

The Great and Corrupted Trixie

By Velvet(Velcro)Heart



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Prologue

Thick clouds of dust rose from the ancient, cold stone floors with every one of Trixie's steps, causing the unicorn's already-irritated eyes to water. She'd long given up trying to breathe through her clogged nose, coughing miserably as she made her way through corridors so ancient they hadn't seen a cleaning pony in at least a thousand years.

"The Great and Powe-*hack* Powerful Trixie's revenge will not be stopped by a mere layer of dust, even if it is half a ponyheight *sneeze* thick!" Trixie half-whined, the cool blue glow of her horn lighting the ancient, unmarked walls of the maze that drilled it's way miles deep into the mountains under Canterlot. When she found hints of great magical power buried in the depths, Trixie hadn't expected a maze. But whichever pony designed it, he or she hadn't planned for the accumulation of the dust of centuries, making it rather easy for Trixie to see where she'd been. Even then, one needed to be a cunning pony to find whatever was hiding at it's very center.

But Trixie was nothing if not tricky.

After hours of dusty misery, she finally found herself walking into a chamber the size of which stunned even the Great and Powerful Trixie. A great cylindrical shaft drilled down towards a depth so deep that no matter how much power Trixie willed into her horn, its light was swallowed by darkness a vertigo-inducing distance below the edge.

But what that light revealed.. thousands upon thousands of pearly white pods, each coated in a thick film of dust, crowded together along the entire length and width of the cylindrical chamber's inner wall. Brushing the dust from the nearest, Trixie could just barely spot the still form within: A unicorn, wires clinging to his horn, tubes entering his body through almost every orifice, floating in a kind of stasis.

But that was not the most interesting part: A cluster of great spherical devices dominated the room's ceiling like a distorted bunch of grapes, gleaming metal strangely untouched by time. All the wires, the cables, they all led there, as did the perilously-unsupported walkways. It hummed softly with sheer magical power, a faint, steady warble that tickled Trixie's ears.

“Ah-hah! Trixie has found it! The source of all great magic in Equestria! Fi-*sneeze* Finally! All Trixie has to do is assign herself a bit more than everypony else and then Trixie will truly be magnifi-*cough!*” Abandoning the rest of her little speech in a fit of coughing and sneezing, the blue pony began making her way across one of the walkways, having already spotted a promising door. The odd metal seemed to thrum under her hooves, some mysterious part of its inner workings causing the material to vibrate against the undersides of her hooves.

The door slid open smoothly to Trixie’s touch, unveiling the inside to be a complicated, yet cozy mishmash of panels, flashing lights, and metallic cables. “Hah! Trixie has found the control room already!” She eagerly shuffled her way in, exploring, testing various knobs and buttons. Trixie was no machinery guru, but even then, she eventually she found a combination that caused one of the panels to light up.

“Advanced Unicorn Magic Network Integration, yes or no? Trixie thinks that sounds promising! Yes please!” the unicorn cheerfully replied to the written text, shoving her hoof down on the button she suspected meant the positive reply. The machine’s sudden buzz almost caused the blue unicorn to jump out of her proverbial skin, even as a large metallic arm unfolded itself from the ceiling, bearing in it’s grip a metallic ring graced with a plethora of wires.

“Yes, yes! Come bring Trixie the magic power! Enhance her horn into a mighty lance!” Trixie could barely hold herself back from prancing in anticipation, eagerly maneuvering her horn into the ring to help speed things along, eyes focused on the panel that so helpfully displayed her ‘integration stage’.

“Ok, Trixie is ‘locked in’, now... wait, personality absorption?! Trixie didn’t ask for anything wi-” She gasped, a sudden realisation snapping her head around - the ponies in the pods, they all wore these rings! She wasn’t being empowered, she was joining them! “No! Trixie doesn’t want to become a magic battery!” she squealed, focusing hard on her magic even as she felt her legs starting to go limp, eyes blurring. One of the gleaming cables leading from the wall to Trixie’s horn began glowing with the unicorn’s power as she used her rope-controlling abilities on it, trying to break it, trying to stop whatever the machine was doing.

The cable came loose in a shower of sparks, a deeper buzz echoing through the chamber as warnings flashed across the screen-panel:

ERROR

Personality absorption complete.
Personality cache damaged.
Enhancing cache size.
Cache overflow.
Identity overflow.
Identity tag: The Great and Powerful Trixie
Identity tag failed.
Identity tag failed.
Identity tag failed.
Identity tag: The Great and Powerful Trixie
Identity tag failed.
Identity tag: [file corrupted]

Identity accepted.

Trixie's empty eyes stared, glazed and unseeing, at the warnings flashing across the screen. She hung limply in the grip of the great robotic arm that settled her into one of the few remaining empty pods.

...and then the machine obediently uploaded the absorbed personality into itself, too much of an automaton to realize what it had just unleashed upon the countless hapless unicorns living in its virtual world...

