

Beyond Judgment

Part VI: Dissolution

Twilight's head was spinning when the group rematerialized elsewhere in Everfree Forest. She had expended so much energy during the fight between shooting flares and maintaining that bubble shield. Her new techniques allowed her to tap into more of her body's energy and use it more efficiently, but she still had the same amount of energy she always had. The mass teleportation was incredibly draining, quite literally.

“ ... It is difficult to verify what it is like to continue to increase the power of a spell with this kind of suicidal intensity as unicorns have forfeited their lives in this manner,” Twilight recalled from her guide.

Voices were arguing around Twilight, but for the moment they were all swirling and unfamiliar, much like her vision. Her heartbeat was fast, and her breathing slow and ragged. Some of her extremities were feeling numb as though she was surrounded by a blizzard, when in fact it had been a fairly warm night. She suddenly realized that she had fallen over sometime after the teleportation was complete. She tried to get back to her hooves, but the dirt was like jelly moving around beneath her. Somehow she pulled off this stunt and was able to sit upright. Something warm and fuzzy gripped her, but she wasn't entirely sure what it was at first. Her vision started to stabilize, and the dual colored blob directly in front of her reformed into Fluttershy, who was apparently the warm and fuzzy thing keeping her upright. Well, it mostly looked like Fluttershy.

“Careful now, little one. It's not your time yet. We have plenty of things to discuss, let me assure you, but this is not the time,” a voice said clearly, but Twilight didn't recognize that one.

“Di-discuss?” Twilight mumbled. “What time is it?”

The thing that was probably Fluttershy mumbled something else in reply.

“W-what?”

“Oh, I'm so sorry, I said I don't know what time it is,” Fluttershy whimpered, burying her face in her friend's neck. “I really wish I could tell you, Twilight, I really, really, wish I could!” she pleaded.

Almost completely recovered from her nausea, Twilight flopped her hooves around Fluttershy and hugged her back. “I'm ... I'm okay ... Just give me a minute.”

Rainbow Dash hovered over, placing a hoof on both of them. “Ease up a bit, will ya?” she said. “Give Twilight a little breathing room.”

“No...” Fluttershy said weakly.

Sighing, Dash continued. “Fine. Keep holding her. Just stop crowding her head, alright?”

Fluttershy nodded, nudging her face against Twilight's neck some more as she did. She moved over to

hold on to her friend's side instead of her neck. She even kept a wing wrapped around her for security. Whether it was for the unicorn's security or her own, she probably wouldn't have been able to answer.

Dash landed with her side facing Twilight. Then she flapped her wings up and down randomly for a few seconds before stopping abruptly. "How many wings do you see?"

Twilight focused for a moment before answering. "... Three. No, wait, that doesn't make sense ... Two. Definitely two."

"Good." Dash said, lowering her wings again. "Now just keep still. Don't move so much."

"An herb for your head I shall find," Zecora said, "Stay here and do not leave me behind!" she then dashed off into the forest.

"Girls!" Rarity shouted. "I'm as worried about Twilight as the rest of you, but Applejack urgently needs help!"

Dash flew off to hover above the downed earth pony and Twilight, with Fluttershy's help, stumbled over as well. Applejack was lying on her side. She was very still, but still breathing slowly. Very slowly. Her sides and flanks were covered with a dozen puncture wounds, each of which wrapped and secured firmly with some article of Rarity's clothing that had been magically formed to her body, stemming the blood loss. Each bandage was a different brightly colored design and material, save for the matching blood stains. Fortunately, she wasn't injured on her head and neck, where she was most vulnerable. Rarity was laying down in front of her, looking over her carefully.

"It's okay," Twilight said, "I can heal her."

Twilight illuminated her horn to begin using the recovery spells she knew before Dash clamped on it with her hooves. Doing so wouldn't actually interfere with the casting of a spell had she not jerked the unicorn's head around a little bit.

"Hold on there, magic girl. I can't let you do that!"

"You can't be serious!" Rarity protested, rising to her three good hooves. "Applejack could die if she doesn't get help soon! Goodness knows where we are right now, and there's no telling how long until we can get her to a hospital."

"I don't know squat about unicorn magic, but look at Twilight! She's in just as bad a shape as Applejack. Believe me, I know a thing or two about head injuries."

"Using her magic is not going to kill her. Not using her magic will kill Applejack!"

"They should both be resting, or Twilight's just gonna get worse!"

