

Beyond Judgment

Part XXVIII: Suspicion

“We apologize, truly, but we are not yet prepared to give further details on the result of the battle.” Luna told the reporter, straining as best she could to keep her voice level.

The reporter was insistent, however, to get any amount of information he could. He was practically quivering with excitement at the prospect of being the pony that would break the story for his paper. His camera rattled around his neck. “Are you sure, your highness? That whole Sleipnir affair came out of nowhere. Who knows if he could pop up again in some other cursed forest? It would put a lot of ponies at ease if you could tell us more about why he left.”

“As we hath explained – repeatedly – Sleipnir came to this realm for one purpose. With that purpose complete, he has since returned to his own world. It is as simple as that.”

“With all due respect, your highness, I've been in this business long enough to know that nothing's so simple.”

Luna was taken aback. Did the ponies of this new time really show such little respect for the authority of her sister? When she left Equestria before, her little ponies were in awe of herself and her power, and would never speak to her in such a manner.

“Dost thou doubt the word of thine princess?” Lune said sternly, leaning in closer to the reporter's level.

“Oh, of course not! No, no, nothing of the sort!” The pony said, pulling a little bit at the collar of his camera brace. “I'm just trying to inform my readers, is all. Knowledge is power, and all that.”

Luna straightened her neck again. “Then thou may inform thine readers that they have the word of their princesses that their nation is secure and their foe retreated. That is all, scribe.”

With that, Luna turned and left the reporter, who began to rummage through his saddlebags for a notepad and pencil. She thought to herself that the “interview” must have taken longer than she thought; she could not locate her sister. No simple task, she was certain. One does not miss a full-sized Alicorn in a room full of ponies. Spreading her wings, she took to the air and flew to the upper level of the hall so that she could look outside. Perhaps she was out there.

Using her magic to open a door to the outside, Luna saw that her sister was indeed out on the balcony. She was standing, in her usual majestic fashion, head high and wings outstretched. Her eyes were closed as she was taking in the gentle wind and absorbing the mid-day warmth from her sun.

“Sister? What art thou doing out here?”

Celestia opened her eyes and looked to her sister. “I'm making an appearance,” she said.

Rolling her eyes, Luna said “thou speakest in riddles. For nopony is out here to appear to.”

“Not nopony. Twilight's family did not come with us earlier. I needed to be certain that they saw me.”

“Indeed. So, is all faring as thou hath predicted?”

“Yes. Twilight's family is suspicious, especially since Cadence has told them about the foresight of elders, but they will not speak out about a conspiracy against us. Spike will, but none will listen to him.”

Luna sighed. “Thou seekest to make him a martyr?”

“I seek only to preserve the covenant.” Celestia said sternly. “As much as we may dislike it, Sleipnir's solution was simply the best one. Twilight brought it upon herself. And Spike is too loyal for his own good. That is out of our hooves.”

Luna sidled up to her sister and looked out over the edge with her. “So much power between us, and yet we are still so limited.”

Celestia said nothing. Luna resigned to standing next to her sister. However, facing the sun was always such a strain on her eyes, so she opted instead to lie down in the shade of the balcony ceiling. She often wondered if her sister was actually capable of staring directly into her sun without injuring herself, but she enjoyed the mystery more than the truth would actually provide, so she never asked.

“You're giggling to yourself again,” Celestia pointed out, “is there something on your mind?”

“Hmm? Oh, no,” Luna said, smiling.

A moment passed in silence as Celestia warmed herself in her sun and Luna made a feeble attempt to hide from it. Then, the younger sister spoke again.

“There were two guests missing this morn. Dost this concern thou?”

“No, it does not. I expected it.”

“Of course, thou did.”

Celestia shot her sister a sharp look before turning back to the balcony again. “Rainbow Dash, injured from her conflict with Colonel Morningstar-”

“Whom thou personally requested to attend the battle.” Luna interrupted.

“Yes, I ordered that he and General Flash command the field. After Rainbow Dash fought and lost against the colonel, she was in no condition to do anything reckless – such as seeking out Sleipnir and avenging Twilight.”

“What about Fluttershy?”

“In her compassion, she would try to keep Rainbow Dash in her bed and tend to her. But, in her

meekness, she would be persuaded by Rainbow Dash to take her to Everfree anyway.”

Luna nodded. “Were they Earth ponies or Unicorns we would be concerned. Pegasi, on the other hoof, would be safest in the skies above the cursed forest. But, we do not understand. If thou predicted that Fluttershy would take Rainbow Dash to Everfree, why send Colonel Morningstar to injure her in the first place?”

