

Beyond Judgment

Part XV: Frontlines

“Twilight!” A certain baby dragon shouted at the top of his lungs. Three of the four ponies slumbering in the hospital room immediately jerked awake. The fourth barely flinched.

“The first thing to do after falling asleep during a study session is-! What?” Twilight declared instinctively. Her sleep had been interrupted a lot recently.

Spike ran into the room as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. He launched himself into the air and hugged Twilight. “They're here! The battle's gonna start any minute! We've got to get you out of here right away!”

“Who's here?” Rarity asked on Twilight's behalf, as she was currently getting the air squeezed out of her by her assistant. “What's going on?”

One of the two guards standing outside the doorway answered. “The valponies have arrived and are massing on the edge of Everfree forest. The princesses are preparing to make one last attempt to negotiate.”

“And we're not here to make your escape,” The guard's partner said. “We're under orders to bring you to the headquarters, Miss Sparkle. Her highness insists that you be present.”

“Oh no you don't!” Spike said, letting go of the unicorn. He rounded on the guards and snorted, shooting a pair of green flames from his nostrils. “I'm not letting anything hurt her! Not the valponies, not you, not anypony!”

“She can't go!” Fluttershy interrupted, stepping up to Twilight's side. “She's not a soldier! We barely made it out last time we fought them! Just look at Applejack!”

Rarity jumped up to stand on the lavender unicorn's other side. “I'm with Spike! I'm not letting anypony lay a hoof on my dear friend.”

“Guys, quit it.” Twilight said, pushing past her friends and turning to face them. “I know you're just trying to look out for me, but I need to do this. The princess wants me there, so I'm going, end of story.”

“But, Twilight...” Spike pleaded.

“No! I'll be back. I'm not going there to fight, I'm going there to watch. Trust me.” Twilight said to her friends, and then to the guards: “Lead the way, sirs.”

The soldiers nodded, and turned to leave with the unicorn in tow. The three of them galloped out of the hospital towards the front line.

Fluttershy collapsed on the floor. Rarity was at a loss for words. Spike was fuming. The unicorn and

dragon had the same idea simultaneously. "Come with me, I'm going after her!" They said in stereo.

The two of them started off after their friend, but Rarity was much faster. She used her magic to lift Spike onto her back. Under any other situation, he would have been absolutely giddy to be so close to her, but he had more important things to worry about. On seeing them leave, Fluttershy leaped up and chased after them as well.

Meanwhile, on a wide grassy plain beside Everfree Forest, three elders were meeting one more time. The Alicorn sisters swooped down from the sky and landed a hundred yards from the forest's edge. The eight-legged horse strolled casually out to meet them. In the shadows of the trees in the early morning sun, a legion of valponies in shining armor waited.

"You have one last chance, Lord Sleipnir," Princess Celestia warned. "You can drop your claim against the ponies and we can all go home without a fight."

"My claim is just as legitimate as yours, Celestia. You also have one last opportunity to surrender either pony to me, and no pony else needs to die."

"Every loss on both sides will only result in more stress for you. You said so yourself. This war is not worth the lives of two ponies."

"Nonsense, I love my job. The more friends the merrier, or so they say." Sleipnir said with a dark grin.

Luna stepped forward between the two. She looked him straight in the eyes. The bickering elders hushed.

"My Lord Sleipnir," The lunar princess said, "think not of your duty, the ponies, or your foolish pride. Think only of us. For our sake, do not go to war."

Sleipnir took another half step back.

"Your speech pattern confuses me again, My Lady," Sleipnir said with a smirk. "Do you refer to yourself or the two of us?"

Luna said nothing, but continued to glare at him.

Sleipnir looked back at her, then his eyes widened as he understood. He looked away. Luna dared a faint smile, believing that he was the verge of changing his mind.

Raising his head again, Sleipnir said: "Let us make a deal. If you're so worried about the loss of life, how about the three of us agree to not interfere in this battle."

Luna was shocked. She walked back to her sister's side, turning her back on the stallion.

Celestia glared at Sleipnir. "Agreed. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

“Nothing. Just one battle, and we can decide this here today. If your army falls, my daughters will find the Ladies of Magic and Loyalty, and will bring to me the first one they find.”

“And even if you do, you'll go back to where you came from?”

“Myself and every valpony.” Sleipnir said flatly.

“Good riddance.”

“Indeed. Let's get this over with.”

