



Bridled Fury

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Chapter 1

Kratos, Ghost of Sparta, did not reflect any emotion as he tore his blade out of the chest of the undead warrior before him, turning his attention to its fallen comrades. Satyrs, undead, cerberi, and centaurs all lay before him, torn limb from limb, their blood coating the stone floor with a pungent scent familiar to the Spartan. "Weaklings," he spat.

He sheathed his blades for the time being, and continued walking through the hallway, stepping on the corpses below his feet. He bent before the iron gate in front of him, gripping the bars. Kratos lifted the heavy gate, slamming it upward into the frame with hardly a second thought. As he stepped into the enormous round room, he noticed a small, almost diminutive altar in the middle of the room. He stepped towards the shrine, hoping to see the small statuette displayed there.

The Spartan turned at a noise. He watched with a growing anger as shadowy portals appeared around the temple room. From these dark holes, figures emerged. More undead soldiers and archers, satyrs, gorgons, and centaurs appeared before him, all with the same intent as the others: to kill him.

With a roar, Kratos drew the Blades of Exile, their wicked curves gleaming in the torchlight, and threw himself at the first satyr in his sight. He cut a gash across its chest, hot blood spilling out even as the Spartan stabbed the other blade into the warrior's skull. He swung the chains bound to his flesh, sending the blades in glowing crimson arcs across the room, rending flesh and bone before his burning gaze.

"Is *this* how you challenge me, Zeus?" he bellowed, jumping behind a gorgon. He wrapped his iron grip around its neck, pulling at her skull. He felt the skin stretching, heard the wretched snake screaming beneath him, flashing its stone gaze at its comrades in its frenzied panic. As he finally tore the gorgon's head away, part of its spine trailing behind, he finished his question. "Do you send these weak foes to me, so that I might grow tired of bloodshed?"

He stabbed another archer. "I am the true god of war! I will *never* tire of bloodshed!" He launched a blade straight into the heart of a satyr, swinging the still-bleating body into its comrades.

He gripped the blades tight in his hands, feeling a fire building up inside of him, and he unleashed his energy, swinging his chain in an enormous vortex of whistling blades and screaming fire, reducing the remaining enemies to nothingness. Kratos retrieved his blades; his shoulders were slumped, and he breathed heavily. Once again, another legion of foes were dead before his feet.

With a grunt, Kratos sheathed his blades, and turned to the shrine. As he drew closer to it, the object displayed on the altar became more obvious to him. It was some sort of statue, depicting a rearing horse. Its marble body was far cleaner and more polished than the surrounding stone in the room.

"Kratos," a voice whispered gently.

The Spartan once again drew his blades, looking for the voice. "Who goes there?" he demanded, "Show yourself!"

The voice echoed from all sides, inside Kratos' mind. *"I am afraid I cannot physically manifest myself. However, I can tell you this: the statue before you can grant you what you seek."*

"This relic will grant me power? Power to defeat Zeus?"

"Once you unlock the power held within, you will defeat your most hated enemy."

Kratos glared. "How do I know this is not a trick? Gods and Titans alike have attempted to lure me away from my path. Why would this be any different?"

At this, there was a blinding white light. Kratos flinched, raising his arms to defend himself, but instead of blistering heat, he felt soothing warmth. Relief washed over his tensed muscles, his numerous scars slightly tingling at the light's touch. For a moment, Kratos felt at ease.

As the light slowly receded, Kratos felt his brow lower and his anger slowly return. *"Would any of your gods have done that? Surely they would instead blast you with fire and lightning."*

"They would have." The Ghost of Sparta stewed in his thoughts, eyes closed in concentration. "Fine." He said at last.

Kratos turned to the shrine, putting away the Blades of Exile. He strode powerfully towards the altar and picked up the statue. The small horse felt surprisingly light, and as he turned it over in his calloused hands, it felt immensely fragile.

Suddenly, the statue exploded in his hands. Kratos was paralyzed as the light returned, harsher, more painful. *"TREACHERY!"* he snarled. The light was overwhelming him now, enveloping. The warmth returned, but Kratos only felt angrier at the voice. Just before he was completely overpowered, the former god of war cursed the gods with his final thoughts.

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Princess Celestia started suddenly. She had been sitting in her throne room in Canterlot, listening to the latest report from her guards when she suddenly felt a deep disturbance.

"Sister?" To her right, Princess Luna moved to comfort her fellow alicorn. "Did you feel something?"

The captain of the guard stopped mid-sentence, noticing the monarchs' looks of concern. Celestia shook her radiant mane in unease. "Captain, keep us alert of any unusual news. I believe we may soon have a very important visitor."

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Chapter 2

THOOM!

“Oh, my goodness!”

At the outskirts of the Everfree Forest, a yellow pegasus froze. She had just finished tending to the animals in the afternoon when there was suddenly a small explosion from beyond the thick tree line.

Fluttershy cringed, her pink mane falling in front of her eye. “That sounded really serious!” she quietly exclaimed. “I have to see what happened!” She flared open her wings, about to take off into the woods, when she hesitated. “It could be dangerous. Maybe I should get the others first...”

“ZEUUUUUUUUUUUS!” A voiced screamed from the same direction as the explosion. It sounded angry and hurt.

Fluttershy gasped. “I can’t wait for them; somepony needs help!” With that, she took off as fast as she could through the forest, dodging tree trunks and branches in her path.

As Fluttershy flew through the forest, she heard the voice cry out again, this time much closer. The pegasus froze in her tracks, hiding behind the undergrowth as she peered into the clearing.

There, she saw a large earth pony walking in circles. He was easily as massive as Big Macintosh himself; his fur was a sickly white, not at all as pure as Angel or Rarity’s coat, with weird red markings running along his left side and an odd red cutie mark shaped like an upside-down horseshoe. Under his fur was an abundance of scars and wounds, especially a large gash running along his abdomen. There was no mane atop his head, but instead a black goatee. He was talking angrily to himself.

“What is this? Why does Zeus drive me to such madness? What is the point? Grraaaaah!” With that, the earth pony swung his tail. Fluttershy

saw that there was some kind of a chain attached to it, and she watched in shock as the chain flew out, the horrible looking blade on the end stabbing into a tree trunk. Fluttershy could only look on as he pulled the chain with all of his might, and within a groan the tree crashed to the forest floor.

As the stallion panted in exhaustion, Fluttershy moved her hoof, snapping a small twig. The earth pony turned suddenly, swinging the chain again. The blade, flat side glowing in odd patterns, embedded itself in a tree just inches from Fluttershy's location.

"Show yourself!" he ordered.

With no other option, Fluttershy timidly stepped out from behind the bushes. Her ears were tucked far back, and she kept her eyes on her hooves.

"What is your name?" the strange pony demanded.

Fluttershy paused. "My name is, uh, Fluttershy."

"Speak up!"

"My name is... Fluttershy."

"I demand your *name!*" the pony roared, towering over the meek pegasus.

Fluttershy squeezed her eyes tight. "Fluttershy! My name is Fluttershy!" she said at last. Although her shout was hardly loud, the pony heard it this time.

"What do you want, Fluttershy?"

"I... I heard you yelling, a-and and I thought you needed help, so I..."

The earth pony glared. "How do I know you're not a spy?"

"A spy?" The pegasus shrank even lower. "A spy from whom?"

"From Zeus!"

Fluttershy blinked. "Zeus? I've never heard that name before..."

The stranger blinked. "You... you do not know of the gods?" The anger in his green eyes receded, if only just a little.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, kind of. You see, the princesses, Celestia and Luna, they're kind of gods. I mean, they control the sun and the moon and stuff, but I don't know any other gods."

The pony looked away, his mind clearly somewhere different. "Then I am in a land beyond the gods' reach," he muttered, his tail twirling the chain back up. He turned back to Fluttershy. "Where am I?"

"Well, this is the Everfree Forest."

"Everfree...?"

"Well, yes, but I guess this whole place is Equestria. I mean, the part the princesses rule. I don't know about the zebras and the griffons, but—"

"Griffons?" The strange pony grew a stern look. "I cannot say I enjoy griffons."

Fluttershy, seeing an opportunity to connect, turned her head more towards the earth pony. "Oh, me neither, I guess. There aren't that many here, though."

The stranger nodded. "Fair enough." He turned and began walking away.

"W-Wait! Where are you going?" Fluttershy followed the other pony, still rather afraid of him, but concerned nonetheless.

"You said you have two gods ruling this realm." The yellow pegasus nodded slowly. "Well, then I am going to find my way to them and pay them a visit. They will return me to my own lands, or I will *make* them return me. By any means necessary," he added, glancing towards his tail-blade.

Fluttershy gasped. “Y-You can’t do that! You can’t hurt Celestia or Luna!”

“Watch me,” the white-and-red pony continued walking. “I’ll crush anything that stands in my way.”

Fluttershy felt something snap internally. She had felt this feeling before; once when a dragon had threatened Ponyville, and another time when a cockatrice attacked her and the Cutie Mark Crusaders. She could feel her eyes burning with fury as she flew around, stopping the other pony dead in his tracks. She hovered with her wings so that she could be at his eye level.

“You won’t lay a *hoof* on our princesses!” the pegasus ordered.

As he looked into her eyes, Kratos could feel his blood run cold. He had traversed the pits of Tartarus, fought monsters that would’ve driven lesser men mad, and slain gods with his own bare hands. And yet here he was, frozen, gripped with... *fear*, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. This small horse had paralyzed him when Medusa herself could not.

“Now, I don’t know who you think you are, or where you’re from, or why you have to be so mean,” the pegasus continued, “but that’s no excuse to threaten somepony you’ve never even met! Now, you are going to follow me back to town, and you aren’t going to harm a *fly*!” She hovered closer to Kratos, her eyes blazing. “Am? I? *Clear?*”

His mouth suddenly very dry, Kratos could only nod.

Fluttershy sighed, relieved that the strange pony complied. “Good,” she said at last, smiling softly. “Let’s go back to Ponyville, and we’ll have all of this sorted out, okay?” She touched back down on the ground and began walking the other direction towards Ponyville, the lumbering warhorse dumbly following behind.

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As the two ponies walked through the Everfree Forest, Fluttershy looked back shyly at the strange earth pony behind her. “So, um, what’s your name?” she asked.

The other pony shook himself out of his trance, then looked over at her. "Kratos. My name is Kratos," he said at last.

"Oh, well that's a nice name. So, what do you do, Mister Kratos?"

"My profession?" The pegasus nodded. "The same as all Spartans. I am a warrior. Former Spartan captain, former servant of Ares, former god of war."

Fluttershy looked at Kratos with some apprehension now. She was walking alongside a killer. He gave off a sort of aura of anger, but also something else, something sadder. "So, you were a god? You don't seem to like gods much."

Kratos glowered. "They all betrayed me, one after the other. They were my family, and still they betrayed me. I was just their pawn."

"Oh." Fluttershy looked away. They walked in silence through the forest.

The sun hung low in the sky when they finally remerged from the woods, just outside of Fluttershy's small cottage. As they approached the door, Fluttershy looked over at Kratos. "Now, you can stay here until the morning, and then we'll talk to Twilight and see if she can let you talk with the princesses. And *only* talking," she added sternly.

Kratos, against his better judgment, agreed. He hadn't rested in years, and the small, earthy cottage radiated peace and quiet. He walked in after Fluttershy, looking about the small, simple house.

Fluttershy looked at her guest. "Are you hungry for anything? I have some soup if you want, or maybe carrots."

The Spartan considered asking for something with meat, until he remembered the fact that ponies— 'pony' seemed much more fitting than 'horse' here— most likely weren't carnivorous. He shook his head. "I would prefer sleep," he said.

“Oh, okay then. Follow me.” Fluttershy walked softly up the stairs at the back of the room. Kratos close behind. They walked down a short hallway, and the yellow pegasus pushed a door open with her nose. “You can sleep here tonight. If you like it, I mean. If not, that’s okay. I could sleep here instead, and you could take mine if—“

“No. This will do,” Kratos said sternly, cutting Fluttershy off. “Thank you,” he added after a pause.

Fluttershy nodded and walked out of the room, whispering a quiet “Good night.”

Kratos listened to her hoofsteps down the stairs, then turned to the bed. It did seem rather small compared to his massive frame, but it would serve its purpose. He walked towards it, silently wondering how he was supposed to get in. The thought came to him, with no hint of irony, that this new form of his could very well present the greatest challenges he had ever faced in his entire life. The Ghost of Sparta then grit his teeth in determination.

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Downstairs, Fluttershy winced as she heard another thump from the room upstairs. She truly wanted to offer Kratos help, but the earth pony strongly insisted he figure the bed out on his own. That had been almost fifteen minutes ago.

She shook her head as an exasperated growl rumbled through the ceiling. “Poor thing,” she sighed. “I’m not even sure how he can have so much trouble with something as simple as getting into bed!”

The pegasus clopped up the stairs again, silently bracing herself for more gravelly shouting. Just as she was about to knock on the door, however, that same voice called out, much less angry this time. “Fluttershy? Could you come here?”

Fluttershy paused for a moment, then swung the door open. Although she didn’t laugh, the mare was more than amused to see Kratos lying on the floor, completely tangled up in the sheets. “I may need your help after all,” he said finally.

Fluttershy, silently admonishing herself for finding humor in somepony else's suffering, gently tugged the sheets off of Kratos. She motioned towards the bed, and he reluctantly obliged, crawling carefully onto the mattress. Once the earth pony was securely on, Fluttershy pulled the sheets and blankets up onto the bed and on top of the earth pony. If anypony else had been in the room, they likely wouldn't have known what to make of the timid pegasus apparently tucking in a massive stallion for the night.

"There you go," she smiled. "Sweet dreams." She walked towards her own bedroom, noting that Luna's night had indeed taken over the sky since her guest had first entered his bedroom.

Kratos shifted in his small bed, feeling the heavy, warm quilt draped over him. The air was calm and cool, and as the Spartan's eyes slowly shut, he could feel...

Peaceful.

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Chapter 3

Kratos suddenly awoke standing in the middle of a city, still a pony. As he observed the crumbled architecture, he suddenly realized where he was. “Rhodes,” he growled under his breath. “That means—”

There was a rumble beneath his hooves, and Kratos turned towards the ledge in time to see the Colossus of Rhodes rise up before him, its eyes glowing blue with energy. This time, however, it wasn’t a humanoid form; the gargantuan statue was now a gigantic horse, with massive stone wings and a monumental horn spiraling out of its forehead.

Kratos just barely had time to twirl about his tail when the Colossus’ horn glowed blue, and he suddenly felt himself lifted above the ground. He was dragged up to the eyes of the stone monstrosity, struggling all the way. As he leveled in front of its face, the giant brows furrowed.

“It’s been some time, Kratos,” the Colossus remarked in a familiar voice.

“Gaia?” Shock mixed in with Kratos’ anger. “You fell off the edge of Olympus!”

Gaia’s voice replied, “You think a mortal like yourself can kill a Titan?”

“I have killed many unkillable things, Gaia. You’re just another supposed immortal who refuses to leave me be!”

Gaia-Colossus glared at the earth pony. “Don’t think that just because you’re in another world that I cannot make you suffer, Spartan.” She spat out the last word as if it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“Leave me, Gaia!”

“No, I won’t leave. In fact, I’m going to ensure that your dreams will be nothing but misery.” At those words, the world began to shift and ripple.

Kratos found himself still floating in the air, reliving the horrors of his life once again. He witnessed his swearing of allegiance to Ares, a foolish and costly action; he saw the dreaded chains wrap around his arms, felt their red-hot metal sear his flesh; then, as was what happened in every one of his nightmares, he watched himself kill his wife and daughter, over and over and over.

Every time the scenes played in his mind, the flames in the background grew higher, the heat grew stronger, the pain more unbearable, the grief weighing heavier and heavier on his conscience.

Just as the Spartan was nearing his breaking point, the fires extinguished. He heard Gaia's voice cry out, "What? What is this? Who dares to tamper with the work of the Titans?"

In response, a second voice rang out across the vast dreamscape. "You are intruding on the realm of dreams. That is *my* domain."

"This is not over, Spartan! I will be back..." Gaia's voice lost its power, and Kratos awoke.

Stirring, the earth pony looked towards the window. Outside, the moon shone brightly, illuminating everything in its soft, white glow. Somehow, he knew, the moon had saved him from his nightmares. "Thank you," he whispered quietly.

Kratos once again closed his eyes and slept, and thankfully did not dream.

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Kratos opened his eyes to bright sunlight filtering through the window. He was now sure of two things: first, that he was still in a land of talking ponies; and second, that some sort of goddess granted him the calmest sleep he'd had in years. The relief brought by the second balanced out the annoyance of the first.

As he walked out of the bedroom, he turned towards the stairs, but hesitated at the top when he heard voices.

“—just starts tearing down trees and threatening Celestia and Luna. And you brought him to Ponyville?”

Fluttershy’s voice replied, “He was just scared, Twilight! He acted just like how lots of animals do when they’re hurt and confused. He needed help getting into bed just last night!” Kratos frowned at the comparison to a wild beast, however accurate it was.

“This isn’t one of your small forest creatures, Fluttershy,” the other voice shot back. “This stallion claimed to be a god, admitted to being a killer, and threatened to attack our rulers!”

Kratos, steeling his resolve, began walking down the stairs. The cottage grew quiet except for his large, powerful hooves thumping on the wooden steps. He stopped in front of the two ponies in the middle of the room. In addition to Fluttershy, there was a purple unicorn standing across from her.

“My name is Kratos,” he announced. “Are you Twilight?”

The unicorn stepped forward. “Twilight Sparkle, personal student of Princess Celestia herself.” She added that last part with an edge in her voice.

“You are angry that I threatened your mentor,” Kratos observed.

“You could say that. And you,” the unicorn glared, “have a lot of explaining to do.”

“I want an audience with the princesses.”

“Not until you answer some questions.”

The Spartan was about to argue further, but he glanced at Fluttershy, her eyes silently pleading to not continue. He’d seen those eyes as cold and sharp as ice, but now his defenses melted. He sighed, “Fine.”

Twilight blinked, not expecting the disagreement to end so quickly. She looked over at Fluttershy for a moment, then gestured towards the couch. “Please sit down.”

The unicorn sat down across from Kratos. "Now," she said calmly, "let's start with the basics: where are you from?"

"Sparta."

The mare blinked. "Where?"

"Sparta." Kratos allowed a small grin on his face. "One of the greatest cities in the world. On the banks of the River Eurotas."

The other ponies looked at each other. The Spartan frowned again. "You say this is Equestria. Where does that lay near the Aegean?"

Silence greeted him.

It was when the silence continued that Kratos realized how far from home he was. He was in another world entirely, far from any human lands. He may have been the only being from his to ever even see this land.

He sighed. "I am from a world far beyond this one. It's vastly different from this place. Different buildings, different... beings," he decided.

Twilight looked at him skeptically. "Okay, then." She thought of her next question carefully. "How did you appear in this world, Kratos?" *If that is your real name*, she added silently.

"I was in a temple on a remote island, seeking a way back to Mount Olympus. I came across a statue of a hors—pony, when a voice spoke to me and told me to touch it."

"A voice?"

"A soothing one, not unlike the goddesses of my own realm. I questioned its motives, and it shone a warm light that made everything... feel right. I trusted it, and took the statue. Then, I was blinded again, and I woke up in this body, in the middle of a forest. I thought it was just another of Zeus's tricks. Until..." He looked over at Fluttershy.

“Her arrival told me what happened was no trick, at least not by Zeus’s hand. She told me of your own gods, and I resolved to convince them to send me back to my world. Fluttershy... *suggested* otherwise.”

“You used the Stare on him?” Twilight Sparkle looked over at Fluttershy, mildly shocked.

Fluttershy nodded, shying away from the two pairs of eyes suddenly on her. “You know I can’t really control it. I told him that he had to come with me back to Ponyville so we could get this all cleared up, and, well, here we are.”

“While that does clear some things up, I still have some questions.” Twilight Sparkle looked towards the pegasus. “Fluttershy, why did you agree to convince me to let him see the princesses? He threatened to kill them; what’s stopping him from trying the moment he’s in the throne room?”

Fluttershy opened her mouth to speak, but Kratos interrupted. “You have my word as a Spartan that no harm will befall anybody, so long as I’m not attacked first.”

“That’s the best you have to offer?”

