

## The Weight Of Our Sins



A buzzing filled Rainbow Dash's ears as a million insects crawled under her skin. *Every second you disobey one of my instructions, my spell is going to take a piece of your sanity.* A violent shudder wracked her body, and she hit the floor with a dull thud. How had she gotten there?

She needed to hurt Pinkie Pie. No, Pinkie Pie was her friend. Dash bit her tongue as she tried to make sense of her surroundings, then realized that she wasn't supposed to think of herself as Rainbow Dash. She wasn't even supposed to think. *Don't think*, or it will come back and take little pieces of Rainbow Dash away and they won't come back again. *Don't think*, just kill your friends with your bare hooves. *Don't think. Just do.*

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight was calling her name.

Dash staggered to her hooves and looked around frantically, her mind failing to process everything she saw. It wasn't Twilight; it couldn't be Twilight. It was Twilight's prison and Dash's jailor. It was Nihilus.

A pair of hooves grabbed her. "Rainbow Dash!" Nihilus said as she spun Dash towards her.

Uninhibited hatred seared through Dash's veins, hot and intense. The sickening sound of a hoof hitting flesh rang out as she struck Nihilus across the face. This was the monster who made her kill Fluttershy. She was going to *pay*.

Nihilus reeled back as blood fountained from her muzzle. "Someone grab her!" she shouted.

Rainbow Dash wasn't going to let anyone grab her. She was going to escape and be free and nopony would hurt her ever again. She spun away from Nihilus, coming face to face with Celestia, Luna, and her friends.

"Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said softly.

But it couldn't be Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash had felt Fluttershy's pulse stop under her hooves. Fluttershy was dead, and none of them were really there, and any moment now she was going to return to the Insanity and kill the rest of her friends.

Suddenly she was staring into two glittering pools of darkness, stretching on into infinity and bringing it right back to her. She was being passed a steaming cup of hot cocoa after a frigid winter flight. She was curling up by a fireplace and stretching out her aching muscles, languishing in the feel of spent energy. All of her friends were still alive, and she was Rainbow Dash again. When Fluttershy broke her gaze, Dash's breaths came fast and ragged.

"What's your name?" Fluttershy asked as she stepped closer and rested a hoof on Dash's shoulder.

Dash shut her eyes. "Rainbow Dash." It was something she would never forget again.

Fluttershy's voice was powerful and firm. "Where are you?"

Dash looked around at all of her friends, each of whom was gathered around a plain table that seemed vaguely familiar. And all of them were alive. Nihilus had been dead for almost a month.

The walls and floors had been stripped of anything that might make the room the least bit homely, making it look bare and uninhabited. No streamers hung from the thick wooden beams that made up the rafters, no balloons were tied to the polished banister that ran along the once-carpeted stairway. Sugarcube Corner obviously hadn't been occupied in some time, making the ground floor a dim reminder of the happy gathering it once hosted. It was the kind of room that could feel lonely with eight ponies in it.

"Sugarcube Corner," Dash said. "We're in Sugarcube Corner." She became acutely aware of the fact that everyone in the room was watching her and Fluttershy.

"Why?" Fluttershy asked.

Dash searched her brain for an answer. "Because... Ponyville is burning." Her eyes widened. "There are dead ponies everywhere and this is the only place we can go. And Terra..." Dash's eyes flitted around the room frantically. "Terra is hurting us..." She spun around as the memory of the fight came into sharp relief in her mind.

Sure enough, the former queen sat in an iron cage that had been stuffed into a corner. She looked tiny without wings or a horn. They'd beaten her. They'd won.

Standing next to Terra's cage was Twilight Sparkle, a thin trickle of blood drawing itself up her face and back into her nostril. Twilight was looking at Dash, her eyes apprehensive and hurt.

Dash had hit her across the face. Dash had thought she was Nihilus again.

“You brought us here to show us Terra’s memories,” Dash whispered to Twilight. “It was the closest building still standing.” Slowly, Twilight nodded. “And Titan cast the spell. The same...” Dash swallowed. “—The same spell Nihilus used on me.”

“Yeah,” Twilight whispered. “It’s exactly the same spell. I think Titan invented it.”

“Of *course* Titan invented it, coruscarim,” Terra said from where she lay sprawled on the floor of her cage. “Is any other mind capable of something so cruel? Other than mine, that is.”

Dash tried to slow down her breathing. “He made you kill them,” she said.

“It’s a shame,” Terra said from within her cage. “But it would appear I missed a couple. I suppose Twilight Sparkle only showed you all the... *relevant* memories. Watching me stumble around Saddleville or Ponytown or *wherever* as I try to tell them all to run would hardly be productive, would it? They never could run fast or far enough before I lost control.

“There’s only so many times you can wake up from a nightmare, feeling a limp innocent fall from your bare hooves, before you just start letting things run their course. They’re all going to die anyway, why should you have to suffer with them? But the spell doesn’t just want you to give up, it wants you to *enjoy* it.”

A phantom buzzing. Her skin began to tingle. Rainbow Dash couldn’t afford to forget who she was. “Stop it!” she shouted. “Stop!” She clamped her hooves over her ears, but nothing stopped Terra’s onslaught of soul-rending truths.

“But no matter how hard you wish you could just let go, you *can’t*. Murder is... so truly evil, and you can’t take pleasure in evil. So what’s the solution? You *hate*. It’s such a powerful thing. I hated my mother for leaving me with him. I hated Discord for ruining my world. And I hated my father, every second of every day. I was choking on it, so much hatred I could barely speak. Because Titan never told me I couldn’t hate him, only that I had to obey him. He knew I’d need it if he wanted me to change. Eventually, I just started hating everything, and suffering became my only release.”

Hadn’t Rainbow Dash built Wrong out of hatred? Out of her feelings of betrayal and abandonment? Dash remembered the feel of Applejack’s rope sliding through her hooves as she dropped Pinkie Pie to her death.

Terra was shaking now. “The Terra you just saw is dead. Buried beneath countless corpses. There isn’t a shred of her left inside me, and if there was I’d take pleasure in destroying it. She was pathetic, everything I despise.”

Dash stared at Terra, at Titan's greatest victim, and realized that Terra was right. Her insanity had run full circle, scooping out the old Terra and filling her in with a monster. How long would it have taken before Rainbow Dash would have fully succumbed to the Insanity? A week had turned her into Wrong. How long had Terra suffered?

