

# Beyond Judgment

## Part IV: Everfree Expedition

Twilight, with Pinkie, Applejack, and Rarity in tow, finally arrived at Fluttershy's house by mid afternoon. Twilight only hoped that the others had formulated a plan to reach the invading army by then. That seemed to be the case, as they noticed Rainbow Dash idly doing stunts above Fluttershy's home as they arrived. Fluttershy and Zecora were sitting, apparently having a snack, around the small table in her front yard.

Upon seeing them, Dash bolted for the ground to fall in line with Twilight. "It's about time you girls showed up. I can't talk to Zecora with her rhymey speak, so I've had nothing to do out here."

"We're here now, RD, and I know what you mean. Bless her heart, but I can't understand that zebra for a hill of beans." Applejack interjected.

"Stop it, both of you." Twilight scolded. "She's the only one who knows how to find those ponies, so behave yourselves."

"Yes, ma'am." The two of them said in unison.

As they all closed in on Fluttershy and Zecora, Fluttershy smiled sweetly and waved at them. "Oh, hello girls. Would you care for some biscuits?"

"Would I?!" Pinkie shouted, zipping forward and slamming her face into the platter to start munching away.

"Please, show a little bit of manners, won't you?" Rarity asked. She then levitated a biscuit that fell on the table when Pinkie dive bombed them. "Thank you very much Fluttershy, that's very kind of you."

"Now, I hate interruptin' a meal as much as the next pony, but we've got work to do." Applejack said.

"Oh, uh, right. I'm sorry." Fluttershy apologized. "I spent some time talking to Zecora, and we know the very best way to get there."

"Excellent." Twilight said, jumping up on her hind legs and ready to charge. "Saddle up, everypony, we've got-"

"Um, wait, please. Twilight?"

The purple unicorn sighed and collapsed down on her stomach. "What is it now?"

"There's just, uh, one teensy tiny little thing you should know before we go. You know that quarry that Zecora said all the bricks were coming from. Well, uh, it's not actually a quarry." Fluttershy then interrupted her own story to give a quick apology to Zecora. "I'm sorry. It's okay, though. I mean, you're not from around here, so you just didn't know-"

“Perhaps I best explain before their impatience turns to blisters.” Zecora offered with a smile. “The quarry I spoke of is the castle of the pony sisters.”

“They're taking apart the old castle?!” Twilight shouted, jumping back to her hooves. “Don't they know the historical significance of that place! It's practically a national landmark!”

“Psh, that place is a dump anyway.” Dash said, hovering above them all. “What do we care if they take a bunch of dumb rocks?”

“The area around that place is like a magical dome.” Zecora said. “That is why I chose Everfree to make my home. Strong magic lives within those stones. Whatever they are building will be a spiritual zone.”

“Beg pardon?” Applejack asked, still a bit muddled by Zecora's words.

“While I certainly would like to see that old place spruced up a bit.” Rarity said. “we simply can't just let them do as they please. What say we head on over there give them what for, right ladies?”

Everypony nodded in agreement, except for Pinkie, who only just then lifted her head from the food tray and concurred in her own way. “Not only that, but we'll give them what five! And what six! What seven even!” She cheered.

“On our way we must make one small detour.” Zecora added. “I must pick up a few potions and our victory will be sure.”

“Oh! Oh! What kind of potions?!” Dash couldn't contain her enthusiasm. “Will they give us super strength or super speed?”

“The potions I have in mind you must not ingest, if you wish for your health to stay at it's best.” Zecora replied with a sly smile.

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A short while later, the group was galloping down the path towards Zecora's home. Dash wanted to scout out ahead, but it was decided that it was best that she didn't stray too far and that she definitely stay below the treeline. Dejected, she hung her limbs weakly as her wings kept her suspended in the air. Dash had to be in the skies at all times, she could barely stand not being able to move around whenever she wanted to. Trying to be stealthy was only tolerable for the sake of her friends.

Also, much to Rarity's joy and Pinkie's chagrin, the clouds had not yet begun to rain and there were no mud puddles to splash through.

“Incoming!” Dash shouted suddenly as she bolted towards the ground.

The others crouched down where they were, ready to fight if necessary, except for Pinkie who merely gawked at the sky and Fluttershy who squeaked and dove for a bush. In the air above them, a squadron of pegasi ponies flew by, just as Zecora had said. They didn't seem to fly in any kind of formation, just

one big flock of ponies.

The pegasi wore silver barding formed of overlapping scales with gold trim. It covered their necks and sides. Plates on their chests were black and shaped like birds, and plates on their flanks were engraved with swans. Their shaffrons however, were small and seemed to just decorate their faces instead of protecting them. Twilight and Zecora mentally took note of this in case it came to blows. Their coats were all white, and their manes all light blue. This was not as odd as it may have seemed, as Celestia's royal guard similarly dyed their hair the same color to promote unity. Unlike the royal guard, they were all female.