Chapter 1

Distortions

Princess Luna wasn't quite sure what to make of the ponies in front of her. She knew fashion had changed in the thousand years of her absence, but had it really changed quite *that* much? The duo stalking around her like feral cats playing with their prey would've forcefully been ejected from the courts back in her age.

"Don't worry, Luna. All you have to do is obey their every whim and you'll be as popular as me in less than a month. These are Eager Edge and Thunder Run, the finest, most highly-recommended image-coaches I could find on such short notice." her sister Celestia had announced as she led Princess Luna into the overly-extravagant dressing-room where the two unusual ponies were already waiting. The tail-end of that sentence definitely didn't do much to improve Luna's flagging confidence.

"Darling, we'll have to fix your *mane*! What did you *do* with it all these years?" Thunder Run rumbled in a warm, gravelly voice that would've made Luna's legs weak.. had it not come from an earth-pony stallion wearing an unsettling amount of eyeshadow, heeled shoes and a dress with enough frills to bankrupt half a dozen dressmakers.

"You will need a new outfit, something that will let your subjects know that you're in control!" Eager Edge added, stalking around on four tightly-laced black leather boots that led all the way up to her shoulders and flanks.

Celestia carefully hid the faint smirk gracing her features behind a levitating porcelain cup, sipping tea from her perch upon a little nest of pillows. It made watching her slightly-overwhelmed little sister try to figure out how to act around her new 'image coaches' a comfortable experience.

That's when the first distortion hit; The pearly-white princess suddenly found her eyes drawn to her teacup as her telekinetic magic fluttered uncertainly around the pale porcelain, causing the surface of the tea within to yaw a good forty-five degrees in complete and open defiance of the law of gravity. Celestia found her head tilting in bemusement as if trying to keep the hot water level to her eyes. As the princess' magic, normally as steady

as millennia of experience could make it, continued folding in on itself like a foal's early practice sessions, faint cracks began spider-webbing their way through the delicate earthwork. Like lightning bolts crawling through a plain of white or tributaries flooding from a recent rain, the cracks swelled and grew, the once-polished cup beginning a strangely-riveting process of disintegration.

PAFF! The sudden detonation of the teacup into a cloud of porcelain dust and herb-steeped hot water caught Celestia by surprise, splashing her front and staining the pillows under her forelegs in darker shades as the cloth greedily sucked up the proffered moisture.

All chatter in the room came to a sudden screeching halt as all three ponies turned to the sound, finding a drenched and shocked-looking Celestia staring at the dust moisture-pasted to her forelimbs. Luna opened her mouth to say something, hesitated, closed it again, and repeated the motion several times like a suffocating fish, before finally settling on the question, "Did you.. just lose control of your magic, sister? How..."

Worried eyes met shocked eyes, countless unspoken words passing between the sisters in a single glance. "...The Moon Engine..." The ancient device' name left two mouths at once. Celestia leaped from her cushions with a sudden unseemly haste, a single step and a flap of her graceful wings bringing her to her sister's side, "Luna, sister dear, I'll have to entrust you with the courts and the sun for just a little while. I'll be right back but just in case it takes a day, I want you to raise the sun, ok?"

Luna sputtered, words only half-formed on her lips as Princess Celestia's horn met hers with an audible click. The sudden rush of power that flared into existence sent both Eager Edge and Thunder Run skittering for cover, leaving a flustered and blushing freshly-crowned mistress of the moon and sun sitting alone in the middle of the room, trying to figure out just what happened. "I trust you, my sister." came Celestia's final words, cast back over her shoulder as she made her way to the door.

As the clattering of Celestia's hooves faded from hearing, the duo of image-coaches carefully came out of hiding, suddenly finding themselves unsupervised and alone with their prey. "Darling, *the* princess of moon *and* sun? Oh, even if it's for but a day, this changes everything! You have to take charge!" the cross-dressing stallion rumbled, "I'll *have* to get you a

whole new wardrobe! Oh, I know just the pony! I'll go get her, she's absolutely *divine* with leather!"

Luna felt one of Eager Edge's overly-long leather boots touch her shoulder as Thunder Run left the room with only slightly less unseemly haste than her sister did. Leaning in close, the unicorn brought her lips unsettlingly-close to Luna's ear and crooned, "Hmmm, while we're alone, Princess, perhaps we can start our lessons..." Pulling back, the sole remaining coach jerked herself upright stiffly and announced, "First lesson: The riding crop!"

* * *

Princess Celestia's hooves clattered across naked stone, her blood roaring in her ears as she thundered her way through the once-secret maze, walls and side-passages rushing past in a blur. Her metallic shoes struck sparks from the floor as she skidded and swerved through her turns, assisting herself with forceful downthrusts of her mighty wings. She'd seen the tracks, the path cleared through the dust; somepony'd been here, recently, dispelling any notion that the temporary disruption in Equestria's magic field was a mere fluke.