Fluttershy placed a hoof on Dash's shoulder again. "Rainbow Dash?" she asked. "Do you want to, maybe um, leave?"

Did Dash want to leave? Would leaving really do her any good? It wasn't like she could fly away from herself.

"No," Dash spoke loudly so that the whole room would hear. "I can do this. I'm still part of the team. Uh..." Dash scratched the back of her mane with a hoof. "Sorry for hitting you, Twilight."

Twilight's face was an expressionless mask. "It's fine. Not much can hurt me anymore, anyway."

"Don't say that, Twilight," Fluttershy said.

"Sorry, did that sound bad?" Twilight said. "It's a good thing really." She frowned slightly. "I think. Anyway, on to the matters at hoof!" A quill and some parchment popped into the air beside her. "I'll take minutes."

The sight of Twilight, quill poised over a scroll, was so *normal* that Dash couldn't help feel a little calmed. She found an open spot at their table, and Fluttershy joined her.

"Your highnesses?" Twilight prompted. "You two are in charge."

Celestia nodded, then opened her mouth to speak. Twilight's quill was scratching against the parchment before she had said anything.

"Terra should die," Celestia said.

Twilight's quill tore through her parchment. "What?"

Next to Celestia, Luna gave a slow nod. "I agree."

Terra started to laugh, a slow, building cackle that upset the newborn silence. No one interrupted her.

"You all look so surprised!" Terra said between bouts of mirth. "Of *course* my daughters want to kill me. All of you should, too. If by this point I haven't given you all an overpowering

feeling of murderous hatred when you look at me, I'm not doing my job."

Dash thought back to the bodies littering the town square. To the sound of Applejack screaming as she burned inside her own armor. She felt the bruises along her back aching from where Terra had pitched her at the ground.

Applejack said what they were all thinking. "Believe me, sugarcube. It's there."

Which made sense. Applejack spent more time than any of them among the citizenry, selling apples. Her family had been in town since its founding. She could probably call every corpse by name.

"I don't hate you," Fluttershy said. "I don't want to kill you."

Terra looked at her and let out a derisive snort. "Idiot."

"I like the idea of murder just as much as any of you do," Celestia said. "But Terra is dangerous, even without her power."

"We once spared our parents to keep our hooves clean," Luna said. "It turned out poorly."

Celestia nodded. "If any pony deserves death, it is Terra."

Fluttershy looked from Celestia to Luna. "But nopony *does*."

Luna regarded Fluttershy coolly. "Are there any other objections?"

"Do I count?" Terra asked.

"I abstain," Twilight said. "I can prove, through objective analysis and deductive logic, that killing Terra is the safest course of action for us." She shook her head and sighed. "What would the populace think of us if we spared her life? But... I still abstain."

Applejack touched the brim of her hat, then worked her mouth. She looked at Terra. "Rotten to the core," she said. "I have a family. They won't live in a world with *you*."

Rarity pursed her lips and seemed to think about it for awhile, never taking her eyes off of the diamond she was polishing. "Abstain," she said at last. "If we just keep her in the cage she can't really hurt anypony, now can she?"

Next around the table was Pinkie Pie. Rainbow Dash had hardly noticed her; she had so far been awfully quiet.

“Blue moon,” Pinkie Pie said loudly. She rocked back and forth slightly, and her eyes had a haunted quality to them. “Slim chance,” she said, somewhat quieter. “Fat chance too.”

Dash didn’t understand. She looked around at the others, but none of them clued her in. What was Pinkie Pie doing?

“Tough luck. Tangerine. Silvia.”

They were names, Dash realized with a touch of horror. Pinkie Pie knew every pony in Ponyville.

Pinkie Pie kept going, her voice growing quieter and quieter until she was only mouthing the words. Dash kept watching her, trying to catch when she said Blue Moon’s name again, when she started repeating her list. She couldn’t.

“Kill her,” Dash said.

“What?” Fluttershy grabbed her by the shoulders. “Rainbow Dash, you—”

“Would have wanted you to kill me,” Dash said. She nodded as she felt the truth in her words. “I would have wanted you to kill me, if I ever became like that.”

“No,” Fluttershy whispered.

“I understand your reluctance, Fluttershy,” Celestia said as she strode to Fluttershy’s side. “You of all ponies would feel for the Terra we saw in her memories. But she is not that Terra any longer.”

Fluttershy looked up at Celestia. “You can’t,” she said. “We aren’t murderers.”

“After so many years it will *finally* be done,” Luna said. “At long last, we will be rid of her. Shall I, sister?”

From the inside of her cage, Terra sneered. “It takes the eight of you this long to decide to kill the greatest mass-murderer in all of history, even though we’re all about to die anyway. What makes you think you’ll have what it takes to beat Titan?”

Celestia’s face fell into an expressionless mask. “No,” she said to Luna. “I’ll do it.” She took a slow step forward.

Fluttershy pushed herself away from the table and threw herself between Celestia and Terra. “I said *no!*” she screamed. Her face was drawn back into a dangerous look, yet tears gathered in the corner of her eyes. She planted her hooves firmly on the floor.

Celestia stopped and looked down at the mare. Her expression didn't change.

"Don't you understand?" Fluttershy said between heavy breaths. "When are we going to stop killing each other?"

Luna broke the ensuing silence. "Fluttershy, Terra is not the mare you saw in the memories."

Celestia regarded Fluttershy. "I understand your sympathy, Fluttershy. But this will be done."

Fluttershy backed up until her back was to Terra's cage. "If she could turn bad, bad can turn good."

Celestia gritted her teeth. "It has been decided."

"Then I un-decide it!" Fluttershy shouted. Her eyes were wide and frantic. Her voice became pleading. "We can't just sit around and decide to kill someone. We can't." Fluttershy turned on Twilight. "Twilight," she said. "*Please*."

Twilight drew a long, ragged breath. "They voted, Fluttershy," she said tiredly. "She's a murderer."

"So it's right to kill a pony because it's wrong to kill ponies?" Fluttershy asked.

"I don't know!" Twilight shouted, banging a hoof down on the table. "Why me? Why do I have to answer that question?"

