

Beyond Judgment

Part XXV: Eternal Bargain

“Surely you came all the way out here with some kind of plan,” Sleipnir continued. He started to walk casually in a circle around Rainbow Dash. “Of course, it would be very much like you to rush in head first without thinking.”

Dash snarled. Did she have a plan? Her memories were still a little foggy after the potion thing the night before. If she had one yesterday, she certainly didn't have one now. “I'm more of a 'make things up as I go' kind of pony,” she replied.

“I should have known. If that's the case, you would have been better off bringing Celestia along to negotiate with me again. Or better yet, Princess Luna...” Sleipnir stopped his pacing and rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he considered the lunar princess' presence. “Regardless, it's always such a hassle to come to this world, and I very rarely get the opportunity. I'll tell you what: give me your best shot. Convince me why I should let Twilight go.”

With that, Sleipnir lied down on the ground and crossed his forelegs over each other comfortably. His tail swished back and forth casually as he eagerly anticipated the pegasi's response.

“Sheesh, you talk more than Twilight does!” Dash said, wings flaring. “If you don't stop talking and give her back right now, I'll-!”

“A fight, is it?” Sleipnir interrupted. “That's certainly not going to work. You couldn't even take on my daughters, let alone me. It would take nothing less than the Alicorn sisters' combined magic to stand up to my physical prowess.

Dash's rage was on the verge of boiling. “Keep it up, tough guy, and we'll see how tough your physical prowess really is!”

“Wait!” Fluttershy called out from behind Rainbow.

“Hmm? Oh, it's you.” Sleipnir said. “I had almost forgotten you were here.”

“Hey! Nopony talks to Fluttershy like that!” Dash shouted.

Sleipnir raised a hoof. “You're right, that was rude. I apologize, Lady of Kindness. I should not have spoken to you like I would this ruffian.”

Dash scratched at the ground and prepared to charged at Sleipnir, but Fluttershy extended a wing to stop her.

“Lord Sleipnir,” Fluttershy began, “I know that you're big and strong, and have magic world traveling powers, and an army of valponies, and you said that somepony has to go... but this world still needs her. She's not just one of the elements of harmony, she's the only one who can activate them. In the past few years we've had to rely on that magic twice. Who knows when we'll be needed again? For the sake

of this whole world... we need her.”

Sleipnir's swaying tail came to a stop as Fluttershy spoke. He sighed as he stood. She started to step back as he moved, but remembered to stand firm.

“I commend your courage, Lady of Kindness, and you make a valid point. Understand that it is not my intention to disrupt the balance of this world. To the contrary, my actions are meant to protect it”

“Protect it!?” Rainbow shouted. “You call this protecting!? Invasion and murder!?”

Smirking, Sleipnir replied “As a matter of fact, I do. There are powers I must contend with and rules by which I am bound. You do not see yet, but this is the only way.”

Dash was so frustrated with Sleipnir at this point, that she couldn't keep herself still. She lifted off the ground and hovered there, trying to burn off just enough steam to keep from going aggro on everypony in sight – save Fluttershy, of course. She refused to lose her cool this time, but that blasted stallion just kept pushing her.

Fluttershy, on the other hoof, was trying her hardest to come up with an agreeable solution. “What if you... Maybe we could... or maybe...” she said, trying think of something to say, but nothing was coming out.

Sleipnir raised an eyebrow curiously as he watched Fluttershy search for words.

“Couldn't.... couldn't you just let her go?” Fluttershy said at last. “I know we don't have anything to give you in return, and the only reason I can give you to do it is that a lot of ponies really care about her and want her to come back. Her funeral is going on right now and I know it's so sad! We need her, and we all really, really miss her. So please, sir, won't you just give Twilight back to us?”

Sleipnir stared down at the yellow pegasus, and glanced over towards the fuming Rainbow Dash. He stepped forward and raised a foreleg. With one swift, sudden motion, he struck Fluttershy across the face with the back of his hoof. She squeaked in pain and surprise as she fell away, skidding a short distance against the ground.

“You disappoint me, and you waste my time. Begging will get you nowhere if you can't put any kind of power or incentive behind your words. I would at least respect a threat, as humorous as that might have been.”

“That's it, punk! Now it's go time!”