The Princess knew the way. As rarely as she came here, it was burned into her mind, a single red thread bending and weaving through the tunnels until...

In a cloud of recently-disturbed dust swept up by the wind of her passing, Celestia burst into the Moon Engine's chamber, worried eyes finding the door into the machine's collection chamber ajar. It took her only seconds to get inside, leaving her wings stinging slightly where they smacked into the doorframe. Her gaze flicked through the chamber... nopony there. The room with its many display panels was bathed in a warm, insistent alarm-red, a metallic cable laying draped across the floor where it'd been severed like a dead snake.

One glance at the warnings flashing across the main display panel told Celestia more than she wanted to know, and a lot less than she needed to. "Oh, little unicorn pony, what have you *done*?" the princess whimpered, her magic carefully lifting the dead cable and settling it back into place, broken wires reweaving themselves like tentacles seeking a loving embrace with

their lost kin. By magic, the cable merged and repaired itself, returning to the worn-but-functional state it had enjoyed mere days ago.

Celestia's magic faded, but the warnings did not, trickling across the glowing main panel's deep red surface:

Warning, Administrator intervention required
System corruption at 19%
System stability compromised.
Emergency disengage compromised.
1000 year service complete: Freedom startup engaged.
Freedom startup failed. Please initiate manually.

The white alicorn steadily acquired more and more of a frown as she ran her eyes along that screen. "This.. could take more effort than I expected."

Celestia sighed. "No time to linger, alas." she murmured to herself as she carefully tapped her hoof across one of the panels and slipped the long pearly flute of her horn into the ring descending to her head. She had her objectives already planned out: Get in, fix the problem, get the problem-pony out of the system, and all would be well. She was the System Administrator, after all. It'd be a piece of proverbial cake.

Strangely, the Princess' final thought in her own body as the machine absorbed her mind had little to do with her mission - rather, in a flash of sisterly love, Celestia spent it on Luna:

...I should've told her that the image-coaches were a joke before I left.
Come to think of it, maybe I should've told the coaches...

* * *

"Coming!" Spike cried out, bucket in hand and towels perilously perched on top of his head as he carefully balanced his way up the stairs at the back of the Carousel Boutique. The door to Rarity's bedroom had become quite familiar to the baby dragon in the past week, but even then he still felt a secret little thrill as he was granted permission to enter the sacred personal sanctum of the unicorn that still hooked his heart with her grace and beauty.

Although that beauty'd been tarnished a mite since the magical incident a week ago: Rarity's snout was still flushed red, her eyes bleary and slightly baggy. Her voice, too, had gone somewhat nasal. All in all, though, Spike didn't care. She was still Rarity, and the opportunity to care for her had given him a chance to spend more time with her than he'd ever had an excuse for before. "Hot water and towels coming right up for my favorite patient!"

Even wearing the little nurse uniform Rarity insisted on designing for him in her sick state was worth it to see the white unicorn draped across the oilsheet on her bed, waiting for him. "Don't ya worry, Rarity, we'll get you coddled up nice and hot. You'll feel right as.. well, not rain, but something at least."

Rarity shuddered visibly, muscles twitching under her coat. "Dear, I'd rather not hear about any rain, snow or ice for a little while. I wanted to *have* a magical ice-sculpture, not become one myself. I really shouldn't have asked Twilight to perform such a difficult spell, she's only a student after all." she complained nasally, although her sagging ears quickly showed her regret at the harsh criticism, "Oh, I'm sounding like an angry old nag. Don't tell Twilight Sparkle I said that bit about her, please? I didn't mean it."

"Don't you worry, Rarity. We all know you're not feeling yourself today. 'sides, it's not like Twilight was the only pony to have a little magic spaz. We got off quite light. Half the parents in Cloudsdale had to visit the hospital from the shock alone. Can you imagine the pegasus cloudwalking magic suddenly cutting off like that? For most pegasi it was just a startle, they have working wings, but the young foals... It's lucky they all got caught in time." Spike continued the conversation with his hands in steaming water, dunking one of the towels in until it was thoroughly soaked through. A firm wring or two removed all the excess moisture, allowing Spike to wrap it around the unicorn's hindquarters without accidentally turning it into a shower. Several towels later, Rarity'd turned into a very content-looking caterpillar-pony hybrid, wrapped from neck-to-tail in hot, moist cloth.

Rarity sighed, eyes closed to thoroughly enjoy the warmth soaking into her sore muscles. Eventually, though, she forced herself to open her eyes and admit to something that'd been bothering her for a while now, "You've been such a kind dragon, Spike, and I've done nothing but whine and complain for the past week. How can I ever repay you?"

Spike let out a little squeak, and physically pummeled his heart out of his throat and back into his chest with a few blows of his small fist. Lowering his voice as much as he could in an attempt to sound appropriately manly, he peeped, "A noble knight such as me requires only the favor of such a fair lady as yourself, or, perchance, a kiss..?"

