

# Beyond Judgment

## Part XXX: Flash Back

Dash was still a while ahead of Sleipnir; it would take a few minutes to catch up. He could have closed the gap a bit sooner, but he chose not to. A whisper in the back of his head told him that he was being foolish, but he dismissed it for the time being. He let his mind wander through the joy of speed.

Even though his opponent possessed the ability to fly, Sleipnir would not trade anything he possessed for the ability. How boring would it be to move in a straight line anywhere he wished? Experiencing and exploring the ground was far too entertaining. Galloping across the countryside a shade over the speed of sound, every gentle slope and rolling hill became a ramp with which he could launch himself into the air. He could bend and flow with the curvature of the earth like a stream. He would never know what was just around the next bend or over the next crest, and it was a thrill to experience the path as it came. The terrain wasn't just a thing to fight against or manipulate in order to travel, it was a toy that played with him as much as he played with it.

There were times, long ago, that Sleipnir and his Lady went on moonlight journeys together. While Luna wielded her wings with grace and elegance, not even she was capable of coming anywhere close to his speed. Of his several regrets, the most minor was the fact that he was never able to show off to her the full power of his gallop. Instead she would make gentle swoops through the night sky as he played on the terrain below. Together, and yet apart. Such was how it always was, even before the Covenant.

There was a place, far from where he was racing, that the two of them would often visit. It was rockier than the badlands on the southern edge of Equestria and without the looming annoyance of dragons. Of course, the sky was always the sky to his Lady of the Night, but the rough, jagged terrain of the Sawtooth Hills were especially engaging for Sleipnir to run in. The Rambling Ridge that Rainbow Dash attempted to trap him with was a mere crack in between cobblestones compared to his hills.

Indeed, those were the last times Sleipnir last had so much enjoyment while galloping.

Of course, navigating such terrain would have been dangerous – even for Sleipnir – under the fog of night. That is why the two of them went together under the glow of Luna's full moon. He was younger then. Much, much younger. Back when his legs were more tone and less muscle, and his eyes wilder. He had great difficulty remaining still then.

There was a game Sleipnir would play with Luna. Whenever she would glide at her lowest, Sleipnir would bank towards the nearest vertical ledge and run up it. Launching himself into the sky towards his Lady, he would try to get as close to her as he could. She would always see him coming, though, and gracefully slip out of his grasp. Having no control over his movement in the air, he would then fall back downwards again – but not before she would kiss him on the tip of his nose at the height of his jump.

There was once when Sleipnir almost managed to catch his prey. Luna had drifted low, much lower than usual – that should have been a sign. Running up a nearby ledge, he threw himself at her. The lunge drew him closer, and closer, but at that pivotal moment where his hoof almost grazed her side, she dematerialized into a cloud of nebulous magic. He sailed through the cloud like a vapor, and fell as

he always did without making true contact. Upon landing, he called up to her, annoyed.

“Thou art a cheater!” Sleipnir shouted to the arcane cloud.

Drifting lazily through the air, darting this way and that, the vapor settled on a nearby spire, still somewhat out of Sleipnir's reach. “We know not what thou means...” Luna said, materializing again.

The princess was more petite then, as well. In fact, that was before she was a princess at all. She was always less... towering than her older sister, but back in those nights Luna was only a bit taller than a common pony. She was closer in proportions to her niece, Cadence, in modern times. Her mane and tail were mostly a pale blue, with only their tips beginning to acquire an ethereal quality.

“Thou cannot use magic to evade thine grasp! Tis against the rules.” Sleipnir said, indignant.

“We have been informed of no rules,” the princess said nonchalantly, inspecting the shine of her slipper. “How could we have broken a rule we did not know existed?”

“Feigning ignorance does not suit thee,” Sleipnir said, pacing. “We hath played this game times enough to know the rules of conduct.”

“Hmm... If that is so, then the one who has broken the rules here is thou, beloved.”

“Thee? Thee!?” Sleipnir was shocked and insulted. He shifted his weight into an aggressive stance as he spoke. “Thou violates the rules of our game and then accuses thee of treachery?! Explain thyself!”

“The game has always been such that thou wouldst lunge at us, and yet miss. This time, however, thou came dangerously close to marring our finely brushed coat.” Luna said, casually brushing her side with a bejeweled hoof.

“But I hath always attempted to catch thou!” Sleipnir said with a stomp. “Yet thou always manages to elude thee!”

“So thou admits it, then?”

“Admits what!?”

“That thou are not a cheater, but rather incompetent?”

Sleipnir opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. He opened it again to say something else instead but still failed to form words. He tried a third time but again failed. Luna began to laugh. She rolled over on her perch as she giggled to herself, clutching her belly and kicking her hind legs into the air. Her companion, from the ground below, scowled at her. He could not maintain the expression for long, however, and himself began to laugh.

“Thou art as cunning as thou art beautiful, my Lady of the Night, even when thou chortles like a mule.”

Luna immediately stopped laughing, and rolled over. She puffed out her cheeks as she pouted and

glared down at her stallion, who began to-

Sleipnir suddenly found that he couldn't breathe. His lungs began to burn instantly as his body used so much oxygen maintaining his sonic speeds. Rocked from his daydream, he started to lose control of his legs. He fell forward and began to tumble end over end as his momentum flung him across the countryside. He clutched his legs as closely to himself as he could, partly to grasp his convulsing chest and partly to keep them from breaking like twigs in the ensuing crash. He began to slow down as his velocity dropped, starting to slide across the grass more than bouncing off of it. He eventually came to a stop in a bleeding heap on the ground.

In a brief flash of interdimensional light, a pair of Valponies appeared in the sky above Sleipnir and glided down to his side. Were it not for his supernatural endurance, he would have already been dead as they arrived.