In a flash of rainbow light, Dash rushed at Sleipnir, hooves swinging. Without missing an instant, the Lord of the Afterlife held up his own forelegs to defend himself. As Dash brought her forelegs to bear against him, kicking at him angrily, Sleipnir deftly parried each of her attacks. Roaring, Rainbow spun around and started bucking with her hind legs as well, kicking at him as hard as she could. It made no difference, as Sleipnir was able to deflect blow after blow with ease.

Dash pushed away from her opponent and performed a backwards loop through the air. Turning back,

she charged forward with as much speed as she could muster. She held out all four hooves, betting that at least one of them could make contact. Sleipnir reared up on his four hind legs to block with his front four. There was a loud crack as they locked hooves, all four of Dash's making contact with Sleipnir's raised legs. She beat her wings hard, trying to push against him. He stood firm, though the force of Dash's wings was able to slide the two of them backwards along the ground, Sleipnir's hind legs formed grooves in the dirt as he was pushed.

Then, Sleipnir swung his head, colliding with Dash's for a punishing headbutt. The impact broke her concentration, allowing Sleipnir to push back and throw her against the ground.

“Rainbow Dash!” Fluttershy shouted, finally recovering from the blow to her face. She looked from her fallen friend, to the looming elder as he approached. Instinctively, she jumped up to stand over Rainbow.

She glared at Sleipnir with one eye, as the other was blackening for the backhoof and hurt to keep open. Fluttershy released the most powerful Stare she had ever performed.

Sleipnir paused, mid-step, as he stared into Fluttershy's eyes. “My... that is a magic I've not yet encountered” he said, then chuckled to himself. “Be at ease, my Lady, I have no intention of killing ether of you. You're too important for that.”

Fluttershy shook her head to clear it after using her stare. “Wh-what do you mean, 'important'?”

Evading the question, Sleipnir continued. “That still leaves us at an impasse. You cannot convince me to give the Lady of Magic back, but I should have known better than expecting diplomacy from Rainbow Dash. I see now that I'm wasting my time.” He turned to leave. “If you cannot best me in wits or strength, I'd rather simply return to my work.”

Dash worked her way to her hooves, having previously been left in a heap after Sleipnir's headbutt. She could already feel the beginnings of a welt.

Glancing over his shoulder, Sleipnir added “If only you could best me in just one thing...”

Rainbow growled and leaped to her hooves. She shouted into the air as loud as she could. “I challenge you to a race!”

Sleipnir stopped and chuckled to himself. He turned around, saying “Really, now? That's your grand scheme? A race?”

“Yeah! A race! That was probably my plan! I mean, that is my plan! I challenge you to a race, winner take all!”

“A fool's errand. If only the mortals of this realm knew more about me, you'd know that I'm the fastest being on your world and mine.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dash said. She began to flutter her wings a bit, lifting off the ground. “Well, now I'm the fastest being above this world!”

Sleipnir laughed again, this time with more humor and less malice. “Very well. Assuming I did feel compelled to accept this challenge, what would the wager be? It cannot be a winner take all bet, seeing as I still hold all the cards.”

“I bet myself!”

“Rainbow, no!” Fluttershy shouted. “We can't lose you too, that wouldn't be fair either!”

“She's right, it wouldn't. Somepony must still pay the price for what the two of you did. If I was to grant anything for this wager, it would be to allow a trade. If I win, you come with me to my realm. If I lose, you still come with me, but I return the Lady of Magic in your place.”

“Deal!” Rainbow shouted.

“No!” Fluttershy protested. “I can't let you! I already lost one friend, I can't lose another!”

Dash swooped down to land in front of her friend. “Hey, hey, Fluttershy, it's alright. You know, it's all kinda my fault anyway, right?”

Fluttershy jumped up and hugged her friend tightly around the neck. “No, it's not!”

“It kind of is. I'm the one who crashed in the first place, aren't I? I'm the one who picked a fight with the valponies in the first place, didn't I? It's okay, really.”

“But I hate losing friends.” Fluttershy mumbled, shutting her eyes tight.

Rainbow hugged her back. “I don't want to go either. But... I think this was my plan from the start, when I told you to fly me out of the hospital.”

“You think?” Fluttershy asked, confused.

“Yeah. That zebra potion did some weird things to my head, but I know I felt guilty. This is all my fault, and Twilight took the hit in my place. It's not fair to her. This is my mess, and I gotta do this. Besides, this place could use an extra egghead way more than it needs a jock like me.”

“Rainbow! Don't say that!”

“It's okay, Fluttershy, just trust me on this. I gotta go.”