“An extra precaution,” Celestia explained, still looking over the horizon. “Rainbow would not be able to cause any harm in her state, and Fluttershy would not allow her to come to harm. The two would fly over Everfree, see that Sleipnir is nowhere to be found, and then return. After a long, uneventful night, the two are sleeping now in a pair of hospital beds, unharmed from their journey.”

“So, thou believes Sleipnir to have returned to his own realm?”

“Of all the things I have predicted so far, I am more certain of that than anything. Sleipnir is nothing, if not absolutely dedicated to his duties as dictated by the covenant. It's why he started this disaster in the first place. Having resolved the matter, he is most definitely returned to his realm.”

“Is this so?” Luna said, raising an eyebrow.

“There is only one thing that I am not entirely certain of. The Zebra of Everfree, Zecora, is an enigma. No pony even knows why she is there in the first place. Twilight spoke of her several times in her reports, mentioning that she is a wonderful healer. Fluttershy might have gone to her for help, either in finding Sleipnir or healing Rainbow Dash, but she was unable to do either.”

“What makes thou certain of this? Our ties with Zebrabwe have always been very loose. We cannot know the extent of Zecora's power of healing.”

“That may be true, but Rainbow Dash has been under critical care for most of the week, and she has lost much of her strength. Zecora's potions may be able to speed the healing process along, but there is no way that she could be fully cured in one night.

Luna nodded, slowly, her expression uncertain. “So, what shall we do now?”

“The worst is over, at last.” Celestia said, sighing deeply. “Twilight's friends will gradually adjust to their new lives without her, as will her family. They will mourn their loss, but the pain shall fade. Time heals all things.”

“Not all things.”

The solar princess glanced back to her younger sister again, albeit briefly. She then looked over her shoulder to the doorway that led back inside, and the guests within. “I have been out here for long enough; It's time I returned. Are you coming, Luna?”

“Not yet. We believe that we shall stay for a bit longer,” she said, then stretched out her wings and legs. “We are quite tired from our daytime duties, and we require a nap. Perhaps we shall retire elsewhere.”

Celestia nodded, and began to walk back inside. “Very well. It means a lot to me that you came today.”

“Of course. We are also grateful to Twilight Sparkle and her friends for saving us from ourselves. This is the least we could do to honor her memory.”

“Yes. Thank you, Luna,” Celestia said and stepped inside, magically closing the door behind her.

Standing, Luna stretched her wings again. Not for comfort this time, but in preparation. Something Sleipnir had said to her a few weeks back had stuck itself in her mind. It was on that night when he fearlessly infiltrated Ponyville.

“I came here to see you. Believe me, if I could create a portal on the moon, I would have. And make no mistake, this conflict is absolutely necessary, whether you believe it or not.”

“We know Sleipnir better than anypony else – even sister,” Luna thought to herself. *“He’s not so strict when it came to adhering to the rules as she believed. After all, it was him who forged the armor we used when we-”*

Luna shook her head to end that train of thought where it was.

“The stallion that we knew from so very, very long ago would not go to such great lengths to secure the soul of one mere pony. If we had been told one thousand years ago that somepony had evaded death itself, we would have expected Sleipnir to come to this world to congratulate that pony in person, not to lay claim to her. This is the very same elder that, weeks ago, conspired with us to scribble ink on sister’s face! Something is not right here. Tis something else he is after.”

Luna had to escape the gathering, but she had to do it discreetly. Instead of taking to the skies, she changed form into that of a nebulous shadow. She could not pass through sunlight in that form, so she seeped into the floorboards of the hall and made her way downward, slithering through the walls and into the ground below.

“The Zebra is not the only thing sister has failed to take into account. She believes that she can predict everypony’s movements because she is an elder, but Sleipnir is almost as ancient as we are. He would know that Celestia would be predicting his every move. Overcoming such a disadvantage would actually be quite simple: Do something completely unexpected. Whatever he is planning, it must be the least likely thing he expects Sister to expect. Unless he’s expecting her to expect him to do that, in which case it’s the next unlikely thing. Or the most likely thing.”

A throbbing pain started to emerge in Luna’s incorporeal head. *“It’s like dealing with Discord all over again!”*

There was no more pacing, no more taking it easy, no time for strategies, Rainbow Dash just had to fly as fast as she could. She could rest when she was dead, which was going to happen soon either way.

Canterlot Mountain rose higher and higher before her as Dash pounded her wings, straining to get

every last drop of wingpower. She could hear the earthly thunder before her. Scanning the ground, she saw Sleipnir approach the mountain as well. They would be on it in seconds. But, at least she was catching up.

