

Beyond Judgment

Part XXIV: Tribute

Fluttershy couldn't remember the last time she flew so fast. In fact, the thought of flying as fast as she was then was enough to make her feel giddy. Maybe it was Rainbow's wonderful leadership. Perhaps it was the draft thing she was doing (whatever that was). Or maybe she was having another one of her excited bursts of strength. In any event, she was soaring like she never had before. The normally leisurely pony looked down, wide eyed, as the trees zipped by in a blur of green shapes beneath her.

“How you doing back there, Fluttershy?!” Rainbow Dash called back over the howling winds around them.

“It's incredible! Whatever you're doing up there, it's working!”

“Ha! I'm not doing anything! It's all you, 'Shy!”

“Really?” Fluttershy said, amazed. “But, I thought you were using a draft?”

Rainbow laughed, and twisted her body around to face her friend. This meant that she was flying backwards, but she was still able to keep the pace. “I'm not drafting, you are! I'm not doing anything to make you faster, you're just riding on my winds! Or something like that, I forget how it works,” she said, scratching her head.

“Wow. This is amazing!”

Fluttershy tried stretching her legs out to feel more the rushing air. She wasn't as adept at adjusting to changing wind currents as Dash was, however, and she almost fell out of the sky as she did so. She flailed for a second before tucking her limbs back into proper position again. Dash chuckled.

“Starting to feel daring, huh? How about we try doing a loop?”

“A loop? I've never tried one before. Is it scary?”

“Hahaha! You can handle it, cream puff! Just stay right on my tail!”

With that, Dash turned herself around again and picked up a little more speed. A little concerned, but curious, Fluttershy pushed herself a little bit harder to match her. The two of them skimmed along the canopy of Everfree before Rainbow pulled upwards, with Fluttershy tailing her. Dash gauged the radius of the loop carefully, making it wide enough that her friend could manage it easily, yet small enough that she would still feel a little bit of centripetal force.

At the height of the loop, Dash heard screaming behind her. The kind of scream that was a mixture of terror and excitement.

She smirked, satisfied.

Completing their arc through the sky, Rainbow leveled out and spun around again. “So, what do you think? Did that curl you wing feathers, or what?”

Fluttershy looked like she was on the verge of hyperventilation, but she kept flying. “I... haven't... flown... like that... since we all chased after you in that hot air balloon.”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, that was some pretty slick flying then too. Wanna try it again?”

Fluttershy gasped. “Not now, look! Quick, slow down!”

Rainbow flipped over again and saw that they were approaching the valpony stronghold. It was just as she remembered it, a fort composed of high stone walls protecting some smaller structure within. There were dozens of valponies about, standing watch and making patrols. They all still bore the same silver armor. Except now that structure was completed, as was the wall. In the center of the stronghold stood an archway made of yellowed stone. It glowed a deep blue, and the inside of the archway was filled with a magical power.

Immediately, Dash put on the air brakes and brought herself to a halt. Fluttershy, however, wasn't prepared for that maneuver. Her inertia combined with the power of their draft caused her to continue soaring forward with the force of a small cannon. She screamed as she careened over Dash's head and across the clearing, ultimately crashing into a tree on the far side. Dash covered her mouth as though doing so would actually reduce the noise. It was no good, the guards had already known they were coming. She had been careless all over again. She darted after her friend to protect her from the valponies.

Fluttershy had gotten herself tangled in couple branches, but wasn't hurt overly much. She poked her head out in time to see Rainbow fly up. The more skilled pegasus took a defensive stance in front of the tree in preparation for the invading army. Her wings and legs tightened as she readied herself for a fight, and she gritted her teeth.

Strangely, though, only one valpony was approaching. Slowly. And leisurely.

When Fluttershy saw the single valpony flying unmenacingly towards them, she squeaked and ducked back in again.

“Do not be afraid!” The valpony called out. “I come in peace! I have a message for you!”

Rainbow did not lower her guard. “...What kind of message?”

“Father's been expecting both of you. Please, come with me, and I'll take you to him.”

“And why should I trust you?” Dash said, eying that valpony seriously.

Fluttershy popped her head back out of the tree again. “Um, because that's why we came here in the first place?”

“...Right. Okay, let's go then!”

Dash took off, flying up and over the valpony, who didn't even flinch. She soared over the walls of the fortress, drawing the attention of all of the guards. Finally, Rainbow landed in the center of the inner courtyard, in front of the mysterious archway. She looked up at it, and then glanced around to all the valponies that surrounded her, studying them. They made no aggressive moves, but instead watched her with mild curiosity.

