

Beyond Judgment

Part XVII: Surrender

Spike, panting hard, ran on all fours over the crest of the hill. Stopping for just a moment to catch his breath, he saw the Equestrian army ahead of him. A balloon of some kind hovered overhead, but he paid no attention to it. Beyond them stood two walls of fire and a massive barrier of pink magic.

He'd recognize that hue anywhere.

“Twilight!” Spike shouted.

Breaking into a full sprint again, he ran towards the soldiers. His closest friend needed him and he didn't have time to go around them all. He approached the line of ponies from behind and kept running, ducking and weaving between the hooves of the larger creatures.

“Woah!” one of the soldier cried as Spike brushed against his leg.

“Hey!” shouted another.

“What's that? What's going on?”

The soldiers were getting anxious and started shuffling around in the confusion. Spike was getting worried about being accidentally stomped on. It likely wouldn't kill him, but it would slow him down. He had bigger things to worry about.

“There it is! I got it!” somepony called out. Almost immediately, an armored hoof smacked Spike in the side. He was knocked back and flew into some other soldier's barding, clutching his ribs.

“I don't have time for this, I gotta see what's happening to Twilight!”

Ignoring the pain, Spike jumped to his feet and kept going. Several spear tips converged on the ground in front of him, blocking him off before he could get far.

“Easy there, little guy. What's the hurry?”

Spike whirled around and started to turn back. More spearheads cut him off again. That time, he tried going up. He lunged upward and grabbed a soldier by the face. The mare panicked and started to fling herself around. She was a unicorn, and her horn worked as an excellent grip to keep from being flung off. Spike knew how sensitive they could be, and did his best not to accidentally break it while its owner was thrashing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that he was close to a banner.

Letting go, Spike let himself be thrown in the direction of the flag, but the momentum from the startled mare wasn't enough to get him that far. Instead, he jumped across the backs and heads of a few more soldiers before throwing himself at the the flagpole.

“What's it doing?”

“Is that a dragon?”

“No way, it's too small. It doesn't even have wings!”

The gilded post was smooth and a little slippery, but Spike had a strong grip and not a lot of mass. He started climbing upwards even as the flag bearer started shaking the post to try and dislodge him. The climb was easier once he got high enough to grab on to the flag itself. Naturally, his claws ended up tearing a few holes in it. The soldiers really didn't like that.

“Hey, hey! It's trashing our banner!”

“Nopony disgraces the one-thirteenth like that!”

“Somepony get that thing down from there! That's an order!”

Finally reaching the tip of the banner, Spike looked over the battlefield. He had a better vantage of the fires and the barrier and did his best to make out what he could.

“Just a... swarm of white pegasi? Oh, those must be the valponies! But I know that barrier spell, the caster shouldn't be able to leave it. Whatever's going on in there, Twilight's-!”

Spike's train of thought was immediately interrupted by the flagpole being shaken again, this time much more violently. He lost his grip for an instant before clinging on again. He called on all the draconic strength he had left to hold on for as long as he could. He wasn't sure where to go from there, but he knew that he had to stay and watch over Twilight for as long as he could. He kept an eye on the shield as he was swung back and forth atop the flagpole.

“That's not working! I'll get him myself.” One of the soldiers said from below. “Come on down here and take your punishment you little whelp!”

The unicorn started using telekinesis on Spike's body in an attempt to pry him off manually. He held fast and was finally able to get a good view of the shield without so much movement. He watched it, intently, refusing to let go. There was movement inside. All of the valponies flying around seemed to be moving away from the Equestrian army. The swarm of them started to get smaller.

“What are they-? They're escaping through an opening in the back of the shield?! Why would Twilight let them do that?! They're going back to Everfree!”

“Stop picking on me and go chase the valponies!” Spike shouted down to the soldiers still trying to wrest him from their banner. “They're going-!”

Suddenly, the shield dissipated. It popped like a bubble and ceased to be. To Spike, that only meant one thing.

Time seemingly froze for the baby dragon as his eyes widened. The image of the shield fading kept repeating in his mind. The next thing he knew, he was on his back on the ground, surrounded by a lot of

unhappy unicorns in armor holding spears at him.

“Wait, wait, don't hurt him! He's with me!” somepony called from overhead.

Spike was still lost in his trance, but the soldiers looked up at a sky blue pegasus with a prismatic mane and lots of battle scars.

“And just who are you?” asked the nearest captain suspiciously, a unicorn mare.

“I'm Rainbow Dash! You know, Element of Loyalty, saver of Equestria for, like, a hundred times, future Wonderbolt star. Any of this ringing a bell?”

“...And this is your dragon?” the captain continued, unimpressed.

“Yep!” Dash replied, swooping down and picking up Spike before any of the guards could object to it. “He gets away from me sometimes. Totally harmless, though. Thanks for catching him! I'll just be-”

“So he's your responsibility, then, is he?”

“Yes! I mean, no! We'll, he's kinda-”

“Then you're gonna pay the damage he caused to our flag!” the captain called, scratching aggressively at the ground and leveling her horn at Rainbow and Spike. The other soldiers rallied around her.

