

Beyond Judgment

Part XVIII: Futility

Rainbow Dash was so frustrated as she returned to the commbal that should hardly fly straight.

“Horse feathers, horse feathers, horse feathers! This is not my fault! And I'm gonna fix it! Where does Spike get off blaming me?! It's not my fault! There was nothing I could do! Twilight's still alive! She has to be! I won't let her die! I'm gonna get this entire army in gear and go get her back!”

Looking around, Rainbow realized that she was so engrossed in her thoughts that she had completely flown past her target. “horsefeatherhorsefeathershorsefeathers!” she muttered to herself as she dove back down.

On arrival, she found the general watching Pinkie from across the basket with mild curiosity, who was still sitting glumly in the corner. Colonel Morningstar was looking over the chart on the table in the middle of the floor, moving pins around.

“What are you all waiting around for?!” Rainbow demanded. “The valponies are still out there! Let's go get 'em!”

“Oh look, you're back.,” Flash said, not looking. “I was wondering how your friend was planning to get down without you. I still don't know how she got here in the first place, so I was waiting to see how she leaves.”

“Listen to me!”

“I am listening to you,” Flash said, still not looking. “You just have no authority on my commbal. You're lucky I'm in a good mood, otherwise I'd have you grounded. We just completed a successful war - and with fewer casualties than predicted!”

“All the more reason we need to get back out there and chase those guys down! We've got 'em on the run!”

“What a brilliant and strategic tactical maneuver,” The general said flatly. “...Colonel Morningstar?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Be a dear and hit her for me.”

“Yes, sir.” Morningstar said, scribbling an unrelated note on a piece of paper.

Although the colonel made no motions to do so, several of the messenger-guards converged on Rainbow Dash.

“Come on, we're gonna have to ask you to leave now. You're interfering with official business.” one of them said. “We're not gonna ask you again.”

Dash was irritated before, but then she was furious. "I'm not goin' anywhere! I've got something to say, and they're gonna hear it!"

Three of the messengers pounced on Rainbow, clinging on to her legs and neck, trying to weigh her down and pull her out of the sky. She was a stronger flier than they anticipated, and struggling against their combined weight, managed to stay mostly aloft. She thrashed around to dislodge them, swerving around in the air, but to no avail. Instead, she managed to grab on to the railing of the basket to keep from falling farther. She smashed the pony hanging onto her neck as she veered into the side of the basket, which caused him to fall away. The pegasus recovered before falling too far, however.

"You're all just a bunch of cowards!" Dash shouted, scrambling to maintain her grip on the railing. "You say you're here to help Equestria, but now these guys just ran off with somepony, and you won't raise a hoof to save her!"

There was a silence among the officers.

"...You know, General, I might just have to carry out that order after all."

"You're supposed to carry out all of my orders, Colonel."

"Indeed," Morningstar said, turning towards Dash. "Let her go, ponies."

The messenger-guards released Rainbow, who shook herself off and righted herself again. "There, are you ready to stallion up and go kick some flank now?" she demanded.

Colonel Morningstar stepped up to a section of the railing that was lower than the rest, low enough that a pony might simply jump over. As though on cue, four of the messenger-guards extended a platform from beneath the basket, which he then jumped onto.

"Miss Dash, her highness wanted us to work with you as best we can, and we have shown as much patience with you and your friends as possible." Morningstar said calmly as the messengers detached the platform and began to lower it to the ground. "However," he continued, his voice growing stern, "once you insult the honor and integrity of the Royal Equestrian Guard, the shoes come off."

"Oh yeah?" Dash said with a determined grin, "and what you gonna do about it?"

Morningstar leapt from the platform just as soon as it was low enough for him to land safely. His hooves landed with a loud 'thump' against the ground and his body flexed to cushion the impact. He raised his head, leveling his horn at Rainbow. "I'll show you the strength of the Guard."

"Psht, is that all you got?" Dash taunted, "You're gonna beat on a civilian instead of doing your job?"

Morningstar smirked. "Very well, I'll make you a deal. If you can best me in a one-on-one duel, I'll recall the entire army and we'll pursue Sleipnir to his portal."