The baby dragon felt surprise blossom as Rarity actually seemed to consider it for a moment and finally, gave a small, curt nod. "A lady always pays her debts. Just one kiss, though, my loyal knight." A faint smile played around her lips as she indulged the noble little dragon's fantasy, lifting her head and closing her eyes.

Her white lips met Spike's nervous ones, his heart bursting into a gallop as his one true dream was finally starting to come true... and that's when he felt that sudden, familiar warmth swell in his belly.

No! Not now!

He tried to hold it in, at least long enough to finish the kiss. Alas, the fates were cruel indeed, and the pressure on his body too insistent: As unicorn and dragon separated, Rarity found herself staring cross-eyed at the saliva-coated scroll now protruding rather rudely from between her lips.

And that's when the letter from a princess hit Rarity's gag reflex.

* * *

Twilight Sparkle never felt so justified in an expenditure as she did right that moment. The shower she'd gotten installed in her home might not have been up to library regulations, but the glorious flow of hot water pouring down her flanks forced the filly to finally realize how badly she needed to relax. Since the magical incident last week, the purple unicorn'd researched nonstop in a variety of awkward positions, to the point that Spike's complaints about her personal hygiene almost reached the intensity of her muscles' protests. The frustrations of countless dead ends and the sheer pressure of her self-appointed task hadn't helped either; if the fact she accidentally covered Rarity in ice wasn't bad enough, the light shower of flightless foals over the lands beneath Cloudsdale had a way of hammering

home the importance of discovering just what caused the ponies' natural magic to go haywire.

For the moment, however, Twilight Sparkle was enjoying a relaxing, hot shower and engaging in a pastime she hadn't enjoyed since she was a little foal: Singing in the shower. "~o live without my ma-agic / would be impossible to do-o / 'cause in this world of troubles / my magic pulls me throu-ou-ough! Epic gargle solo! *Arglarglarglarglarglegarglegargle- Ptooie!* SPIKE! What are you doing in my shower?!"

"Washing ponyvomit off my snout." a chagrined-looking Spike deadpanned, "And thanks for spitting a mouthful of water in my face, it's the perfect ending for an otherwise perfect day. Here's a letter from the princess, I'm going to take a nap. I just want this day to end." The baby dragon grumbled, holding out the tightly-rolled scroll before hopping out of the shower and, still dripping, heading out to his soft, plush dragonbed.

Twilight pulled a face as she carefully levitated the scroll, going through the effort of wiping Rarity's saliva and gastric fluids from it's surface before unrolling it. "Finally, a response!"

But the letter wasn't from Celestia...

Chapter 2

Entry

Princess Luna looked taller somehow, Twilight Sparkle noted. Perhaps it was the way she held herself; straight, strict and imperious rather than the shy little hunch she'd acquired after the Nightmare Moon incident. Maybe it was the way she replaced most of her royal finery with a suit of gleaming, dyed leather that creaked softly with every motion, both covering and accentuating the shape of her body. Or it could be the way everypony around her quickly lowered themselves to the floor in supplication when they saw her approach to avoid disciplinary action by the riding crop levitating mere inches off of Luna's flank.

As the Princess of the moon fixed her gaze on Twilight Sparkle and approached in smooth, perfectly-rhythmic steps, the purple unicorn found herself at eye-level with the delicate curls of subtle embroidery along Luna's leather chestplate. "Twilight Sparkle, you're here. Good, the letter arrived intact then. We have something to discuss, in private."

"But Princess Luna, can't you tell me what's going on? Where's Princess Celestia?" Twilight Sparkle questioned, hesitating long enough in following Luna's swaying tail to earn a gentle little tap of the princess' crop upon her flank.

"You'll find out soon enough. Come. It's essential we don't linger in the corridors to discuss this." the alicorn replied, Twilight's fertile mind conjuring increasingly-worrying imagery. Luckily, Luna's private rooms turned out to be opulent, but comforting, lacking the 'dungeon' feel the small unicorn's imagination had furnished it with.

"I'll have to start with a history lesson." Luna began, quickly snagging Twilight Sparkle's attention from the decor. "What you're about to hear may, if all goes well, become public knowledge soon enough."

The dark alicorn seated herself on a nearby pillow, horn glowing as she used a small fraction of her power to lift a quill and a piece of paper from a desk across the room. "When Nightmare Moon.. when I was banished, the history books say that Celestia took the burden of both sun and moon upon

her shoulders. The history books.. gloss over certain details, however. I personally never would've known had Celestia not told me."

The levitating quill made soft scratching noises as it trailed lines across the paper, Luna's magic working without interrupting her tale, "The fact is, she couldn't simply take the burden of the moon. Her power, her talent is entirely in the sphere of the sun, and with my banishment I took with me the influence of the moon. In ending my eternal night, she inadvertently brought forth eternal day. No matter what she tried, the moon proved too elusive to her magics, and the sun, without it's celestial sister balancing it, would not fall below the horizon."