“Twilight?” Fluttershy walked over towards her friend. “I can go with Kratos. He wouldn’t do anything while I’m there.” She looked at the earth pony knowingly, and for a moment Kratos felt a familiar pang of guilt from years past.

Twilight looked at the other two ponies, then sighed. “I’ll write Princess Celestia and see if she or Luna would be willing to grant an audience. I don’t promise anything,” she added as she walked out the front door.

Fluttershy and Kratos stood silently for a time, neither sure of what to say. “So,” Fluttershy said at last, “what would you like to do until Celestia responds?”

The earth pony mulled it over. “I’ve yet to actually see Ponyville,” he replied.

“Oh, that’s a great idea! I could show you around town, and maybe afterwards you could help me take care of the animals.”

With that, they walked out the door. Despite her cheerful demeanor, Fluttershy's mind was racing, predicting all sorts of worst-case scenarios from taking the Spartan into town. The only question was which one would happen first.

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Chapter 4

As the unlikely duo walked along the cobbled streets of Ponyville, Kratos' jaw was agape. His head turned in every which direction, his eyes wide open. Fluttershy looked at him worriedly. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"It's so... so..." The stallion blinked. "Colorful!"

"Does your world not have much color?"

"It does, but not this bright." *Or anything but red*, he thought to himself. Kratos blinked. "So, where were we going?"

"Oh! Well, we could always, um..." Fluttershy trailed off. What *could* they do in Ponyville? It was probably easier thinking of places they *couldn't* go. Pinkie Pie was working, which meant Sugarcube Corner was definitely off-limits until Kratos was properly prepared for the pink party pony. She also doubted that the stallion would be at all interested in dropping by Rarity's boutique. The club was closed, though even if it were open, Kratos would probably dislike the loud noise and flashing lights as much as she did. Fluttershy rushed to try to think of something... safe. "Are you hungry? We could go to the café if you are."

Kratos thought about it. He hadn't eaten since his arrival in Equestria, and now that it was finally acknowledged, hunger began gnawing at him. "Very well," he said at last.

As Fluttershy led the way to lunch, Kratos once again realized he'd been speaking slightly softer than his usual gravelly yell. For some reason, his volume had been lowering since he became a pony. Now that he thought about it, he had an idea why.

Not much later, the two were seated at a patio table, both of them eating their meals. Fluttershy daintily ate her daisy salad, while Kratos settled on the carrot stew, his stomach silently begging for some fish or

meat. Lunch went along smoothly, except when Fluttershy had to correct the stallion in his manners. Neither of them spoke much.

Fluttershy moved, as if to speak, when a voice called out. “Fluttershy, darling!”

The pegasus looked over. “Oh, hi Rarity!”

The white unicorn flashed a bright smile as she walked up. “I was just passing by when I saw you here, and I simply had to visit!” She turned, suddenly noticing the earth pony staring at her. “Who is this?” Rarity asked.

“Oh, this is Kratos. He just dropped by recently, and we decided to buy lunch.”

Kratos nodded a hello. Rarity’s eyes scanned him. “Oh, are you family?”

“Old family friend,” Kratos lied. He wasn’t sure how he was related to the pegasus. Was he her patient? Guest? Captive?

Rarity thought for a moment, then turned back to Fluttershy. “Anyways, darling, I was hoping you could drop by the boutique later, and—” She froze for a moment, her eyes staring at nothing in particular. She suddenly looked at Kratos. “You!” she exclaimed. “You’d be perfect!”

Kratos blinked. “What?”

“You see,” Rarity began, “I’ve been working on a suit for a rather large gentleman from Canterlot. He’s an aristocrat now, but he spent his youth as a blacksmith in Stalliongrad, and his physique is, to be frank, mountainous! I’ve tried to get Big Macintosh to help, but he’s always busy at the farm. You, meanwhile,” she continued, measuring Kratos’ form, “would be an excellent fit for the suit! Oh, you simply must come down to the boutique and—”

“I’d rather not.”

Rarity stopped. “Excuse me?” she clarified.

“I don’t take orders well,” Kratos stated flatly.

The unicorn twitched ever so slightly, a hoof running through her purple mane. “Oh, but I insist! It won’t be any trouble at all!”

“It most likely will be. I’d rather not,” Kratos repeated with a hint of steel in his voice.

Fluttershy cringed. She was the only one Rarity had told about her ‘mild quirk,’ as the unicorn put it, which required perfection in every aspect, and she knew that when things didn’t go as planned, her condition would worsen. Meanwhile, Kratos was stubborn beyond even Fluttershy’s experience with Angel; he would easily not do something he didn’t want to do. Neither pony would budge, and the conflict was guaranteed to end violently, regardless of who snapped first. Unless...

“Kratos?” The pegasus spoke up. The other two ponies looked at her. “We have plenty of time before we have to do anything else. Are you sure you couldn’t spend just a little time helping Rarity?”

The Spartan balked. He wondered indignantly whether Fluttershy was serious. He was about to declare his unrelenting loathing for even the suggestion of such a disgrace when he made contact with her eyes again. Those eyes once again bore through his defenses and probed at his mind. He sighed in defeat. “Fine. Just let me finish my stew.”

Rarity laughed with delight. “Excellent! Be sure to come straight to the boutique when you two finish lunch!” With that, she walked away, her anxiety evaporating within seconds.

Kratos shot a glare at Fluttershy. “You have me wrapped around your hoof,” he growled.

The pegasus blinked. “I’m just helping a friend in need.”

Kratos slurped down the rest of his stew, much to the disapproval of the passing waiter, and stood. “Friend?” He snorted.

“Oh, but of course!” Fluttershy replied, setting her plate aside. “Rarity and I are very close friends. I know she’d do the same for me.”

Kratos looked at the young mare. “Really. She’d never betray you, or manipulate you, or abandon you once you outlive your usefulness?”

Fluttershy looked aghast. “She’d never do that!”

Kratos shook his head. “Let’s just get this over with.” Fluttershy took the hint, and led the way towards the Carousel Boutique.

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“Fluttershy? Are you here? Somepony told me you were at Rarity’s shop, and—” Twilight Sparkle stopped mid-sentence. “Wow.”

Before her stood Kratos, the purported bloodthirsty killer, standing absolutely still on a pedestal and wearing a sky-blue tuxedo, Rarity walking all about and adjusting the suit. The earth pony’s face echoed only a miserable acceptance of his fate. Fluttershy stood by the entrance. “Oh, hello Twilight,” the pegasus smiled.

Twilight just stared at the stallion. “Wha... how...”

Rarity sighed as she worked. “Well, it’s not quite finished yet, Twilight, so do be fair about it. It’d be easier to make this suit if *somepony* would just take off his jewelry,” she added icily.

Kratos glared at the dressmaker. “I always keep the Golden Fleece on,” he spat, referring to the armlet on his right foreleg, which had required that sleeve to be rolled up. “It never comes off, and I intend to keep it that way.”

Twilight shook her head, erasing the surreal scene for the time being. “Look, I came to tell you that I got a reply from Celestia.”

Kratos turned towards the purple unicorn, then winced as he felt something sharp jab his neck. “Would you stop that?” he growled.

“Well, then, don’t move!” Rarity shot back.

Fluttershy looked at Twilight. “What did the princess say?” she asked.

“She and Luna want to speak with Kratos. As soon as possible.”

Even Rarity stopped at that. “What? What would the princesses want with, well, him?” she asked, gesturing towards the brutish figure glaring at her.

“They also want the Elements of Harmony present.”

It was now Kratos’ turn to look surprised. “The Elements of what?”

“We’ll explain later,” Twilight said, waving a hoof. “They’re sending chariots to pick us up, so we need to round up the others. Get Kratos out of the tuxedo, and let’s get going!”

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Princess Celestia stood on the balcony, anticipating the Elements and their guest. It would take some time before they arrived, which just let the anxiety build up more in the meantime.

“Peace, sister.”

Celestia sighed, looking over at Luna. “I’m afraid peace might not be an option anymore,” she replied.

The smaller alicorn looked confused. “It’s just one demigod from Earth.”

“This one demigod has slain more gods than any other force combined,” countered Celestia. “He has bested Death. He has slaughtered Fate and changed his own destiny and the destiny of others. Not a single being has shown him an ounce of compassion for his entire life. And he is in our world.”

“That is exactly why we are bringing him here, though!” Luna’s eyes were full of hope. “To show him that the world is not such a cold place as he believes. His sleep last night was peaceful for the first time since he can probably remember, and he *knows* I allowed it!”

“Perhaps.” Celestia was quiet, still staring down at the land stretching out before her. “Think of this, though; one of the Titans had enough power here in our realm to inflict those nightmares upon him. There is a passageway between these two worlds, a passageway that *he* opened up.”

“He has a habit of tampering with things he shouldn’t, doesn’t he?”

Both princesses turned, shocked, at the voice behind them. It was a powerful, booming voice, and a familiar one. A third alicorn stepped out onto the balcony, a notably bulkier stallion. His mane and tail bristled with pent-up energy, small zaps of lightning traveling between hairs.

The sisters glared. “You,” Luna hissed.

Zeus, God of Lightning, ruler of Olympus, stood tall and proud, his wings flared out in an impressive display of his wingspan. “It’s been some time, hasn’t it, my little ponies?”

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Chapter 5

The seven ponies walked through the halls of Canterlot, flanked on either side by the royal guards. Three other ponies had joined Kratos, Rarity, Twilight Sparkle, and Fluttershy. Kratos had been introduced to them, but he hadn't bothered to remember their names.

As they approached the enormous set of double doors on the far end of the hall, a sort of tension built up in the air. The doors swung open just as the septet reached it, likely opened by magic. They entered the massive throne room and were immediately greeted by two ponies unlike any Kratos had seen before.

The goddesses were graced with both wings and horns, and were larger than most other ponies. Their manes, respectively the color of the dawn and the night, fluttered on some unfelt wind. The white goddess stood taller than Kratos himself, while the deep, dark blue goddess beside her, while just slightly smaller than her sister, still held considerable power in her presence. They both radiated power, not unlike many other gods Kratos had encountered. The difference here was that their presence wasn't nearly as hostile or foreboding. It was more... welcoming.

The welcoming feeling was somewhat bogged down by the rather tense atmosphere in the room. Twilight had never seen her mentor with so much as a look of mild concern before, even during the Nightmare Moon debacle. Now, though, Princess Celestia looked like there was something weighing rather heavily on her thoughts.

There was an awkward second or two before the six ponies before the princesses. Kratos hesitated a moment longer before he reluctantly did the same.

Princess Celestia cleared her throat as the ponies stood. "Greetings, Twilight Sparkle. And greetings to her fellow Elements of Harmony," she added, nodding towards the other five ponies. "It has been some time since we've seen each other." Princess Luna smiled shyly at the group.

The alicorns then turned their attention towards the large stallion beside them. Celestia's face grew just a hint harder. "And of course, there is our guest."

Kratos stepped forward, noticing the guards' reflexive tensing at his movement. "My name is Kratos," he announced.

"We know quite a bit about who you are, Kratos."

The earth pony glared. "How?"

"We have our sources," Celestia replied amiably.

Kratos couldn't help but steal a glance at Fluttershy. He knew the young mare was innocent, but he took some pride in knowing his fear of spies was justified.

"We also know what you came here for." Both princesses shifted slightly.

One of the other ponies, a blue one with a rainbow mane that made Kratos' head spin with confusion, looked over at the stallion. "Hey, yeah! Why *are* you here?" she asked.

"I seek passage back to my world."

"To what end?" Luna asked.

Kratos growled in response, "Vengeance."

Celestia nodded slowly. "Be that as it may, we cannot help you return."

"What?" Kratos spat.

"Princess, do you mean he's serious?" Twilight Sparkle looked incredulous. "You aren't really suggesting there are other worlds out there?"

“I’m surprised after your— thirteenth friendship report, was it?— that you still hold such skepticism, Twilight.” Celestia noted with a small grin. She turned back to Kratos. “And no, I am afraid that you cannot return to your world very easily. To pass between realms requires the powers of a god, or a very powerful key to allow you passage.”

“Then I will find this key! I used one to come here, I’ll use another one to return,” Kratos persisted. He could feel his tail begin to itch with anticipation.

“The Keys are very rare.” Luna winced slightly. “There were never many to begin with, and even we do not know their locations.”

“Then there is no hope.” Kratos’ face turned grim.

Celestia shook her head. “Not quite. We do know where *one* of them is.”

The stallion’s ears perked up. “Where? Tell me where it is!”

“Respect the princesses’ authority, sir!” warned the guard nearest Kratos. “We will not tolerate insolence for our rulers.”

Celestia smiled. “Why, right here in this castle.”

“Then *give it to me!*”

“Hold it, pardner,” interrupted the orange earth pony next to Fluttershy. “You ain’t one to go around ordering ponies about, ‘specially not the princesses!”

“My patience wears thin!” Kratos announced, ignoring the mare. “Give me the location of this key or I will extract the information myself!”

Fluttershy cringed. “Kratos, please...” she whispered.

Celestia’s eyelids lowered. “Try me, Ghost of Sparta.”

With a roar, Kratos whipped about the Blade of Exile. The chain extended far beyond what it originally appeared to be, and the pegasi guards only had time to duck before the blade arced over their heads.

Once the blade was ready to strike, Kratos lunged at the taller princess. He fully intended to wipe the smug grin off of her face, with his bare hands— *hoofs*, if he had to.

As he launched himself through the air, Kratos suddenly felt something wrap around his hind legs. Luna and Celestia could both see a look of confusion pass over the stallion's face before he was forcefully yanked down hard onto the marble floor.

Kratos landed with a resounding crack, very nearly biting his tongue clean off. He attempted to recover, only to find the orange pony from before expertly tying his legs together with a rope she seemed to have pulled from nowhere.

"Now what in the hay d'ya think *yer* doin', buster?" The orange mare spat.

Kratos glared for a second. Without a word, he spread his forelegs, snapping the rope. He rolled back onto his feet as the mare stared dumbly in shock, and made another leap at Celestia.

He had leapt up easily twenty feet into the high-ceilinged throne room, and his downward arc was zeroed in against the white alicorn. Her sister wore a look of mild panic, but Celestia retained that same smug look that drove Kratos mad.

"Stop *grinning*, you— what?" Kratos again found himself frozen, this time by a transparent sphere that almost seemed to be a giant... bubble? He looked back at Celestia, realizing that he had been mere feet away from the first strike.

Princess Celestia's smile finally faded. Her horn glowed, pulling the bubble closer to her. "You have quite the temper, Kratos," she observed. "Perhaps something more... passive-aggressive will keep you subdued."

Kratos struggled, kicking and head butting the walls of the bubble, only to see it stretch instead of popping. He tried to slash the flexible prison with his blade, to no avail. "Why must you torment me?" he snarled. "Give me the key!"

Celestia glared. Everypony else in the room shrunk at the sight of perhaps the only time they had seen the princess angry. Luna had seen that look herself once, and had all the more reason to fear it.

"I'd warn you to calm yourself down, Kratos. You may have escaped Hades more than a few times, but I doubt you could escape from the very center of the Sun."

Confusion mixed with the anger in Kratos' eyes as he continued to struggle. "The sun is just a chariot! I've slain Helios, and I'll slaughter you just as easily!" he growled.

Celestia's smile returned, with a venomous gleam. "That's where you're wrong. The sun is a star here, a massive ball of flaming gas and plasma. Thousands of degrees, where even metals can be boiled away into nothing. Not to mention the core. All of that heat, plus the weight of a million Earths bearing down on you from all sides. Does that sound like a mere chariot?"

Kratos stopped moving for a moment. He looked into the alicorn's eyes. She meant everything she said. She could as easily banish him to his certain death as she could free him from his prison.

The anger left Celestia's face, and everypony relaxed visibly. "Now then," the princess continued, "we may allow you to use the Key so you can return. However, this little... *outburst*, as well as your previous history, has shown that you are clearly not worthy to hold an item of such power. You may gain the right to use the key, so long as you contribute something to Equestria first."

Kratos stared at the princesses. "...Contribute?"

Luna spoke up. "If you can learn about and embrace the Elements of Harmony, then we will find you worthy of returning to your home. This is

also why we called you here,” she said, looking to the other still-stunned visitors.

“Hold on there,” the orange one cried. “Are you tellin’ us that we have t’ teach this varmint about friendship? He tried to kill the two of you!”

“Applejack’s right,” the rainbow pegasus declared. “This guys a total psycho! I don’t think he’d ever make friends!”

“He has me,” Fluttershy offered meekly.

“Fluttershy, Ah hate to break it to ya, but he’s more yer patient than yer friend,” The orange earth pony noted. Although he didn’t say anything, Kratos agreed.

“Aw, c’mon, you guys! It could be really fun!” This came from the bouncing pink one, who proceeded to hop towards Kratos’ bubble. “We could throw parties, and play games, and perform quick-time events, and—”

“What?” Everypony gave her blank stares.

The mare giggled regardless. “Remember, press ‘X’ to not die!” She told Kratos in a sing-song voice.

Luna shook her head. “The point is, if anypony could show Kratos here the magic of friendship, then who else but the Elements of Harmony?”

There was a pause. Twilight stepped forward. “We’ll do what you ask then, Your Majesties,” she replied calmly, bowing. “We will show Kratos the magic of friendship.”

Celestia smiled warmly, and the bubble popped. Kratos felt himself rather unceremoniously dropped to the marble floor. “The magic of what?” he asked, standing back up on unsteady legs.

“We’ll explain later,” Fluttershy mumbled, nudging the stallion towards the exit. The other ponies followed behind, although they all stared at their new “friend” with varying degrees of anger or concern.

Celestia called out, "Oh, and one more thing!" The group stopped. Celestia's horn flashed for a moment, and a golden bridle appeared on Kratos' head. "Kratos, don't do anything you might regret, or *that* will make sure you do."

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After the Elements of Harmony left with their guest, Celestia bid the guards leave their throne room. "And work on your responsiveness," she added dryly.

For a moment, the sisters were alone in their throne room. "You really should not have provoked him like that," sighed Luna.

"I was testing the waters," Celestia replied. "He may have a chance yet."

"Don't be too sure." Another alicorn stepped into view.

"I don't suppose you gave him a chance, did you Zeus?" Celestia's question held a hint of venom.

Zeus' brows lowered. "Subtlety has no use against a monster like Kratos."

"Subtlety seemed to be the only barrier between the two of us, and it was used rather well."

Zeus snorted. "You were lucky. The fool had paradise within his grasp, and denied it. By slaughtering everyone in Elysium."

"As the means to save your world, if I recall. Speaking of which," Celestia's eyes narrowed. "you seem to have visited ours without so much as an announcement. That's against the Rules."

"This was an emergency," Zeus declared. "Kratos is a fool, but he's also a very dangerous one. You have much fewer gods here, and I doubt you'll last long against him. He's used to... more worthy opponents."

Luna glared. "Melodrama and senseless violence are not worthy of much, "

"Regardless, the other pantheons don't have to know about this. They might be a little... concerned if it turned out our little god-slayer was running rampant across the multiverse."

"That reminds me," Celestia interjected. "How did he find the Key to Equestria?"

Zeus sighed. "He was at another temple seeking another relic to increase his power. We think he may have found a remnant of Bellerophon."

Both sisters froze. Neither of them had hoped to hear that... *name* again.

A look of worry overtook Luna's face, while Celestia just grew angrier. The Sun Princess swore. "That foal."

"And Kratos will cause even more problems than *they* did," Zeus growled. "We should have killed him on the spot!"

"I think we've got him under control." Celestia smiled. "That was no ordinary bridle he's wearing now. Only my sister or I may remove it, and it will punish him every time he acts out violently."

"Punishment never worked well before. How will this be any different?" Zeus looked incredulous.

"Trust us, Zeus. I know trust isn't natural for you Olympians, but better late than never to learn. If Kratos can learn the magic of friendship, we—"

"You'll send him right back to us!" Zeus spat.

Princess Luna looked out the window, towards Ponyville. "He won't be a problem once he discovers the Elements for himself. Just give him time."

Zeus glared at the smaller alicorn. "Fine," he grumbled at last. "But if he doesn't improve, we'll come back. And we'll clean up the mess we've made, even if you refuse to do so." With that, there was a crackle of lightning, and the god of lightning disappeared in a flash of white light.

"Ah, I see. Now we are his maids," Princess Luna grumbled.