Dash crossed her forelegs and leered suspiciously at the colonel. "And how do I know you're gonna

keep that promise?”

Morningstar crossed a hoof over his head and bowed. “I swear on my honor as a guardian,” he said, the glaring upwards again, “Not that you'll defeat me either way.”

“Alright, you're on!” Dash said, landing on the ground. “I'm gonna smoke you in no time flat!”

“Hah! Against a civilian, I won't even need my weapon.”

From above, General Flash called out. “Will you foals quit yapping and start beating each other already?”

The combatants glanced up and saw that Flash had ordered the commbal to be lowered. The messenger-guards were pulling on ropes to reduce its altitude. Morningstar assumed she did so purely to watch the fight.

“Once my knife hits the ground, you both start. All ready?”

Dash crouched low, ready to pounce, and pawed at the ground. Her wings buzzed as she flapped them rapidly, her hooves holding her in place until the signal fell. Morningstar braced himself and ignited his horn with orange magic, anticipating the first move. The two of them glared at each other for an endless moment awaiting the signal.

That wasn't the first time Dash had been in a brawl. She definitely had a bit of a mean streak in her younger years, especially back when she hung with Gilda. She had never tussled with a unicorn, though, just other pegasi. She didn't know what to expect from the colonel, but that didn't matter.

Then, the general's dagger fell from the sky, stabbing into the grass blade first.

Rainbow Dash was the first to act. She threw herself forward in a streak of prismatic light. She darted in all directions all around Morningstar, weaving in and out and back and forth, leaving a seemingly impossible rainbow trail in her wake. Staying low to the ground, she could make much sharper turns by cornering on her hooves than if she was purely in the air. She didn't aim to hit him yet, the first move was just meant to confuse him.

Morningstar glanced around, trying to follow any pattern in Dash's movement that he could find, but to no avail. He silently commented on her incredible agility. Without a mental lock on where she was, exactly, he couldn't even use telekinesis to bring her to a stop. Of course, that would have been a dishonorable tactic he would have never used anyway.

Instead, the colonel poured energy into his horn for a different purpose. It glowed and hummed, and a spread of small bolts shot from the tip. They spread out in front of him, shooting into the air or leaving small pock marks in the soil. None of them, however, managed to land on Rainbow Dash herself. As fast and erratic as her movements were, she was in enough control to watch Morningstar and see what magic he was using.

Upon seeing her opponent's focus turn to his ineffectual magic burst, Dash turned to the offensive. She

launched herself legs first into his side, connecting squarely with his armor. Not only was the impact enough to leave a notable dent in his barding, it propelled him several yards away. He tumbled across the ground, but Morningstar knew how to take a hit like that. He tucked in his legs to keep them from getting twisted as he rolled across the uneven grass and straightened his neck to keep from snapping his horn off.

Without missing a beat, the colonel rolled back onto his hooves and was standing as soon as his momentum was low enough.

“You had enough?!” Dash taunted.

“Not a bad kick.” Morningstar replied. “If only you had hit me a little harder. It's a shame the only blow you'll land on me wasn't enough to take me down.”

“Fine! I'll just have to try it again!”

Dash buzzed her wings again, and launched herself at her opponent. She retried her previous technique of high-speed evasion. Her body began to burn; Not just from the physical exertion that normally so exhilarated her, but because of the strain she was putting on her wounds. She could feel the stitches pulling at her muscles, but she pushed it out of her mind for the time being.

Morningstar looked around, still trying to find a pattern to the pegasus' movement he could exploit. Finding none, he empowered his horn yet again. Then, just as he was about to release another spread of photonic magic, he twisted his head to the side. Disrupting the release of energy with the sudden motion, the otherwise straight beams of light twisted in on themselves, and began to scatter in all directions. Spiraling and arching everywhere, there was no way for Dash to dodge them all.

Despite her already impressive speed and reaction time, Rainbow couldn't outrun light. Giving her best shot anyway, she tried to dodge and weave between the scattering bolts of magic. She screamed as her body was pelted nearly a dozen times, some of which striking her wounds directly. Dash veered away from Morningstar and headed for clear skies above.