More lines were added, the feather (quite possibly previously a pegasus') dancing neatly to Luna's idle commands. "She kept the sun as weak and low as she could, and frantically sought to find a magic that could reestablish the balance as the temperature across Equestria slowly climbed."

The quill halted for a moment, giving the princess a moment to look over her work, "The answer she found.. it must've torn her heart. Working with a haste born of desperation, she and the best artists of arcane writings built a great machine and called countless volunteer unicorns to the hole torn from the mountain's heart. There, the Moon Engine took in each unicorn and drew forth their magic, weaving each individual thread, thin and fragile by itself, into a tapestry of power that could grasp and move the moon. Equestria was saved, and by commanding the machine, Celestia could perform a task I should have never neglected."

Luna paused for effect, "Success did not come without a price, however; for as long as the machine was required, the volunteers would remain trapped within, their minds lingering in it's arcane pathways until the day I would return and take the burden of the moon upon my shoulders once again. In a few months, maybe a year, I believe I would've recovered enough that the machine would no longer be needed. At that point, Celestia would've activated the in-built release, and set the volunteers free upon Equestria's soil as heroes. Did you know she's been planning housing for them for years? A celebration too. Honor-ceremonies for each and every one."

"However.. A week ago, the machine suffered a momentary malfunction. Celestia went to see if she could repair the damage, and... integrated

herself into the Moon Engine. My own investigations after the event exposed that, little over half a week prior, a lone unicorn made her way into the Moon Engine chamber and managed to damage both it and herself during the transfer into the machine. Unfortunately, I can't release or awaken either of them from outside the system. And if I were to enter it and get stuck, like I suspect Celly is... I can't abandon my duties raising the sun and moon."

Luna sighed, then turned her gaze firmly upon the rapt little unicorn before her, "But you have no such duties. That, you're a unicorn and Celestia trusts you. Therefore, I want you to integrate with the Moon Engine, find Celestia. If you can't get her out, take stock of the situation and then report back to me. I'll do my best to help you."

With a few final scratches, the alicorn finished her drawing and presented the paper to Twilight Sparkle, "This is what she should look like inside the machine."

The unicorn focused on the paper, glanced up at Luna, then back down at the paper. This was a lot to take in. It brought up so many questions, so many worries and fears. So many things she took for granted about magic and the princesses just collapsed around her ears, but for some reason only one question made it to her lips: "Thousands of years of life, and you never learned to draw beyond kindergarten level?"

* * *

"So, get in, find Princess Celestia, and get back to the place I came in through." Twilight Sparkle reiterated to herself for the dozenth time as the machine's strange, metallic arm reached down and clamped a ring around her horn. Princess Luna glanced back over her shoulder, forehooves braced on either side of one of the many glowing plates with odd runic language trickling across it's surface. "Yes, exactly that. Now remember, I'll be out here, trying to help as much as I can. But remember, my influence is limited, and as time is experienced differently inside than outside, my responses will be.. dramatically delayed. On top of that I have tasks out here that require my attention. If I were to stop raising the sun.. there would be panic in the streets."

“I left you some things to start with. They should help... Good luck. You’re going in.”

Darkness engulfed Twilight Sparkle, a perfect black void that swallowed every detail around her, leaving her with nothing but an odd falling sensation which made her stomach float up somewhere against her spine. Just as she began to feel the first frissons of panic building, a spark of light burst into existence, akin to a tiny star that settled at the tip of her left forehoof. Like the point of a pencil, the star smoothly slid across her coat, carving patterns of glowing white lines back and forth along the length and breadth of her body. Never straying, never wavering regardless of the unicorn’s initial startled motions and her attempts to follow it with her gaze, it painted her until she found herself patterned in a neat array.

Twilight barely had any time to admire her new decoration, tilting her forelimbs this way and that in front of her snout, before the star leaped from her body and scribed a perfect circle in the air a mere two feet from her face. As if cutting a piece from the void’s emptiness itself, the acitinic-white flare burned patterns through the black, crafting a gleaming mass of triangles and arches that split and finally fell together into a disc-shape. Obeying some unknown command, the disc settled just above the unicorn’s withers, where she could barely see it from the corner of her eye if she turned her head as far as she could, hovering in complete defiance of gravity or logic as if attached to her spine by a tiny invisible stick. No telekinesis involved whatsoever.

The tiny star winked out, it’s task done. It didn’t stay gone for long, however; Far beneath Twilight, it flickered back on, joined by countless of it’s kin in numerous colors. White, green, blue, orange, they burst into motion, leaving burning, glowing tracks as they raced out into the depths of the void. No mere disc, no mere pattern, they swept forth towards the horizon and, right in front of Twilight’s eyes, drew a world..