Sleipnir turned to walk back towards the cover of the forest. Celestia turned and left as well. Luna glanced over her shoulder at her new immortal enemy as he hung his head. She turned her nose up at him and flew off with her sister.

“Even if it means losing you, this war is absolutely necessary.” Sleipnir mumbled to himself, holding his head high again.

Twilight and her escort galloped to the the royal guard's temporary headquarters. Rarity and the others were some distance behind them, still unnoticed. The entire square was still packed with tents and crates of logistical supplies, but there was hardly a pony around. For the first time, Twilight noticed a few locals milling about, but they still seemed cowed, nervous, and uncomfortable, as though the swarm of intruders might return at any moment.

In the distance, Twilight could hear the pounding of hundreds of hoofsteps in unison. The army was on the march.

“Wait!” Twilight shouted, skidding to a halt.

The soldiers dug their hooves into the dirt can came to a stop a few feet ahead of her. “What!?” One of them demanded.

“It's easier to teleport when we're not moving.” The unicorn said as her horn glowed.

“Tele-what?” The guard said as the three of them disappeared in a flash of light.

Seconds later, Rarity and Fluttershy stopped at the spot where their friend vanished. Spike climbed off of the unicorn's back and stomped the ground.

“That crazy mare! What does she think she's trying to do?!”

“Which way did she go? How do we find her? Oh, Oh, what do we do now?” Fluttershy said, looking around.

“She's gone to that dreadful battle,” Rarity said. “Why on Equestria would they think it's a good idea to send her there, of all places?”

“Sleipnir will find her for sure if she's right there! Wouldn't the safest thing to do be to hide?”

“Rrah!” Spike growled, snorting more green flame from his nose. “Don't you get it?! Of course they know she'll be found there. They're counting on it!”

“Counting on it?” Rarity asked. “Whatever do you mean?”

“There's no time! Listen, can you hear that?”

Fluttershy pointed her ear to the wind. “... I hear a lot of hoofsteps to the southeast. Marching! That's where she went! Let's go, this way!”

The yellow pegasus grabbed spike by the arms and tossed him into the air, catching him on her own back. The baby dragon was notably heavier than the other animals she carried that way, so she struggled to maintain flight at first. After she recovered, she sped off in the direction of the army as fast as her wings could carry her and her companion.

“Oh, curse these long journeys,” Rarity complained, “A diva isn't meant for this kind of thing.” Nonetheless, she ran a hoof through her mane one last time before galloping after her friends.

“Gah! What just happened?!” one of Twilight's escorts shouted as he rematerialized outside Ponyville.

“Magic, my good sir. Ah! That must be the command balloon!” Twilight declared, and immediately galloped away.

“... Are all the mares in Ponyville that crazy?”

“Don't ask me, I'm from Manehattan.”

Twilight headed in the direction of the large white balloon floating above the regiments of ponies before her. The stomping of their hooves was almost deafening as they marched in unison. She couldn't see it from the angle she was in, but she knew the front would bear a banner with Celestia's cutie mark. The basket was much, much wider than a normal balloon, about the size of a zeppelin. This gave its passengers more room and a better view of the ground. It was being towed by several pegasi, and several more were flying alongside of it. Unlike most of the soldiers she's seen, these pegasi had their natural coat colors. Lower ranking soldiers traditionally dyed their fur white to emphasize unity.

“That balloon is carrying the general,” Twilight recited to herself, testing her knowledge. “It gives her the ability to look over the entire battlefield from the sky. Even if the general is a pegasus, the balloon still acts like a beacon watching over the troops. She can give orders to that flock of other pegasi who convey messages to captains on the ground. They also serve to protect the general from attack.”

“Hey!” Twilight shouted up to the balloon. “Hey, I'm here! Permission to come aboard?!”

One of the messenger-guards noticed the lavender unicorn on the ground, and darted inside the basket. A moment later, she emerged again and swooped down to speak with Twilight. She had a pale brown coat and bright yellow mane. She wore armor like the other soldiers, but it was much lighter.

“General Flash is ready for you.” the pegasus said loudly over the din of marching hooves. “We were hoping to leave with you, but Celestia insisted we march immediately. If you wait here, I can arrange for a carriage to-”

“No need.” Twilight said with a smile. “I can get up myself.”

Seconds later, Twilight had teleported up to the balloon. Seconds after that, she was pinned to the floor with a blade to her throat. She wasn't sure how that last part came to be and she asked so aloud. The first response came in the form of a mumble through teeth clenching a weapon. The other was more easily comprehensible.