“Well?!” Dash shouted, “Where is he? Don't tell me you've turned tail now, Sleipnir! I got a score to settle with you!”

Meanwhile, back in front of Ponyville town hall, Rarity had stepped up to the podium to speak. Nopony had really noticed before, but now that all eyes were on her, everypony saw that her horn was constantly aglow, and one of her forelegs was enveloped in her sparkling blue magic. Bringing the mysterious box with her, she took her place and paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. She closed her eyes and pointed her nose to the wind, feeling in flow through her perfectly coiffed mane.

“Oh, she's a lovely one.” Morningstar noted, almost involuntarily.

General Flash groaned. “Keep it down, Colonel. Now is not the place.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then, Rarity spoke.

“Twilight Sparkle is one of the most amazing ponies I've ever had the pleasure to meet. Her strength of heart and spirit, as well as her strength of mind and magic. Why, I'm not afraid to admit that there was a phase in my foalhood where I was quite arrogant in my own intellect and arcana as I pined away at the glamor and sophistication of the beautiful Canterlot. Had we met then I believe she might have become my greatest adversary, because I've seen her perform spells and wield magics beyond my meager capabilities.

“But one cannot forget that magic doesn't come from raw talent alone, not even in Twilight's case. She's had the determination and zeal for knowledge to refine her natural abilities into the greatest magical power of our generation. She was such a strong willed and determined pony. She always charges head-first into the most dire of problems. Not just the likes of dragons and manticores, but against the fears and self doubts of her friends.

“There was a very brief time not so long ago that I injured this leg. I was ready to give up my entire career to self pity and shame, but Twilight showed me that I wasn't completely helpless. It was then that I set out to create for her the perfect dress to show my gratitude. How can I call myself the Element of Generosity if I cannot return the kindness of one of my dearest friends? I now present to you all... my magnum opus.”

With a flick of her neck, Rarity flung the box she was carrying into the air. The ribbon tying it together was pulled apart by her magic, and the box opened up, spilling its contents. A white object fell out of it that shone with a prismatic light. Rarity caught it with her magic and filled it out, revealing it to be a

beautiful dress – which came as a greater surprise to some of the guests than it did others. She did more than just hold it out with her magic, she formed her telekinetic energy into the shape of a pony. Not just any pony, but a unicorn with a perfectly kept mane and a long, straight tail. The mirage pony floated gracefully down to the ground, stopping to hover just above the coffin of Twilight Sparkle. The crowd “ooh”ed and “ah”ed as it descended, seemingly forgetting they were still at a funeral.

The princess immediately recognized the material that the dress was made from. The skirt over the mirage pony's back was made from overlaid sheets of it. The fabric was cut into diamond shaped patterns that overlaid each other along the back and rump, whose sheets tapered into points along the sides and behind the flank. The hind legs, however, were exposed save for the sheer foal blue skirt beneath the layers of diamonds. Along the chest were strings of silver chains like an intricate necklace that sparkled as well. The design also had matching boots made of the same material stitched together like a quilt, and layers and smaller diamond shapes overlaid across the back of the neck, all the way up to the ears and horn of the mirage pony.

“I both love and hate this dress,” Rarity continued. “I made this as a tribute to my dear... dear departed friend.” She started to choke up a little, causing the form of the mirage pony to falter and warp a little as well before she managed to pull back her composure. “It is a symbol. Not just of her but of all of us, all of our friends. It is made from an indestructible diamond fabric given to me by Sleipnir himself, the very stallion who took her from us. However, like this dress, our friendship can never be truly destroyed. As you can see, this design reveals the wearer's cutie mark. This is to remind whoever looks at it that this dress is as much about the wearer as the outfit itself, and that we mustn't forget who this dress is for.”

As Rarity spoke those final words, an extra lavender light began to glow from within the mirage pony. Inside of it, between the flanks, the purple light took the form of Twilight's cutie mark and shone through the skirt of the dress as though it were a real mark.

There was a pause after that. Rarity said no more as well and quietly stepped down to return to her place among them. She hung her head at first as she walked back. She felt strangely empty, with the whole project completed and presented. She wasn't sure what to do next, what her life might be like one friend short.

Then, an applause began. It started with a single pony stomping in the crowd, and spread through the entire audience. She stopped for a second to look over them all. She saw Pinkie and Spike applauding as well. It warmed Rarity's heart. In the glamorous way only she could do, she lifted her head with a toss of her mane and walked proudly.

The applause died down and Princess Celestia stepped forward again. “Thank you very much, Miss Rarity. That was very generous of you. Now, Shining Armor? You wished to speak next?”