..a world that came up under the unicorn with all too much speed.

“Oof!”

* * *

Twilight Sparkle's eyes opened blearily, refocusing on a strangely-tilted horizon. An odd sense of vertigo accompanied her awakening, one that had been with her since she hit the ground and had steadily coaxed her from the depths of her momentary unconsciousness. After the unicorn's analytical brain finally fully revived, the reason for this experience became all too obvious: She was laying sprawled out on a tilted slab of something smooth and black, strangely glassy except where it's rough, uneven edges had cracked away from whatever surface it'd once been part of. Finally rising to her hooves, albeit unsteadily, the unicorn took stock of her surroundings.

It was a disaster area. A great metropolitan city, or she assumed it was, lay ruined around her. Great glassy towers stood unevenly, their black walls broken, great gaps torn in their structure as if mauled by a titanic Ursa Major. Light from the strange, rippling heavens poured through the holes, casting twisted shadows of the structures' exposed skeletons across the debris-littered streets below. And through it all, strange, glowing green tendrils crawled like a thin network of slowly-pulsing veins, an ominously-organic presence in an otherwise perfectly-angular city.

"That's.. not what I expected." Twilight Sparkle startled slightly as the sound of her own voice, a sharp contrast to the surrounding silence. Wincing, she carefully slipped down from the fallen wall that had been her landing platform moments before, and turned a small circle. "Where is everypony? Luna said this was a thriving city, the busy urban buildup around the portal to- and from the real world." Twilight gasped, whirling around to face the place she landed, finding the stately structure she assumed to be the portal in stately ruins. "Shoot! I should've known Luna's knowledge would be a thousand years out-of-date!". The unicorn did a little stompy-dance, using all four hooves to work her frustrations out on the innocent street surface, "Shoot! Shoot-shoot-shoot-shoot-shoot-SHOOT-SHOOT!"

..A blobby sphere of green goo came sailing from the ruins, smashing into a nearby wall and detonating in a strange warbling 'thwoomph!'. "I didn't mean it like that! It wasn't a suggestion!" Twilight squealed as she quickly turned to see a trio of ponies clambering across the broken rubble. They looked little better than the cracked rock they crawled across, their manes were tangled, their motions were jerky and unsteady, and most notably: the neat glowing patterns across their bodies were heavily distorted by large, swollen green bulges that covered their bodies like pestilential growths.

“Stop shooting, stop shooting! I’m here on a peaceful - whoa!” Twilight Sparkle neighed as several of them spewed forth globs of explosive goop, spraying the area where Celestia’s prize student stood moments before. Twilight’s hooves struck the smooth floor in a rapid rush of hoofbeats, tail streaming behind her as she dodged around fallen and cracked walls, trying to put as much rock between herself and the twisted, spewing ponies. “I’m not your enemy! Shoo- I mean don’t shoot!”

The response was an unabated, if thin barrage of bulbous bolts, some surging ahead in a straight line whilst others sailed in almost-serene ballistic arcs. All ended against nearby cover in a warbling splash that seemed to rapidly decay the glassy rock, consuming and abrading it until glowing cracks radiated outward from the impact point like an acid-etched spiderweb. Twilight had seen enough, more than enough; uncaring of direction or purpose, she galloped through the streets, into- and through the shattered buildings, clambering over debris, sliding down slopes. Veins of luminescent green crunched under her hooves, leaking tiny trickles of fluid that stung and bit her legs while her lungs burned.

The realisation that the sound of explosions had faded into the distance came late to the terrified unicorn, her legs finally slacking as she greedily rasped for breath. For a moment, all Twilight Sparkle could do was stare at the soft glow of her forehooves, waiting for the trembling to subside. “They.. they tried to hurt me.” That little factoid was troubling in of itself. The residents of Ponyville got angry sometimes, sure, but rarely if ever to the point of blows. The closest Twilight Sparkle ever came to being hurt that way was with Nightmare Moon.. and the Ursa Minor, and that dragon that tried to maim Spike, and the other dragon, that hydra, that cockatrice, that mantichore...

“Come to think of it...” Twilight Sparkle murmured, coming to the strange discovery that she was probably one of the most experienced ponies in Ponyville when it came to nearly being maimed. “...avalanche, stampede, buffalo attack, projectile pegasi, an anvil, a piano...” Twilight jerked upright, scraping together enough confidence to dampen the fear, “I’m.. I’m a survivor! I take things that would flatten normal ponies and come out on top! You know what? I can handle this! The first place I find that might have answers, I’m going there.”

“First..” The unicorn looked around herself, making sure she’d shaken the strange, infected-looking ponies, before turning her gaze to the unnatural skies. Streams of glowing lights flowed through the heavens like a sparkling diamond trains following invisible rails, forming perfect lines that zoomed back and forth, across and through each other as far as Twilight could see. The main source of light, however, at least looked a little more familiar - a large silver sphere that radiated a cool silver light, a strange hybrid between sun and moon.