“Father, are you alright?” The elder of the two valponies asked – not that anypony but Sleipnir himself could tell the difference. He chuckled at the question, and then coughed harshly. No, clearly he was not alright.

Testing his muscles slowly and carefully, Sleipnir attempted to judge the damage. It was quite a stumble he had just experienced. “Two broken legs...” he choked out. “One... three... four... six.... Six broken ribs. Wait, was that all the numbers...? I think I missed one.”

“That wasn't all the numbers, father. You skipped two and five.” One of the valponies responded.

“Really...? Better add concussion to the list... I think I've fractured my pelvis a few times too.”

“The degeneration is progressing faster than expected,” the younger valpony said.

“You need to be restored. Return my energy to you so that you may be healed,” the elder valpony added.

“Return my energy as well to delay the degeneration,” the younger valpony continued.

Sleipnir thrashed at the idea, which only served to exacerbate his condition. He tried to hold up a hoof to stop them, but it only flopped back down again as soon as he raised it. “Daughters! No! Not both of you!” Sleipnir choked out. “It's not time for that yet. Not yet...”

“You must take me to heal yourself and continue the race.” The elder said.

“I offer myself as well, father,” the younger added.

Sleipnir looked at his daughters. His beautiful, beautiful daughters. Coats as pure as fresh snow and manes of flowing gold. The only distinguishing feature between them were their eyes. Each of his daughters, every single one of them, had a distinct eye color. Sometimes the difference was subtle, but it existed. It was something they could call their own and be individuals, even though he couldn't grant them true identities. His valponies were strong and obedient, loyal and hard working. If only he could have made them intelligent as well...

There's one of those regrets again. That certainly does happen a lot to dying ponies.

The urgency of the valponies' words belied the stoicism of their expressions. They were simply doing as they were told, following his instructions as simply and logically as he had given them. They were to watch him from the other side, and come to him if the illness struck and he needed help. It was easy for them to cross realms – it's what he created them for – but he couldn't do so without a portal. His inner power was too great.

Unfortunately, that power was fading. But he had a bigger problem.

His daughters were absolutely right. It wasn't time for Sleipnir to stop running yet. He had to finish the race. With his injuries, he couldn't move. It was only a matter of time before he died where he lay, degradation or not, and that would cause all kinds of new problems. There was only one way he was getting back up. One of them had to die.

Sleipnir looked to the elder valpony. He recognized her instantly, as he did all of them. Her eyes were a deep amber, bordering on a muddy brown. She was seven thousand four hundred and twenty eight years old. Older than most. How many beings had she brought dutifully to the afterlife in her millenia of service? How many important ponies had she personally conveyed to their final resting places? After so long, to be sacrificed so unceremoniously in a place like that would be unthinkable.

Sleipnir looked to the younger of the two valponies. Icy blue eyes, with just a hint of green. Five hundred and twelve. So young! She was so very young. She had such life ahead of her. So much more she could accomplish. So many important figures she could meet, figures that she would watch be born, grow, age and die before she brought them home. He couldn't take her. Not her.

There was no choice. There was nothing Sleipnir could do, but he had to choose. He groaned as he strained to lift a hoof.

Vision blurring and muscles weakening, Sleipnir couldn't precisely select one of his daughters even if he wanted to. Extending one of his remaining good legs, he attempted to point to the space in between the two of them. He could see his hoof wavering; not from indecision, but his inability to hold it steady. Given his injuries, there was no telling where he was actually indicating. In a moment of weakness, he let chance decide.

“You... Just you... Do it. The other... stay.” Sleipnir said, closing his eyes tight.

“Yes, father,” the chosen valpony said. Sleipnir strained to not notice which one the voice was coming from.

A bright light began to shine from outside Sleipnir's tightly closed eyelids. He felt a warmth envelop his body, seeping into every part of his being. With a tingling sensation, he began to feel his body repairing itself. Muscles merging back together, bones snapping back into place, sinews stretching back to where they should be.

Slowly, Sleipnir stood, his strength returned to him – for the time being. He had to move fast if he was

to wrap everything up before it was too late. The energy inside of him began to subside, settling to where it needed to be – where it originally was before he used it to create that valpony in the first place.

“Are you better now, father?”

Sleipnir looked down at the valpony who spoke, and he knew. It was the eyes. From that color knew which of his daughters was the survivor and which was the sacrifice. He looked at her for a long moment, thinking back to the missing eye color so that he would not forget. He stared for long enough to confuse the valpony, causing her to tilt her head to the side in wonder.

“I’m fine now.” Sleipnir said at last. “Go back home and return to your watch.”

“Yes, father.”

The valpony spread her wings and took to the sky. She flew gently upwards, disappearing in the same flash of light in which she and her sister appeared before. Not even her armor remained of her now. Sleipnir took a deep breath, and raised his eyes to the sky. In the distance, just on the edge of his vision, he could see the annoying, stupid little blue pegasus that he needed.

He had lost many of his daughters on that fateful day in Everfree, when the Elements fought them. More than he expected, to be truthful, and he returned them all to his soul just as he did the one just then. It was painful, of course, but it was with purpose. A purpose that he explained to them, though they barely comprehended. A purpose they all volunteered for, though they did not understand.

But that? That was needless. It was wasteful. It was cruel. And he had to do it. A minor aberration in his grand scheme with a terrible consequence.

He knew he should have been taking that run more seriously.

Sleipnir clenched his teeth and shut his eyes tight. He threw his head back and roared into the sky.

“RAINBOW DASH!”

***Boom-fwoosh!***

In a burst of newfound strength, Sleipnir leaped to full speed. Approaching mach III, the ground flew by him at a pace even he could barely keep up with. His powerful stride quickly became a series of powerful leaps from one hilltop to another.

It only took seventeen seconds for him to catch up to his opponent.