Then, Sleipnir took a sharp turn. Dash flinched, thinking he was about to pull off some other trick, even though he was nearly a quarter mile ahead of her. She chided herself for it.

Rainbow watched as Sleipnir veered away from the mountain, making a path that seemed to circle around it, instead of up towards Canterlot. Dash started to panic again, wondering if she was remembering the course properly. He did say to go to the castle and back, didn't he? She was sure he did.

Dash chided herself again, smacking her temples with her hooves. "He's getting in your head! Don't lose your cool now, you've got this. Just keep flying."

Banking upwards towards the castle, Dash kept an eye on Sleipnir, trying to figure out just what exactly he was planning. He was galloping towards the railway track that ran into the mountain. Then he took another tight corner and disappeared into the tunnel.

"Ha! Of course!" Dash shouted to herself, ecstatic. "He's still ground-bound! He can't just run up the side of the mountain, he has to follow the train tracks! Chalk another one up for flight!"

Although Rainbow Dash had been to Canterlot many times before, she usually had to travel by train since there were non-Pegasi traveling with her. It always struck her as so inefficient and time-consuming, having to weave in and out and all around the mountain in order to ascend it. And how much time must it have taken to dig giant holes out of the mountain, anyway? It takes about half an hour to ascend the mountain by train through the series of tunnels, as opposed to the five minutes (or more, for a Pegasus who was not the fastest flier in Equestria.) to just fly straight upwards. She had friends to hang with for these journeys, so it wasn't so bad. Now she was thankful for it.

Rainbow ascended the mountain at full speed, quickly closing with the underside of the castle. As silly as the tunnels are, she had some serious respect for whoever built a castle that hangs off the side of a mountain like that. That would have been nothing for clouds, but solid stone? She always assumed the princess' magic had something to do with keeping that place together. There was no telling where Sleipnir was at that point, but Dash wasn't going to waste her advantage by thinking about it. Instead, she focused on her next maneuver before she slammed into that stone face in front of her.

Flying straight upward at full speed for as long as possible, Dash suddenly tucked her wings in to her body and let her momentum carry her the rest of the way. She flipped her body around so that at the height of the trick her hooves made contact with the hanging floor Canterlot with a loud "clop!" For a brief instant she stood, crouched, upside down. Before gravity started to pull her away again, she kicked off against the stone floor and rocketed herself towards the ground.

The sensation of flying downwards reminded Dash of that day in the fields. The day that started that whole mess. She remembered Twilight's advice on reaching maximum speed and performing a sonic rainboom. She narrowed her eyes and focused.

“Just keep flying. That's the most important thing I can do. Just keep flying.”

If there was any chance of breaking the sound barrier – and keeping it broken – that just might have been Dash's best chance. It would definitely build up that lead she was getting. She held her hooves forward and tucked them in close, streamlining her body. She carefully controlled every minute motion of her wings, getting the most thrust out of every muscle. The ground was closing, but her elevation was high. She just need some time. Just a little more time!

The air in front of Rainbow tightened like a drum. It was becoming hard and hard to eke out more and more wingpower. The wind forces was causing turbulence all around her, but she stayed steady. She pushed downward with everything she had.

“A little more...! Just...! A little more!”

Boom!

That was it! Dash could feel the eruption of sound resonate through her body as she hit the speed of sound. Glancing back, she saw the ring of rainbow colors expand from a single point behind her. Being as close to the mountain as she was, part of the wave crashed against the nearest rock face. The myriad of colors swirled and buckled around each other there as some of the rock began to crumble.

Dash screamed; Partly in fear, partly in frustration. She was slipping again! It was just a disk, not a cone like Sleipnir said! Furthermore, she was blasting apart the mountain! The mountain that was holding up Canterlot!

Pulling upward, Rainbow lifted herself out of her dive bomb. It was just as well, as she was getting dangerously close to the ground. Changing to a shallower angle, she kept pushing herself as hard as she could. She was right at the edge of the barrier. She could feel it.

Boom! Boom-boom! Boom!

More sonic rainbooms, but none of them had any staying power. Four different rings of prismatic power surged through the air, crashing against the ground in front of the mountain. Trees cracked and buckled. A nearby pond was almost emptied of its water when one rainboom splashed into it.

It was too much. Dash dropped her speed to something much more manageable. She gasped for air after holding her breath from the tension. She looked over her shoulder towards Canterlot. She had gained quite a lead, and Sleipnir was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he was still going through the tunnels? Maybe he didn't plan for that?

“Maybe,” dash panted to herself, “maybe that'll be good enough...”