The two friends were literally butting heads at that point, shoving back and forth with each point. They didn't even realize that the orange pony in question was already glowing with purple magic. Fluttershy noticed this, still clinging to Twilight's side, but didn't object, she just held on to her a little tighter.

“Will you two stop fighting!” Pinkie shouted, finally speaking up. Her hair had still not returned to normal.

Rarity and Dash looked at Pinkie, only to follow her outstretched hoof to Applejack. The last of Twilight's magic faded away as they did. The earth pony let out a deep breath as the healing spells faded as though a weight was lifted off her lungs. She began to breathe more steadily, but her eyes remained closed.

“I ... told you I would be fine,” Twilight lied with a smile, her vision going blurry again.

“Okay, fine, don't listen to me!” Dash pouted. “But if you try doing any more magic, I'm taking that horn from you. You got that?!” She waved a hoof menacingly at Twilight.

Twilight continued smiling and nodded. The world started to spin in a whole new direction as she did.

“So it's settled then. Hey, Pinkie, help me carry this workhorse glory hog and we can get out of here.”

Pinkie nodded and stood next to Applejack's resting form so Dash could lift her onto her back.

“You're going to have to help me walk for just a little while,” Twilight whispered to Fluttershy, “don't tell the others, okay?” The pegasus nodded and nuzzled her neck again.

“Does anypony know where in Equestria we are?” Rarity asked.

“We are a thousand paces north of where we fought,” Zecora said, emerging from the forest with a leafy plant in her mouth. “Can the valponies find us here? I think not.” She walked up to Twilight and extended the plant to her. “Chew on this, but you must not swallow. The juices will make your head feel less hollow.”

Twilight wasn't entirely sure what to make of that last rhyme, but she knew to trust Zecora's judgment – especially when it came to herbs and medicines. She took the plant gratefully and started chewing it.

“We must continue north back to Ponyville.” Zecora continued. “Though we are far, the valponies might search for us still.”

“Nonsense! No pony is going anywhere until you're all bandaged. Ow!” Rarity said, whimpering as she accidentally stepped on her injured leg. “We're only going to make ourselves worse if we all try hobbling off like this.”

The rest of the group agreed to that. And after Rarity tore apart the last of the clothes in her saddlebags for wrapping they continued their journey homeward. Twilight managed to wobble her way through with Fluttershy's support. Dash took to the treeline to keep an aerial eye out for anypony following them. Zecora, being in the best shape, took point to find the best path for her injured companions.

Rarity made herself a sling for her leg. It wasn't long before she was able to adjust her stance to be able to walk gracefully with only three good legs. By then, all that mud she had complained about earlier

seemed inconsequential. She considered asking Twilight to heal it as well, but she didn't want to be a bother. It wasn't so bad, she could hardly feel any pain in her leg at all.

Pinkie carried Applejack the entire way. She didn't say much, and her head hung as low as her mane. None of them said much of anything, really. They were all very tired, and they had much to think about.

A little over an hour later, Ponyville's local physician, Nurse Redheart, had an abrupt awakening in the middle of the night. She hadn't encountered so many ponies in such bad shape at once since the “baked bads” incident, and she called in assistance from a neighboring village for that one. A bunch of ponies with sick tummies was one thing, but half the group that showed up at her door that night needed surgery – stat. There was no way she could get assistance for that one. She lived in her own wing of Ponyville's little hospital, so she was able to get right to work as soon as she got up.

Redheart quickly diagnosed Twilight with magical exhaustion and sent her to her own room along with Fluttershy and Zecora, whom she showed where some food could be found. Twilight desperately wanted to see Spike, but she knew that he would be sleeping like a rock at that hour and nothing less than a sonic rainboom would wake him up.

Applejack was placed in a bed adjacent to Twilight in the same room. She was still unresponsive, but stable. Redheart then brought Pinkie, Dash, and Rarity into the emergency wing to prep them for stitching. As Fluttershy and Zecora gathered some fruits, veggies, and even a few flowers for Twilight to eat, all she could do was stare at the comatose workhorse and will her to wake up.

“I'm sorry, Applejack,” Twilight whispered. “I shouldn't have taken you all along with me.” She tried to hide her face under the covers, but felt just as guilty not watching over her friend and poked her head out again.