Rainbow panicked, and almost dropped Spike in the process. “Woah, hey now, I'm just-!”

At that moment, Zephyr flew in between Dash and the captain and reached her forelegs out protectively. “Stand down Bannerette! That's an order!”

“That deranged little dragon is a menace! It practically shredded our flag!”

“Oh, come now.” Zephyr scolded like an exhausted mother. “Stop fussing about your flag for one minute. Just take it to the quartermaster and have it fixed; there's no point in bullying civilians.”

Bannerette growled. “Fine, they're all yours then.”

“Good. This battle is over, we're moving out anyway. General Flash wants anypony with a medical background to the front for support. We've got some pretty bad burns up there. Everypony else is to fall back to Ponyville. Now, move out.”

“Yes, sir”

Turning to her troops, the captain carried on her orders. Zephyr faced Rainbow Dash.

“Sorry about that. Bannerette is pretty protective of her flag.”

“No problem. I've got a friend who's real fussy about her clothes like that too. You should have heard

what she threatened to do after I-” Rainbow began, then her ears twitched as she realized what Zephyr had just said. “Wait, what do you mean we're leaving?! We gotta go get Twilight!”

“Sorry, but that's our orders...” Zephyr said, glancing away for just a second. “We came to protect Ponyville and repel the valponies. We're done here.”

“Yeah, we'll I ain't one of your soldiers!” Dash protested. “And we're gonna go get our friend, right Spike?”

Rainbow held up the baby dragon to get a look at him for the first time since picking him up. His head and limbs hung limply, as they had since she rescued him. “It's no use, we're already too late.” he mumbled.

“Whaddya mean, 'too late?' It's never too late!”

“I mean, she's g-” Spike choked over the word. “g-gone.” Then, tensing up again, he raged. “And it's all your fault! All because of you and and your stupid stunts! If you didn't crash into things all the time, none of this would have happened!”

“Hey, don't you pin all this on me! It's not like I enjoyed killing myself!”

“You never take responsibility for anything! You're always lazy and irresponsible, and now Twilight's paid for it! This is all your fault!”

Normally, nopony gets away with talking to the great Rainbow Dash like that, but she forced herself to let that one go. “We don't have time for this. Come on, we're finding her!” Dash said, flying off towards the edge of Everfree.

“There's nothing to find but a body, now Put! Me! Down!” Spike screamed, and started thrashing around all over again.

Wresting himself free from Rainbow's hold, Spike started to fall back down towards the soldiers below. Most of them had turned away from the treeline and were marching back towards Ponyville. Spears hoisted over their shoulders, they formed a moving sea of blades as he fell. Zephyr swept in and caught him by his tail before he landed on one of them.

“Easy there, little guy! You-”

“Don't call me 'little!'” Spike screamed. “Put me down right now!”

“Alright, alright! Hang on.”

Zephyr flipped the baby dragon over to carry him in a more dignified manner. She carried him over to the edge of the army's formation so she could set him down on a clear patch of grass. Rainbow followed behind them. Spike continued to scowl at her throughout the entire process. After putting him down, Zephyr settled on the ground and knelt down to talk to him face to face.

“Listen, dragonling-”

“My name is Spike.” he said, leaning forward and jabbing his thumb to his chest.

“Sir Spike,” Zephyr corrected, gently. “I know what it's like to lose somepony. Really, I do. But blind anger isn't going to get you anywhere. If you need to blow off some steam, do it, but just be careful who you're aiming at when you do.”

“You want me to blow off steam?!” Spike shouted as though it was a challenge. He was breathing hard, shooting puffs of smoke through his nostrils. “I can do a whole lot more than steam!”

A few minutes earlier, Rarity and Fluttershy had caught up with the battlefield, reaching the crest of the hill as Spike had done before and looked over the army.

“Oh! Oh, look! We made it, there they are!” Fluttershy cheered, pointing at the obvious army of ponies in front of them.

“Finally! I haven't walked this much in my life!”

“Rarity! We're here to help Twilight and Spike, remember?”

“Oh, of course, darling,” the pearly unicorn replied, admonished. “I don't mean to complain, I'm just so very tired. We've come all this way, and we mustn't give up now. But, how do we find them now that we're here?”

“I'm not sure. It... looks like everypony's okay. So, I guess that means we won? Eep! They're coming this way!”

“No need to worry, they're quite a ways off. We've have at least a good- hey!” Rarity began before her winged friend grabbed her around the torso to fly her out of the path of the returning soldiers.

“Really, Fluttershy, the feats of strength you perform in a bind never cease to amaze me. Or, when you perceive a bind, that is.” Rarity said, noting the distance between their last position and the soldiers.

The pegasus blushed and hid behind her hooves a bit. “Hee hee, I panic sometimes, and then things happen. Sometimes I don't even realize it's me.”

“Yes, well, perhaps you can channel that nervous energy of yours into finding our friends.”

“I don't know,” Fluttershy said, floating higher to get a better look. “It'll be really hard to find Spike among all these -Eek!”

“What is it? What do you see?”

“Smoke! There's a lot of smoke! Was there a wildfire out here?! I hope none of the creatures got hurt...”