“One really mustn't intrude on a commbal,” said a soothing, gentlecolt-like voice on the far side of the balloon basket. “Especially one under the command of an old guard. They can be very... twitchy.”

“...Okay...” Twilight wheezed. “Can you get off me now...?”

A heavy old hoof was lifted from her ribcage and Twilight coughed once as the gladius was retracted as well.

“Terribly sorry, Scout,” said the owner of the hoof; a mature, azure earth pony in heavy plate armor. “Wasn't expecting company. Well, not company that I didn't have to-”

“Please tell me you didn't just kill Twilight Sparkle!” burst a pony off the side of the balloon. Twilight and the old pony looked to find the pegasus that had flown down to meet her just before. “Oh, good...” the mare said with great relief, letting her legs and head hang as her wings kept her aloft. “You're fine.”

“It seems I should have just waited like you wanted,” Twilight said, rubbing her throat.

“We'll take care of things from here, Zephyr, you get back in formation.”

“Yes, ma'am!” the pegasus said enthusiastically and saluted before veering away from the balloon to fly alongside the other messenger-guards.

“So, you're the famous Twilight Sparkle, are you?” the old pony said with a tone devoid of any enthusiasm.

“Yes, I am,” Twilight said, beaming. “You must be General Flash. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“The sentiment's one way, Scout.” the general replied bitterly. She swung up a hoof and pointed out the side of the balloon. “I got nearly a thousand ponies on the ground out there. Every one of them is about ready to give their lives to protect you. A thousand lives to protect one just isn't right in my book.”

Twilight recoiled. She wasn't expecting that. "I-I'm not that important..." she said timidly.

"I know you're not. None of us are." General Flash said and turned away, looking over her troops.

Twilight bowed her head and looked away. She suddenly felt very much out of her element and slumped down on her haunches.

"Don't let the old girl get to you," said the gentle voice again. "Not all of us look at it that way."

Looking back up, Twilight was met by a handsome, pale yellow unicorn in light barding. A pointed mace hung from his side. His mane was a deep shade of blue, and he looked to be several years older than she was. He smiled as he held a hoof out to her. She smiled half-heartedly back at him as he helped her back up.

"Her highness was reluctant to explain precisely what an elder was," the yellow unicorn continued, "but the general consensus was that we don't like ultra powerful beings going about demanding things regardless. Every pony down there knows why she's here, don't you concern yourself about that."

"Thank you, mister...?"

"Colonel. Colonel Morningstar, at your service. Your reputation proceeds you, Miss Sparkle; I seem to have you at a disadvantage. Trust me, however, I don't make a habit of treating mares that way. It will an honor to command this battle at your side," said the stallion, bowing his head.

Twilight blushed. "Oh, um, Thank you. Really, I'm not that special. I'm still learning, after all."

Morningstar laughed. "If that's the case, I cannot wait to see you fully developed."

"Confound it, Colonel, will you stop hitting on the mare!" General Flash shouted, still looking over the side.

"Hitting? He wasn't hitting me." Twilight said. "*I really wouldn't like that,*" she thought to herself, "*that mace looks really sharp.*"

"At once, General!" Morningstar whipped, and turned to gallop to his place at her side. "Come, Miss Sparkle, have you ever been on a commbal before?"

Twilight followed the colonel, taking a look around the basket for the first time. There was a table in the center whose legs were permanently affixed to the floor. A map of the area surrounding Ponyville was stretched across it, held in place by an array of pins to keep it from flying off the side. There were several bins along the railings with various clipboards in them, but Twilight didn't have the time to look at them more closely. She walked up and stood next to Colonel Morningstar, keeping to the far side of him from the general.

"Do you mean this balloon?" Twilight replied. "No, I haven't."

Morningstar laughed again. Flash just sighed.

“Commbal is shorthand for 'command balloon,’” the colonel explained. “From here was can-”

“You get a bird's eye view of the battlefield.” Twilight interrupted. “And those pegasi out there are messengers for carrying your orders to the ground.”

“Ah, very good, You know a thing or two after all.” Morningstar said, looking over to Twilight and smiling. “We're also carrying intelligence on the surrounding area and every pony under our command. Everypony down there is relying on us for direction and guidance.”