Zecora returned with a tray of food balanced immaculately on her head and Fluttershy behind her. The novel of watching her do so had not worn off on the pegasus. Twilight was lost in thought watching Applejack that she didn't realize they had returned until Zecora placed the tray down on the side table in front of her face.

“Here you go, Twilight,” Fluttershy said, picking up a bunch of grapes and holding it out to her. “I know you're really, really, sleepy, but you have to eat at least a little before you do, please.”

The yellow pegasus looked like she was about to fall asleep herself. Her eyelids and tail were sagging low. Even her mane seemed to be drooping. It seemed like the only thing keeping her going was her concern for her friends.

Twilight initially tried to use her telekinesis to lift the fruit Fluttershy was offering her, but she found that her magic wasn't responding. Her horn glowed faintly and produced a few small sparks. Fluttershy almost dropped the grapes on the floor as she grabbed Twilight's horn to make her stop. “Oh! No, no, Nurse Redheart said no more magic. Here, use your hooves,” She cooed, taking her limbs from beneath the sheets to pick up the fruit for her.

Having her horn snatched for the second time that night was almost as irritating as having her hooves held like that. Twilight also didn't appreciate being spoken to like a filly, but she knew her friend was only trying to help. She forced a tired smile and pulled her hooves free from the pegasus' grasp. "Thank you Fluttershy, I think I can manage."

"Oh, um, okay. I'll be over here if you need anything." Fluttershy said with a worried smile, taking a few steps back. "Really. Um, any-anything at all. Just name it and I'll be there. I promise, I'll—" She stammered.

Fluttershy was always helpful and eager to please, but the way she was acting seemed strangely clingy to Twilight. "It's okay, really. You just go sit down and have something to eat too, alright?" she said, still trying to smile warmly.

"O-Okay. Whatever you say!" Fluttershy snatched an apple from the tray with her mouth and hurried over to one of the benches that lined the wall across from the beds to lie down. Although Applejack could down an entire apple in one motion, Fluttershy nibbled at it in small bites. Zecora had already taken a couple of carrots and started eating by herself. She wasn't trying to be unsocial, she just had a tendency to do things on her own away from other ponies. Normally so used to holding everything with magic, Twilight fumbled a bit gripping her meal.

They all ate in silence until Fluttershy offered a question.

"Twilight?" She squeaked softly.

"Yes, Fluttershy?"

"... That spark thing you used earlier ... where did you learn that?" She asked. She didn't look up as she spoke, but stared directly at her half-eaten apple instead.

"You mean that flare? I actually looked that one up myself after Trixie came through Ponyville. She may have been a selfish show-off, but her fireworks were pretty. I thought it might be neat to be able to do that myself."

"Did it take a long time to learn? Is it hard?"

"Well, that's two different things." Twilight put a hoof to her chin for a moment as she thought about the best way to explain magic to somepony who wasn't a unicorn. "It is kinda tricky to have a flare sparkle and explode, since you have to give it the power to do that before you release it. A lot of spells are like that, so I have some practice. As far as it being hard..." She contemplated for a beat more. "I can make it as big or as small as I want, it's all about how much energy I put into it. Kinda like running, or flying I suppose, you can go faster by trying harder. To make a flare strong enough to ... to ..."

Twilight trailed off on her lecture, thinking back to the sight of valponies being singed and broken by her spells. Fluttershy continued to stare silently into her apple as Twilight spoke, reluctant to face anypony else.

"So, to really fight other ponies, you just have to try real hard?"

Twilight was surprised by the gentle natured pegasus' questions. Even Zecora craned her head around to see what she was getting at.

“ ... Uh ... yeah ... Yeah, I guess so.”

“So ... So if I can't fight other ponies ... That means that I didn't t-try hard enough. T-That I didn't c-care enough about my f-f-friends...”

Fluttershy began to cry. Zecora, somewhat unfamiliar on how to handle an outpouring of emotions, hesitated before jumping up to her side. Twilight did so immediately, almost knocking over the side table as she did. Fortunately, she had long since recovered enough mental clarity to make this maneuver, or getting all the way over to her would have been impossible. She hugged her distraught friend tightly as she cried into her mane. Zecora rested a hoof reassuringly on Fluttershy's back.

“No, no, sweetie, that's not true! I've seen you stand up for yourself, for all of us before. Like the manticore, and the dragon. You stood up to a real, live dragon! You won a staring contest against a cockatrice! I'd be the Princess' cherished lawn ornament standing next to Discord right now if you hadn't done that! You are so brave, Fluttershy.”