The captain of the Equestrian Guard stepped up. “Yes, your highness.”

“You started that applause, Colonel. Cheering a speaker at a funeral? What kind of stallion are you?” General Flash whispered as Shining Armor began to speak.

“Yes, sir. She looked like she could use a little bit of reassurance. Like the pink one said, one mustn't

forget to be happy.”

Dash paced back and forth in front of the shimmering portal, glaring at it intently. Fluttershy, on the other hoof, was more or less relaxing a few yards away. While her friend was eagerly anticipating the return of Sleipnir, she had recruited a few of the local squirrels to help her pick twigs and leaves out of her hair. Having since accomplished that, they were all chatting about the weather.

“Come on!” Rainbow shouted. “You said he was waiting for me, so where is he?! I've been waiting for him for, like, and hour!”

“It's only been seven minutes.” One of the valponies corrected.

“Details, details! I've got places to go and naps to take, I don't have time to hang out around here and wait for Sleipnir to show up! Death waits for nopony, right? But I've still been waiting for him for half an hour!”

“Seven minutes,” the valpony corrected again.

Suddenly, a rumbling sound emanated from the arch. Everypony in the fortress stopped and turned towards it. Fluttershy instinctively cowered from it a bit just as the squirrels she was conversing with cowered behind her.

“I am not the Lord of Death, my lady, I am the Lord of the Afterlife,” boomed Sleipnir's voice from within.

“Oh yeah? Then you should have no problem giving Twilight back!” screamed Rainbow.

“*Come on, Fluttershy, be strong. Be strong.*” The tender pegasus reminded herself.

Fluttershy stood, then squeaked once as the urge to fly took hold. She shook it off and took a few steps forward.

The face of Sleipnir emerged from the shimmering wall of energy contained by the arch. He walked out of it, the rest of his body and his eight legs surfacing through the field of ancient magic.

“Hello, father!” Each of the valponies cried out merrily as they all crowded around him. The armor of those who moved in closest clanged and they bumped against each other. Sleipnir smiled and laughed as he nudged the faces of some of them with his extra hooves.

“Hello to you too, my daughters! Are you all keeping watch over the fortress like I asked?”

“Of course! We made sure none of the monsters of Everfree forest got close.”

“Wonderful! That's my girls.”

“Hey!” Dash shouted. “What's goin' on here!”

“My apologies, Lady of Loyalty. It's not often that I give my daughters such special tasks. I wished to see how they fared on their own in such unfamiliar territory. Come now, step back girls. Father has work to do.”

The valponies did as they were told and stepped away from Sleipnir, giving him room to approach Rainbow Dash. One of them, however, nudged his side with a hoof.

“Hmm? Is something the matter?” Sleipnir asked.

“It's one of the patrols, Father. They never returned last night.” The valpony replied.

“What?! What happened? Did you send backup?”

“Of course. A larger patrol was sent to look for them. They found them turned to stone. It was a cockatrice.”

“No! I warned you all to be extremely careful about them!”

“You did. All patrols were recalled at that time to the protection of the fortress, and everypony is accounted for. The next day, a patrol was sent to recover their statues.”

“Where are they now?”

“They were left in the corner of the fortress, over there.” The valpony said, pointing.

Sleipnir and the two friends followed the extended foreleg of the valpony, noticing for the first time the pair of statues in the shade of the walls in the distant corner.

It was one statue, really, the two of them fused together in stone. The first valpony was standing on the ground, her head turned to the side and one leg raised in apprehension. The other was above her, holding on to the first with her wings outstretched as she tried to carry her home.

Sleipnir dashed towards the valpony statue with an incredible burst of speed and came to a halt in front of it. He was silent as he raised a hoof to nudge the cheeks of his petrified children.

“Hey! Hey!” Rainbow shouted, her wings flaring. “I've been waiting for you all this time, and now-”

Dash's rant was interrupted by Fluttershy tapping her shoulder.

“Shh. I, um, think you should give him a moment,” she whispered.

“What? What for?”

“...He's mourning.”

“Wha-? Mour-?” Dash stuttered, then rounded on Sleipnir “Hey! I've had it up to here with you!” She flew up to the Lord of the Afterlife, who turned back to face her. “Mourn on your own time! We've got a score to settle, and we're gonna settle it right now!”

Sleipnir closed his eyes as though in concentration for a few seconds. Then he opened them a furrowed his brows. He smirked. “Very well. We have much to discuss. You want Twilight Sparkle back? Convince me why I should give her to you.”

Special Bonus!

Sketch of Rarity's dress [here](#).