"*This* is the crack team of ponies that defeated me with the magic of friendship?" Terra asked. "I have to say I'm glad I'm not capable of shame."

Rainbow Dash looked over to Terra. Terra was a murderer, yes, and they'd all wanted to kill Esteem for the same reasons. The fallen queen truly did deserve to die, in Dash's eyes.

But she wasn't going to leave Fluttershy to stand alone. The mare had guts, sticking up to Princess Celestia like that.

"Leave her alive," Rainbow Dash said. Twilight shot her a look of confusion, and she added, "What? She can't really hurt anyone, right? And we can always kill her later."

Twilight let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine. Terra lives for now. But she's yours to take care of, Fluttershy. As for *you*," Twilight said, turning to Terra. "I hope you know what you're getting

into.”

Terra blanched. “Huh?”

“I’ll pull you out if I need you again,” Twilight said.

Dash looked from Twilight, who was paying attention to Terra, and Celestia, whose mouth was held half-open, as if she couldn’t think of something to say. Had Twilight just overruled the princess at Fluttershy’s behest? She had, and that could only mean one thing.

Twilight Sparkle was now the ruler of Equestria.



The Royal Pony Sisters sat atop a cloud high above Ponyville, watching the ruddy glow of the setting sun wash over the ruined town, a warm blanket draped over a hurt foal. The buildings below were barely specks, but Celestia could still see where the picturesque small town gave way to the ruin left by Terra’s swath of destruction.

Celestia idly drew a hoof through the cloud beneath her. “They *voted*,” she said. “We decided Terra would die and they just... put it to a vote.”

“That may be my fault,” Luna said. “I was not the sole decision maker after we went to Canterlot, especially not after Twilight’s return.”

Celestia sighed. “She overruled our decision and gave our mother to Fluttershy. No one opposed her. I’m not exactly used to having ponies second guess my decisions.”

Luna’s horn began to give off the faintest glow, and above them Sirius appeared in the night sky, so faint it was almost invisible. “That doesn’t go away,” she said. “But we have to consider the possibility that Fluttershy might be right.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be something?” Celestia asked. “Terra redeemed. Titan’s first victim.”

“Terra is sick,” Luna said. “I have never seen a pony take such pleasure in pain.” She fixed



the sky with an imperious glance, and Polaris revealed itself. “Still, if anypony could cure her, it is Fluttershy.”

The moment Celestia had the sun halfway below the horizon, Luna turned eastward. A faint sliver of the moon rose into the sky.

“I’ve always wanted them to take more autonomy,” Celestia said. “But this is not exactly the ideal time. They’ve had impeachment clauses for the past thousand years, elected officials, public forums, but they’ve *always* deferred to me. I’ve always wanted them to be able to rule themselves, to *choose*, but now...”

“What if they choose wrong?” Luna asked.

“What if *they choose wrong*?” Celestia said. “Twilight and her friends don’t know Terra as well as we do. We have the benefit of age. And we’ve seen a world they can’t even fathom.”

Luna looked down at Ponyville, and Celestia followed her gaze to the rubble that buried the town square, still smoking in places. “They’re closer to fathoming the old world than you or I are willing to admit,” Luna said. “And if they choose wrong they will suffer the consequences and learn.”

Celestia watched the last sliver of the sun fall below the horizon, glad to see the end of another miserable day of war. “And in a hundred years, when every pony alive now is dead, will the lessons they’ve learned be forgotten? Are they doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again?”

“Perhaps,” Luna said. “But we will be there to guide them.”

“Unless we die tomorrow,” Celestia said.

“Unless we die tomorrow,” Luna agreed. “I must admit, dear sister, that the odds do not seem to be in our favor.”

Celestia could have laughed at Luna’s understatement. The odds weren’t just against them; they were paltry. Insignificant. “Even if we win,” Celestia said. “The chances of both of us surviving are... slim.”

“I’m aware.”

The cloud beneath them was now the deep blue-grey of the coming night, and Celestia knew that if she were a mortal, she’d probably be feeling cold by now. She leaned her head against Luna’s side. “I wish we’d had more time together.”

“So do I. We spent so much time fighting. Each other, Discord, each other again. We were only really sisters when we were children. It seems like... a waste,” Luna said finally.

Celestia fixed her gaze on the ruins of Ponyville once again. “A waste,” she agreed. “I wish you could have seen more of the world I made.”

Luna gazed out over the landscape. “I know.”

“It wasn’t perfect, but it was still so much more than either of us had hoped. I thought it would be hard to take the war away, but ponykind just has so much *good* in them. They made it so easy.”

Luna gave a slight tilt of her head, as if considering Celestia’s words. “They adapted to war quite easily.”

Celestia scoffed. “Did you see them in there? They don’t have much fight left in them, if they have any. I’m glad it’s our fight now. I’ve put Twilight through enough.”

More stars were flickering into view as the pale orange light of the sun faded. “You did what you had to,” Luna said, her eyes on the sky.

“And she’ll never forgive me for it.”

“Give it time,” Luna said. “Ponykind used to despise and fear me. They still do, but not nearly as much as they once did. Every day I fight with them, their feelings of dislike ebb. Change is slow, Celestia. You of all ponies should know this.”

“Oh?” Celestia asked, her eyes twinkling with subdued mirth. “When did you get so wise?”

Luna shrugged, never taking her eyes off her work. “Too much time with the six. It’s odd: the love and gratitude of the citizenry used to be all I wanted. But now that I believe that what I’m doing is right, it doesn’t matter to me. All I care about is Titan’s defeat.”

“We don’t have time,” Celestia said. “Barely a day.”

“Unfortunately, you may be right,” Luna said.

“It isn’t fair,” Celestia whispered. The sun’s dying light drained the color from the world around them. “I just got you back. Everything was going to be perfect. We were going to rule together in a new golden age. And now Titan’s come back and destroyed everything I built over the past thousand years.”

“Celestia,” Luna said, pressing her muzzle against Celestia’s neck. “You and I made our

peace. We put decades of war behind us. We're fighting for what is right. We're fighting for ponykind. We're fighting against Titan. We've done all that we can, and now there's only one thing left to do."

Celestia looked up at the myriad stars that now spanned the night sky. "What's that?"

A faint smile touched Luna's lips. "With any luck? Succeed him."



Rarity was working.