The kind pegasus smiled just a little bit as Twilight explained all that and managed to control her tears. “T-that's different...”

“How? How is that different?”

Fluttershy raised her head to look Twilight in the eyes. “It's not me, it was them. The manticore was just upset, and the dragon and the cockatrice were being meanies. But the valponies ... They weren't just being mean, they were really trying to kill us.” She glanced over in Applejack's direction. “And they almost did. I can calm down an angry creature, even make one behave if he's being rude, but to change a pony's mind when she's out to kill? I-I can't stop that.”

“It's okay. If only more ponies were gentle like you, then maybe we wouldn't have had to fight at all.”

“You think so?”

“Regrets and fears are like a poison for the soul,” Zecora interjected. “Lament on them too long and you'll turn dark as coal. If you disapprove of what you did yesterday, look to tomorrow and find another way.”

Fluttershy closed her eyes tight for moment, taking Zecora's word in, then shook her head. She then broke free from her friends. She flapped her wings and fluttered to the ground a few steps away. “I'm sorry. I think I'm just going to take a walk now, okay?” She turned and left before anypony could stop her.

Twilight stood up to catch up to her friend, but Zecora held out a hoof and stopped her. “Our words have been said. The rest is up to her instead.”

Zecora led Twilight back to her bed and insisted that she sleep. She protested a little and insisted that someone go after Fluttershy. The moment her head touched the pillow, however, she was out like a light. It was even more comfortable than the leather binding of an old book and a grassy knoll.

Twilight's rest was shattered at mid morning the next day to the sound of chaos in the next room.

“What do you mean, severed?!” A high pitched voice shrieked. “Why can't I move my leg!?”

The sudden disturbance shocked Twilight, causing her to flail about and fall out of bed. A midnight snack and a good rest being an excellent cure for magical exhaustion, she leaped up, horn glowing, to investigate the disturbance. She galloped out the door and turned to face down the hall where the racket was coming from.

Nurse Redheart was backing out of the room next door. She was holding up a leg to shield her face from a flurry of objects that were emerging with her. A bedpan rolled noisily across the floor. Rolls of gauze bounced off of her head and leg. A lamp flew at a high arc out the door and sailed over her head before crashing against a wall. The voice continued to shout from inside.

“I am an artist! Don't you know that I need all of my hooves?! How am I supposed to perform my craft like this?! And look at these stitches! They're hideous! And you call yourself a professional?! Why couldn't you fix me?”

“*Why couldn't you save us, Twilight?*” The broken, echoing voice from Twilight's nightmare repeated in her head.

Twilight jumped up next to Redheart and projected a shield around both of them, blockading the door. This proved somewhat useless as the only thing Rarity had left to telekinetically throw in their direction was a couple of pillows from the neighboring bed. Out of ammunition, she collapsed back on her bed and cried.

“Rarity!” Twilight shouted.

“Leave me alone!” Rarity shouted, slamming the door with her magic.

“There was nothing I can do.” Redheart explained to Twilight. “Whatever cut her like that went straight through the nerve. I'm an Earth Pony, I can't heal that.”

“I have healing magic, I can-”

“It's not that simple. Even if you could repair the nerves in her arm, it's far too late to heal her now. Maybe if you did just after the injury, but not half a day later. The cells have already begun to decay. I'm sorry. Really, I am.”

“You mean she's paralyzed?!”

“With physical therapy she can get most of it back in time. She should consider herself fortunate that

she still has the leg after walking on it all the way back here. Even more so that she has magic in the meantime.”

Twilight's head was spinning at the thought of Rarity being an amputee. She grabbed Nurse Redheart's head. “What about Pinkie?! How's Rainbow Dash?!”

Redheart pulled herself from Twilight's grip. “They're both fine. Rarity is the only one that had any kind of complication. They're both resting on the other side of the hall if you want to see them.”

“No, this is all wrong ...” Twilight said, shaking her head. “This is all my fault. I should never have brought them with me!”

Twilight turned tail and bolted. She ran down the hall and teleported outside, startling a few ponies who were out on the street that morning. She continued running for home, teleporting past and around anypony in her way. Once her library tree was in sight, she teleported one last time to arrive on the highest balcony. She collapsed there and buried her face in her hooves.

“This is all my fault ... “

“*Why couldn't you save us, Twilight?*”