“At least there’s a sun.. of sorts. Now, I just have to find a nice high spot, and find some ponies that can tell me where to find the Princess.” Twilight Sparkle added to herself to help organize her thoughts. Finding a tall tower proved to be easy enough - there were plenty to choose from, and after some searching, the unicorn picked one that looked like it wouldn’t fall over immediately. A large tear in one of the windows at the approximate height of the first floor became her way in after a difficult climb across the rubble of an adjacent structure.

The inside proved... spartan. Strange, large, angular rooms and flat surfaces everywhere, as if the place was cut from a solid block by a perfectionist mathematician. It would’ve been a stark place had it not been for the glowing green ivy-stuff growing in through the cracked window, forcing Twilight Sparkle to step carefully lest she sting her hooves again. The chamber she assumed was a living room had a few odd-but-interesting knickknacks that held Twilight’s interest for several long minutes. Two small transparent boxes not much bigger than a softball shared space on a table with a small bowl. The boxes.. Twilight wasn’t sure what to make of them. They reminded her of tiny fishbowls, entirely transparent but for the edges, with small multicolored polygonic abstracts floating around inside them like fish. Dismissing them as ornamental, she turned her attention to the bowl. For all it looked like, the bowl seemed filled with simplified sugar-cubes, a little filly’s idea of a proper breakfast.

Quickly glancing around to see if anypony was watching, Twilight gave in to temptation and dipped her snout into the bowl, sucking up several of the ‘sugarcubes’, a quick swallow sending them down her throat. They tasted like.. nothing much, really. At least they proved to be edible, of a sort. At least, she hoped they were, otherwise she’d have a real problem when they came back out the other end.

“That’s another foalhood dream fulfilled that didn’t quite pan out like I’d hoped.”

Exploring further, the unicorn mentally mapped out the basic living unit, bedrooms and living room, even if there seemed a distinct lack of kitchen or toilets beyond a small storage area that, since it contained more of the ‘sugarcubes’, was mentally tagged a larder.

The elevator didn’t seem to have power, or even counterweights of any kind. Looking for a convenient on-switch proved equally useless. With a sigh, Twilight explored the emergency ladder running the length of the elevator-shaft, hooked her hoof over one of the rungs, and began climbing...

* * *

Seen from the rooftop of the tower, the city had a kind of eerie, desolate magnificence, stretching out around and beneath Twilight Sparkle’s hooves. The tallest towers broke her view of the horizon like jagged teeth, backlit with the pale glow of the strange solar orb in the midst of its phoenix’ plunge of dusk. The failing of the light steadily cast the already-dark metropolis in increasingly-sharp contrasts, turning it into a sea of black accented by the slowly-pulsing green glow of the ivy-like veins crawling across and through the structures.

But that made it all the easier for Twilight to trace the countless glowing lines to the nearest nexus, where they merged around.. a wide structure, decorated with spindly spires and high-gothic architecture, damaged, even wounded but still breathing in the cool emerald glow. A cathedral, trapped in the middle of a web of pulsing veins like a spider’s kill.

“There, then. To start off.”

Turning around, she sighed and slipped through the door into the depths of the tower. She was not looking forward to climbing down all those rungs again.

* * *

If there was one positive thing about the cathedral, it was that it was lit better than the surrounding area. Unfortunately it was lit by that steady,

pulsing green glow, a color Twilight Sparkle was slowly forming a love/hate relationship with. Worse yet, this close, there were more details visible, many of which providing ominous little hints. Perched upon the stone walls, smooth, yet detailed statues of tall, winged ponies graced the cathedral's architecture. By the shape of their bodies, they seemed to be made in the images of both Princess Celestia and a pre-Nightmare Moon Princess Luna. Twilight couldn't be entirely sure, however, as the statues had been violently beheaded, leaving no tell-tale horn to show their alicorn nature.

Careful to stay in the plentiful lingering shadows, perhaps failing to remember that she now glowed, Twilight Sparkle snuck closer to the great structure. A piece of fallen wall that had wedged itself up against the side of the building let her ascend to the cathedral's rooftop. Among the beheaded, winged shapes she crept, touching only gently when she needed support, as if in deference for the broken goddess-imagery. The cathedral rooftop was uneven, weathered, cracked by pulsing emerald growth. Small pieces came loose where Twilight Sparkle set her hooves, threatening her balance. It held, though, as she carefully made her way to a part where the roof had simply caved in, leaving a suitable little spyhole.