The feel of the needle gripped with her mind, the taut pull of the fabric—these things did more to relieve her than any spa, any massage could ever do. Pinkie Pie's armor lay on her bed. The Boutique had been gone for two months now, so Rarity was making do with the tools the Cakes had around the house. And as she worked, she sang.

*"Thread by thread, stitching it together,  
Pinkie's rig, linking all the straps to fit just right,  
Making sure the magnets pull nicely  
Underarmor has to fit so tight  
Otherwise she'll risk taking some shrapnel,  
Leaving lots of room for her new grapnel  
I'm fixing Pinkie's rig"*

An effort of will, and Pinkie's rig was pulled apart into its components, then began to rotate in the air as Rarity examined the areas that needed patching. Had she ever had so much focus before the war?

*"Inch by inch, we get a little closer,  
One more god, Sweetie Belle I'll be back soon I swear,  
And you'll never know about father  
I'll make sure you live to be a mare  
Titan won't succeed in making us his  
Because a secret truth of our new world is  
That even gods can die"*

*Bladecasting's easy,  
It's thinking of you that's hard  
Blood makes me queasy,  
It'll ruin my robe; make..."*

Rarity frowned. "Hmm," she said. "Sleezy, cheesy, uneasy? Make me feel all uneasy? Make my friends feel uneasy?" She should have picked an easier word.

"You can sing," Pinkie said.

Rarity turned to find Pinkie Pie standing in the doorway to the room she'd lived in for years with a shell-shocked look about her. Pinkie's eyes moved from Rarity to the her old bed, covered in pink blankets and pillows, then on to her rig. "I can't sing anymore," she said finally.

Straps and canisters clattered against one another as Rarity gently set Pinkie Pie's rig down on the bed. "At first I could only hum," she said. "But it came back."

The floorboards creaked as Pinkie Pie stepped slowly into the room. "How can it come back?" she asked. "Nothing will ever go back to the way it was. Not without Blue Moon, and Slim Chance, and Fat Chance too..." Pinkie sat down and screwed her eyes shut.

"Oh my," Rarity said, striding over to where the mare had started to rock back and forth. "Pinkie Pie, darling, come here." Rarity put her forelegs around the mare and tried to steady her. "It will be all right. We'll win."

Pinkie Pie began to sob, her chest heaving against Rarity's side. "It doesn't matter if we win," she wailed. "They're all dead and Twilight doesn't smile and Rainbow Dash is so hurt..."

"Pinkie Pie!" Rarity snapped. Pinkie blinked away her tears as she looked up at Rarity. "Now you listen here." But what could Rarity say? Things were never just going to go back to the way things were.

"We aren't fighting to make things go back to the way they were," Rarity said. "We're fighting to survive."

*Terrible*, Rarity thought to herself. *That was absolutely terrible. How is that going to cheer up Pinkie Pie?* "But when this is over," Rarity continued as she saw the stricken look on Pinkie's face. "We will remember the dead."

*Ugh, now I sound like a soldier.* "We'll rebuild all the buildings that they knocked down, you understand? And we'll make Twilight smile."

Pinkie Pie snivelled. "Y-y-you really think so?"

“Of course I do, Pinkie Pie.”

Pinkie swallowed thickly. “Pinkie Pie swear?”

Rarity stopped. Could she Pinkie Pie swear that things would get better? Did she truly believe that they would? Pinkie Pie stared at her as Rarity tried to think, her face slowly breaking into anguish once more.

Rarity believed that some dresses—such as anything made of gauze, were fragile and prone to tearing. Sometimes a ruined dress could be patched, or tattered pieces replaced. But sometimes they couldn't. Sometimes a dress was beyond repair.

Those times were frustrating, but they were also rewarding; they were a chance to make an entirely new dress. The flaws of the precursor could be taken into account, and every design idea she'd had making the first dress could be incorporated into the second. Rarely had Rarity failed to design a dress that was not more fabulous, more awe-inspiring, more beautiful than the first.

“Pinkie Pie swear,” Rarity said, her voice firm and unwavering. “Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye. Nothing is so broken it can't be fixed, Pinkie Pie.”

Pinkie Pie sobbed once, drew a hoof across her wet nose, then looked up at Rarity and smiled.

Rarity smiled back. She did so *love* making dresses.



“Why won't she stop staring at me?” Terra asked from within her cage on the ground level of Sugarcube Corner.

Fluttershy looked back at Rarity, who had pulled up a chair and soundlessly examined Terra for the past ten minutes. “Her talent is beauty,” Fluttershy said. “And you're very pretty.”

“I'm aesthetically perfect,” Terra said. “I was built with your sense of visual appeal in mind.”

“No,” Rarity said. It was the first time she’d spoken since she’d sat down. “Not perfect. You were prettier in your memories. But even now you are very beautiful. On the outside, that is.”

“Inner beauty?” Terra raised an eyebrow. “How precious. Do you also intend to show me the goodness of the world with the power of heart? I’ve seen what ponies are on the inside, child. It isn’t pretty. It’s mostly water, actually. But it never fails to come out red.”

“I’m leaving,” Rarity said, standing. “I don’t see why you bother spending time with her, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy sighed. “I want to help you,” she said as the door swung shut behind Rarity.

Terra gave her a lazy smile and sprawled out against her cage bars. “Is that so?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Terra shivered. “Can you make me a god, little pegasus?”

“No.”

Terra waved a hoof dismissively. “Then I don’t exactly see how you can help me.”

“You were good once.”

Terra sneered like a predator expecting a fresh meal. “And that means *what*, exactly?”

“You can be good again,” Fluttershy said.

“You think you can make *me* a princess again? No. Certainly not in a day.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “Not in a day. But maybe someday.”

“You only have a day,” Terra said. “Titan will regain his full strength soon. If you think you or I will live see the sun rise the next morning, you are insane, little pegasus.”

Fluttershy paused before whispering, “I’m not a pegasus.”

Terra stood and leaned against the bars of her cage, her eyes narrowing. “Eraterus,” she hissed. “How could you possibly have survived?”

“I don’t know,” Fluttershy said. “But I’m alive and... and I don’t know what I am.”

Terra grinned. "Is that so?"

Fluttershy swallowed. "I used to take care of the animals," she said. "But Titan made it so that they won't listen anymore. And I can stare at something and take their choices away. And I heal, and I think I can sing..."