“One thing at a time, dear. Do you happen to see Spike or any of the girls?”

“Okay! Okay! Mustn't panic. Stay calm...” Fluttershy said to herself, and took a deep breath. “Um... Oh! That looks like Rainbow Dash! She's following some other pegasus. And she's got Spike! They're going this way, come on!”

“I'm coming! Ow, but I simply cannot run any further.”

Fluttershy landed next to her friend and walked alongside her. Inwardly, she was grateful for not having to rush anymore, and the sight of some of her friends in one piece relieved her in a way she wouldn't have been able to describe in words.

“Who's that auburn pegasus?” Rarity asked.

“I don't know. She's saying something to Spike. I can't hear from here.”

Then, Spike shouted. “I can do a whole lot more than steam!”

Spinning around, the young dragon snorted a few times as the smoke he was breathing gradually changed to bursts of fire. Then, after a sharp intake of air, he screamed. Along with that scream, a brazier of green flames exploded from his mouth, a brazier that would have been large enough to engulf a full sized pony were one in his way. A few feet behind them, several of the soldiers marching home were startled by the eruption, as were the mares who were watching him.

“Again!” Zephyr encouraged, stomping her hoof. “Let it out again!”

“You shouldn't have gone, Twilight! You should have just listened to me!” Spike shouted, releasing another torrent of emerald flames on the breath of his final word.

Rarity and Fluttershy stepped up as close as they dared. Rainbow settled on the ground as well next to Zephyr. The green light from the flames flickered across their faces as Spike continued to vent his frustration. Tears started to stream down his own face.

“Did... something happen...?” Fluttershy asked quietly.

“I don't know...”

“You should have just taken me with you!” Spike continued shouting. “I've never been able to go on any of your big adventures! I should have been able to protect you!” he screamed, breathing more fire into the open air of the field in front of him.

That burst proved to be the limit of his stamina however. During his shout, the flames started to flicker and die down. They gradually sputtered out as Spike emptied his lungs. When the last of his energy gave out, he collapsed belly-down on the grass unconscious.

“Spike!” Fluttershy cried as she leapt forward to pick him up.

“Spike! Spike, are you alright?!” Rarity said, stepping up as well.

“He should be fine, just worn out is all.” Zephyr said. “Is he a friend of yours too?”

“We are. Please, tell us what's going on.” Rarity said.

“It's Twilight!” Rainbow burst out. “She just-! ... She just gave herself up!”

“She what?! Why didn't you try to stop her?!”

“There was nothing I could do! She just poofed down there and blew right past the guards! Next thing I know there's this magic bubble, and then it's gone, and now Spike says she dead! I dunno what's going on!” Dash said, throwing herself on the ground and covering her face with her hooves.

“Listen,” Zephyr said, “It's probably not a good idea for any of you to hang around here longer than you should. The valponies might come back, for one, or something else might come out of Everfree. That goes for you too, Rainbow Dash.”

Rainbow snapped her head back up and then stood. “No! Spike's right! I need to, to, to go do something! Yeah, isn't there something that Equestria's fastest flier can do to fix this?” she pleaded.

“Please, if you could just follow the troops back to Ponyville, that would be for the best. I'm in charge of communications for this legion, so I can make sure that somepony sends you a message as soon as we know what's going on. Until then, it's just not safe.”

One of the other messenger-guards then flew down with an order. “Zephyr, sir! General Flash wants to know why you're not giving her a report on the medical support!”

“Duty calls, guys. Please, just go. Now. Your friend here should be fine. He just needs to rest for a bit.” Zephyr said. Then, up to the messenger, “Tell her I'm gathering it now.”

With that, Zephyr lifted off the ground and headed towards the ponies still gathered around the dying flames of Sleipnir's trap. The other guard let the ponies be and returned to his own duties.

“Well, I... guess we should just head home now.” Fluttershy said with a sigh. “I'll carry Spike, since you're so tired...”

The sleeping form of the baby dragon was then engulfed in a gentle glow of baby-blue magic and was lifted onto Rarity's back.

“No, I think I can manage, thank you,” the pearly unicorn said with a smile.

“Okay,” Fluttershy said, visibly relieved. “Um, what about you, Rainbow?”

“I'll- I'm gonna- I need to go get Pinkie!” Dash said. Then, after kicking at the grass once, she lifted off to fly back to the commbal.

“Come on, Fluttershy, darling. We have a long way back home.” Rarity said softly.

“O-okay.”

The two mares walked in silence, besides the sound of marching from the soldiers ahead of them. Rarity was careful to walk slowly and gently as she carried Spike on her back, as he was in no condition to hold on for himself. A strong wind almost pushed him down once, but she was able to catch him with her telekinesis.

“...Do you think Spike was right?” Fluttershy asked at last. “Do you think that Twilight's...”

“I don't know.”

Another moment of silence.

“...W-what do you suppose will happen to Spike if...”

“Don't worry your pretty little head. If worse comes to worse I'll take care of him. He always sort of liked me the best, didn't he?” Rarity said, smiling and blushing a little.

“Hee hee, I-I guess he did, didn't he?”