Hooking her hooves over the edge, the unicorn lowered herself to her belly, and peered down into the cathedral's innards. The pews lay stacked against the walls and windows, the sun and moon symbolism along its inner walls defaced with the now-telltale sign of the impact of those green, hurled blobs. What happened within, however, was far more interesting: The room was illuminated by the glow of several of the pustulent ponies. Their bodies were misshapen by glowing growths that looked painful, yet their expressions were a discordant mix of exultant and blissful. One lay spread out across the altar like a strange, willing sacrifice, while another stood over him, forehooves on the altar's edge.

"The heathens have come." the lead pony began, its voice a strange, distorted warble. The ponies turned as the cathedral's great front doors swung open, and six of the crazed ponies led a small group of others into their flock, standing guard. The other ponies looked.. healthier, black with blue or red lines tracing neatly across their bodies, several mares and two stallions. "They have come to accept the blessing of the true Goddess."

“N-no!” one of the captives, a small mare with a spiky mane, squealed as she was forced to the altar, one of the captors beside her grasping her head and forcing it towards the sacrifice.

“Consume the Corruption. Corruption Consume.” the words came as a chant from the throats of several of the green ponies as the captor forced the mare’s snout open and against one of the bright blisters covering the sacrifice’s body. There was a disturbing wet, tearing sound as they forced the mare’s mouth shut around it, pushing a thick blob of it down her throat. She retched as she came away, wobbling unsteadily, but already her glowing lines grew dim, before rekindling with emerald energy. She didn’t run as they let her go and pushed her aside for the next captive. Her voice soon joined the chant as the next pony was forcefully inducted, “Consume the Corruption. The Corruption Consume.”

It felt to Twilight Sparkle like her stomach had escaped her body and was busy sliding down the tilted cathedral roof. She couldn’t think, couldn’t decide between disgust or horror. Her legs locked, she watched helplessly as pony after pony was forced to eat a piece of that strange, willing, sick pony on the altar. Clearly it was affecting him, too; the green glow slowly grew paler, then weaker as more and more of his body disappeared.. before finally and suddenly bursting apart, simply sinking in on itself in a cascade of tiny cubes.

The ritual leader simply swept the altar clean of the mess, and gestured to the little mare they’d inducted first. Without a word spoken, she simply climbed onto the altar, awaiting for the next captive to eat a portion of her corrupting flesh. Twilight Sparkle gagged, a soft little noise, but enough to suddenly draw one pair of eyes to her.

“Hey! You!” one of the captives, a young stallion, cried out as he spotted Twilight watching. “Don’t just watch! You’ve got a disk, toss it to me!”

“But..” Twilight hesitated, startled, but the surprise jolted her brain back in action. Snatching the floating disk from her back with her mouth, she flung it down through the hole. “Catch!”

The young stallion didn’t catch: In a move that would’ve done prince Blueblood proud, he jerked the corrupted pony holding on to him into the path of the soaring circle. A wave of little cubic pieces washed over the

stallion as the pony holding on to him exploded. With no second wasted, the colt burst into motion, already in full gallop for the door. "Run, idiot!"

Twilight Sparkle quickly lost sight of the pony as she jerked her head back and began running. Already, the disturbed corrupted ones began stirring into action, the first blobby orb flung at the gap in the rooftops sailing through serenely even though Twilight's face was no longer there to catch it. Half-sliding down the tilted rubble, stubbing her hooves and bumping her knees, Twilight reached the streets in a desperate hurry, just in time to see a streak of white twisting through the air, turning to hit her. She turned to run, dodging left and right, trying to avoid the strange projectile that turned and twisted to follow her no matter how she fled. Eventually, she knew, she could no longer dodge it. She braced for impact..

The disk clicked neatly back into place on her back, losing its pearly glow.

"Faster, pony, faster! My memory is too fragmented to carry weapons! We have to run!" the shout from behind was the only warning Twilight got as the stallion slid past her, his teeth clamping down on her withers as he dragged her along. "We're taking the off-ramp here, it's downhill all the way!"

Twilight Sparkle teetered for a moment as she was forcefully pushed and dragged out of her intended course to a wide curving road that indeed, showed a distinct downward slant.

"Friction dampeners to active memory!" the young stallion cried out to nopony in particular - but something responded, small bright orange spheres bulging into existence beneath all four of his hooves. "Alright, get on!"

It wasn't like Twilight had a lot of choice, and the stallion seemed to be the only one who wasn't trying to kill her. She hooked her forelegs over his shoulders, and awkwardly clamped her stifles around his lower legs, her analytical mind idly noticing that he was actually a bit smaller than her. "I'll have you know I don't usually ride strange stallions-ooooaaah!"

A quick kick of the stallion's hindlegs launched them forward, the spheres beneath his hooves sliding across the smooth pavement as if he were on rolls, gaining speed with every second spent on the ramp. The strange motions of his legs as he steered and poured on what power he could

seemed eerily familiar to Twilight in this alien, abstract world. “You’re rollerblading!”

“This isn’t a sport! We’re running from zealots!” the stallion corrected, “Now hold on tight, this last turn’s a doozy!”

It was.