"Don't." Terra shivered again.

Fluttershy frowned. "Don't what?"

Terra shut her eyes. "Don't sing."

Fluttershy tilted her head. "What makes you think I would sing for you?"

Terra's eyes opened to narrow slits. "It would hurt me," she said, as though that explained everything.

"I don't want to hurt you, Terra."

"You should. Or have you forgotten all the ponies that they're burying right now because of me?"

"I don't want to kill you, Terra."

"And why not?"

"Why would I?" Fluttershy asked. She let out an exasperated sigh. "Murder makes murder right? *Please* listen to me, Terra. No pony has cared about you for so long. I thought that maybe if *I* cared, you'd at least have a second chance."

Terra wrapped her forelegs around herself. It almost looked as though she was cold. "Are you *really* so broken?"

"W-what do you mean?"

"What are you trying to prove by sticking by me, eraterus? Why do you need to convince everypony that you're so good and pure of heart? Do you want them all to see that you're better than they are?"

"N-n-no!"

Terra sneered. "Or is it that you do it for selfish reasons? Are you just trying to convince yourself that through all of this, ponies are still good? I have terrible news for you, eraterus: they

aren't."

"You're wrong!"

"They were good when they were happy," Terra said. "When Celestia had them living in ignorant bliss. You act like this new world is broken. It's fixed. This is the way things are supposed to be. This is, as Titan would say, the—"

"Don't!" Fluttershy said. "Don't say it." She refused to believe that the animals were *supposed* to run from her in fear. She refused. "Are you cold?"

Terra gritted her teeth. "It's night," she said. "And it's almost autumn. *I'm* cold because *it's* cold."

"Really?" Fluttershy asked. "I feel fine."

Terra started to rub her hooves together for warmth. "You've been at the mercy of heat for all your life. I've been a god. I'm not used to feeling anything but perfect. Now I feel like a wet paper bag."

"Did it hurt?" Fluttershy asked. "When we took it away?"

"Yes," Terra said. "And it wasn't *you* who took it away. It was Twilight Sparkle. You and your friends are just a set of batteries."

"I'm sorry."

Terra barked out a laugh. "For what?"

"Hurting you. I know that if Twilight could have made it easier for you, she would have."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Terra asked. "How can you not see what it took me seconds to realize? Your precious godling is so methodical, so reasonable, so *in control*. When it comes down to it, she's just cold, hard logic. Maybe when she looks at *you* there's equity in her eyes. Maybe *you* can watch it slowly leaking away as she kills her enemies one by one. But when she looked at me, right before she invaded my mind? Nothing. No pity, no hate, just the job she needed to do."

"Twilight isn't like that."

"Twilight is Titan, my little pony. She's a dark god waiting to happen. The weight of this war is going to make her collapse in on herself and—"



Fluttershy interrupted Terra with a voice that was perfectly calm. "Why are you doing this?"

Terra flashed her an innocent smile. "Doing what?"

"Trying to upset me. It isn't very nice."

Terra shrugged. "Cruelty, I suppose. I want to hurt you. It's what I do. It's who I am."

Fluttershy didn't answer Terra. Instead she stood up, turned around, and flew upstairs.

"You're proving me right!" Terra called out as she left. "Doesn't that bother you?"

Fluttershy found the Cakes's linen closet, grabbed the thickest blanket they had, then brought it back downstairs. Terra gave her a peculiar look as she passed it through the bars.

"Why?" she asked, eyeing the blanket suspiciously.

The faintest smile touched Fluttershy's face. "Kindness, I suppose. I want to help you. It's what I do. It's who I am."

Terra looked from the blanket to Fluttershy. Suspicion seemed to melt into confusion on her face. Terra looked at Fluttershy, her face uncomprehending, for a very long while.

Then she started to cry.

It didn't come out all at once, and Terra's first sobs were not very loud. Rather, her body trembled as she clumsily pulled the blanket toward herself with her hooves. She blinked hard, then blinked again, then shut her eyes entirely before tears started to roll down her face. She looked for all the world like a mare desperately trying not to cry.

"Go away," Terra said weakly. "Don't look at me."

"You need somepony, Terra."

Like a little filly, Terra tried to pull the blanket over her head so that she couldn't be seen. She failed. Fluttershy guessed she wasn't used to using her hooves.

"There's no one," Terra whimpered. "She died. He killed her. And I'll never live up to her expectations."

"Shhh. I'm here."

Terra swallowed. "Will you...?" She didn't finish her sentence.

Fluttershy didn't need her to. She got up, moved next to the cage, and reached through the bars to take Terra up in her hooves. Sometimes all a pony needed was to be held.

Terra punched her in the throat. The attack was so sudden, so unexpected, that Fluttershy didn't even have the time to cringe. One moment she could breathe, and the next she couldn't.

Terra threw herself forward, grabbed Fluttershy's mane in her teeth, then struck Fluttershy's forelegs with her own. Fluttershy's legs were thrown back, and she lost her balance. Terra dropped down to lie flat on the floor, then kicked a hind leg out to knock Fluttershy off her hooves.

Fluttershy spun as she fell, and Terra's forelegs wrapped their way around her neck before she hit the ground. It was all so well coordinated, so flawlessly executed, that she didn't have time to react. One moment she was offering Terra a hug, the next Terra had both forelegs wrapped around her and was using a hoof to push her neck into the stranglehold.

Terra's voice was venom in her ear. "Erateri can have enough earthpony magic to rival even the earthponies themselves. And as you're undoubtedly the apex eraterus—possibly the only one still alive—that means that you'll survive this. Which is why when you stop breathing, I'm going to cradle you to the ground, pull you close, and beat your head to a bloody pulp with my bare hooves."

Fluttershy flared her wings and beat her hind legs against the floor in panic. What had happened? Terra had lied. Terra had lied and Fluttershy had fallen for it. She tried to pull herself free, clutching at Terra's forelegs, but it was to no avail—her strength didn't matter when Terra had all the leverage. She couldn't meet Terra's eyes to use the stare. She couldn't open her mouth to sing—but what good would that do anyway?