Each of the pegasi were also carrying large, yellowed stone bricks in their hooves. They seemed to either not notice or not care about the ponies on the ground and continued to fly past. However, a couple of the armored couriers did catch on and swooped down. They landed in a huddle as irregular as the formation they were flying in as their stone cargo slammed against the dirt.

The invaders then began to speak – all three of them at once, and not even in unison. That seemed to catch all of them off guard for a second before the one closest to Twilight and the others went ahead and continued. Her voice was a bit loud, but gentle and pretty, and could best be described as heroic.

“I am-! ... I am a valponie, and I claim this territory on behalf of all valponies. I mean no conflict, and I must ask you to turn back now.”

Applejack was having none of that. “Who do y'all think you are?! You come waltzin' in here and start takin' apart our history, and then make demands of us?! I outta buck you back to wherever the heck y'all came from!” She yelled, scratching at the dirt with her hoof, ready to charge up and deliver on her threat.

The Valponie were unimpressed. They lifted up their stones and flew back off. The one who spoke continued as they left. “You will not be asked again. The Valponies at the stronghold will not be so relenting.”

Dash, on the other hand, was more than willing to fulfill Applejack's threat anyway and rushed after them. Rarity's telekinesis brought a quick end to that.

“If you could put a hold on your brutish ways for just a moment, you'll find that we can't take on a stronghold by ourselves.”

“What if we had the elements of harmony?” Fluttershy suggested from behind her hiding spot.

“We gave them to Celestia, remember?” Twilight said. “We don't have time to get there and back. And we don't want to just pick a fight with them. We're trying to search, not fight. Figure out why they're here.”

“I think it's pretty darned clear why they're here.” Applejack said.

“Then the least we can do is figure out how many there are.” Twilight continued, looking across all her friends one by one. “Come on, together we've faced insurmountable odds before. Right now, we're the

only ones that can get information on what's going on here and report to Princess Celestia.” She then held out her hoof. “For Equestria.”

The others agreed and each placed a hoof in the center, including Zecora who wasn't even a true Equestrian.

“For Equestria!” They all cheered together. Pinkie then blew on a party horn to celebrate.

Dash was excited to get moving again, especially after Twilight's speech, but she remembered that she had to stay low again. She was frustrated having to hold back so much for this mission.

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After a bit more traveling, the group managed to arrive at Zecora's house undetected by anymore valponies. Like Twilight's, Zecora's home was carved out from the inside of a tree, although this one wasn't nearly as big. The zebra herself was somewhat of a hermit, so her home was mostly utilitarian. A single carved wooden mask hung above the door, and a number of potions hung from branches, presumably to ferment or cure.

“Wait here, my friends, I'll be back in a flash.” Zecora said. “Allow me to tap into my secret stash.”

With that, Zecora trotted not towards her home, but towards a seemingly random tree that was nearby. There was nothing remarkable about it, save for being a bit wider around than the others nearby. She stood up on her hind legs and started pawing at the trunk with her front hooves like she was feeling for something. With a swift and sudden kick, the bark of the tree cracked and she stepped backwards. The bark then opened outwards like a closet, revealing a number of potions and jars hidden inside.

“Wow, that was amazing!” Pinkie cheered. “Do you have more super secret trees like that somewhere?” She then started darting from tree to nearby tree, bonking her head against them in an attempt to open one.

“These bottles contain much danger inside, so I keep them inside this tree to hide.” Zecora explained. “While I pick out the brews that we will need, can you hand me that basket with the beads?”

“Oh, certainly.” Fluttershy said. She then flew gently over to pick up a wide wicker container decorated with azure beads resting against the tree house. She placed it next to Zecora before removing the lid for her.

Zecora picked up the basket and set it on two hanging branches nearby. Studying her cache of hazardous potions a bit longer, she finally picked out several and carefully set them inside. Unlike most of her creations, these bottles were clearly marked, but with symbols from her own language. Finally satisfied with her selection, she closed up the container and her secret tree again. She then lifted up the basket and balanced it effortlessly with her head – a feat that surprised the others almost as much as the discovery of her stash had in the first place.

“So, what is it you've got there now?” Dash asked.

“This is the result of the darker side of my craft. Those who fool with these potions are surely daft.”

“So, what is it you've got there now?” Applejack asked again.

“I think what she means is that those are poisons and acids.” Twilight said, a little fearfully. “I don't know if we really need all that.”

“I truly hope that we'll need them not.” Zecora explained. “But I shall bring them in case times get hot. The potions will not kill, but some injuries they can instill.”

“If you say so. Just be careful with those.”

Zecora nodded. How she did so without dropping the basket nopony knew, but it didn't mean it scared them any less.

As they all turned to leave, Rarity walked up beside Zecora. “Darling, may I ask you something? I know you come from a distant land and all, but wouldn't it be easier to carry that on your back instead of your head?”