"You always focus on the littler things," Celestia admonished.

"Kratos is far from a little thing, though."

Princess Celestia sighed. "We'll just have to see how he can handle the Elements of Harmony after so much time spent surrounded by discord and misery."

"Did we not have Elements of Discord at one point or another?" Luna looked confused.

"Please, sister, that was during a rather awkward era. I'd rather not discuss it."

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Chapter 6

“Twilight?”

“Yes, Kratos?”

“You don’t suppose modesty is the secret Seventh Element of Harmony, do you?”

“Doubtful.”

“Then why,” Kratos fumed, his teeth clenched, “am I forced to wear this humiliating device on my face?”

Kratos and the others had returned to Ponyville and regrouped at the library, which apparently doubled as the purple unicorn’s home. In that time, Twilight and Fluttershy had attempted to help the other Elements of Harmony understand the situation.

Twilight scrutinized the bridle on Kratos for a moment before shaking her head. “The princess isn’t one to let anypony in on her plans, even me. I don’t even know what kind of effect this spell has.”

Although he only glowered at this statement, internally Kratos was ablaze. *That high and mighty witch will pay for this*, he thought darkly. He could see it now; he’d once again be trapped in the bubble, Celestia smirking at his misfortune. Then, with a blast of fiery energy, he would tear through the magical barrier, much to her shock. As the arrogance melted off of her face, Kratos would begin swinging the blade, gaining momentum, gaining power. And then...

Kratos’ eyes widened suddenly. As his thoughts began to orchestrate the alicorn’s demise, he felt the bridle activate with some sort of energy. He could feel its effects beginning to take hold.

It was as if the world became slower, denser somehow. Kratos couldn’t quite describe it as anything else but a sort of trance or dream.

The Spartan attempted to shake off the sluggish feeling, already setting aside his plans for revenge. They'd wait for another time. He turned back towards the conversation.

"—will each plan out our own ways to teach Kratos about our respective Elements," Twilight continued, speaking to the others. "How does that sound?"

"If the princesses say so, Twilight, Ah'll do it, but Ah ain't happy helpin' out a bloodthirsty maniac." The orange pony from before, Applejack, shot Kratos a look. "Y'all be on yer best behavior, hear me?"

"If it's in my best interests, then yes." Kratos matched her glare with his own.

Rarity gave a small toss of her mane. "I don't see why we can't help out a pony in need," she observed.

"Yeah! It'll be totally fun!" The pink earth pony, very appropriately named Pinkie Pie, bounced all about. "I'd better get ready for my part! I'll need balloons, streamers, and— ooh! Ooh! We'll need lots of puzzles!" Without letting anypony question her, she bounded out the door.

"...Right," Twilight continued, trying to move on past Pinkie's outburst. "Fluttershy, do you think you can take Kratos back home for now? Maybe start teaching him about the Element of Kindness?"

The purple unicorn was greeted by a wall of stares from everypony else in the room. "You expect *me*," Kratos began slowly, "to begin learning about friendship with the element of Kindness?"

"That... does sound a little unlikely," Twilight admitted. "Still, it's worth a shot. Besides, it'll probably be late by then, and you're already in Fluttershy's guest room."

Rarity slightly perked up at the last sentence. She whispered something to Applejack, who Kratos noted had then reacted with a furrowed brow.

“Fine. Fluttershy, if you wouldn’t mind...”

“Oh!” The yellow pegasus stood up. “Yes, of course. We have to take care of the animals now anyway; we can start with that.”

As he followed the pastel-colored mare out of the library, Kratos felt a slight sense of foreboding about being around animals.

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Kratos stood his ground, muscles tensed for battle. His face was cast in a determined scowl underneath the bridle, his eyes locked in a fateful staring contest with what would surely be his greatest foe.

Across from him, a small white rabbit sat on its haunches, lazily eating a carrot while his eyes shot daggers at the stallion. The two sat across from each other, never blinking, barely moving.

“It’s good to see you two are getting along so well!” Fluttershy approached the two with a basket of food for the animals, even as a swarm of all sorts of forest creatures began crowding around her.

Kratos’ eyes briefly flicked towards the pegasus before returning to the rabbit. “Is he normally this welcoming?” he rumbled.

“Oh, goodness no!” Fluttershy smiled lightly. “In fact, I think he likes you.”

Angel made a sort of signal with his paw. Fluttershy’s attention was focused on some nearby birds, but Kratos got the message clearly. Somehow, the rabbit was communicating.

I know what you’ve done, Angel seemed to say, I know all of your crimes, all of your sins. I will break you like the weakling you are.

Kratos flared his nostrils. *You think you could challenge me?*

The rabbit’s eyelids lowered. *I don’t have to.*

The stallion turned, slightly nonplussed. "So, Fluttershy," he began, "you take care of all these animals?"

"Yes." Fluttershy smiled as she absentmindedly passed some vegetables to a very confused-looking pair of ferrets. "You see, it's my special talent. I'm very good at caring for animals, and nursing them if they're sick or hurt."

Kratos' ears perked up slightly. "Special talent?"

"Well, yes. Everypony has a special talent that shows who they are. It's also part of their cutie mark. I'm really not the best at explaining it, maybe somepony like Twilight or Cheerilee—"

"Cutie mark?" Kratos' confusion began to show in his expression.

Fluttershy turned slightly, showing her flank. "A cutie mark is the symbol of a pony's special talent. My butterflies show that I'm very connected with all of the wonderful creatures around Ponyville, and your..." She stopped, staring at Kratos' flank. "What's your special talent?"

Kratos turned. For the first time, he noticed the mark adorning his backside. There was a large red Ω on either side of his body, interestingly the same color as his tattoos. "... He looked back at Fluttershy. "It's probably nothing important."

"Oh, but everypony's talent is important!" Fluttershy tilted her head. "Do you work with horseshoes? That's the only thing I could think of."

"It's not a horseshoe," Kratos sighed. "It's an omega. The last letter of our alphabet. It symbolizes the end."

"The end of what?"

Kratos thought it over, frowning in concentration. "...I'm not sure."

"Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out." Fluttershy turned, realizing her previous mistake and giving some fish to the ferrets. "Now, would you like to help me feed the animals?"

Kratos was momentarily lost in thought before he nodded slowly. He walked towards the basket, noticing the animals shying away at his presence. As he lifted some carrots out with his mouth, giving them to a small cluster of large-eyed baby bunnies, a thought crossed his mind.

“Wait. How does caring for animals pay for anything?”

Fluttershy froze. “Well, it doesn’t, really,” she admitted. “I have a sort of job on the side. It’s nothing important. You probably haven’t heard of it.”

Kratos raised an eyebrow, intrigued. He scattered birdseed across the grass. “I’m sure you could tell me. If we’re to be friends, then shouldn’t we be more honest?”

“Oh, well, um, I guess.” Fluttershy pawed at the ground. “You see, I write some stories here and there...”

“So you’re a storyteller then. A creator of epic poetry and prose.”

Fluttershy blushed deeply, even as she continued checking on a squirrel’s bandaged tail. “I guess ‘epic’ is one way to describe it.”

Kratos nodded, satisfied. He then turned to continue his work.

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The sun began to set as two ponies and a rabbit made their way along the dirt road. Kratos occasionally shot Angel a look, but was otherwise busy pretending to listen to Fluttershy talk all about this type of bird or plant or so forth. He couldn’t keep track of it, so instead he focused on his own thoughts.

The afternoon’s activity had surprised the Spartan. After a while, the animals began to trust him, and he found the idea of birds perching on him not nearly as annoying as he had originally thought. In fact, he had rather liked caring for the animals.

It was as he was walking along, thinking about this, when the weight of that last notion hit him. Here he was, a Spartan warrior, a demigod, a former god of war, and after a little over a day in a faraway place, he was

surrounded by bright colors and feeding small forest critters. It wasn't... *natural*. He had to eat raw meat, butcher some monsters, do *something* to restore his—

Kratos shook himself. There was no need to worry; it was just the means to an end. Being surrounded by bright colors and wide-eyed animals didn't make him any less of a man, and neither did learning about friendship. He was confident enough in his own toughness. Besides, kindness could be selective; he certainly didn't owe any kindness to a certain king of Olympus.

"Kratos?" Fluttershy looked at him concerned, stopping her story. She had noticed the small, dark grin on the Spartan's face.

"Sorry," he rumbled. "Just distracted."

Fluttershy nodded, still looking at Kratos, then continued talking.

That was another thing he had noticed. When he had been with Fluttershy, he felt *lighter*, almost, like the burden he always carried on his skin and in his mind was dampened by her presence. Her wide, sparkling eyes, her soft smile, her kind demeanor; it all reminded Kratos of... her.

"—so that's when I realized the blue jay wasn't a blue jay at all, but a badger." Finishing her story, Fluttershy looked upwards. "Well, looks like we're back."

They had indeed reached the pegasus' cottage. Once inside, Kratos immediately trudged up the wooden stairs, all the significant events of the day finally weighing down on him.

A soft voice came from behind him. "Are you going to bed so soon? The sun's barely set yet." Fluttershy gave the Earth pony another slightly worried look.

"It's... been a long day." With that, Kratos entered his room. He struggled into his bed with slightly less effort this time, although Fluttershy still insisted on helping with his sheets.

He stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours. Attempted regicide and deicide in one day was tiring enough; doing both at the same time was even more exhausting. On top of that, Kratos knew that it would undoubtedly be a long day ahead of him tomorrow. One thing he knew for certain, however, was that the next time he saw Zeus, it would be much more different than their last few fights.

Another surge of magic was triggered at this thought, and the sluggishness returned, focusing in Kratos' eyelids. The Spartan almost immediately drifted into a deep sleep.

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Chapter 7

The moment Kratos entered the dream, he was confronted by a somewhat familiar dark blue mare standing right in front of him, both of them surrounded by an empty white void. He noticed the wings and horn adorning her body, as well as her taller frame. The flowing night-sky mane provided the final clue.

“Princess Luna?” he assumed.

“Indeed.” The mare’s curt reply gave Kratos a somewhat sinking feeling, as well as the hidden power behind the voice.

“Am I to assume you have a purpose for being here?”

“You attacked my sister, Kratos.” There was a sort of glint in Luna’s eyes. “We had trusted you— well, / trusted you— and you betrayed that trust the very first chance you had.”

Kratos scowled. “She provoked me.”

“She did, unfortunately,” Luna agreed, nodding slowly. “It is a rather irritating hobby of hers, but you could have just as easily taken the high road on the matter.”

“I don’t usually use the high road,” Kratos remarked.

Luna ignored his comment and continued. “That, and not only do you have the Royal Guard on edge, but the Elements of Harmony, as well. They are hardly happy being your mentors; they do not trust you, and with good reason.”

“I’ll be fine one way or another. I don’t see why you’re so interested in helping me.” Kratos scrutinized the moon goddess, eyes flicking involuntarily to her flanks.

"I would ask that you refrain from any further thought of that sort," Luna shot back, looking mildly perturbed. "I want to help because... I try to see the good in everypony. I know what it is like to have dark feelings eat at you."

Kratos harumphed. "I extremely doubt anything in this world can be very dark." What the Spartan didn't ask was how she knew about the turmoil that boiled in his thoughts.

"Trust me. There are things in Equestria that I would not dare to wish on anypony." There was a glint in Luna's eyes, and for a moment, Kratos sensed something foreboding about the mare. They were at eye level, and he still found himself almost instinctively taking a step back.

"Consider yourself lucky, Kratos," Luna continued. "There are quite a few others trying to access your dreams right now. Gaia is trying to plant more nightmares, and Zeus and the other Olympians have been attempting to send you maddening visions since you closed your eyes. I'm the only thing holding them back."

Kratos nodded. "...Thank you," he said begrudgingly.

A thought entered the Spartan's mind. "What sort of magic does this bridle use?" he asked.

Princess Luna glanced at it for a moment. "That is a numbing spell. Releases a magical sedative whenever it's triggered. In your case, I'd guess my sister set the trigger to whenever you have violent thoughts towards anypony."

Kratos' ears drooped at the implications of this. "...Oh," he said at last.

Luna shrugged. "Resist the temptation to maim and kill, and all will be well. I have faith in you."

Kratos stared for a moment. "You're telling me to *what?*"

“I’m sure you will be fine.” Luna looked away, as if she heard something. “Morning is coming soon. I shall keep the defenses up, but I have to go. Next time we meet in person, try to behave yourself.”

Kratos held himself high. “You have my word as a Spartan that I will behave as one should in front of royalty.”

“Yes, and look at how well the word of a Spartan held up last time,” Luna observed dryly, with the smallest hint of a smile.

The stallion glared. “You’re lucky I consider you one of the few gods I *don’t* plan on killing.”

Luna rolled her eyes as she began to fade away. “It is truly an honor.”

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Kratos awoke, glancing at his window to see a calm, bright morning outside. Already, the birds were chirping, and a soft breeze could be seen gently swaying the trees. The sun shone in a clear blue sky above the rolling emerald hills.

The stallion already knew it was going to be a bad day.

Slowly, the Spartan slid out of bed. As he descended the stairs, he saw Fluttershy once again tending to animals, this time applying bandages to a wounded bird’s leg. She turned, seeing Kratos. “Oh, good! You’re awake! I was just going to ask Angel to check on you.”

Kratos shot a wary glance at the rabbit, who was innocently tugging at a carrot much like one would snap someone’s neck. The earth pony’s thoughts briefly flashed to his fight with Helios during his ascension of Olympus, a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He turned away just enough so that the rabbit was in his peripheral vision. “Which Element am I to learn today?” he asked, looking towards the yellow pegasus.

“Well, Applejack mentioned needing some help down at Sweet Apple Acres,” replied Fluttershy.

"I'm not much of a farmer," said Kratos, rather skeptical.

"Oh, well, the others are pretty busy this morning, but Rarity said she had more orders to fill out—"

"Sweet Apple Acres, you say? Was that the farm we passed on the way to town?" Kratos asked hastily, grabbing the light breakfast Fluttershy had prepared for him and galloping out the door.

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"You want to try your hoof at helpin' on the farm?" Applejack scrutinized the Spartan. "Do you even know the first thing 'bout applebuckin'?"

"I'd imagine it involves bucking," Kratos replied dryly. "And apples."

The orange earth pony huffed. "Ah swear, you an' Big Macintosh both."

"All right," Applejack sighed, "Ah'll teach you the basics, an' then you and Ah will clear out a grove or two. After that, if you do well enough, we'll treat you to an Apple Family brunch."

"Brunch?"

Applejack waved her hoof. "It's like breakfast and lunch at the same time. Real fancy. "

Kratos nodded. "I may have to pass on 'brunch,'" he said. "Fluttershy and I were having lunch in town."

"Really now?" Applejack stared at Kratos for a moment, then turned. "Right. Anyways, jus' follow me."

With Kratos in tow, the mare walked over to a nearby apple tree. "Now, applebuckin' seems relatively simple, but there's a lotta technique to it. Here, let me just show you a quick demonstration."

With that, Applejack angled herself so that her back was turned to the tree. She craned her neck, making sure it was in range, then pulled back her left hind leg, shooting it back outward like a spring. Her hoof impacted the tree, bringing a cascade of apples down into the baskets below.

“Now, think you can do that?”

Kratos glanced at a nearby apple tree and walked towards it. He turned, angling himself much like Applejack had. He raised one hind leg, bringing it up to the tree trunk first to make sure it was accurate, and then pulled all the way back. Without a word, he bucked the tree, watching with some satisfaction as the apples were knocked off their branches into the baskets.

Applejack nodded. “Ah suppose that’s not so bad for starters,” she said casually, “but you missed a few.”

Kratos looked up. Much to his chagrin, it appeared that he had only knocked out a little under half of the apples on the tree. Somehow, starting off with such a heavy blow didn’t feel right. It was almost as if he needed start with a lighter attack first.

Applejack gave the second tree another kick, clearing the remaining apples. “Now, don’t feel too bad about not gettin’ them all on your first try,” she began, but was cut off when Kratos walked past her towards another tree, clearly not listening. “Now what in the hay are you—”

She watched as the Spartan reared up in front of the tree. He proceeded to beat at it with his hooves, almost like he was boxing. After a few swift blows across the trunk, he turned, planted his forelegs into the ground, and with a roar drove his back hooves into the tree. The tree, upon suffering such a beating, yielded all of the apples on its branches, and more than a few loose leaves and twigs fluttered down.

Kratos noticed the orange mare staring at him. “It works for me,” he explained somewhat lamely.

Applejack stared for a moment longer before shaking herself. “All right,” she said, “Ah suppose you know what yer doin’. Now, let’s get bucking!”

After perhaps a half-hour or so of emptying the trees of their crimson fruit, Kratos looked over at the orange mare. "Applejack, if you'll allow me to ask, what, exactly, does this have to do with Honesty?"

"Well," Applejack began, "it might be a bit of a stretch, but there's nothin' quite like good, honest hard work to whip a pony into shape, and Ah figured a big fella like yourself could be of *some* use around here."

"You're right," Kratos said flatly. "That *is* a stretch."

"Now, if Ah can ask you somethin' right back," Applejack began, casting a glance towards the stallion while she bucked, "what in the hay did Celestia mean by yer 'previous history?'"

Kratos paused. "I don't want to talk about it," he said finally, kicking another tree to emphasize his point.

"Ah can tell you right now that there ain't no way to avoid answerin' this question," Applejack declared.

Kratos stared at the mare, one eyebrow raised. "And how," he rumbled, "do you plan on making me tell you?"

"Ah have my ways."

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"Let me go," Kratos demanded frankly.

The small yellow pony nearest to him stopped, thought about it for a moment, and then said, "Naw."

The other filly, a white unicorn, giggled. "Yeah, no way! This is going to be fun!"

The Spartan was currently hogtied, much like the incident in Canterlot. However, the main difference now was that the rope had been covered in some sort of glue, effectively binding Kratos the moment it had wrapped around his legs. Applejack had mentioned something about "good

ol' Zecora" and her "fancy-schmancy herbal glue" before dragging Kratos through Sweet Apple Acres towards a small clearing, in which there was a particularly large old apple tree with a tree house. There, the Spartan became the captive of a mysterious group who called themselves the Crusaders.

"C'mon, Scootaloo! Where's that equipment?"

Kratos stopped struggling for a moment. Equipment?

Scootaloo appeared, lugging a large metal container behind her. "It's right here, Apple Bloom!" she declared. "It would've been here sooner if somepony hadn't run off without helping me."

Sweetie Belle looked offended. "I had a perfectly good reason to leave!"

"Whatever," Scootaloo sighed.

"All right," Apple Bloom grinned, "let's get ready for another shot at finding our cutie marks!"

The three fillies reared up, raising a hoof towards the roof. "CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS PHYSICIANS!"

Kratos stared at the display for a moment. "I... What—" he began, but he was cut off by the noise of objects being moved and tossed about as the Cutie Mark Crusaders began digging through the contents of the box.

"I wonder what this does," Sweetie Belle said, holding up a sort of listening device with a metal circle at the end. The Spartan had no idea what it was or what it did, but he didn't want to find out.

"What about these?" Scootaloo held up small mallets.

"Oh, *this* looks kinda cool!" Apple Bloom's head emerged from the container, brandishing a hypodermic needle in her mouth. Kratos felt a sense of dread drape over him like a winter gale the moment he saw the light reflect off the tip of the needle.

The stallion edged towards the window. "Applejack!" he called out. "I don't want to hurt these children, but I will if you don't let me go!" He attempted to swing his blade for emphasis, perhaps to graze one of the fillies, but quickly realized that Applejack had the foresight to tie up his tail, too.

He glanced back momentarily. Sweetie Belle was currently levitating a bone saw all about the room with her magic.

"Really, Applejack, I'm willing to negotiate now!" Craning his neck to look out the window, Kratos realized that the orange mare was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, man! Check this out!" Scootaloo held up two pads attached to her hooves. After briefly rubbing them together, she hit triggers on either side, filling the room with static electricity and making every single hair on the Spartan's body stand up.

"Applejack? I do not pretend to understand how Equestrians think, but I don't see any connection to honesty or friendship! Release me! NOW! Wait, what are you— no, stay away from there! Applejack, I am commanding you to— no, asking— I am *begging* you, please!"

"APPLEJAAAAAAAAACK!"