"Who do you think is going to find you?" Terra asked. "Which of your friends is going to walk through that door and see the mess I've made? I hope it's Pinkie Pie; she seems so cheerful. Or maybe the rainbow one, who thinks that gods are something to be fought. Perhaps the earthpony; she seemed so close to breaking."

A blue glow as deep as midnight encased Terra's forelegs, and they were peeled away from Fluttershy's neck with a deliberate slowness. Fluttershy threw herself away from the cage as soon as she was freed, taking in a rasping breath that stung her throat as it went down. She looked up to see a set of familiar hooves on the floor before her.

"You think that they're weak," Luna said. "That their compassion makes them powerless." She stepped past Fluttershy to stand in front of Terra's cage.

Another choking gasp tore its way down her bruised throat as Fluttershy turned to see

Terra, suspended in the air before her daughter.

“Their compassion is what put you in that cage,” Luna said. “And their compassion is what will free you. Because no matter how much hatred you have inside you, Terra, Fluttershy alone has enough love to smother it.” Luna took a step closer and let Terra fall back to the floor. “Is Titan himself capable of such a feat? You and I both know the answer to *that* question, mother. There’s only one pony with true power in this room, Terra. It isn’t you. And it isn’t me, either.”

Terra pushed herself to her hooves, trembling, and wiped a foreleg across her mouth. She locked eyes with Fluttershy, her gaze one of pure loathing. “I *hate* you,” she said. “I *hate* you for not hating me.”

Luna took her eyes off of Terra. “I would think, Fluttershy, that you have done enough for tonight. Do you have a place to stay?”

Fluttershy realized that Luna was asking if her house had been destroyed or not. She nodded, not willing to speak through her damaged throat.

“Good,” Luna said, fixing Terra with a dispassionate glare. “Then let us leave my mother to her thoughts. I’m sure you’ve given her quite a few of them.”



“I’m sorry my mother tried to kill you. Are you all right?”

Luna was in Fluttershy’s cottage at the edge of Ponyville. They all had to stay somewhere, after all. Rainbow’s house was taken by her and the pegasi. Applejack’s farmhouse was built to cater to large crowds, and she, Pinkie Pie, and Spike were looking after the rest of the army. Sugarcube Corner held Terra and Rarity. Twilight would stay in the library.

A kettle sat heating on the stove—Fluttershy was going to try and soothe her throat with tea. Luna sat serenely in the center of the living room, and Fluttershy reclined on the couch under a blanket. She’d offered Luna one, but apparently the princess didn’t get cold.

“I shouldn’t have let her touch me,” Fluttershy rasped through her damaged windpipe.

“Perhaps,” Luna said. “But if redemption is possible, your actions alone will sway Terra.”

Fluttershy curled up on her couch and pulled a blanket over herself. “Do you believe that?”

“That redemption is possible?”

“Yes.”

Luna nodded. “I have to. I was once a hate-filled tyrant, Fluttershy. I killed more ponies than you have met in your entire life. Not either of our minds together could comprehend the lives that I have destroyed.”

Everypony she had ever known. Parents. Friends. Classmates from flight school. The mail pony. All of them dead twice over. Luna was right—Fluttershy *couldn't* comprehend death on such a scale. “You’ve saved us, too. We would have lost to Nihilus if it weren’t for you.”

“I am not concerned with balancing the scales, Fluttershy. If I have a hoof in defeating Titan, then they will be forever in my favour, but that does not mean that I cannot do evil. If Titan destroys us, then my deeds will have meant nothing, but that does not mean that I did not stand for good.”

“D-do you think... do you think we’ll win?”

“I don’t know,” Luna said. “Celestia and I together are strong. But Titan alone is a primordial force. He has always used agents to carry out his will. I fear what his direct intervention will bring.”

“It’s sad that he’s so alone,” Fluttershy said.

Luna couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not. Sympathy for Titan? “Hardly alone,” Luna said. “He likely has every creature in the Everfree under his control.”

Fluttershy sat up abruptly. “The creatures?”

Luna gave a curt nod. “Titan controls something or he destroys it, and the Everfree is the model of his natural order. I imagine that by now every living being, from the smallest carnivorous splinter beetle to Exakktus himself, is now under Titan’s control.”

“Exakktus?” Fluttershy asked.

“Exakktus the Black. The largest, oldest, and most powerful dragon alive. I saw him last over a thousand years ago.”

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "Titan has a dragon?"

"Indeed," said Luna. "It has been said that Exakktus is as big as a village. That his wings can smother the sun itself. His flames appear as roiling black smoke, thick and dark as ink, and his horde is as much the charred and twisted bones of his victims as it is treasure. His scales are as dark as *Singularity*, and his heart cares only for death and dominance. His maw—" Luna stopped. "Have I said something to frighten you, Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy was pale and shaking, her eyes wide and her pupils diminished to points. "I'm afraid of dragons," she whispered.

"I see. Have no fear, Fluttershy. Even in my youth, I could match Exakktus in battle. I slew his brother, Firkraag the Red, with the help of a knight named Valiant. He used the severed head to propose to my would-be murderer, Astor Coruscare. Also, his blade, *Carsomyr*, ended up in the possession of Rarity's father Esteem. Small world. I imagine Exakktus would do anything to add that sword to his horde."

Fluttershy swallowed. "Anything?"

"Dragons live for treasure, Fluttershy. Possessing the sword that slew Exakktus's only equal would show that he has surpassed Firkraag once and for all. And it is not as though he can add *Nadir* to his horde."

"Luna," Fluttershy whispered, "do we still, um, do we still... *have* the sword?"



In that corner, the forces of evil.

One dark god who had supposedly seen the creation of their world. Titan, who had never lost to an enemy before. His power was something quantifiable—Twilight's best estimate put him at somewhere around three thousand, four hundred years old. Alicorns were born with a set amount of magic that increased linearly with age, so it was easy to determine what Titan might measure on the Coruscare scale and apply the result to unicorn and earthpony magic as well.

But it was more than raw power. What spells did Titan know? How did he fight? Did he even know *how* to fight? After all, what use had Titan ever had for skill in battle when his only

true rival had apparently been Discord? According to Harmony, he wasn't just good—he was the best. She'd said she'd never seen him lose. But lose *what?* Against *whom?*

Then there was the matter of his alicorn magic. Celestia had a gift with fire. Luna could weave shadow easier than Rarity could cloth. What kind of spells came naturally to Titan? Mind magic? Control? He'd already demonstrated a remarkable ability to become undetectable—but Harmony had demonstrated remarkable abilities in spades.