Having completed his spell, the colonel looked around until he saw Rainbow above him. “Is that all?!” he shouted up to her “Do you concede yet?!”

“Not on your life, punk!” Rainbow called back down. “No more fooling around! It's do or die time!”

Rainbow pulled off a few quick loops in midair to build up speed, and then fired herself almost straight down at Morningstar like a meteor. She held her hooves out to push against the wall of air in front of her as she approached that critical velocity. Far too mad now for rational thought, she intended to hit him with a sonic rainboom.

The colonel caught on to Dash's plan, however. “Ha! Don't you know that sound isn't as fast as light!” he shouted as he called forth his special type of magic again. This time, he planned to disorient her. He raised his horn into the air and focused his willpower into creating as bright a nova of light as he could; So bright that even Flash and the messengers, watching from the combat dozens of yards away, had to shield their eyes. For Dash, who was looking directly at him and on an inward trajectory, the effect

was blinding.

Rainbow broke her concentration on the rainboom as she tried to save her vision. As her legs and wings recoiled, her aerodynamics were thrown dangerously off. She banked upwards again and started tumbling haphazardly through the air, falling instead of flying. The wind resistance was drastically reducing her momentum, but she was still out of control, barreling through the air with a lot more force than the last catastrophic crash she had.

Morningstar released his nova spell and latched on to the falling pegasus with his telekinesis as she tumbled overhead. He dug his hooves into the ground and pulled his head backwards with all the strength he could muster, trying to slow her down.

It was not enough. Rainbow crashed into the ground hard. The impact was enough to even disrupt Morningstar's telekinesis, causing him to fall over backwards as his connection was broken. The pegasus immediately lost consciousness.

Rainbow slowly opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was white. Her head was spinning, but as far as she could tell she was lying on her back. A blue pony's head, blurry as it was, came into her view.

"... Not... how I planned to get here... but I'll take it," Rainbow mumbled, and pointed at the blurry blue face. "Now give back Twilight... Sleipnir."

"I ain't Sleipnir." The pony said. "But I respect your determination. If only somepony could smack the insubordination out of you, you'd make a fine guardian."

"W-what?"

"Don't worry, though. We have sergeants that can take care of that. If you survive, that is. That was a pretty nasty landing."

"...Is that why everything hurts...?"

"Yes. Yes it is. I don't think there's a stitch in your body that stayed intact on that one. We're got you patched up for now, though, so try not to bleed to death before we can get you to a proper hospital."

"Okay." the injured pegasus replied meekly.

Slowly, Rainbow's vision cleared and she saw that she was talking to General Flash. The white thing in front of her was just the underside of the balloon. She tried looking around, but that didn't help with her headache and nausea, so she quit. Something pink wobbled into her line of sight, though.

"That you Pinkie?"

"Uh-huh."

“Oh, good.” Rainbow said, and coughed. “Now I don't have to be alone when I die. Again.”

Pinkie smiled a kind of weak, tired smile of somepony on the verge of tears. “Nope. You're not going away yet,” she said, holding up one of her forelegs. “See? No noodle.”

Dash wasn't certain if Pinkie was just being Pinkie, or if her own delirium was worse than she thought. Either way, the earth pony's hair had deflated again, and that was never a good sign. “Huh?”

“It's my Pinkie Sense. I figured it out. My leg gets all noodley when somepony I know goes away. The first time it happened was for my Granny Pie a long time ago. I didn't know about it until days later, so I didn't know what it meant. I just thought I slept on it funny when I fell out of bed that morning.” Pinkie chuckled a little. “I remember showing it off to my sisters and making them laugh. It was the first time I ever had a Pinkie Sense, so I guess that's where it all started. When I fell over a little while ago before Twilight left, I figured it out.”

Rainbow didn't catch all of that story due to her spinning head. Something about pies in bed, or something.

“That's nice. I'm gonna sleep now.”

Pinkie smiled again. “Okey dokey. I'll be there when you wake up.”