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Chapter 8

“Sorry, Kratos,” Applejack grimaced. “If Ah’d known that my sister an’ her friends had gotten into Nurse Redheart’s supplies, Ah wouldn’tve let them near you. Even so,” she added carefully, “you seem a mite shook up over the whole thing.”

Kratos glared, holding his head high. “It was a perfectly natural reaction.”

“You went an’ knocked a hole in the wall big enough for a manticore.”

“Yes.” Kratos glanced back momentarily at the tree house. “That is a perfectly natural reaction for someone who does not wish to experience torture more than they already have.”

“More’n they already—” Applejack stared. “Oh. Oh! Golly, sugarcube, Ah didn’t know! Ah never knew you were—”

“That’s because I didn’t say anything about it.” Kratos’ eyes showed a reflection of sorrow. “I’m not one for lying outright; there’s nothing honorable about it. What I do is just another form.”

“Ah’m awful sorry, Kratos.”

“I don’t need your pity.” Kratos looked away. “I’ve made many others suffer just as much as I have. Some of it was justified.” Kratos’ thoughts turned briefly to Ares, to Hades, to many of the monsters he had slain. “Most of it wasn’t.” A flood of faces, named and unnamed, assaulted him at the mere mention.

Applejack shook herself. “Ah... Ah was expectin’ honesty, an’ maybe some bad history, but Ah didn’t expect this.”

“I shouldn’t say anything else.” Kratos turned. “I’ve seen things... *done* things... that I wouldn’t want anyb— anypony here to experience. You’ve been right to suspect me.”

Applejack stared for a moment longer, then allowed a small smile. "Sugarcube, Ah believe you jus' learned a lesson in honesty."

"...What?"

"You just broke down an' told me somethin' you ain't told no pony else in your life. Not only that, but you admitted yer weakness an' told me flat out that Ah wasn't wrong to distrust you. You spoke from yer heart right there, an' that's what honesty boils down to: bein' truthful with everypony, yerself included."

Kratos' brow furrowed, the gears in his mind turning. "That... actually makes sense," he said finally, albeit begrudgingly. "Thank you, Applejack. You're wise beyond your yea—" The Spartan froze. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Didn't yer mama tell you t' never ask a lady's age?"

"I would prefer to not discuss my mother." Kratos' expression was dead serious.

"Well, alrighty then," Applejack replied with a somewhat uneasy look. "It's gettin' close t' noon. You might wanna hurry over t' town."

Kratos looked up at the sun, realizing how much time had passed. "So I might," he said, beginning to gallop off. "You have my thanks, Applejack!"

The orange workhorse watched Kratos run off towards town, then shook her head. "Poor fella. Musta been through a lot already, an' he still ain't prepared for what's gonna hit him."

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By the time Kratos arrived at the Ponyville Café, Fluttershy had already sat down, and was currently ordering. "Carrot stew," he announced to the waiter, sitting down. "Perhaps with less of the green things this time."

"You mean 'cilantro?'" the waiter sniffed.

“Yes, that. Whatever it is, I don’t like it.”

The waiter scribbled it down, took the menus, and, with his head held high, walked back into the café.

“Oh, hi Kratos,” Fluttershy smiled. “And how was your lesson on Honesty?”

“It was... productive,” Kratos said at last.

“Oh, that’s great!” Fluttershy exclaimed softly.

The waiter returned with their food, shooting Kratos an angry look as he left.

“So,” Kratos began, looking up as he ate his stew, “any idea who’s next?”

Fluttershy swallowed her bite of daisy salad. “Well, Rarity still needs—“

“Besides Rarity.”

“Oh.” The pegasus stared for a moment. “Well, Rainbow Dash has been busy lately. I mean, she says busy, but it’s probably not work. Not that she’s bad at her job, she just spends a lot of time practicing. And napping. Anyways,” Fluttershy continued, “Twilight has been trying to find some way to teach earth ponies magic, but she hasn’t found anything yet.”

“Who does that leave?”

“Well,” Fluttershy hesitated, eyes averted. “Pinkie Pie said she wanted us to come and pick up some, uh, cupcakes whenever we’re available.”

“Cupcakes?” Kratos stared. “What’s a cupcake?”

“Oh, it’s a dessert.”

“So, what’s wrong with picking up cupcakes?” Kratos looked mildly confused.

“Oh, nothing. Just, um, be prepared.”

“For what?”

“...Anything?”

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After lunch, Kratos and Fluttershy walked towards Sugarcube Corner. The building stood out rather prominently, apparently being made out almost entirely out of sweets. Kratos stared for a moment before following a very nervous-looking Fluttershy inside.

The first thing that Kratos noticed was that he had stepped into a dimly lit room with stone walls and flooring, with torches acting as the only illumination. The second thing was that the door was promptly slammed behind him.

Just as Kratos’ eyes adjusted, he heard a voice cry out: “TRIANGLE!”

The Spartan ducked just in time to feel something massive swing past where his head had previously been. Before he could properly respond, the voice spoke again: “X! Hit X!”

Kratos rolled, dodging what must have been a swarm of arrows and darts, only to feel a huge weight thud onto his back. He strained to hold himself up, to no avail. Just as his legs began to buckle... “SPAM CIRCLE! SPAM CIRCLE!”

As if gaining power from some other source, Kratos suddenly found the strength required to shrug the weight aside, heaving it onto the floor. Again, before he could see what it was, his thoughts were interrupted. “TURN THE ANALOG STICK! COUNTER-CLOCKWISE! GO GO GO!”

Kratos only stared, confused. In his one moment of inaction, he was promptly knocked off his feet by a mighty force that smelled of sugar and fruit.

As he landed on the ground, the Ghost of Sparta attempted to contemplate his situation when the voice sighed. "It's always the analog stick parts that nopony sees coming. Hey, I bet that counts as a surprise! SURPRISE!"

With that, the room brightened, and Kratos was surprised to see that the stone was in fact a very elaborate wallpaper design, and, on top of that, a few dozen ponies were currently milling about the room, socializing.

A flash of pink arrived in his field of vision, and Kratos suddenly found himself staring into two startlingly blue eyes. "Hi, remember me? You probably don't, because according to that scene in Canterlot you didn't bother remembering our names! But then later, we'd apparently explained it on the trip back home, so you have no excuse for forgetting, you silly willy nilly!"

Kratos stared for a moment, reeling. "I... take it you're Pinkie Pie?"

Pinkie gasped with shock. "Oh my GOSH! You *do* remember my name! This is so great! Y'know what would make it more great? If you had fun at this *party*!"

"...Party?"

"Of course!" Pinkie Pie backed off slightly, allowing her to gesture broadly with her hoof. "It's not every day somepony new comes to Ponyville, and it's super-duper rare for visitors from other worlds to come here, let alone a franchise like yours! I bet you're the only interdimensional traveler in all of Ponyville!"

Kratos noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that a brown Earth pony with an hourglass cutie mark looked somewhat offended. "It's an honor," the Spartan said flatly. "Now, might I ask why you were trying to *kill me*?"

Pinkie Pie giggled. "I wouldn't kill you, silly! I just thought it was a while since you'd had any quick-time events, and we needed *something* resembling an action scene to hold everypony over!"

“Then... what...” Kratos looked back. A bag of flour was dangling over the door, right where he had dodged the swinging object. He saw a multitude of fake tails embedded in the wall; what they were for, he couldn’t guess. An anvil— a gods-be-damned anvil!— was right where Kratos had tossed it. He felt the area of impact on his side, then sniffed at his hoof. “...Cherry?”

“Yep! Cherry pie, to be exact!” Pinkie Pie bounced all about. “What, did you think I’d really try to kill anypony? Because believe me, I probably couldn’t kill somepony even if I wanted to! A *lot* of ponies act like I’m one step away from snapping and heartlessly torturing my friends, but really, that’s just silly! Now go on and enjoy your party!”

With that, the pink earth pony sped away in a blur. The party turned back to its regular din of conversation, and Kratos looked around. He caught a familiar pastel pegasus in the corner, and approached her.

“You said we were coming here to pick up cupcakes.”

Fluttershy cringed. “Well, yes. I mean, Pinkie told me to tell you that, but, you see, most ponies in Ponyville know that Pinkie Pie loves throwing surprise parties, and, well...”

Kratos nodded slowly. “What am I supposed to do now, then? This is a far cry from parties where I’m from!”

“I... don’t know,” Fluttershy admitted. “What did you normally do at parties?”

The Spartan reflected on his travels, namely what he did for leisure between each bloodbath. He glanced around briefly, and excused himself in an uncharacteristically quiet manner.

He muttered to himself. “These are ponies. They’re horses. I couldn’t do that. I mean, even if they talk... No, I’ve made a point to only... *do that* with humans, or at least humanoids.” He glanced back at his new body. “Then again, this form isn’t the best for humans.”

Kratos sighed, walking towards a blue unicorn mare. “When in Crete,” he grumbled.

“Excuse me,” he said, glancing over the mare’s form, “What’s your name?”

The unicorn’s eyes stared from underneath her spiky, two-color mane. “Colgate.”

“Colgate...” Kratos presented what he was sure to be a charming grin, at least for him. “A name the Muses themselves could shower thousands of praises upon! A name of grace, of beauty, of...” He sniffed the air, mildly confused. “Of mint.”

Colgate allowed a small smile. “Oh, thank you.”

“Olympus may hold no power here, but would you care if we made tribute to Aphrodite regardless?”

“...What?” Colgate stared at Kratos, not quite understanding the line that had wooed so many women’s hearts before. Another mare approached, a purple earth pony with grapes and a strawberry adorning her flank. “You all right, hon?” she asked.

Colgate turned. “Oh, hey Berry. Yeah, just, uh, leaving. You ready?”

With that, the two mares departed. Kratos noted that the two of them stood awfully close to each other, their flanks occasionally rubbing against each other.

Kratos stared for a moment longer. “...Oh,” he said at last, his expression one of mild shock. He sighed again. “That doesn’t matter. I’ll find an appropriate lover soon enough. They can’t all prefer other mares.”

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“They don’t all prefer other mares,” Kratos seethed, “but apparently, that doesn’t matter!”

Eight mares. He had asked eight damned mares to consider bedding with him, and while another two had “other” interests, the others outright rejected him, saying something about “manners” or “hygiene” or “What

does that even mean?”. He’d used all of his best techniques: flexing, bragging about previous conquests, claiming that the mare in question excited his heart like the promise of battle. Not one of them worked. Kratos was not used to rejection, and he seriously began to consider his usual revenge tactics on the next one to reject his advances. Then, Pinkie Pie arrived again.

“Silly Kratos,” the party pony giggled, “you can’t just go butchering ponies because they don’t want to play minigames with you!”

Kratos glared. “Well, what do you have in mind?”

Pinkie grinned. “WeeIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII,” she began, in a singsong voice.

*“Ponies here in Ponyville are not quite as relaxed
About things like death and war and also beasties with two backs!
So before you go kill anypony, I suggest you stop,
And if the need really grows too great then go to bed and cl—”*

Pinkie Pie found a hoof shoved rather forcefully into her mouth. Kratos took a deep breath. “I don’t know what you were just doing,” he said, his voice dangerously low, “but it irritates me.”

Pinkie just giggled more, backing away so she was out of the Spartan’s reach. “I knew you were going to be all grumpy-wumpy, so I decided to take your mind off of it with a song! Everypony loves songs!”

“Singing isn’t going to work,” Kratos rumbled. “I always hated theater.”

“Of course it worked! You don’t want to kill everypony here anymore, do you?”

Kratos blinked. “...No,” he said, a look of confusion crossing over his face. He was still angry—that was a constant—but his previous thoughts of murder were turned off, even before the bridle could activate. “How did you do that?”

As she walked by, Twilight Sparkle shook her head. “Don’t ask,” she told Kratos flatly, continuing towards the punch bowl.

“Oh, that Twilight!” Pinkie merely laughed at the unicorn’s interjection. “Now,” she said, looking around, “let’s get you partying!”

“That’s what I was *trying* to do,” Kratos huffed.

The party pony let out an exaggerated sigh. “Really, Kratos. There’s more to parties than minigames, no matter what Nintendo thinks!”

“...What?”

Pinkie proceeded to enter deep thought, a hoof to her chin. “Now, all we have to do is get grumpy old Kratos here to lighten up!” Her eyes lit up. “Ooh! How about a joke?”

“A... joke?” Kratos quickly attempted to estimate his chances of escape. He considered, briefly, the possibility of just bucking Pinkie straight through a wall and charging for the front door, bystanders be damned, but even without the bridle hindering him, deep down Kratos knew that the pink mare was somehow unkillable. For now, he’d have to endure whatever happened at this party. “Fine.”

Pinkie began excitedly. “Okay, so there’s this magician, right? She’s got this whole ‘Great and Powerful’ routine, but she just does illusions and stuff. And she worked on a cruise ship—”

“Cruise ship?”

“It’s like a super-duper huge boat that ponies party on!”

Kratos nodded. “Explains how you know about it.”

“Right, so this magician did the same show eeeevery time, with all the same tricks! But she didn’t have to worry about it, because the audience was never the same! But then there’s this phoenix that lives on the ship, and it watched all of the magician’s performances until it figured out her tricks. Then the phoenix went and told the audience how the magician did it, and ruined her show!”

Kratos stared. “Why?”

Pinkie did pause for a moment to consider his question. "Because phoenixes have nothing better than mess with everypony and occassionally burst into flame! Anyway, the magician got really mad at the phoenix, but it belonged to the captain, so she couldn't do anything.

"Then one day, the ship sprang a leak and sank, and the only survivor was the magician. She clambered onto a plank of driftwood, and who was to be perched on the other side... but the *phoenix*?

"For three days and three nights," Pinkie continued, almost in a conspiratorial whisper, "the two survivors just stared at each other, never speaking, never moving, never blinking. Then, on the morning of the fourth day, the phoenix sighed and said, 'Okay, I give up. Where'd you put the ship?'"

There was a brief moment in time where the Spartan stallion simply stared at the pastel pink party pony. Pinkie's smiled faltered briefly as Kratos' eyebrow gained a slight twitch.

Kratos' mind was reeling. He never bothered with humor, neither as a child nor in his adult life. Now, suddenly confronted with the conflict of a phoenix and a magician, something that managed to slip through a mountainous cultural barrier, his thoughts were in a rush to sort out this new development. All the Spartan interpreted from these events was a throbbing headache and mild loss of control of his facial muscles.

Kratos noticed that Pinkie Pie was staring at his face. "What is it?" he barked, a hint of worry betraying itself in his voice. "What's happening?"

Pinkie Pie grew an enormous, toothy grin on her face. "I'll tell you what's happening!" she declared. "You're smiling!"

Kratos glanced at a window. In the vague reflection, he could see that his mouth was, indeed, locked in an upturned direction. He had cracked a smile at the joke. Kratos knew that smiling was hardly laughter, but it was progress, and progress was what he desired the most. It would mean another Element of Harmony conquered, and therefore it would mean another step towards returning home and gutting Zeus like the coward he was.

He turned, eyes locked onto the pink mare. "Quick, the smile is fading. Tell more jokes!"

Pinkie Pie giggled. "Okie dokie, Loki! No, wait," she said suddenly, "he's Norse! Anyway, here's a grrreat one I learned a while ago! Okay, so there are these two colts talking at school. The one says to his friend, 'I know this great way to make some bits off of your folks. It'll sound weird, but trust me: all you have to do is go up to one of them and say that you know the whole truth...'"

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Fluttershy walked carefully and quietly towards the snack table. She had finally mustered up the courage to wade through the thick crowd of ponies, memories of the last party's desserts giving her the strength she needed.

The pastel pegasus had just begun to reach for a piece of berry cobbler when a loud, gravelly noise rumbled through Sugarcube Corner. Fluttershy only had time to allow a small squeak before cowering under the table. She poked her head out from the tablecloth to locate the source of the sound.

Her search managed to find Kratos, grinning widely, his head shaking. Over the din of the crowd, she could hear his voice: "Oatmeal? That is most certainly insane!"

Fluttershy emerged slowly, walking towards her friend. "K-Kratos?"

The Spartan turned. "Ah, Fluttershy! Good news: I believe I've discovered the Element of Laughter! I believe young Pinkie here has slain many years of scowling."

"Oh, that's great!" Fluttershy smiled. "So, what was that about the oatmeal?"

Pinkie Pie cut Kratos off before he could speak. "We do not speak of the oatmeal to innocent ears!" she hissed.

The other two stared as Pinkie bounced off. Kratos glanced at Fluttershy. "It's... A long, long story. Now if you'll excuse me a moment," he said. "After what I've heard about this 'pin the tail on the pony' game, I'm not about to pass it up."

With that, he trotted off into the crowd, but not before casting a look about Sugarcube Corner, as if he detected something. Not seeing anything of concern, he resumed his trip towards the party games.

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Outside Sugarcube Corner, a lithe white pony flitted about the windows of the sweet shop on rapidly flapping wings, about the size of Princess Luna. He snuck away without anypony seeing him, shooting up to a cloud high in the atmosphere.

Once he landed, the smallish horn on the alicorn's head flashed, and a small portal appeared. Zeus, in his human form, stood on the other side.

"Hermes, you have something to report?"

Hermes, messenger of the gods, bowed as gracefully as he could on four legs. "Father, Kratos is learning faster than we expected. He has made much progress in Honesty and Laughter today. Kindness has been gradually rising in its Bearer's presence. The others... nothing yet, but there will likely be an increase soon enough. Celestia may soon enough make him our problem again."

Zeus scowled. "How? He's nothing but a hollow killer."

"I suppose in this world he's just a big softy, isn't he?" Hermes flashed a bright grin.

"Show respect!" Zeus instinctively raised his hand. "This is the man that killed your uncles, your siblings! Control your foolishness!"

Hermes flinched. "Of course, father. Shall I incapacitate him?"

“...No,” Zeus decided. “Let us see just how Kratos does on his own. Knowing him, it will not be long until he once again destroys what he cares about. If not, then we’ll *help* him fail.”

Hermes bowed again. “Yes, father.” With that, the alicorn dissipated the portal and flew off, his glowing orange mane creating a comet-like aura as he flew towards the setting sun.

Chapter 9

"If any sort of Fates exist in this world, they hold nothing but contempt for me," Kratos groaned, his face a mask of agony.

Fluttershy looked over at her companion sympathetically. "Well, you shouldn't have eaten all those sweets," she replied. "You must have quite the tummyache."

"I'm not sure what a 'tummy' is, but it causes me great pain, as well." The Spartan's eyes flicked upwards, almost as if searching for a cure to his current suffering. "And to think not so long ago that I was in some sort of heightened bliss..."

"You mean when you had a sugar rush?" Fluttershy recalled the rather hectic last twenty minutes or so of the party, in which the numerous cupcakes, fritters, and candies Kratos had devoured without so much as a second thought began to kick in. He began talking about some sort of amulet, and how everypony else was moving so slowly all of a sudden, and something about everything turning green. After running around, grumbling something about bells and levers, he began yelling that he needed more time, and that the puzzles were just getting unfair. Eventually, thank Celestia, he crashed, his face simply sinking into a three-layer chocolate cake. Pinkie Pie pulled him off the table and woke him up with a bucket of water, at which point Kratos asked to go home.

"Well," the pegasus continued, "let's just see if some dinner and rest will get you back into shape."

"Just rest if you don't mind," Kratos grumbled. "I don't think I can eat any more than I already have."

The Spartan lumbered up the stairs, his insides still screaming at him. He crawled into bed, trying to lay in some way that didn't make him queasy. Eventually, he stared at the wall long enough to fall asleep.

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When Kratos realized he was dreaming, he grumbled, "When I go to sleep, the intent is usually to rest."

"It is not my fault this is the only time I can talk to you," Princess Luna huffed. "Besides, you have been stirring up more than your share of trouble, mortal."

"Like what?"

"Zeus visited us."

Kratos' face instinctively hardened into a scowling glare. "What? You mean you've spoken with him?"

"We're... acquaintances," Luna said carefully, trying to choose the right word. "All the pantheons of the multiverse are well aware of each other. We work together, in a sense."

Kratos was seething. "You dare to meet with him behind my back? You dare to ally with him?" he growled.

"Ally?" Luna rolled her eyes. "Hardly. He is an arrogant, conniving, heartless foal who cannot control his libido and has others clean up the messes he makes. My sister and I may not feel as passionate as you do about it, but we find no pleasure in working with him."