Too many variables. The forces of evil had power, but it fell within such a wide range that it hardly bore thinking about.

And in the other corner, what would have to pass for the forces of good.

Luna, Celestia, and a smattering of ponies so weak in comparison as to be negligible. The princesses were what, a little more than a thousand years each? Then there were the Elements of Harmony. Friendship wasn't the strongest magic in the world, it was just the key to Harmony's superweapon. And Titan could pick his dead wife's magic apart with hardly a thought.

It didn't add up. Not with only Luna and Celestia, not including Twilight's godslaying archspell. There was no artifact to sweep in and magically save the day anymore. Twilight had finally learned the truth of the Elements's origins, and it had awakened her from a happy dream and dropped her into a grim reality. And the reality was that they were certainly going to lose.

Twilight picked up a duster with her magic and began to run it over the Ponyville Library's many bookshelves. They'd accumulated much grime in the time she'd been away, but with the end of the world looming, dusting wasn't really a priority task. Staying busy was.

It was night out, and the only light came from a couple of candles situated around the room. They cast a faint glow about the library, hardly enough to see by, but Twilight wasn't really paying attention to see if her duster missed any spots anyway.

It struck Twilight as odd that even now she was afraid to die. After all she'd been through, dying was certainly the least of her worries. And yet here she was, a scared little filly about to face the end of everything she held dear. Despite all her apparent power, she was nothing before Titan. Luna and Celestia weren't much better off.

The door to the library creaked open, and Twilight turned to see Princess Luna stride into the room, the flickering candlelight causing her shadow to dance against the wall. "Twilight Sparkle."

"Princess," Twilight said tonelessly.

The clatter of the shutting door was the only sound that followed. Luna regarded Twilight,

her face almost statuesque, before walking over to what seemed to be a randomly selected bookshelf. "You have lost hope," she said, examining the books.

*Sweep.* Twilight's duster cleared a layer of grime from a half-empty shelf. "You can tell." She'd meant it to come out a question; instead it sounded like a flat accusation.

"I suspected," Luna said. "Your mind is... not unlike Celestia's, and she has been having similar troubles." Luna's mane licked at the bindings of half a dozen books as she spoke, a second sky reaching out to touch whatever it could.

*Sweep.* At the mention of Celestia, Twilight stiffened a little. "Are you here because of her?"

"No, Twilight Sparkle. I am here for you. You despair."

*Sweep-sweep.* A layer of dust was sent to the floor. Later, Twilight would have to clean it too. "Despair? Do I look like I'm despairing right now?"

Luna stepped away from the bookshelf and turned toward Twilight Sparkle. "You do," she said. "Not the despair of a pony watching her house burn to the ground, but a different sort. A cold, lonely kind of despair. The despair of a pony standing in the ashes. It is a kind that I am not unfamiliar with. Why are you here alone, Twilight Sparkle, when you could easily be with your friends?"

*Snap.* The handle of Twilight's duster shattered, each wooden shard tumbling to the floor. Had she been holding it that hard? "We're going to lose." Twilight's voice was low.

"So you won't spend your last night alive with them?"

Twilight's breath caught in her throat for the slightest instant. How could she explain herself? "They'd... expect optimism. But I know better. How can I look at my friends and be happy when I know that we're going to die?"

Luna blinked. "I see."

"It's okay." Twilight's voice wavered. "We've... we've had some good times. Even after Titan they were still always, always..." Twilight swallowed. "*—there* for me."

Luna gracefully trod over to where Twilight stood staring at the broken shards of her duster. "Why do you think we'll lose?" Luna asked.

"Math." Was Twilight's answer. "He's stronger than all of us put together by a significant margin. He has more power." She lifted her broken duster into the air and floated the fragments over to a garbage bin.

“Power?” Luna said. “There is your mistake. This world is not one to be won by war, Twilight Sparkle. Power is not the only thing that determines the outcome of a conflict. Remember that.”

Twilight’s mouth twisted into a grim frown. “I’ve yet to see any evidence to support that, Princess.”

“Then consider your math error,” Luna said. “You failed to account for the magic of friendship. That puts our side ahead by quite a large order of magnitude.”

“The *magic of friendship*?” Twilight asked. “Friendship is just a... a *trigger condition* for Harmony’s weapon. And it’s a weapon that’s *useless* against Titan!”

“Friendship is *not* useless.”

“It’s *useless* here!”

Luna brought a hoof down on the library floor, shattering hardwood like it was paper. “Listen to yourself, Twilight Sparkle!”

Twilight drew back as splinters flew through the air around Luna’s hoof, then swallowed thickly.

“How could you of all ponies possibly believe that there is no magic in friendship? After all that it has helped you accomplish, after *all* that you have seen! Go to your friends. Look them in the eyes, talk with them, laugh with them, and tell me if lifting a duster is more magical than what you *feel*, truly *feel*, in your heart. Friendship is a *force*, Twilight Sparkle.

“Love. Wonder. Happiness. Titan has none of these things. If you allow him to take ours, then you give up our only advantage. If we are going to win, it will be for our intangible virtues, not brute force. Magic, *real* magic, the kind that I use to raise the moon, cannot be fought.”

Twilight stared at the floor, trying as hard as she could to understand what Luna was telling her. “And I’m here in the library, alone,” she said at last. “I’m losing hope when they need me most.”

Luna leaned down, and her flowing mane sent a cool breeze over Twilight’s face. The princess looked almost... indistinct, in the candlelight. As though she truly were an object of shadow, vulnerable to the faintest flame.

“You are not alone, Twilight Sparkle. I am here.”

Twilight sighed. “Do you know how many townspies I spoke to today? Ponies who’d lost



loved ones, their homes, everything. Ponies who used to *know* me, and now they act like I'm their saviour, despite Celestia's return."

"You are a talented leader, Twilight Sparkle. They do well to put their faith in you."

Twilight turned on her heels and began to pace, avoiding the new hole Luna had made in her floor. "I might be a good master general," Twilight said. "But I'm not infallible!"