“Wow...” Twilight said breathlessly. She put her hooves over the railing to get a better view of the army below her. A thousand ponies clad in golden armor marched before her. Unicorns, Pegasi, Earth Ponies, all working in unison. Banners of various colors and designs rose over their heads, indicating different officers on the ground. The soldiers would all look to these flags as well as the commbal itself for support. Twilight felt empowered simply by being there.

“It's like having a thousand friends...” Twilight said, and then immediately regretted how silly it sounded.

“Something like that.” Colonel Morningstar said with a smirk.

“...Idealistic foal.” General Flash mumbled.

“Sir! You have more guests incoming!” Zephyr interrupted, flying up to the front of the commbal and saluting again.

“More?!” Flash said, irritated. “Shall we just invite all of Equestria up here and save time?! Who else could possibly need to be up here?”

“Hiya! I'm Pinkie Pie!” said the pink party pony, jumping in front of General Flash's face from underneath her.

The old pony leaped back in surprise. “H-how did you do that?!” she stammered.

“Do what?” Pinkie asked innocently, cocking her head to the side.

“Sneak up on me! I've trained for decades on how to respond to stealth attacks; above, below, behind, on the ground and in the air, and I have no idea who you just got so close. Morningstar!”

“Yes, Sir?”

“See to it that this pony is enlisted. I want to see her on espionage and intelligence training by this time tomorrow.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Wait, what!?” Twilight interrupted.

“Oh, oh, oh, if you're looking for intelligence, just ask Twilight!” Pinkie suggested, pointing to the unicorn. “She's chock full of intelligence! Like a jelly filled doughnut! Oh, that reminds me! Are there snack on this flight?”

“No, Pinkie, you are not getting espionage training!” Twilight insisted.

“Twilight, you've got to stop taking that mare so seriously!” said a familiar voice between laughs.

“Rainbow Dash?!” Twilight exclaimed, turning to find the pegasus behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you all doing here, indeed!” Flash bellowed, startling everypony on-board except Morningstar.

“Um, we're with her.” Rainbow said, pointing to Twilight while simultaneously hiding behind her.

“These are my friends, Sir.” Twilight explained. “Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie.”

“The holders of the elements of loyalty and laughter. Astounding. I never would have dreamed to be in the presence of-”

“Stow it, Morningstar!” Flash shouted. “I've had just about enough of this nonsense! If you don't mind, we're preparing to wage a war here. A war to protect both of you, might I add. Now you three can just sit here quietly and let the adults work. Morningstar, up here. Now.”

“My apologies, ladies, but duty calls. Loudly,” the colonel whispered to the mares before taking his place at the front of the commbal.

“So, how did you two get here?” Twilight asked quietly.

“We spent the night with Pinkie's family.” Rainbow whispered back. “The guards that flew her there wanted to leave that night, but she wouldn't go. She bribed them with cake.”

“Hey, you ate some too, Missy.”

“Well, yeah, okay. We all ended up staying there until morning. The guys had to come straight here, so here we are. What are you doing here?”

“Princess Celestia wanted me to be here. I studied military strategy all night so I could try and help, but I don't think the general likes me.”

“Yeah, I'm getting that vibe too.”

“Really? Are you guys getting twitches too?” Pinkie interjected.

“What? What twitch?” Twilight asked.

“Oh no, is your Pinkie Sense going off again?”

“Not exactly. My leg's all noodley!”

“It's what?”

“Look!” Pinkie said, holding up her front left leg, which hung limply.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“I dunno. I've never had anything like this before.” Pinkie said, waving her leg around and studying it closely.

“Miss Sparkle, you're going to want to see this...” Colonel Morningstar said with a slight quiver in his voice.

Twilight stood up and walked to the front of the commbal with the two officers. The army had arrived at a clearing beyond which the Everfree Forest stood. The soldiers on the ground came to halt, and the messenger guards were starting to pull on the lines hanging from the commbal to bring it to a stop as well. An army was emerging from the forest. Valponies, more than Twilight could count, were marching out to meet them. She could clearly see, however, that they still outnumbered the Equestrians. She knew from her studies that numbers weren't everything, but they did account for a lot, especially on level ground. She swallowed hard.

“Is that Sleipnir at the front there?” Twilight asked.

General Flash picked up a pair of binoculars and looked through them to the opposing army. “eight legged pony? That has to be him.”

“So,” Colonel Morningstar began, still retaining a hint of apprehension in his tone. Then, taking a deep breath, he continued: “It begins.”