"...Why work with him then?"

"It's the agreement the pantheons made many eons ago." Upon receiving a blank stare from the Spartan, the princess continued. "You know that your world is ruled by the pantheon of Olympus, and the Titans ruled before them. Meanwhile, Celestia and I make up the pantheon of this world, after deposing a rather... chaotic spirit who ruled over Equestria before us."

"There are far more than just two worlds, though. One world is the numerous realms of the Norse, Ra is the sun god elsewhere, and that Yog Sothoth fellow lurks down in the interdimensional underbelly, among many others. All the worlds have had generations of pantheons come and go, but

the originals made a pact declaring that all the gods were to form a sort of alliance. There is a document called the Rules— yes, very original, I know— that more or less outlines the proper behavior and guidelines for interactions with other pantheons. While the Equestrian gods have followed the Rules to the letter, barring the occasional loophole, Zeus has broken almost all of them, short of declaring war on another world.

“Which brings us to the present,” Luna said with a small sigh. “Zeus has made it very clear that he does not want you to come back. Since we’re not letting him have what he wants, that means he’s going to cheat. If there’s anything Zeus is good at, it is tampering with others’ affairs.”

Kratos’ scowl persisted. “Is he still here?”

“No, thank goodness. He scampered off to Olympus after he was done throwing empty threats at us. Besides, I don’t see you carrying the proper tools for what you have in mind.”

“You mean the Blade of Olympus?” Kratos searched his thoughts. He realized that the sword had indeed gone missing upon his arrival in the forest, just before his fateful encounter with Fluttershy. “Then I’ll find it.”

“Not before finishing learning about the Elements, you will not.” Luna fought the urge to roll her eyes at the Spartan. “You have a rather one-track mind, don’t you?”

Kratos didn’t respond for a moment. “...What’s your point?”

“The point is that you’ve almost completed your training,” Luna replied. “You have Generosity, Loyalty, and Magic left to learn. Magic will come about once you have learned the others. You are almost home.”

Kratos allowed a small grin to flicker across his face.

“Which means there will almost certainly be sabotage,” the alicorn continued. “Knowing Zeus, this will not be nearly as straightforward as it should be. Be on your guard. I’m sure you can do it.”

With that, Princess Luna faded away, along with the dream world, and Kratos slept soundly the rest of the night.

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The following morning, Kratos' eyes snapped open at the sound of a certain voice downstairs. "Fluttershy, darling, I must insist that we begin his training as soon as possible. Early to bed and early to rise and all that!"

Kratos realized all at once how he would likely be spending his day. Standing on some pedestal, wearing some ridiculous piece of clothing, being jabbed repeatedly with pins and needles as that white unicorn loosed an endless barrage of meaningless words upon him, all under the pretense of learning Generosity somehow. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop her.

"Perhaps there will be some hidden mercy," he grumbled to himself as he began walking down the stairs. He looked over to the couch where Fluttershy and Rarity were sitting, and the brief flash of steel in the unicorn's eyes told Kratos otherwise.

"Ah, Kratos!" Rarity batted her eyelashes. "Your timing is excellent! I was just reassuring Fluttershy here that you are going to be in very capable hooves. Now, meet me at the Carousel Boutique in half an hour. That should give us both some time to prepare."

With that, Rarity exited. Fluttershy attempted a reassuring smile. "I'm sure you and Rarity will get along just fine," she said.

"I envy your confidence."

Fluttershy walked towards the kitchen, changing the subject. "You'll need breakfast first, though. I cooked up some oatmeal. You know, if you want it."

Kratos sat at the table, glancing at the bowl before him with some apprehension. He recalled the story Pinkie Pie had told him the previous evening. With just the slightest hesitation, he dug into the oatmeal, scarfing it down. He stood abruptly, placed his bowl in the sink as gracefully as he could using his mouth, and made his way out the door, feeling an impending doom weighing down upon his back.

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While he wasn't suffering the supposed doom he had feared, the Ghost of Sparta had to question whether this was better. He was currently standing at attention in the dreaded boutique as his captor entered the room.

"Now," Rarity said, standing tall in front of her charge, horn aglow as she floated a stack of paper alongside herself, "one cannot be generous without knowing proper manners. The only way to know manners, of course, is to know how to be a gentlecolt. To that end, I have compiled a brief list of the proper etiquette for any situation."

Rarity began to pace. "Let's start with the basics. First and foremost, a good gentlecolt says 'please' and 'thank you' when it is appropriate. Fair warning, it is almost always appropriate. Also, you must always remember to open and hold the door for anypony and everypony who is walking through; you should never let a door slam on somepony's face. Of course, then..."

Kratos could only watch the unicorn move back and forth across his field of vision, his face assuming its usual scowl as the mind behind it reeled from the ensuing barrage. "The basics" were apparently far from basic, as Rarity listed off what must have been hundreds of infinitesimal details regarding what to do and not to do in almost any given situation. The bridle flashed at least thirty times during her monologue, and Kratos had to fight to keep his eyes open.

"—after every meal. Frankly, it's a little much, but it has the right idea. You really should brush your teeth before you leave for any social gathering. By the way," Rarity added with a small glare, "it's also rude to scowl at anypony. You could at least try to keep your expression neutral."

Kratos blinked, only catching the previous snippet of her monologue. "My expression *is* neutral," he rumbled.

"...Indeed." Rarity took down a small note on the papers, and continued. "Now, I suppose we should discuss table manners and polite conversation. I know Fluttershy tried to teach you some of the former, poor dear, but if yesterday's party is any indication, you still have much to learn."

As the unicorn droned on, Kratos returned to his still-sluggish thoughts, his mind working on some way to better his situation. In the back of his mind, meanwhile, he considered last night's dream. Luna's visit had brought both good and bad news. Kratos was apparently learning the Elements in a way to satisfy the princesses; soon enough, he would be free. In the meantime, however, Zeus was willing to sabotage their efforts and keep Kratos in Equestria. Whether or not he would be able to was the question. The Spartan decided with finality that he would not let any god's plan interfere with his goals. Zeus could try, but he would fail. In the meantime, he believed he found his ticket to freedom.

"Tell me this is a joke." Kratos said suddenly, staring through glazed eyes.

Rarity paused her monologue, mildly insulted at his interruption. "Beg pardon?"

Kratos sighed, his eyes shut in magic-induced concentration. "I was no philosopher where I came from, but even I know this is futile. You have a plan to have me memorize a complete knowledge of the traditions of higher-ranking members of your society through verbal instruction. That might work for a vagrant off the streets, provided he was from this world. *I am not from this world.* I come from a different world that is separated not only by the cultural structure, but the very workings of nature itself. I can barely understand your concept of a party, and now you expect me to learn the customs of an Equestrian aristocrat via an oral presentation of said traditions?"

Rarity froze, her eyes wide. A few hairs twanged out of place in her mane. "Wha... how... how did you—"

"The bridle," Kratos said flatly. "Every time I think of maiming or killing some...pony, it releases a numbing spell. In small doses, all it does is lower my anger so I don't act on it. However, the bridle's magic has activated thirty..." There was a flash. "...six times since I came here. My mind is a small boat floating in a sea of painkilling magic. It's almost a sort of... enlightenment, I suppose, or a 'sugar rush.' That was how I found and exploited the single, massive flaw." The Spartan turned suddenly. "Why did the birds stop chirping?"

Rarity ignored the non sequitur, still reeling from the sudden debunking of her plans for the day. "All right, then," she said at last. "We'll have to go about this differently. I suppose I should have used Plan B from the start. Actions speak louder than words, after all." With that, she turned, walking towards a nearby closet.

Kratos looked back at the designer. "Plan B?"

Rarity returned, wearing a green combat helmet adorned with branches and twigs. "I suppose you could call it 'intensive study,'" she replied. "Or boot camp, whichever you prefer. The point of it is, you will undergo severe physical training and mental conditioning for the sake of developing manners and learning Generosity. If rote memorization is unfit for teaching you, then we'll simply have to try a method you're likely used to. What do you say to that?"

"...That sounds suspiciously like my childhood." Kratos felt sudden apprehension, slowly replacing the blissful numbness with a dull headache.

"Excellent!" Rarity smiled. "Then let's begin."

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Hours later, Rarity nodded. "I believe it's time." She opened the front door of the boutique, her eyes still on the Spartan. "Just go around the block, and be as well-mannered and generous as possible And remember, I will be watching your every move."

Kratos nodded, and stepped out into the busy noon streets of Ponyville. As he walked along the cobblestone road, he jostled against a cream-colored mare carrying several bags. Kratos turned in time to see one of them fall to the ground.

Kratos' head ducked down, almost as if dodging a blade, and picked the bags up gently. He offered it back to the mare. "Sorry about that," he mumbled, placing the bag back on her back.

“...Thank you,” the mare said, and continued walking. Kratos nodded, and kept walking turning left onto the next street. There, he saw a brown pony struggling to carry a large couch into his store.

The Spartan approached. “Need help?”

“You bet I do!” the stallion laughed. “I’ve had nothing but sofas in here for the last few months. My back’s been killing me. What I wouldn’t give for some quills.”

Without another word, Kratos wriggled his way under the couch, taking most of the weight himself, and led it into the store, with the grateful storeowner following close behind. As they set it down, he looked over. “Thanks, mister...”

“Kratos.”

“Davenport. Tell you what: ever need a quill or a sofa, I’ll give you the best of the best! You have my word!”

“...Thanks.”

Kratos eyed Davenport for a moment before stepping out of the store, returning to his original route. His eyes scanned the street, looking for anyone else to help.

And so it went for another twenty minutes or so. Kratos, always on the lookout, would come to the aid of anyb-pony who needed it. He bucked a colt’s kite out of a tree, assisted a gray pegasus with delivering a piano—the mailmare commenting under her breath that she’d “learned since the last time”—and held the door for more ponies than he bothered counting. Kratos began to notice, with some mild disgust, that he was actually almost enjoying it. His actions helped others, and those he helped took a liking to him. Some of the mares he had confronted the previous afternoon were even grateful for his help, if justifiably suspicious. He once again felt the vague closeness of happiness, although he was still hardly content.

This same dissatisfaction kept him distracted long enough to walk directly into a lamppost. He shook his head vigorously, attempting to blink

the spots out of his eyes. Through his ringing ears, the Spartan could hear laughter, and it hardly took a scholar to know it was directed at him.

Kratos wheeled about, looking for the source of the laughter. He found it surprisingly on the thatched rooftop of a nearby house. There, a tall white pegasus stood, chuckling at his misfortune. Kratos recognized the blazing mane, and the horn just barely protruding from it confirmed his identity.

“Hermes...” Kratos growled.

The alicorn’s laughter cut short, and he froze, realizing with dawning horror that he’d been discovered. “Catch me if you can, Kratos!” he shouted with false bravado, and took off flying through the streets of Ponyville.

Kratos could feel his blood boiling, even as the bridle released its numbing spell. He took off full gallop after the fleeing god, making sure to dodge bystanders. His tail already began swinging, readying itself for the ensuing battle.

After flying a few blocks, Hermes glanced back. Kratos, while still far behind, was gradually making his way towards the alicorn. Hermes knew he was faster, but Kratos had endurance on his side. The Spartan likely wouldn’t stop running until he had his prey. The alicorn needed some kind of advantage.

Hermes slowed down for a moment, scanning the street. He found his target, and with a flash of his horn brought the chimney of a nearby house crumbling down. He stopped, hovering in mid-air to appreciate his handiwork.

Kratos saw the bricks begin to avalanche off the roof above where a young filly was walking. She looked up, realizing all too late what her fate was to be. The Spartan’s speed almost doubled.

With a bellow, Kratos lunged. He shoved the filly out of the way, and felt the remnants of the chimney crash down on top of him. The pile of bricks was still, as a crowd gathered. A mother burst out of the crowd, hugging the child tightly as they both sobbed. The street was silent. Hermes grinned.

The smile would not last. The bricks began to heave, and the Ghost of Sparta emerged from the wreckage, somewhat bruised but very much alive. He scrutinized the mother and daughter. Their desperate embrace echoed in the Spartan's memories, reminding him of two of the few people he had cared about.

The Spartan stood tall, chest heaving. His eyes locked Hermes with a blazing hatred locked within them. He began walking, slowly, towards the hovering alicorn, readying his blade as he approached. He felt the wall of eyes staring from behind, but they didn't concern him. He only had one thing on his mind.

The bridle flashed. It was ignored.

Hermes' grin faded. His plan had worked, at first: the child was unexpected, but Kratos was hit, and likely hurting; besides, some brat from another world hardly mattered. Now, though, the Ghost of Sparta didn't seem the slightest bit slowed. In fact, he seemed more determined than ever.

The messenger of the gods turned tail and fled. Kratos broke into a gallop, thundering after his target like a rocket, kicking up dust on the dirt path leading to the outskirts of Ponyville.

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“—and furthermore, I will no longer stand for this—”

“Zeus?” Princess Celestia's usually bottomless patience was beginning to run out. “Do you have a point to all of this?”

The older alicorn glared. “My point *is*,” he spat, “that you two are harboring a rebellious, mindless murderer in your realm, with the intentions of sending him to kill me!”

“Hardly. We are trying to rehabilitate a weary, traumatized byproduct of your thoughtlessness, and when we're convinced he's learned enough, we're sending him back home. What that ridiculous fate system you have in your world decides to do regarding the whole ‘son kills father’ thing could

have been very easily avoided on your part; if there's anything to learn from Kratos, it's that you can change your fate rather easily."

"With the Fates dead, prophecy hardly matters anymore!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Luna replied curtly. "Besides, there's still that other god you have sneaking around. Do not lie: we can detect his presence. Whoever they are, they are violating the Rules just as much as you are."

"There is no other god! I would not stoop to using a spy!" Zeus's chest puffed out with indignation. "I won't tolerate this attack on my dignity! I warn you now to—"

A small sort of portal appeared in front of the Olympian, a small white alicorn appearing on the other side. "Father? It's Hermes. I need to—"

"Hermes?" Zeus could barely hide his apparent disdain at the choice of interruption. "You are to refer to me as Lord Zeus, first of all. Second, this is hardly the time for whatever you've gotten yourself into!"

Princess Luna's eyebrows arched up. "Hermes? I suppose he is your spy then?"

"Fath— Lord Zeus, please!" The messenger's eyes were pleading.

Zeus was fuming, the electricity crackling in his mane with more intensity. "Hermes, what possible reason do you have for interrupting me?"

Hermes opened his mouth to respond. Before he could, though, another voice broke in.

"TURN AND FACE ME, COWARD! TURN AND CONFRONT YOUR DEATH!"

Hermes shrieked, eyes wide with panic, and the portal cut out.

The throne room was silent.

Zeus turned to the princesses. "Call off your mongrel!" he barked. "Kratos is assaulting a god this very moment!"

Princess Celestia's eyes shifted subtly. Instead of their usual sparkle, there was a cold glint of iron in them. She raised an eyebrow at the Olympian. "I'm sorry," she deadpanned. "You said there are no other gods here. He's not attacking me. He's not attacking my sister. He hasn't attacked you yet. Since we're the only gods here, that means it's a false alarm."

"You heard him! You know what's happening in that pit of a village this very moment! Now strike down that... monster! At once!"

"Clearly just a prank. You know how Hermes is."

Zeus was growing agitated. "Damn you, that is my son!"

"If that was the case, then that would be your own fault, wouldn't it?"

Zeus fell silent. The glare he leveled at the sun princess was one of pure loathing. He stomped his hoof down and disappeared in a flash of lightning, the smell of ozone left lingering behind.

Princess Luna turned to her sister. "That was horrible of you, Celly."

Celestia sighed. "Do you think I enjoyed that?" she asked. "Kratos isn't able to kill Hermes; he doesn't have the Blade of Olympus, and the bridle is still working. It won't be pretty, but he'll stay alive. Zeus is getting worse, though. More demanding, more arrogant, likely more violent... I pray that Kratos is sent back soon."

Princess Luna looked out the balcony door, towards Ponyville. "I'm not sure that's going to be enough."

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Chapter 10

Rainbow Dash awoke to the sound of a girlish shriek.

The weathermare's head emerged from her cloud pillow. She looked around from her small perch over the outskirts of Ponyville, searching for the jerk who had the guts to interrupt her nap. She found the offending pony soon enough, as he flew over the rolling green hills below as if his tail was on fire.

Dash swooped down from the cloud to investigate. She flew up alongside the other pegasus, noticing his glowing mane and larger size. "What's got you in a hurry, buddy?"

The other flier turned, and Rainbow Dash noticed both the small horn obscured by his mane and the panicked look in his eyes. "Leave me, mortal! This does not concern you!" With that, he sped up, leaving a somewhat stunned pegasus behind.

"Hey!" The Junior Speedster took off again, steadily catching up with the revealed alicorn. "Who are you to go around dissing people and flying off like—"

"I said *leave me!*" With that, the alicorn delivered a rear hoof at his pursuer. It was a weak kick, but still knocked Dash square in the jaw, sending her reeling. By the time she recovered, there was only a fading orange streak to show where he had traveled.

Rainbow Dash was about to resume the chase, but the sound of thudding hoofsteps from behind made her turn. She was greeted by the sight of a galloping Kratos, his eyes locked on the blazing trail in the sky and his mouth grit in a toothy snarl.

Rainbow Dash pulled up alongside the Spartan as he ran. "Hey, what's got you all saddle-sore?" she asked.

Kratos glanced over. "You're Loyalty's bearer?"

The pegasus grinned. “Yep! The fastest flier in all Equestria!”

“Well,” Kratos rumbled, eyes returning to the orange streak, “*that* was Hermes, fastest flier from my world. He’s been spying on me, and tried to kill me and a young child.”

“Woah, what?”

“Exactly,” the Spartan replied. “Now, if you’re so fast, then help me *stop him*.”

“Got it!” With that, Rainbow Dash took off, her namesake trailing behind her. Kratos ran along the path for another thirty seconds or so before noticing that she had returned. “How, uh, do we stop him?”

The Spartan attempted to ignore his lack of foresight, scanning the landscape for ideas. “See that ridge up there?” he asked, pointing towards a cliff cropping up above the thick forest.

“Yeah,” Dash nodded. “That’s a little far into the Everfree, though.”

“Just get him near there.”

With that, the two split up. Dash continued chasing after Hermes’ trail, while the Spartan turned left onto a path that led deep into the somewhat familiar Everfree Forest.

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Long after exiting the outskirts of Ponyville, finding himself hovering over a forest, Hermes dared to slow and turn his head to look back. Upon seeing no sign of a hulking, bloodthirsty earth pony behind him, the messenger god relaxed. “I give myself too little credit,” he chuckled. “I could outrun him easily!”

“Oh yeah?” Well, how about *me*?”

Hermes glanced over just in time to see a rainbow streak rocketing towards him. “What in Olym—*oomph!*”

The alicorn shook his head, flexing his jaw as he turned towards the attacker.

Rainbow Dash flitted about, forelegs raised and ready to strike again. "Yeah, you want some more? Go on, try to hurt any more kids! I dare ya!"

Hermes looked at the pegasus before him with disdain. "You foal! Wait, no." He shook his head again, vigorously. "Confound this world and its vernacular... You fool! You dare to attack a god?"

Dash laughed. "I didn't know gods ran like cowards from an angry bald pony with a goatee. I know he's unstable, but c'mon!"

The alicorn stared, slack-jawed. "You... really don't know, do you?"

"Know *what*?" Dash glared accusingly.

"How dangerous Kratos is! Do you know why I ran?" Hermes demanded, eyes wide. "Why I was sent to spy on him? Why Lord Zeus will do everything in his power to keep him trapped in this world?"

"...Because you owe him money? Maybe you got a crush on him? How should I know?"

Hermes' expression shifted. It changed from panic to a low, snarling mask of anger. His mane and tail, once only faintly glowing, burst into blazing orange energy, and trails of magic wisped from his hooves. "Insolent mortal," he hissed.

Rainbow Dash gulped.

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Kratos barreled through the underbrush of the forest, the cliff slowly growing closer in the small clearing ahead of him. The thick foliage was almost a tunnel, forcing the Spartan to continue towards the small patch of light leading to his destination.