"I know, Twilight. We can't ever hope to deserve the trust they give us. But we can *try*. And if any pony deserves their faith, it is you. You are not the distant moon or the fallen sun. You are one of them, and you understand them, far more than my sister or I ever have. You have shown yourself willing to risk everything for them, and when you truly accept the mantle of leadership, you are... *inspiring*."

Luna's eyes grew distant as the flickering candle flames played within them. "You make others want to be... better. *More* than what they once were. The effect that you can have..." Luna pulled her hoof from the broken floor and set it down on solid ground. "I believe that *you* can build a better future for ponykind. And I believe that *you* have inside you the very soul of Titan's undoing. I have faith in you, Twilight Sparkle.

Luna reached out, cupped Twilight's face in her hooves, and their eyes met. Twilight stared into her nebulous turquoise orbs and felt a vague tinge of familiarity. Luna spoke again, her voice consumed with determination.

"Prove. Me. *Right*."



Ponykind was a drift of infinitesimal dust, billowing about his hooves on the winds of blind chance. They dared to call it a victory when he did not sweep them aside.

Titan sat. It was not a position he assumed very often. The shattered plateau of the Dark Heart of the Everfree Forest spread out around him, sundered by the clash of gods. The verdant forest stretched out around the plateau, ignorant in its serenity.

They were ants, and emboldened by their capacity to lift a weight ten times their own, they were trying to move a mountain. But Titan was immovable.

Titan stood, walked three paces, and looked down on the exact center of the plateau. He drew a hoof across the ground, brushing away dust and pebbles to uncover the smooth rock beneath. A touch to the stone, and a slight ripple of power disturbed the air, tearing leaves off the trees around the broken mountain. It returned to him in moments, carrying the character of a magic he had long since forgotten to feel.

A savage raged against a thunderstorm, unaware of the titanic conflict the elements waged within. What could one pony, one unenlightened brute do to end the churning tempest? Twilight Sparkle would rage, and the lightning would come. But would her death suffice, or did her transgressions call for true retribution?

Titan's gaze pierced stone and earth and spell, seeing for the first time what he had buried in an aeon past. Twilight Sparkle dared to wield Harmony's magic against her King. He would use Harmony's magic against his subjects.

The earth shook.

They were wretched parasites, crying out against the very being that had given them life and earth and order. Their crushing insignificance, their debilitating simplicity had fascinated Harmony. They forever craved the demands of their design, and so the ghost of intellect with which they were gifted attributed to these things higher forms so as to justify their primitive pursuits. Love, for companionship. Morality, to guide their herd mentality. Peace, as an assurance of survival. As if they could comprehend true morality. As if Titan had not already given them peace.

The false plateau cracked and broke beneath him, the sound loud enough to break mortal ears. The earth seized, and trees were torn free from the earth, their roots snapping as dirt cascaded from their forms. Titan ascended.

Harmony had succumbed to their false beliefs, turning to them for guidance rather than the very tenets by which she and Titan had ruled. Through her, ponykind had killed Titan's son, and eventually Harmony herself. Even as Titan had bought them real peace by defeating Discord.

The arms of The Citadel were now distinct. They heaved their way out of the ground around him, each carrying a thousand tons of broken stone and soil. A small effort of will, and Titan blew most of the debris away. He folded his wings and set his hooves down on the shards that rose to receive him for the first time in a millenia and a half.

They were cosmic dust caught within the pull of a star. They could not even comprehend the being that they reckoned with, and they did not understand his divine providence. Twilight Sparkle led them. Twilight Sparkle was the most ignorant of all.

Titan began to ascend, the elementary white of his magic filling the sigils of the shards wherever he stepped. The remaining debris was annihilated and recycled as The Citadel came to life. Harmony's greatest creation. Next to Empyrean, that was.

They were machine beings, worth only the matter that composed them. The drop of divine blood in all of them had caused them to malfunction as intellect warred with instinct to create a hybrid monstrosity. Was reducing them to their base state the only answer left?

Simultaneously, each petal-like arm of The Citadel met its neighbors, sealing Titan within the metal tower. He continued his climb to the uppermost ring at a leisurely pace. He was in no hurry.

Terra was gone. No doubt killed by Twilight Sparkle and Harmony's last, wretched gift to ponykind. Had Twilight Sparkle taken her power? Would Twilight Sparkle meet him in battle alongside Celestia? Were they so infected by pony ideals that their basic arithmetic could fail them that much? Did they truly hold on to hope?

Titan reached the summit, and his horn burned like a star brought low. The walls of The Citadel were lit with his power, and the great spell shaped itself in his mind. Each ring formed from the floating shards beneath him, and a single beam of white light shot skyward.

High above Titan, a wave of energy travelled outward from the point where the beam met the sky. The first spell was the call. Each creature he had tamed in the Everfree would come to him, and each of them would take part in the slaughter.

Another wave. The second spell was the storm. Let the savages bring themselves to bear against his might. Only Titan could tame the feral elements, now.

The final wave did not come, for the final spell would take time. Such was its magnitude that Titan himself could not have cast it without The Citadel to provide the design, to deliver his magic to the world.

He had decided that ponykind could be salvaged. Genocide was beneath him. Instead, despite all their resistances, ponykind would be fixed. The final spell would kill only the things that made them weak, only the things that made them imperfect servants of the divine authority. When it was finished, they would fit perfectly into the natural order.

No freedom. No will. No love. No morality. No hope.

Could a more perfect world be imagined?

Titan had not always been alone. He had once been imperfect. But ponykind had taken his companions from him, and in the stark emptiness that followed he had seen his true place in the

natural order. As its master.

Now they would be empty, too. They would thank him, once he showed them how. And they would worship him, once he gave them their expectations. They would see that companionship was a waste. That Titan had been right all along. Not the other way around.

But for now they would come for him. Twilight Sparkle would come for him. They would wade through a sea of their own ignorant imperfection, and when they finally reached Titan, he would drown them. He would drown them all. Even his daughters.

The king was the strongest piece. The only piece that mattered. The piece that bore the burden of both victory and defeat. The piece that was the avatar of the player himself.

And in all of creation, from the hot and screaming birth of the universe to the unfathomable end of time, from the edge of the cosmos to the center of the most massive, seething star, from the youngest god to the heart of every living pony, there was only one true king.

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Chapter 21: [The End of Harmony](#)

[A thanks goes out to The Prereaders](#)