Zecora responded with another sly smile back at Rarity. “A useful skill that draws respect, including from pony boys. Any mare who can balance so must be full of strength and poise.” She answered, before trotting on ahead.

Rarity scratched her chin as she stopped to consider what Zecora said. Then she magically lifted her own saddlebags and suspended them over her head as she pondered the physics of what she was about to attempt. She straightened her neck and kept her head high as she carefully guided the strap between her horn and her mane. This was already causing problems as the bags now covered her eyes. Deciding to test out the balance part anyway, she released her telekinesis. She then squealed as the weight nearly tipped her over forward.

The others, looking back, had no idea about Rarity's little experiment, they only saw that she had spontaneously decided to wear her saddlebags on her face and that her hind legs were kicking about as they searched for ground, which she couldn't see. When she levitated her bags again, her first sight was her friends looking at her with confusion, except for Pinkie and Zecora who could barely contain their amusement.

“My apologies, everyone.” Rarity said, blushing profusely and returning the bags to their proper place. “I was just, um, testing my balance, that's all!” She said, laughing nervously. “Move along now, everypony, we have work to do!” She continued, dashing on ahead of everyone.

The sight of a pony running sparked an inner fire in Dash, and she started to fly faster ahead of Rarity, only for Twilight to remind her to slow down and stay with the group.

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As the group drew closer to the Valponies' stronghold, they were having a harder time staying hidden. It was nearing dark now, so the shadows were on their side, but they were running into more and more

patrols. Over time, they started to hear the sound of masonry in the distance, along with torch lights.

“Those Valponie are funny.” Pinkie commented to nopony in particular after another patrol passed. She said it in a tone that was unusually level for her.

“I don't think they're funny.” Fluttershy said. “I think they're scary.”

“You think everything's scary.” Dash interjected.

“Oh, no, no, no, I don't mean 'ha-ha' funny, I mean strange funny.” Pinkie said.

“How so?” Fluttershy asked.

Pinkie screwed up her face as she thought long and hard about what her muddled intuition was trying to tell her. “They're ... missing something.”

“Missing? Oh my, I hope they're alright. But, what are they missing, exactly?”

“I don't know ... My Pinkie sense has never sensed anything like 'em before. All I know is that they're not real ponies. They're faker-fakersons who try to look like ponies.”

Fluttershy started to shake a little bit more than she already was and moved to walk closer to Pinkie.

“T-then ... W-w-what are they?”

Pinkie concentrated for a little bit longer. “Hmm ... I have no idea!” She decided, and went back to hopping merrily along.

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By the time the moon started to rise over the trees, the group found themselves on the verge of a field. In the center of it was a partially built stone wall surrounding some sort of camp. Fortunately, Luna decided to bless them with a full moon that night and they could still see clearly.

“Well, we made it, now what do we do?” Dash whispered.

“Run away?” Fluttershy suggested.

“No, we need to find out what's going on here first.” Twilight said.

“We can't just all sneak around in one bunch like this. We simply must split up.” Rarity advised.

“We'll be easier to spot than Big Macintosh in a field full of fillies.” Applejack added.

“You're right.” Twilight said, and then thought for a moment. “ ... Okay, here's the plan: Fluttershy, see if you can get one of your animal friends to get inside and count how many valponies there are. Rarity, you stay with her. I don't want anypony going anywhere alone. Applejack, you and Zecora go that way around the stronghold.” She said, pointing down one side of the field. “Pinkie, do you think you can be

stealthy?”

“I'm already behind you.” Pinkie whispered, thoroughly terrifying Twilight so much that she almost gave away their position.

After a few panicked breaths, Twilight calmed down enough to continue with her plan. “Alright then, you go with them. Remember, the important thing is to stay out of sight.”

“What about me, Twi?” Dash asked.

“You're coming with me. We're going to pass by the other way around the stronghold. We're going to pass by Applejack's team on the other side, and we're all going to circle around back here. After that, we're all going to head home before anypony knew we were here. Got that?”

“Oh man, I should just do a super-speed flyover.” Dash complained. “I'll be all 'bam!' take a look around, and 'bam!' be out of there before anypony knows what happened.”

“No, we can't take that risk. They could be faster than you, for all we know.”

Rainbow Dash seemed visibly offended by that possibility. “Say what? How could- Seriously? Faster than-?”

“Focus, Dash. I need you on this.”

Dash sighed deeply and hung her limbs weakly again, but agreed. “Fine. If you need me on the ground, I'll stay grounded. But just this once.”

“Great. Does everyone know what they're doing?”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and went ahead with the plan. Fluttershy turned back and started calling softly for a bird's favor as Rarity followed. Applejack rounded up her team and headed one direction while Dash and Twilight went another.

Tensions were high as they split up, but one among them was so eager to rush out there that she could burst. Unfortunately, explosions aren't always useful in a stealth mission.