He had thankfully retraced his voyage from his first day in Equestria to the clearing that he had arrived in. Upon searching the nearby area, he had been greeted by a welcome sight: the Blade of Olympus. The sword was still in prime condition, its blue aura radiating along the center of its blade. Kratos attempted to pry it out of the ground, finding that the grip was now more fitting for being held by a mouth than a hand. Kratos shrugged it off as more of Equestria's bizarre effects on things from other worlds.

After surveying the rest of the area, Kratos had found another item he'd been hoping for. It was currently affixed to his back, the harness jostling as he ran. As the clearing grew closer, he could hear blasts of magical energy in the distance. He could only hope he would be on time.

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Rainbow Dash had used almost every single trick she'd ever learned to try and lose the alicorn trailing close behind, barring a Sonic Rainboom. Cloud Drills, Sprite Tornadoes, Filly Flashes... Dash would have used a Super-Speed Strut if she thought it would help.

Hermes, however, was matching her move for move. He wasn't gaining on her, but he definitely wasn't falling behind. On top of that, he was shooting bolts of energy everywhere Dash flew. The last few had just barely missed her, and the pegasus knew she was fighting a hugely uphill battle.

Dash kept arcing towards the stone ridge, hoping every time that Kratos' plan would miraculously show up there. She had passed it for the fifth time a while ago, and dreaded fatigue was starting to weigh down her wings. The big chump would need to get there soon.

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Not long after, Kratos finally broke free of the entangling grip of the Everfree Forest, emerging onto a steady uphill ridge. He galloped up its length, his eyes picking off a rainbow streak and burning orange trail shooting all across the sky. He was in time.

With a shift of his body, the contraption strapped to his back unfurled. Two massive wooden appendages stretched out to either side, adorned

with an assortment of grimy black feathers. Their construction was an amalgamation of sloppy and precise; considering its previous owner, this was no surprise.

Kratos gave the Icarus Wings an experimental flap, feeling them push the air beneath him. The mechanism was almost guided by thought, given how well it was controlled, doubtless some lingering influence of the madman's father. Assured that the wings were ready, Kratos paced back to the far edge of the cliff, mentally marking the outcropping ridge that would act as his launching point.

He was ready.

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Dash nearly cried out in relief when her griffin-like eyesight picked off a familiar hulking earth pony on the ridge. She dove down suddenly, building up speed as she lowered herself to just below the cliff's altitude. Hermes followed close behind.

As Rainbow Dash blew past the edge of the cliff, she found herself wondering about Kratos' supposed plan. For one thing, what were those things on his sides she had seen? For another, why in the hay would he be running off the cliff? It didn't make any sense—

Dash's mind exploded in a white-hot flash of pain as one of Hermes' neon bolts finally struck home. She could feel her entire body go numb, as if somepony had flicked the "off" switch. She could barely register what the noise was behind her when she blacked out

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Hermes sneered as the pegasus careened from the sky. He had managed to knock her out, but she wasn't falling; it seemed her wings were still working, and she haphazardly coasted to the forest below. She would be hurt, but he had wanted so much more than to knock her senseless and scuff her up. She mocked him. For that, she deserved far worse.

The Olympian's thoughts were interrupted when he realized that the sun had been blotted out. It was odd: he hadn't been flying close enough to

the cliffs for them to block out the afternoon sun. It was when he looked up towards the shadow that he understood, his stomach dropping much faster than the fallen pegasus was.

Kratos dove down towards Hermes, the Icarus Wings shedding feathers even as he rocketed towards his target. It almost looked as if he was going to hit Hermes full on.

The air was forced violently out of Hermes' lungs as two immense hooves planted themselves in his chest and stomach. Kratos easily swung himself around, wrapping his forelegs around the alicorn in a stranglehold.

The two began to fall towards the ground headfirst, spinning wildly as the forest rushed up to meet them. "Wh-what are you doing?" Hermes stammered.

Kratos' face was set in determination. "Leveling the playing field."

Hermes could only watch in silent, stunned horror as they fell, wondering how mad Kratos would be to try a suicide maneuver like this. The Olympian would survive, but the mortal Spartan would be crushed. Just before impact, Kratos twisted, placing a screaming alicorn underneath himself to cushion the blow.

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The two landed on a hill, leaving a solid crater the size of a large wagon, and began rolling down the incline while being torn at from all sides by thickets and branches. When they finally came to a stop, Hermes found himself lying on his back, head spinning.

The alicorn stood, looking around. He turned around just in time to see a pale earth pony charging towards him at full speed, his artificial wings folded up. Kratos wheeled about, bringing his back legs in and shooting them out, driving his hooves into Hermes' chest.

"Why?" Kratos bellowed, pawing at the mossy ground. "Why must you gods always sabotage me?" The god could only cough in response.

Kratos grit his teeth as he prepared another attack. "All I wanted was to forget the pain! Forget the strife! But you all kept leading me on, denying me *my life!*"

Hermes attempted to fire off another bolt of energy. It deflected harmlessly off the Golden Fleece, even as the Spartan continued slowly approaching. Kratos' bridle, which had been flashing almost constantly since he had first given chase, was now steadily glowing. Hermes knew that wasn't right, but didn't have time to ask about it as he dodged a swing from the Blade of Exile.

"Now," Kratos fumed, "I am trying to return to my own home from an entirely different *world*, and you won't let me accomplish a simple task!" The chain blade finally hit home, carving a gash in Hermes' flank.

"Gaah! Wh-why isn't the numbing spell *working?*" the alicorn demanded, as ichor, the golden blood of the gods, dripped from his flank. "You shouldn't be able to see straight, Spartan!"

Kratos allowed himself a small, dark grin, recalling his experience with Rarity that morning. "I've... developed an immunity," he replied. The smile disappeared. "Now let's see if we can numb you a little."

A swift series of blows slammed into Hermes' side, Kratos' forelegs jabbing at any perceived weak point. The alicorn staggered, and upon recovery made his counterattack. His strikes were weak, but fast, and seemingly coming from all sides. A lucky blow struck the Spartan's right eye, aggravating his old scar.

Kratos bellowed in response, and Hermes felt his old confidence returning, even as he continued raining down blows on the stallion. "My my, Kratos. Hurt already? Perhaps you ought to quit now, before you go inflicting any more pain on yourself."

"Pain?" Kratos knocked the last hoof aimed at his face out of the way. He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that threatened to shatter Hermes' newfound bravado. "That wasn't pain, that was an old ache. Do you want to *feel* pain?"

Before Hermes could respond, the Spartan charged, catching the alicorn in his ribs with one shoulder and slamming him into a nearby tree as hard as he could. The alicorn rolled over, attempting to stand on shaky hooves, but his legs were knocked out from under him by a length of chain. Before he could understand what was happening, Hermes found himself lashed to a tree. Before he could cry out, a wickedly curved blade was planted into the trunk just inches from his head, silencing the noise.

Hermes looked up and down the length of the chain. It began at the base of the short sword, wrapped around both himself and the tree, and ended several feet away, wrapped around the tail of...

The messenger god couldn't observe any more as another hoof struck his face, harder this time. "Now... what are you doing here?" Kratos bellowed.

"I-I was simply admiring the countryside! Equestria's a great place, y'know. I've visited here before, and lemme tell you—"

Kratos turned his rump to his captive, and for a moment Hermes thought he was being insulted. The Spartan then turned his head, and with a glint in his eye drove his back legs into Hermes' ribs.

"*Hrrk!*" The alicorn's eyes bulged. He knew he had heard a few ribs fracture.

Kratos turned back. "What. Are. You. *Doing here?*" he growled.

Hermes coughed. He could taste ichor in his mouth. "I was sent to spy on you... with instructions t-to sabotage your learning of the Elements."

"Why?"

"Lord Zeus doesn't want you to return!" Hermes flinched at the Spartan's reaction to Zeus' name, but he continued. "He wants you as far removed from Olympus as possible!"

"And for that you would resort to killing children?" Kratos glowered.

“That attack was intended to slow you down! The child wasn’t my idea!”

Kratos glared for a moment, then turned away. Hermes shut his eyes, waiting for another blow to strike. None came. He opened his eyes to find the earth pony only staring outwards.

“What exactly would Zeus do if I were to learn all the Elements?”

Hermes wracked his brain for answers. He recalled one snippet of his father’s tirade from that morning, but he knew it would be suicide to reveal it. “I’m... I’m not sure!”

“You *lie!*” Kratos bucked the god again, this time delivering his hooves into his stomach. Hermes instinctively doubled over in pain, but only strained his throat against the chains. “You’re his son, and one of the favored ones at that! You would know his plans!”

Hermes turned his head, spitting out blood, and looked back fearfully at the Spartan. “Zeus... said that if you succeeded, and the princesses allowed you to use the Key, he’d... he’d invade Equestria.”

Kratos stared. “*What?*”

Hermes continued. “If the royal sisters don’t cooperate, then he plans to... remove them, and send every monster he can to kill you, and anything that stands between you and them.”

“...Everything?”

“Everything. Even... especially ponies.” Hermes choked out the last part.

Kratos processed the information he had received. Zeus was willing to crush him, at all costs, and would gladly dispose of Luna and Celestia if he had to. The Spartan held no love for Princess Celestia, but Princess Luna was one of the only deities that he was on good terms with. Athena was dead, or at least some ethereal spirit, so that really made her *the* only one, and Kratos was not about to let Luna suffer her fate.

“Well then, Hermes,” Kratos spat. “If Zeus is scheming what you say he is, then I suppose we’ll have to make an example out of you.”

For the first time, Hermes noticed the glowing weapon strapped to the Spartan’s back. “No!” he cried. “Please, whatever you do, don’t kill me!”

“I’m not going to kill you, coward. I’ve learned the beauty of mercy.” Kratos smiled. The alicorn had seen him smile before, whilst spying at the pink one’s party, but this was far different. The Spartan now wore a dark, thin grin, shaped as if it were carved with a knife. “I won’t harm you with a single blade, Hermes. Not. A single. Weapon.”

He leaned in close to the chained Olympian, the grin evaporating. “Let’s begin.”

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Rainbow Dash stirred, squinting at her blurred surroundings. She attempted to stand, but found herself on wobbly legs. She eased herself back down onto the soft ground, waiting for her vision to clear. It felt like ages, and Dash could hear her mind screaming for movement, but eventually the forest stopped spinning.

“Good. You’re awake.”

As Dash stood, she turned to see Kratos standing beside her, motionless as usual. “How’d we end up here?” she asked, rubbing a hoof against her head.

The earth pony raised his eyebrows. “You don’t remember, then?”

“I was napping, and there was some dude flying like a madstallion, but...” The thoughts clicked in Rainbow’s mind. “Woah, wait! Was that really an alicorn? Like, some other god?”

Kratos nodded. “Hermes, messenger of the gods. He was sent from my world to spy on me and keep me from learning the elements. I took care of him after he rendered you unconscious: he won’t be showing up any time soon.”

The pegasus couldn't help but feel some apprehension. You didn't, y'know, *kill* him, right? He was a jerk, yeah, but that's no reason to—"

Kratos cut in. "Hermes is still alive. Please, Rainbow Dash; I've learned better since I arrived here. Besides, you need a certain tool to kill gods."

"Oh." Dash's suspicions were still raised. "Then what *did* happen to him?"

Kratos shrugged, his expression almost bored. "He is a messenger. I simply had him deliver a message to Zeus."

"...Right." Rainbow Dash looked around, surveying the thick foliage surrounding them. "So, where are we, exactly?" she asked.

"Somewhere in the Everfree Forest. Are you familiar with it?"

Dash nodded. "Yeah. I've been in here a few times."

"Familiar enough to get us out?" Kratos continued.

The pegasus winced slightly. "Uh, not really." A thought crossed her mind. "Duh! I'll just fly up and see where we are!"

With that, Rainbow Dash launched herself up into the air with a powerful flap of her wings. Much to her surprise, the pegasus found herself falling back to the forest below. Her legs screamed in pain as she touched down, almost bringing her to her knees. "Ohhh...kay, what was *that*?"

"My guess?" Kratos glanced upwards, where Dash's back had been facing when she woke up. Sure enough, there was a tunnel cut straight as a bullet through the canopy, a number of branches missing. A particularly thick arm, however, had stood strong, leading her to where she had fallen. "You were hit by a magic bolt that sent you crash-landing in a thick forest. Doubtless the impact has left you injured. You've probably hurt your wings, too."

"I'm always the first one, aren't I?" the pegasus muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Just felt a little Pinkie Pie-ish.” Rainbow Dash looked around. “So, what now?”

The Spartan glanced up at the sky through the rather convenient hole in the canopy. “The sun is growing close to setting. If the Everfree is to the west of Ponyville, then we need to head east.” Kratos turned, his back to the sun. “That way.”

With that, the two set forth into the thick forest, with the earth pony keeping a close eye on the weary pegasus.

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“How many more times are you going to attempt this, Zeus?” Princess Celestia’s expression held no more aggravation, only unbearable boredom. “We are *not* going to ‘eradicate this petulant mortal,’ nor are we going to ‘keep him locked away in this saccharine prison world.’ Also, your vocabulary isn’t impressing anypony.”

The male alicorn’s nostrils flared. “I am willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that monster never threatens Olympus again, one way or another.”

Celestia’s eyes flicked to the ceiling. “You’ve mentioned that,” she replied dryly. “And have you considered the possibility that if you treated him well enough, he wouldn’t hold the animosity required to threaten Olympus?”

“All he knows is anger and suffering! That is all he is capable of!”

“We could not help but notice he’s expanded his repertoire.” Princess Luna couldn’t help but cut in. “He can also farm, admit his weaknesses, take a joke, enjoy the lighter side of life, feed small animals, learn compassion, learn manners—”

There was a bright flash, and before the three alicorns hovered an initially unfamiliar figure. His wings flapped haphazardly, legs dangling uselessly from his sides. His face was a bruised, bloody mess, the mane

flattened to reveal a broken horn. The figure's sides were dented and misshapen, a far cry from the usual grace of an alicorn.

"...Hermes?" Luna couldn't help but stare.

Hermes fluttered weakly towards Zeus. "Father..." he croaked.

"Hermes! What happened?" Zeus showed genuine concern in his eyes.

"Kratos... found me spying," the young Olympian coughed. "Tried t-to throw him off my trail, nearly killed some stupid kid. Got real... real mad at me. Caught me, and interrogated me..."

Zeus' face hardened. "Interrogated about what?"

"He... knows about the plan, should we fail."

Princess Celestia's eyebrows lowered. "What plan?"

Hermes was about to respond, but Zeus cut him off. "Then what?"

"Promised... he wouldn't kill me. Had the Blade but... promised he wouldn't use a weapon. Then... he made me give you a message." Hermes looked up mournfully at his father. "This hurts a lot."

But Zeus wasn't looking at his son. He stood tall, glaring at Celestia and Luna. "'Learned compassion?' You call this travesty compassion?" he bellowed.

Celestia's eyes grew cold again. "I thought he wasn't here."

Zeus roared. "Not this again!"

"Your son here is the runt in a rather large litter of yours, even limited to the ones on Olympus," the Sun Regent continued. "Surely he went and annoyed Apollo, or even Hercules? You certainly haven't stopped these squabbles bef—"

"ENOUGH!"

Thunder boomed inside the chambers. Zeus was seething, the electricity jumping all across his body. "You continue to make a fool out of me, assuming my son is nothing but a chew toy for your little Spartan! If this continues, you'll see soon enough what happens when you incur the wrath of Olympus!"

"F-father?"

"Quiet, boy!" Zeus reared up, stomping both hooves down. He disappeared in an immense flash of lightning, the area where he stood singed. Hermes remained in the throne room.

The Olympian alicorn looked over, smiling weakly. "Hello, Luna. Good to... good to see you again. I would love to catch up, but it would appear as though my father left me here, so if you wouldn't mind—"

"Actually," Princess Celestia began, "First I think we should talk about this 'plan' you mentioned..."

Hermes gulped.

Chapter 11

“So...” Rainbow Dash looked around, clearly uneasy about being unable to move quickly. “You wanna talk or something?”

Kratos glanced over at the pegasus for a brief moment before his eyes returned to the forest path. “About what, exactly?”

“Well, I talked to that Hermes guy, and he seemed really afraid of you. Something about what you did back in your world or whatever.”

Kratos grimaced. “Hermes is a coward, although I suppose his cowardice was justified.”

Dash squinted. “How, exactly?”

“I killed his uncles. A few of his siblings.” Noting his companion’s disbelieving stare, he added, “They attacked me first, though.”

“Wasn’t he a god? Gods don’t die! And how many do you even have in your world?”

“Far more than just two,” the Spartan assured her. “And they usually don’t die, unless you have this.” He nodded his head back to the glowing weapon strapped to his back. “The gods of Olympus abandoned me, and have attempted to kill me more times than I can remember. Don’t pity them, and don’t pity me.”

“Ohhhh-kay,” Dash replied, shifting uncomfortably. “Let’s talk about something else. How’s your time been in Ponyville?”

“Fine.” Kratos didn’t add anything else.

Rainbow Dash decided to try again. “...Have you been having fun?”

“Yes.”

The junior speedster rolled her eyes. "Would you care to tell me about it?" she snarked.

"To what end?"

"To make this go a little faster! I mean, come *on!*" Dash's expression was one of agony. "We're in the middle of the Everfree Forest, and not only can I not fly, but I'm stuck walking with the dumbest traveler ever!"

"You could just go on ahead if you're so bored," Kratos shot back.

The pegasus shook her head. "Nuh-uh! I'm sticking right by you, even *if* you're going to be a jerk about it, so you might as well make the best out of it!"

Kratos grumbled under his breath, "Either you truly believe in loyalty, or you're just a stubborn fool." Turning back to Dash, he sighed. "What do you want to know?"

Rainbow Dash thought for a moment. "Whaddya think of everypony? You know: us, the princesses, any other ponies you've met around here?"

"Erm..." Kratos began. "Princess Luna is the friendliest deity I've ever met, although that is not saying much. She seems rather optimistic, though."

Dash looked confused. "You only saw her for like five minutes, though."

Kratos shrugged. "She has visited my dreams a few times."

"Huh." Dash glanced over at the Spartan stallion. "Guess she kinda likes you. What about Celestia?"

"...I don't think she and I are on good terms."

"Well, duh!"

“As for the bearers...” Kratos looked over. “Applejack is a fine wo...mare, albeit a tad stubborn. Means well by it, though. I’m still not very fond of Rarity, but that’s her own fault. Pinkie Pie is...”

“Pinkie Pie is Pinkie Pie?” Dash offered.

The Spartan considered the description. “...That works, yes. Haven’t spoken with Twilight, but she seems... too intellectual for me. As for you, I admire your bravery, at the least: not many would charge straight towards a god. Don’t know you well enough otherwise.”

“What about Fluttershy?” The pegasus shot Kratos a look he couldn’t quite decipher.

“Fluttershy...” Kratos sighed. “Fluttershy was the first being who showed genuine kindness to me in a long time. She was willing to take me into her home and care for me however she could, and I cannot thank her enough. She has hidden depths, though, a hidden strength...” The Spartan allowed a small smile, looking downwards with a look of remembrance.

“You seem kinda... fond of her.”

Kratos’ head snapped back up. “...What?”

Dash shifted awkwardly. “Okay, lemme ask it like this: do you, y’know, *like* Fluttershy?”

“In what sense?”

“Do you... have the hots for her?” Dash finally asked.

Kratos stared. “Why? Do you?”

“What?” Rainbow Dash looked aghast. “No way! She’s been my friend since forever! Besides, I don’t dig mares! Why’d you even ask that?”

“First off,” Kratos began, “because you gave me that sort of... impression. Second, because my relationship with Fluttershy is nothing like that!” The anger boiled away. “She... reminds me of someone, really.”

Cautiously, Dash ventured, "Who?"

"...Calliope. My daughter."

"...Oh." She turned back towards the path, then stopped. "Wait a minute, you're a *father*?" she asked, her mouth gaping in shock.

"Why is my life of such great interest to you?" Kratos demanded, glaring at the pegasus.

"Mostly 'cuz we don't really know anything about you," Dash said, rolling her eyes. "We know you're from another world, that you've got something against Celestia, that you've apparently seen and done a lot of messed-up things, and you're currently living with a friend of ours. Not exactly reassuring."

