*Dear Trixie,*

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

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

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

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

*Good Luck!*

*Love,*

*Your Bestest Best Friend in all Equestria,*

*Pinkie Pie!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And what about the others?"

"Oh, well I see Miss Sparkle a lot, she's always getting all sorts of deliveries from Canterlot's library, since she's trying to expand hers. We talk sometimes, she's really nice, but

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

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

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

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

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

The pair arrived at the clearing much as Trixie was used to already after having done so the previous two days. The stage from the night before was completely dismantled...somehow, though Trixie was unsure how it had been done so quickly and without any trace of it being nearby. It was as if the entire stage had disappeared in the night. A most curious circumstance, but not one that Trixie felt was worth concerning herself with right now. No, right now she needed to focus on her contest with Twilight Sparkle, who was at the designated spectators' area with only Rarity accompanying her. There was no sign of Applejack, Rainbow Dash, or Fluttershy - Derpy frowned at the absence of the latter.

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

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

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

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

in the endeavor."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Me? Whatever for, dear?"

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

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

"Like I said, they're Magically Accurate Weight Distributors," Twilight smiled, "They absorb magic, and the amount they absorb is reflected in the size and weight of the sphere. The weight is exponentially greater the larger the object becomes, so at this minimum size it weighs barely more than a marble, but as it gets bigger and bigger it gets heavier and heavier, so that apple-sized one would weigh as much as a boulder. They're really quite fascinating devices."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

your potential in this?"

Trixie scoffed, "You must take me for a foal. The Great and Powerful Trixie noticed that you were holding onto a far greater burden than her own, and that you didn't seem to be anywhere near as exerted as herself. So I figure, why should I waste everypony's time wearing myself out just to prove what I found out two days ago - I'm not as strong as you are, apparently not by a long shot. But I remind you, Twilight Sparkle, that there is more to magical ability than strength alone, there is finesse and grace to it as well. Your friend Rarity would attest to that, I am certain; she said as much when she challenged me during my last visit."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trixie noted, as the burning red eyes just beyond the path faded away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um...Trixie that's-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

"Sort of...but-"

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

"...what?"

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

"Beg pardon?"

"Oh my..." Fluttershy gasped.

"What?"

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

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

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"SURPRISE!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you-**

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

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

"No." \*click\*

**ALL ABOOOOOOOOARD! HA HA HA-**

"No. Hmm..." \*click\*

**Baby, baby, baby oooooooooo-**

"Oh Celestia no." \*click\*

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

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

**You've got the touch...you've got the powaaaaAAAAAAA-**

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

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

"Oh this is my *jam!*"

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

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

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

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

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

Trixie sighed loudly, "How many times must we go over this? I am the Great and

Powerful Trixie, and I wish to prove to myself and to all of Equestria that my title is deserved."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twilight frowned, "Why?"

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

"...I'm sorry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well...yeah, you *are* a bit self-absorbed," Twilight blushed, "But you've proven that you're able to tone it down for the sake of your friends, and...that just made you more attractive," Twilight turned bright red, "Respectable! Is what I meant to say. Um...right. I...respect you. Even if you're not as powerful as I am, you do try your best."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pinkie Pie bounded over, "Twilight's got a bit of a crush on you," she clarified as she

wrapped an arm around Trixie.

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

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

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

"Twilight Sparkle," she said wearily, "I need some time to think on this. For now...let's postpone our Duel. Tomorrow was supposed to be Concentration, was it not? Well, I think *both* our minds will be on other things."

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

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

She climbed the stairs in complete silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

there is to this.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Circumstances?”

“Oh, I went a little crazy,” Pinkie Pie whispered, “Started talking to inanimate objects and making wild accusations. Dashie said I was referring to myself by my full name, Pinkamena



Diane Pie, which is really weird since I haven't called myself by that name since before my very first party that I held for my parents and sisters way back on our rock farm."

Trixie nodded, "I suppose next you'll tell me Applejack and Rarity are-"

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

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

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

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

"Your...Pinkie Sense...tummy...what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What? Why?"

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

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

"Of course! Your Auntie Pinkie Pie is on the job!"

"Auntie...what? I'm a year older than you."

"Whatever, *Fluttershy*," Pinkie rolled her eyes.

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

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

Pinkie bounded over to her bed and was almost instantly asleep. Trixie found herself relieved to do the same, but deep down she knew she was likely to have a difficult time of it. There was still this nagging in the back of her head, telling her that everything that was

happening tonight was eerily similar to another story she'd heard, a long, long time ago...