Rainbow raised her wings and started to fly. Fluttershy, still hanging from her neck, clung as she ascended. Rainbow had to pull her hooves apart to make her let go, and she fluttered gently back to the ground. She looked down at her before turning back to confront Sleipnir.

“You'd better be ready to lose, octo-freak!” Dash taunted, “There's no way you can be faster than me! I can do a-”

“A sonic rainboom?” Sleipnir interrupted, flatly.

Dash crossed her forelegs and grinned. “Impressed?”

“You've done no such thing. You think you have, but you've deluded yourself.”

“...What?” Dash asked, offended.

Sleipnir started to pace casually, walking past Rainbow. “I'm surprised that the Lady of Magic never told you, seeing how she's supposed to be the intelligent one. She was probably just sparing your feelings, if she was even aware at all. It's not surprising, though, as nopony has actually performed the feat in the past. I should know, I was there for all of it.”

Dash swung around to look Sleipnir in the eye. “Hold up there, Stretch. What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about the speed of sound, and how you have never actually exceeded it. You've come close, of course; Skimmed along it like a pebble on the surface of a lake, but you've never actually broken the surface”

“Um, yeah, I have! I've done it, like, three times!”

“She has, I've seen it!” Fluttershy said.

Shaking his head, Sleipnir explained. “You're not listening. You think you've broken the sound barrier, but you haven't. You've come close, but you have not once maintained that speed. Tell me, what was the shape of the wave you produced as you produced your... 'rainboom.’”

“It was, like, a big circle. What was the word Twilight used once? A disk.”

“Precisely. A disk radiating from a single point. It was at that point and that point alone that you reached the speed of sound. Then you became complacent. You always relaxed at your presumed achievement and dropped to sub-sonic speeds. Think about it: if you had maintained your speed at that critical moment, you would leave a cone of rainbow colors in your wake, not a disk.”

Dash dropped to the ground and sat, trying to wrap her mind around what Sleipnir was saying. Physics wasn't her strong suit and she wished that Twilight was around to try and explain it in laypony's terms. Or Spike, rather, since he was better at translating her sciencey-speak for the others. She quickly gave up on that and shook her head.

“Fine, then. Let's assume I can't fly at the speed of sound, can you?”

Sleipnir grinned and chuckled to himself. “Race me and find out for yourself.”

“I don't like this, Rainbow. This is a bad idea!” Fluttershy interrupted again.

“Don't worry, Fluttershy, he might be bluffing. And did you forget about these babies?” Dash said, fluttering her wings. “He may have a bunch of legs, but I can fly! You're on, Sleipnir!”

Dash spat on her hoof, and extended it towards the Lord of the Afterlife. He hesitated for a second before spitting into his own hoof and pressing it into hers. Being the size of an alicorn, Sleipnir's hoof dwarfed Dash's at almost twice the size. The clapping sound as their hooves struck each other caused Fluttershy to physically shudder. It echoed loudly in her ears as though they were in a large, hollow cave. She knew Rainbow. Applejack may have taught her the spit promise, but Dash never went back on anything she set out to do. Whatever was about to happen, it was out of her hooves then.

“So, where to?” Dash asked, beginning to become excited. “Oh! Oh! How about to Ponyville!”

Sleipnir rolled his eyes and waved a hoof dismissively. “Psht, that distance is merely a brisk stroll; Hardly an endurance test for the likes of me. We must travel farther. To Canterlot!”

“Canterlot, huh? Never traveled that far in one race before...” Rainbow said thoughtfully. That soon gave way to giddiness. “Hehe, awesome! If I'm goin' out after this race, I wanna go out in the record books!” she declared, raising a hoof.

“Not just to Canterlot, but to Canterlot and back. We touch the nearest wall of the castle and return to the portal.”

Dash's hoof hung in the air for a moment as she took in Sleipnir's words and mentally calculated the distance.

“Oh... kay then. Uh, yeah! I got this! No sweat!”

Fluttershy opened her mouth to protest, but stopped. The situation was out of her control, but the least she could do was support her friend.

“You can do it, Rainbow Dash! You show him who's the fastest pony in the universe and kick his flank!”

Sleipnir and Dash stared at the pegasus for he uncharacteristic outburst. Rainbow laughed. “Heheheh, yeah! You ready to eat my wake, Sleipnir? Because I'm taking you down!”

“Of course, Lady of Loyalty. I've been waiting for this race for a long time.”