Kratos simply harrumphed and turned back towards the path, stewing in his anger. Of course Rainbow Dash was right, but he was in no mood to admit that. He thought he'd have felt a little better, releasing his stress over the past few days by beating Hermes into a bloody pulp. He'd have thought finally getting his ha... *hooves* on the pest would have been far more satisfying, but afterwards he felt as hollow as he did when he first arrived in Equestria. On top of that, it wasn't like he could very easily tell them his background without alienating all of them. The less they knew, the better.

After they walked along for a long period of silence, the Spartan could hear Dash sigh. "All right, so that's a touchy subject. As long as we have that cleared up, how'd you like that party yesterday?"

Kratos mulled the question over. "From what I *can* remember, it was the most at ease I've ever been. Pinkie has a way of making one feel... welcome."

"Well, yeah," Dash shrugged. "That's her whole deal. She throws parties to make ponies happy. The one time she thought we hated her parties, she went a little nuts. I think Twilight mentioned some syndrome, but I dunno."

"Which is why those floating objects are her cutie marks?" Kratos asked.

“Yeah! And my cutie mark is all about me striving to be the fastest, and yours is...” The pegasus glanced over at Kratos’ cutie mark. “...Uhhh—”

“I don’t know either,” Kratos said.

Rainbow Dash smirked. “Don’t tell the Crusaders. They might just make you an honorary member. You’d never leave Equestria then.”

Kratos allowed a low chuckle, partly at the now almost fond memory of the three fillies. “They would forgive my assault on their tree house?”

Dash thought about it with a sly grin. “Scoots would probably hold a grudge, at least until I gave you the Rainbow Dash seal of approval. What can I say, the kiddo loves me.”

Kratos briefly noted the apparent ease he was now having with the pegasus, and was about to reply to her remark in kind when he felt the ground underneath him crumble. Without another moment of warning, the trail beneath Kratos collapsed into the ravine that edged along the path, tearing up the underbrush along the way.

“Kratos!” Rainbow Dash attempted to take off towards the falling Spartan, but her wings still ached, and she only succeeded in crashing to the dirt path. She opened her eyes just in time to watch Kratos tumble out of sight.

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Moments later, Kratos landed unceremoniously on a rotting, fallen log, knocking the wind out of his lungs if only because it had caught him off-guard. He rolled off, thudding onto the mossy ground.

The stallion stood slowly, scanning the area. This section of the forest was even darker and more choked with vines and foliage than before. He was far from feeling afraid of anything the Everfree had to offer, but he remained on his guard anyway.

As he continued looking around, Kratos' eyes picked up a small glimmer of light shining through the darkness. Recalling his last experience with mysterious sources of light, the Spartan advanced cautiously, checking that the Blade of Olympus was within reach.

Kratos emerged in a small, perfectly circular clearing, with the exact center holding a small white altar. Upon the altar rested the small marble bust of a young man, his head held high and proud.

"Greetings, Ghost of Sparta." The voice was different from the first one he had heard, but they shared the same bizarre echoing sound. *"We've had our eye on you for some time."*

"Who are you?" Kratos barked.

"Right to the point, I see. One of your better qualities." The Spartan could swear he heard the voice "ahem" before continuing. *"I am Bellerophon. You have already met my friend Lancer, if you recall your visit to the temple."*

"Then you are the ones responsible for my journey!"

"Indeed. You, Kratos, are the only one capable of freeing us from our eternal prisons."

Kratos scowled. "And why should I?"

Bellerophon tsked. *"Not the true paragon of Kindness, are you, Ghost of Sparta? No matter. I simply warn you that you may well share our fate, if you continue."*

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Zeus has the entirety of the pantheons wrapped around his finger," the voice replied, its voice flowing through the air. *"He could easily pressure the Royal Sisters into disposing of you. Perhaps, say, with the threat of war?"*

Kratos' confidence faltered. "They would not dare."

"Oh? And what of all the other gods you have met in your travels, hmm? I suppose not long ago, they would not have dared either?" The voice emitted a mirthful chuckle, and Kratos could almost see a smug grin on the bust's features.

"All the gods will betray you, Ghost of Sparta. Even your beloved Princess Luna has been using you, although her designs are really rather benign compared to what Celestia has in store, should you become too much of a liability."

Kratos glowered at the entire clearing, not sure where to aim his glare. "...What do you want of me?"

"Strike Zeus and Celestia with the Blade of Olympus," the voice declared.

"...I can do this."

"Then, use the power you glean from them to break our bonds, and together the three of us will be more than capable of destroying the gods, of both Olympus and Canterlot. Once you clean up some loose ends, of course."

Kratos' eyes widened. "Loose ends?" he echoed.

"The Elements of Harmony," Bellerophon replied. *"They are the only force that can halt our ascension. Dispose of them, and victory is ours."*

Kratos stared, his eyes far away even as his ears heard everything the spirit said.

"Just think!" Bellerophon continued. *"Do you recall the bliss that Lancer bestowed upon you? You can return to that feeling! It will be an end to the memories, the sorrow, the tragedies that follow your every move and haunt your every moment! You would be a free man! Y—"*

"Kratos!" Another voice cut in from above. "Where are you, buddy?"

The Spartan shook his head, the familiar voice breaking his trance. "Rainbow Dash..."

“C’mon, you gotta be okay!” Dash continued, still unseen through the thick canopy. “You’re not going to go and die or disappear or anything on my watch!”

Kratos turned back towards the statue, his face locked in grim determination. “No.”

“No?” Bellerophon sounded genuinely surprised.

“I will not slay the Elements of Harmony to free you,” Kratos clarified. “Nothing you can offer me would move me to any other decision. You act as though you know me rather well, but there’s something about me you should know.”

Kratos craned his neck, gripping the Blade of Olympus tightly in his jaws. “I am no traitor,” he growled, somehow still speaking clearly.

With that, he leapt, swinging the sword with all his might into the statue, shattering it and driving the blade into the altar.

Bellerophon howled in pain, and for a moment Kratos could almost hear a more feminine voice crying out in tandem. Magical tendrils of white light exploded from the bust, writhing as it shot upwards through the trees overhead. As the light left, Kratos heard a hoarse voice whisper in his ear, *“You have not heard the last of us.”*

With that, the clearing darkened to match the rest of the forest.

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Rainbow Dash looked up to see the sun far lower than it had been before, the sky slowly approaching the colors of sunset. “This is so bad,” she muttered to herself. “It’s my time with the big scary dude from another world, and now he’s gone, or worse. The others are gonna kill me!”

“Not... if I... have anything... to say about it!”

The pegasus turned towards the edge of the ravine, just in time to see a large, wickedly curved blade drive into the ground. Slowly but surely,

a dirt-stained, scuffed-up Kratos clambered onto the ledge. He allowed a weary smile. "I would have returned sooner... but this body is not meant for vertical climbs."

"Kratos! Boy, am I glad to see you!" Dash froze for a moment. "Not that, y'know, I was worried or anything," she added, attempting to recover.

"I don't doubt that," Kratos replied knowingly. "Let us continue where we left off."

With that, the two returned to the path, treading more carefully this time. What neither of them noticed, however, was the glowing portal behind them.

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Zeus practically shook with rage as he dispelled the communication. Kratos had learned almost all the Elements. If Celestia kept her promise, she would return him to the world of Olympus, and there was little doubt of what would happen after that now that he had also retrieved the Blade.

The god of thunder turned, taking in the view of his majestic mountain home. He would not stand to see this place desecrated by the Ghost of Sparta's presence.

"I suppose, then," he rumbled, "that it is time."

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As the brief glimpses of sky turned more and more orange, Kratos squinted ahead. "I think I see the edge of this forsaken wood."

Dash's eyes honed in on the tunnel of light at the end of the trail. "Hey, yeah!"

Cautiously, Rainbow Dash put on more speed. Upon finding that her wounds were no longer as painful, she broke into a gallop, with the Spartan following close behind. Both of them reveled in their perceived victory, albeit in their own manners.

Both of these celebrations were cut short, however, as a dark, swirling mass appeared in the ground in front of them, halting their advance. An immense foreleg, thick with muscle, sprang out of the mass, and out of the darkness climbed a beast taller than either of them, even as said darkness disappeared. Kratos recognized the brutish, beady eyes that locked onto him, as well as the humanoid body shape that seemed almost foreign to him now.

“What... is that thing?” Dash asked slowly, staring.

As the creature hefted its immense battle-axe, Kratos growled one word: “Minotaur.”

Almost on cue, the creature bellowed and charged, gigantic hooves thudding on the forest floor. Kratos responded in kind, readying both Blades as he galloped towards his foe.

With a roar, the minotaur swung its axe in a massive horizontal swipe. Kratos effortlessly ducked under the slice, then swept the Blade of Exile at the beast’s legs. He sprung up as the minotaur stumbled, drawing the Blade of Olympus across its chest.

The minotaur fell to its hands and knees, expressing its surprise with another agitated roar. The Spartan silenced the beast with two jabs to the jaw with his forelegs, and an immense buck between the eyes that would have made Applejack proud.

The minotaur swung blindly, just grazing Kratos. He responded by launching the chain blade into the beast’s chest, yanking himself towards his target.

Kratos landed on top of its chest, only to feel a meaty fist close around his throat. The Spartan was flung into a nearby tree, splintering the trunk as he knocked it over. Slowly, he stood back up, his face set in grim determination.

The Spartan slowly advanced towards the minotaur, even as it threw another swing. He turned, allowing the axe to bounce away harmlessly from the Golden Fleece. As the monster reeled from the rebound, Kratos

bucked one of its knees, bending it the other way with a sickening crack. The minotaur fell to its left knee, the other one hanging limp behind it, even as Kratos leaped onto the beast's head.

Without a second thought, he drove the Blade of Olympus into the back of the minotaur's skull, allowing it to trail down along its back as Kratos descended behind the creature, leaving a jagged cut the entire way down. Silently, he landed on all four hooves, even as the minotaur collapsed behind him, its body limp and its spine all but obliterated.

Kratos turned back to see the monster dissipating, and a very stunned Rainbow Dash. "Wha... you just..." She did not blink for a long time.

Kratos suddenly felt extremely self-conscious. "That was a minotaur. That's what I *do* to minotaurs. There's usually more of them, though, and other monsters..."

Dash finally blinked. "That's what you do? Monsters appear, and you just brutalize them?" She shook her head as she stood back up, and in passing asked, "Why the hay do you want to go *back*?"

Kratos couldn't answer. He had his reasons, but doubt had begun to gnaw away at them. Still, the minotaur's appearance was worrisome. "Rainbow," he said, "that was a monster sent by the gods of Olympus. This was no coincidence."

The pegasus turned to Kratos, even as they continued their fast-paced walk. "Whoa, what? Then what was that?" she asked.

The answer was on the Spartan's lips even before his nose detected acrid smoke in the breeze. "This is an invasion," he growled.

The sight that greeted the duo's eyes as they ascended the hill was one that neither of them had ever hoped to see. Before them lay Ponyville, a simple thatched-roof village with a small, peaceful populace. And it was under attack.

This time, they took off towards the town at the same time. It didn't even register to Rainbow Dash that, even as she flew at full speed, Kratos was galloping just as fast as her.

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"The horror! The horror!"

The cream-colored mare recoiled from the beast in front of her. The undead stallion snarled, rusted armor clanking as it cornered her between two overturned wagons. "Please," Roseluck begged, "not like this!"

Both of their eyes widened in surprise as, with a *crunch*, a blade erupted from the beast's ribs. Before the rose-maned pony could say anything, the creature was yanked away by a long length of chain.

Roseluck only stared as that large fellow from yesterday's party landed in front of her, wielding two awful-looking blades, including the one that had dispatched the monster. "Is there a safe zone?" he asked gruffly, mumbling through the other blade's hilt.

The mare nodded her head, still jittery. "I-I was headed towards the town square. I—"

"Move, then!" Kratos growled, already turning to try and locate the pavilion over the rooftops. Rainbow Dash arrived above them, signalling down the street. The three of them bolted down the cobblestone, even as more ponies and monsters appeared.

Kratos leaped onto the back of a gorgon, smashing his front hooves into its temples even as a small colt was wrapped in its coils. The snakelike creature recoiled in pain, freeing the colt even as Kratos drove the Blade of Olympus into its neck. The Spartan noticed the colt's fearful gaze locked on him. "Get yourself to the square," he growled.

The colt complied immediately, even as Kratos scanned for his next target. He knew he should only target the monsters attempting to hurt others, but he felt an old, familiar feeling brewing in the pit of his stomach. As he bucked a much more goat-like satyr against a stone wall, feeling its body collapse under his hooves, the Spartan was almost... enjoying

himself. At the very least, it was unnerving the other ponies, particularly Rainbow Dash, who had so far seen the most of his martial abilities.

The enjoyment more or less evaporated upon having one undead soldier score a lucky strike across his muzzle. Kratos grit his teeth, ignoring the sizable cut across his cheek, and sent the warrior careening into a wall, crumpling as it hit the ground.

The Spartan turned towards the chaotic crowd of colorful companions they had garnered along their way. "Silence!" They froze, turning towards him with apprehension. "The pavilion is down this street. Make your way there, and *don't* do anything foolish!" Offhand, Kratos cursed the effect Equestria had on his speech.

As one, the civilians took off towards the town square. Kratos followed close behind, watching for stragglers and enemies as they traveled. Soon enough, they reached the circular building, the doors flanked on either side by the Royal Guard. The Spartan couldn't help but notice their absence elsewhere.

"Move to the center of the pavilion in an orderly fashion," one of the white-coated soldiers droned. "Once there, wait calmly for further instruction..." The guard stared at the immense earth pony bringing up the rear of the crowd in recognition.

Kratos raised an eyebrow. "Who is to dispatch the monsters wreaking havoc in this village?" he asked.

"We're... just the vanguards," the pegasus offered. "The main force should arrive soon enough, assuming they got out of Canterlot fast enough."

"Fast enough?" The Spartan parroted.

"This isn't the only location under attack," the second guard said, holding up his professional demeanor while shooting his fearful partner an irritated look. "Now, *sir*, if you would please join the others inside."

Grudgingly, Kratos walked through the double doors, shooting the first guard a look that made his armor rattle. As he continued along, he

heard the second guard speak up. "What in the name of Celestia was that little act, Gladius?"

"You weren't in the throne room when I was, Charger!" Gladius replied defensively. "That stallion was a complete maniac!"

"You mean that's the guy who...? Dear Luna..."

Kratos chuckled. He had hoped his reputation caught on with the Guard: everyone needed a sort of looming threat to enforce humility once in a while.

Eventually, Kratos relocated Rainbow Dash, who had gone ahead and located a group of the others. The other Bearers had made it, as well as the dragon, Spike, the Crusaders, and what the Spartan presumed to be members of the Apple family.

"Kratos!" Fluttershy, hurried towards the Spartan, her red, teary eyes wide first with relief, then with surprise at the cut across his face. "Oh, my goodness! You're hurt! I was so worried when Rarity told me you got into a fight with some pegasus, and then you ran off and—"

Kratos raised one hoof, blocking Fluttershy's attempt to tend to his wound. "That was no pegasus," he clarified. "That was Hermes, Olympian god. He was sent to spy on and sabotage our efforts."

"Where did you two go, anyway?" Twilight Sparkle scrutinized Rainbow Dash and Kratos. "They said you ran out of Ponyville, but..."

"We cornered him in the Everfree Forest," Kratos clarified, not noticing the eyes he drew upon mentioning the name. "It took us hours to get back to town, and when we returned, Ponyville was... under attack."

Twilight nodded. "And the monsters?" she asked.

The Spartan grimaced. "A favored army for the gods of Olympus."

The others were silent. Apple Bloom scanned the faces of the adults. "So, is this a... a war or something?"

“...Kratos?” Fluttershy stared up at the stallion towering over her. “Is it?”

Kratos looked away for a moment, scanning the crowd of ponies scattered across the building, huddling together, seeking some sort of refuge from the hell outside. It was a familiar sight, one that he had crushed underfoot more times than he cared to remember. An idea sprung to mind.

“...This is no war.”

At this answer, even the bored-looking red stallion standing by Applejack expressed some surprise. “I do beg your pardon, Kratos,” Rarity began, “but what about an invading army of monsters makes this anything different from a, well, a war?”

Kratos turned back to the group. “The monsters outside are spreading chaos,” he replied, his eyes glinting with cold steel, “so that Ponyville will suffer considerable damage in property, possibly in lives. This is supposedly happening across Equestria, meaning that many towns are likely under siege. Let me ask you this: how would your princesses react if they were to look out the window and see their majestic cities burning, their beloved subjects running helpless from a new and terrifying threat?

“This is no war,” Kratos repeated. “This is a warning. A warning to the Royal Sisters. If they do not relent to the wishes of Olympus, then the *real* invasion will begin.”

“...What’re the wishes of Olympus?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“If I have to guess?” Kratos turned to the window facing Canterlot, his mind already beginning to plan and calculate the next battle. “My head on a platter.”

Chapter 12

There was a painfully long pause after Kratos' morbid prediction. The Bearers of the Elements of Harmony looked at each other, their expressions a mixture of fear, confusion, and in Pinkie's case, mild obliviousness, then back at the warrior silhouetted in the evening light.

"...So now what?" Applejack asked, breaking the silence. "Yer just fixin' to have them kill you so this is over?"

Kratos glanced at the farmer, tearing his gaze away from Canterlot. "I still retain the will to live," he replied somewhat bitterly. "Besides, my death would hardly stop Zeus' rampage."

Twilight Sparkle stared at the Spartan. "But you just said—"

"I said they would demand my head on a platter. I didn't say they would *leave*, especially if your military is as effective as it would appear to be." Kratos made sure any nearby guards heard the last part, as the majority of them either shuffled their hooves or flinched. "Once they have a taste of conquest, the Olympians will continue their campaign."

"So then we're doomed? Is that it?" Applejack glared, even as a number of the surrounding ponies flinched at her question.

"We are far from certain doom." Kratos looked back towards the window. "If there's anything I've learned, it's that you must control your own destiny. I have defeated death many times; this will be no different. This time, though, I have a plan."

"Do you mind filling us in on it?" Twilight asked impatiently.

"This attack is all part of Zeus' plan," the Spartan began. "His arrogance will demand that he confront the princesses in person. I will enter Canterlot and wait for him to arrive. When he does, I will *end this*." The bridle flashed.

Kratos' last words dripped with malice, catching the others by surprise. It had been the first outward sign of his violent tendencies they'd seen since his attack on Celestia. These words actually seemed more worrisome than his attempted assault, if that was even possible: instead of the previous emotional, knee-jerk reaction, there was a chilling glint of determination in his eyes.

Twilight Sparkle spoke up again. "If that's the case, then we're coming with you."

Kratos' scowl deepened. "No."

"Not only do you not know how to travel to Canterlot, but there is no way I am letting you go near Princess Celestia with that... whatever it is," Twilight shot back, pointing a hoof towards the glowing Blade on the Spartan's back. "Besides," she added, "I think you owe it to all the ponies of Ponyville to get rid of these monsters first."

Kratos glanced about, surveying the pockets of survivors. A number of ponies were being treated by the nurse mares, but many others had wounds still untreated. Another glance out the window, this time at Ponyville instead of Canterlot, revealed a ransacked town, with all manner of abominations roaming the streets. Because of him. His reaction, at least in his mind, was not the same as the other times he had surveyed such a scene.

"Kratos..."

The Spartan turned. Fluttershy's reddened eyes were sporting fresh tears. "I was in town when those creatures came. My cottage door... was... unlocked. I don't know if anything's happened, or..." The pegasus started sobbing quietly, seeking out a corner to curl up in. Rarity, a look of concern on her face, followed her.

Kratos fought back the inner turmoil attempting to burst through at the sight. "I will return soon," he stated simply. With that, he turned, and strode purposefully towards the door.

The two guards stared, placing themselves in front of the exit. “Look, uh, sir,” Gladius said, attempting to keep a level tone, “our orders are to keep all citizens in the safe zones. You cannot—”

“I am not a citizen,” Kratos growled, leveling a glare at both guards, “and I have greater concerns than your orders. Now *move*.”

Gladius instantly slid out of the way. Charger, with a sigh, did the same on the opposite side. Kratos nodded, then exited the pavilion. The guards, along with the Bearers and company, saw the Spartan stallion drawing both of his blades before disappearing behind a pillar of smoke.

“What’s Kratos doing out there?” Scootaloo asked.

“Prob’ly best left unanswered, Scoots,” Rainbow Dash replied, inadvertently replaying the brief encounter with the minotaur in her head.

Rarity returned to the huddled group, having delivered some reassurance to the still softly crying Fluttershy. “I can’t help but notice he was rather... *willing* to cooperate, given some apparent incentive,” she remarked dryly.

“Yeah, about that...” Dash flexed a freshly bandaged foreleg. “You might wanna mess with that little theory of yours, Rarity.”

“What do you mean?” Rarity blinked. “I think it’s rather obvious what our ‘guest’ is after. Don’t you?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not like that.” Upon receiving a number of stares, the speedster sighed. “Look, I had a talk with the big guy,” she told her four closest friends, keeping her voice low. “You might wanna hear this...”

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Another undead soldier found itself impaled to the wall of a small shop. It opened its mouth to hiss, only to receive a hoof to the skull. Kratos retrieved the blade from the creature’s ribcage as it dissolved, turning to face yet another minotaur.

As much as he had enjoyed spending the last few days in a world that wasn't hell-bent on killing him, it felt almost comforting to let his mind slip back into thoughts of how to dismember the hulking beast before him. There were no more ponies to see him as the killer he really was; they were either barricaded in the pavilion, fleeing into the countryside, or dead. He could finally let instinct take over his body, and let his mind work.

Kratos ducked under the minotaur's axe, gritting his teeth as he drove his blade into the beast's leg. His encounter with Bellerophon seemed deeper than just a vengeful spirit. *Stab*. The fact that he and the voice he called Lancer were the reason he was in Equestria to begin with spoke of a scheme. *Shhllk*. And he did have a scheme: they planned to usurp both Olympus and Canterlot, destroying the gods of both realms. But they needed Kratos to do that. *Crunch*. If they were so powerful, why would they need him? He'd been betrayed enough times to smell ulterior motives, despite Bellerophon's almost enchanted words. *Shhinggt*.

As Kratos jerked the Blade of Exile out of the minotaur's skull, he turned towards a swarm of harpies, screeching at each other as they scavenged the body of a fallen pony. They were too busy squabbling to notice the grim-faced reaper slowly approaching them from behind.

Kratos recalled those very same words the spirit had whispered to him. Was Luna really just using him? He didn't think so. Her sympathy for him seemed genuine; at least, more genuine than any other god or goddess he had met. And what had the spirit said about Celestia's plans, "should he become too much of a liability?" Likely just the whisperings of fruitless conspiracy, but the Spartan had seen plenty of conspiracies bear poison fruit.

Bellerophon's name sounded far too familiar, as well. Kratos had heard plenty of stories about the older heroes as a youth, warriors that had come far before his time. Bellerophon sounded like one of those heroes, but the Spartan couldn't recall his feats, even as he separated each wing from the screeching harpies.

Kratos paused, surveying the street. Any remaining monsters were slowly dissipating into shadow, as they always did, their blood remaining behind to stain the town all sorts of brown, red, and black. It was only now that Kratos realized that no more monsters were materializing. There was

only one wave of monsters attacking Ponyville. Once they were all gone, the town would be secured, and he could go to Canterlot.

A roar to the west caught Kratos' attention. He turned towards the source of the noise, striding towards it. If he was going to make it to Canterlot in time to crush Zeus, he would have to be efficient in cleaning the town.

As the cyclops appeared, crushing a storefront with its club with the same bellowing roar, Kratos readied both blades.

Very efficient.

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"...Well, then," Applejack said at last. "Ah'd reckon that explains a few things."

The five Bearers, sans Fluttershy, had regrouped near the back of the pavilion. Once assured relative secrecy, Rainbow Dash then informed the others of what information she had gleaned from Kratos.

"His daughter?" Rarity asked, almost to herself. "He does act rather protective of Fluttershy, but I had assumed his reasons were more, well..."

"Hey, we all saw it, Rare." Dash shrugged, wincing slightly. "We just sorta saw from the wrong angle. We can only see so much as our eyes allow."

Twilight Sparkle blinked. "That's... surprisingly well phrased, Rainbow," she noted.

The speedster grinned. "Read something like it in a fortune cookie once," she explained. "Thought it fit the situation, y'know?"

"What I don't get though," Applejack cut in, putting the conversation back on track, "is why he's so touchy 'bout it. You'd think havin' a daughter like Fluttershy would make him open up more, but it seems only Dash an' I got anything outta him."

Rarity thought. "Maybe some sort of tragedy occurred to... Calliope, was it?" The cyan pegasus nodded in confirmation. "There is an air of grief to Kratos..."

Twilight thought about it. "Pinkie?" she began, turning to the party pony. "You haven't really said anything since Dash told us all of this. What do you think?"

Pinkie Pie shook her head, unusually solemn. "No can do," she declared. "I'm not saying anything about Kratos' past. We've been through too much together for me to just go spilling his secrets."

"What do you mean, Pinkie?" Dash asked. "You two only hung out at the party for an hour or so."

"Yeah, but we became super best friends!" the pink mare chirped. "We ate cupcakes, and played pin the tail on the pony, and shared dark secrets that we swore to keep anypony else from ever knowing! There's absolutely no going back on a Pinkie Pie swear!"

Twilight stared. "Dark secrets? Is that why you seemed somewhat depressed after the party?" Twilight could recall seeing her friend's hair deflate a bit as the party guests had left, following Kratos and Fluttershy's example.

Pinkie Pie only shook her head again. "There will be no cupcakes in these eyes, Twilight! None! Absolutely not! Zip! Zero! Na—"

"We get it, Pinkie." Twilight rolled her eyes. "Look, what do we do with this information? I'm not sure if Kratos should know that we know about this. I'm not sure how he'd react to it."

Four heads nodded. Rarity glanced at the others. "And Fluttershy?"

"What about Fluttershy?" asked Pinkie, once more acting her usual self.

"I think I understand," Twilight replied, taking the question in place of the designer. She cast a look at the pastel pegasus behind her. "We don't know why Kratos is so touchy about his daughter," she said, keeping her

voice low, “but Fluttershy has had the most success in connecting with him. If she discovers this, she might ask. If she asks, we lose his trust, and losing a friend’s trust is the fastest way to lose a friend—” Twilight turned expectantly.

“*Forrreeevveerrrrrrrrr...*” Pinkie Pie hissed, right on cue. The effect was somewhat lost with the following giggle, but the scholar’s point stood.

“Ah don’t like it,” Applejack sighed. “He’s been openin’ up to us, an’ we’re just gonna keep this stuff from him *an’* Fluttershy.”

“Course you don’t like it,” Rainbow Dash shot back. “Element of Honesty to the end. He’s been keeping secrets from us, too, and I think they’re a lot worse then us knowing one little thing about him. Which he *told* me about, so it’s not that big a deal.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right,” the farm pony countered.

“It’s not even a wrong!”

“You an’ what—”

“Girls.”

The five ponies turned. Fluttershy had arrived in their circle, her eyes still red, but dry. “Whatever you’re arguing about, it’s not worth it. There are more important things going on right now.”

Silence descended over the group. An unspoken agreement was reached in the eyes of those gathered: they wouldn’t tell Fluttershy. Not yet. She didn’t need anything else to worry about.

The six ponies stood in awkward silence, none of them knowing how much time was passing them by, when there was a pounding on the main door. Everypony in the pavilion turned, fearing the worst, even as the few royal guards there prepared to defend the civilians. Before they could, however, a gruff voice called out.

“Ponyville is secured.”

The two guards by the door hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. They received their answer when the solid double doors were knocked open with a deafening crash, splintering as they crashed into the stone walls on either side of the doorframe.

Framed in the orange light of the still-setting sun, Kratos stood, his head hung low in fatigue. "The invaders are gone. Ponyville is secured," he repeated, collecting his breath. He walked slowly, the crowd parting in front of him. Blotches of foul-smelling gunk were splattered across his coat, and there was a fresh bruise on his ribs. Contrasting sharply with the brutal imagery was the small parade of animals that followed close behind, in particular a white rabbit perched triumphantly on the Spartan's back.

Kratos reached the Bearers. "Your animals were well defended," he told Fluttershy, "mostly thanks to your cottage's brave guardian." Angel hopped off the Spartan's back, joining the other critters in the pursuit of the timid pegasus.

Fluttershy beamed at her patients and friends that now gathered around her hooves, but the smile faltered upon spotting the bruise. "What happened?" she asked worriedly.

"Your cottage's brave guardian." Kratos turned to Twilight Sparkle. "There is no other immediate threat to Ponyville. There will be time for rebuilding and mourning later. Shall we travel to Canterlot?"

The purple unicorn thought, then begrudgingly nodded her head. She ignored the obvious question of how in the world he'd defeated an entire town full of monsters, and instead asked, "Do you want your wounds treated first?"

"I'll be fine."

Twilight hesitated. "All right, then," she proclaimed. "We'll gather up whatever supplies we need for the journey and meet back up at the library by nightfall. From there, we will ride to Canterlot."

"It's only a model," Pinkie Pie coughed.

Applejack chose to ignore Pinkie's outburst. "Um, Twilight? Don't mean to burst yer bubble here, but Ah'm not so sure we'll be seeing much nightfall today. The sun's been settin' fer over two hours now."

The others turned. The sun was exactly where it had been over the Everfree Forest when Kratos and Rainbow Dash had first arrived. The moon itself was still unseen. The sky was frozen.

"This is bad," Twilight stammered. "This is very, very bad. The princesses are always on schedule with the sun and moon. The only time it wasn't was when..." She trailed off. The six Bearers all gave knowing looks.

Kratos' look was one more of confusion. "When what?" he asked.

"Never mind that," Twilight replied absentmindedly. "We need to get to Canterlot as fast as possible. Girls, pack lightly. We've gotta get going."

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Having informed their loved ones to stay at Sweet Apple Acres until they returned, much to the glee of the Cutie Mark Crusaders and the frustration of Spike, seven ponies set out on the road towards Canterlot. Twilight led the way, walking side by side with Applejack. Fluttershy followed close behind, accompanied by her pale, hulking shadow. Rarity walked alongside the two, occasionally casting an unreadable look at Kratos. Rainbow Dash arced and looped above them, already recovering from her wounds. And Pinkie Pie...

"Hey! Hey, girls! Watch this!" Pinkie called out, bouncing in circles around the others as they walked. She then reached into one of her saddlebags, launching a cupcake at Kratos.

The Spartan turned, the cupcake impacting the Golden Fleece. His arm drew close, then instinctively snapped back out, somehow launching the cupcake at a nearby tree. The party pony began giggling when the cupcake impacted with a splat. This was the ninth time this had happened. "What are you trying to prove?" Kratos asked.

"That cupcakes are just as magical as lightning bolts and fireballs!" Pinkie just barely managed to suppress another fit of giggles. "You deflect

fireballs, you deflect lightning bolts, and now you deflect cupcakes! I mean, duh!”

“I’m deflecting them because I learned what happens when one eats too many of those *things*,” Kratos countered. “There will be no more ‘tummyaches’ for me.” He turned back to the front of the group. “How long until we reach Canterlot?”

Twilight cast a glance back. “We just barely left town. You’re really asking that now?”

Kratos glanced over his shoulder to see how far they had gotten from Ponyville when he realized a balloon had been tied to his tail. He turned back to the scholar. “Yes.”

“Well, ya best strap yerself in, Kratos,” Applejack smirked, “‘cuz we’re gonna be on the road for quite a while.”

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Kratos was not sure how long “quite a while” was supposed to be, but he was sure it shouldn’t have been this long. The sun had only recently returned to its descent behind them, casting long shadows across the landscape. Pinkie Pie, however, was still very, *very* Pinkie Pie, and most of the conversations amongst the group involved fond memories and inside jokes he had no knowledge of.

Complicating it further was the darker thoughts he had locked away in the back of his mind. In the presence of the Bearers, his violent impulses were subdued, but having so recently spilled blood and torn flesh, the “old” Kratos threatened to rear its ugly head. Kratos silently cheered when they reached the base of the mountain range Canterlot was carved into.

Rainbow Dash, flying lazily above the group, perked up suddenly. “Did anypony else just hear that?” she asked.

“Very funny, Dash.” Twilight glanced up at her friend, unamused.

The speedster shook her head. “No, seriously. I thought I heard a rumbling noise.”

“Ah heard it too,” Applejack agreed. “Sounded like it came from down the hill.”

The group turned towards the apparent disturbance. They didn’t quite catch it at first, the sun disappeared and the sky turning a deep purple color, but soon enough they felt a rumble echo in the ground underneath them.

Kratos’ eyes seemed to be playing tricks on him. It almost looked as if part of the night sky was moving. The collective gasp from the other ponies told him that it was no illusion. That was when *it* emerged over the hill.

The beast was far more massive than any of the monsters he had slain that day. It would have dwarfed the pavilion, even crushed it with some work. The massive, muscular legs slammed into the ground, sharp claws digging into dirt. It was a massive bear, torn out of the heavens themselves, and it was glaring down, right at them. The bear growled.

“...What is that?” Kratos asked.

“Th-that’s an Ursa!” Twilight exclaimed, eyes as wide as saucers. “What’s one doing this far out of the Everfree Forest?”

“*That* populates your forest?” Kratos turned back to stare at the creature. He understood the ponies’ concerns about the forest, even if he didn’t feel quite the same fear they held for it. He had fought larger.

“Oh, of all the times to be away from Ponyville,” the lavender unicorn muttered, shaking her head. She looked back up in time to see Kratos striding towards the beast.

“Woah there, sugarcube,” Applejack called out. “What’re you plannin’ on doin’?”

Kratos cast a cold look back. “I am taking care of this obstacle.”

“Are you *crazy*?” Twilight stared at the Spartan stallion in disbelief. “You can’t just go and kill an Urs—”

“I’m not killing it, I’m sending it elsewhere and buying you time.” Kratos continued walking. “Make your way up the mountain,” he commanded. “I will return shortly.”

Four ponies, fearing the worst, immediately set out for the base of the mountain, where the path grew rocky and more elevated. Two of them, however, stayed behind. Fluttershy stared down at the departing stallion with a look of fear. Twilight, meanwhile, tried to think of some way to convince Kratos of his folly.

The unicorn turned. “Fluttershy, please go with the others,” she asked. “I’ll try to convince him otherwise, but I’m not sure what’s going to happen. I’d rather we keep as many ponies out of danger as possible.”

Fluttershy was about to voice her concern, but another bellow from the Ursa convinced her of Twilight’s argument. She cast one more worried look at Kratos before galloping up the hill.

Kratos, meanwhile, drew closer to the beast, both Blades at the ready. The bear bellowed, eyes glowing with rage. Its head lowered, roaring directly into the Spartan’s face. That was the beast’s first mistake.

Kratos rolled under the monstrous maw, attacking the nearest foreleg with both blades. The Ursa attempted a weak swipe with the wounded paw, and was rewarded with the Blade of Olympus plunged into its pads, the sword sinking in up to the hilt. With a twist, the blade was removed, painfully, from the beast’s flesh, coated with thick, purple blood.

The Ursa stood gingerly on its right foreleg, finding the paw rendered useless, even while Kratos readied another attack. This attack was aimed at the other limb, already slashing across the elbow.

The Ursa growled in pain as its forelegs became painful to stand on. Kratos chose this time to emerge from under the beast. He accomplished this the best way he knew how. With a calculated swing, he launched the Blade of Exile upward, under the Ursa’s chin, hooking into the flesh.

“Kratos! Wait!”

The Ursa reared with pain, and Kratos glowered darkly, ignoring Twilight's shouts as the hooked blade held firm, catapulting him up. Kratos arced over the creature's head, realizing as he did so he would likely be thrown off and away. The moment he neared the behemoth's flesh, he twisted his neck, planting the glowing Blade of Olympus into the beast's back. With a solid pull, the chain blade was torn from its fleshy grip. With both his tools freed for use, Kratos began his work.

Twilight Sparkle could only look on as two arcs, a long, thin streak of red and a shorter, more powerful blue, slashed and stabbed and sliced their way along the Ursa's back. Kratos swung the chain blade out again, planting his weapon on top of the beast's head. He worked his way up the Ursa's back, ignoring the fact that it now stood on its hind legs, digging his rear hooves as best as he could into the improvised grips he made with both blades during his ascension. Both hindlegs felt a constant squish, thickly painted with the beast's blood— itself like liquid stars— until he reached the muzzle.

"You don't know what you're doing!"

Kratos growled, partly at Twilight's incessant pestering and partly at partly at his target, shouting a reply with each stab and slice into the Ursa's face. "I... have done this... enough times... to know... what! I'm! DOING!" With that, he raised the Blade of Olympus, aiming for the beast's glowing white eye.

Before he could hit his target, the Ursa reared its head, bellowing with wrath and pain. Kratos felt just the briefest second of worry as his steel grips slid out, sending him tumbling off the beast's head. In a split second, however, he found a better idea.

Once again, the chain arced out. Once again, it dug into the Ursa's translucent flesh. This time, however, the chain was linked on one side of the monster's neck. Kratos swung himself back around, towards the blade. Upon finding purchase, he plunged the cobalt sword deep into the Ursa's neck.

The Ursa roared, rearing again in an attempt to bat away the pony on its neck, as the shaking only served to shake the blade deeper into its own throat, blood bubbling up.

One of the claws finally hit its mark, swatting Kratos away. As the Blade of Olympus followed suit, it left an even bigger gash in its throat. The Spartan made a desperate second attempt at planting the Blade of Exile into the beast's flesh; this time, though, he had hesitated a second too long, and the blade arced past the Ursa's neck. With that, he tumbled to the ground, the ground rushing up to meet him for the second time that day.

This time, however, his fall was not met with a bone-crunching thud. Instead, he realized that he had halted his fall only a few feet from the ground, his vision obscured by a purple glow.

Kratos felt himself drifting towards Twilight Sparkle, who was currently glaring at him with the unspoken rage of her mentor's sun. The aura disappeared, dumping him unceremoniously on the ground with a heavy thud. The Spartan stood, shooting an ugly glare at the unicorn, before turning back towards the Ursa.

The first thing Kratos noticed about the beast that still loomed over them was that the white glow had left its eyes, replaced by yellow-tinted orbs that had grown wide, as if just awakening. The second thing he noticed was that, upon its awakening, the behemoth reacted to its wounds with another weak bellow, one that sounded almost like a... wail.

With that, the Ursa turned tail and fled, limping towards the horizon. Kratos moved, to continue his pursuit, but he felt an iron grip on his tail. He turned to see the purple glow still surrounding said tail.

"What?" he asked venomously.

Twilight's glare didn't relent. "You did enough damage in that fight to scare it off. You were supposed to fight to buy us time, *not* to ruthlessly murder it. It would seem, however, that you had forgotten that last part!"

The Spartan scowled. "Killing the beast *would* have bought time. Besides, it could have sought help from its pack."

Twilight's hoof planted itself into the side of her head as she groaned. "You don't know much about animal behavior, do you?" Kratos chose not to answer. "Ursas are elder creatures, but they're still more or less giant

bears, and bears most certainly do not live in packs! The closest thing they have is a female Ursa Major with its cub—" Twilight froze. "This is bad."

Kratos continued, ignoring Twilight's blank stare behind him. "A mother and her cubs, then. I bested a male on my own?" He snorted. "Then I have nothing to fear from your 'elder creatures.'"

Twilight shook her head almost imperceptibly. "You defeated a male." She turned her gaze back to Kratos. "A male. Ursa. *Minor*."

"What?"

"That was just a cub!" Twilight snapped. "Ursa Minors are large enough to be considered a serious threat, but they're still young! You just severely wounded a cub, one that is now running for its—"

An earth-shattering roar tore across the landscape, as Twilight's eyes went even wider with panic, and even Kratos himself was forced to turn and confront the noise. What he saw made his stomach nearly drop.

Approaching from the west, still highly visible despite the great distance between them, was a downright gargantuan mass of translucent purple. The body was bulging with raw power, its shoulders hunched in pent-up rage, even as the diminutive Ursa Minor cowered behind it. Enormous golden eyes swept their gaze across the landscape, finally locking onto the small hill where two ponies stood, one radiating magic and the other stained with the blood of its cub. The Ursa Major let loose another terrible roar, bearing down on the hill with a slow, loping charge.

By the time his ears stopped ringing, and his head was clear, Kratos could just barely recall the last part of Twilight's sentence. "...for its mother."

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