Chapter 10: “Endless Sacrifice”

 Dusk’s eyes shot open. He sat up, ignoring his protesting injuries, and listened to the growl. It was a noise so subsonic that it was more felt than heard, especially over the sound of the ongoing storm, but he knew whatever was making it was big, and probably headed their way. He shook Apple Fritter.

 “Wha—? What’s going on?”

 “We’ve got a big problem,” he said, still staring at the entrance of the cave.

 “How big a problem?”

 He gulped and pointed a hoof. “*That* big.”

 Into the cave mouth appeared a nose, and it was unnervingly large on its own. It was also blue, as was the rest of the massive, ursine head that followed it. Huge red eyes narrowed at the sight of the ponies as the growl pitched up slightly. Dusk and Fritter scrambled to their hooves, staring at the monstrously large animal.

 “Is that—Is that an ursa?” Fritter asked breathlessly.

 “Yes. Yes it is,” he responded.

 “Major or minor?”

 “Does it *really* matter?”

 The ursa let loose a huge roar of challenge that made the floor of the cave reverberate. The two ponies looked frantically around for an alternative exit, or even a hiding place, but quickly came up empty.

 “Dusk…” Fritter said, cowering slightly. “Dusk, we’re trapped.” Her eyes were getting wider and wider as the reality of the situation took hold.

 Dusk stood in front of her, single good wing flared in panic as he tried to think quickly. *Oh, Harmony, what the hay do I do? I can’t take this thing on!* He glanced behind him at the shaking earth pony, and then looked back to the ursa padding slowly into the cave, watching the ponies closely as if to see what threat they might pose. He felt a terrible calm come over him. His limbs weren’t shaking anymore. Even his injuries seemed to hurt less.

 *This is it,* he thought. *This is the sacrifice. I have to get her out alive.*

 “Fritter? I’ve got an idea.”

 “What’s that?”

 “I’m gonna draw its attention. You stay against the far wall, and when you have an opening, you run for it.”

 “…That’s an awful plan!”

 Dusk grimaced. “That’s true. But it’s also the only plan we have. If you follow this stream, you should end up right at Ponyville Dam. The farm’s right there on the other side. Get some help, and get back here as fast as you can. If I’m very lucky, I’ll still be here when you get back.”

 She pressed close against his side, still staring at the ursa. “Dusk, I can’t leave you here to die!”

 He turned enough to look into her eyes. “If you don’t, then my entire life has been a waste, Fritter. Do not fight me over this. Please,” he pleaded.

 She didn’t say anything in return, but she did walk slowly across the cave to the opposite wall, flattening herself against it as much as she could. She watched him closely, her eyes tearing up. He gave her what he thought was a brave nod, and prepared himself for the battle to come.

 There is a part deep inside most stallions, a part that is often given over to competition, sport, or enterprise. A part that revels in the fight, that waits for the battle. For most of his life, this part had made Dusk sick to his stomach, but he needed it like he never had before. He tried to give himself over to it—to draw strength from it, but he wasn’t sure if it was helping. His unnatural calm remained, though, allowing him time and clarity of mind enough to plan strategies and examine ways he might take advantage of his smaller size.

 The ursa squared itself in the middle of the cave to take a swipe at the ponies.

 Dusk took a deep breath, tugged the hat down over his eyes just a bit, and charged.

 He let loose a crazed yell, catching the ursa off guard. He made it all the way to its footpaws by the time it recovered from the surprise, twisting its jaw down to snap at the pegasus. Dusk sprinted in between the front paws and dodged straight for the wall away from where Apple Fritter was hiding. He spun, bounced off the wall, and sprinted back the way he had come from. The ursa, intent on biting the intruding creature, got tangled under its own feet and tumbled to the ground, raising a large cloud of dust.

 “NOW!” Dusk screamed. He could just see Fritter sprint for the entrance, unable to look at him as she broke through the entrance and raced for Ponyville.

 *Well, that’s that. Now all I have to do is survive. Somehow I don’t see that as being quite so simple.*

 The ursa scrambled back to its paws and snarled in rage, claws raking huge furrows in the stone wall and floor. Dusk swallowed his fear and tried to get ready for the next round. The massive bear jumped forward, surprisingly graceful for its size, and took a swipe at Dusk with a paw the size and mass of a carriage. Dusk tucked in his bad leg and dove forward, sliding on his side as the paw swept right over his eartip.

 He jumped back to his hooves, and bucked the ursa’s front leg as hard as he could with only one leg to brace on. The ursa stumbled and sat heavily on the floor, blocking off Dusk’s escape route with its gargantuan bulk. He ran back, attempting to jump over the claws heading for him and only partially succeeding. His back legs were swept out from underneath him, sending him sprawling across the floor of the cave, broken ribs screaming in agony.

 He coughed, struggling to get upright again. He noticed that his vision was starting to swim at the edges as the pain returned. It had to be now or never. On three legs, he sprinted as best he was able towards the wall just in front of the celestial bear. The ursa saw him and moved to get against the wall to block his path, but Dusk had other plans. He jumped, took two steps up the wall, and *leaped*. The ursa seemed almost amazed as Dusk jumped towards its head. Just before the bear could snap at him with its jaws, Dusk flapped hard with his one good wing, pitching himself into a barrel roll. Teeth the size of railroad spikes snapped shut, taking a few strands out of his tail, but leaving him more or less unscathed.

 Dusk began to level out of his roll, feeling euphoric as time slowed down. *I did it! There’s daylight!* His hooves were mere inches from the ground when the ursa’s paw finally connected.

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 Twilight Sparkle looked over her checklist again. She was pretty sure that every job had been accounted for. The ponies who had volunteered for cleanup duty all milled about the interior of the library, waiting out the storm and getting ready to go to work. She allowed herself a pleased smile. *With any luck, the cleanup should be done in just over a day instead of a week. Just goes to show what a little organization can—*

 Her thoughts were interrupted as the door slammed against the outside wall, caught in the winds. Applejack came charging in, breathless. “Twi!” she yelled, “It’s Dusk—he’s hurt and needs help!”

 “Wha—?”

 “Come on, he’s fightin’ an ursa!”

 Twilight’s checklist clattered to the floor. “He’s WHAT?” The unicorn ran over to Applejack.

 “I found Rainbow and sent ‘er to the hospital,” Applejack explained. “She’s gonna get some pegasi and a medic. Apparently he’s hurt pretty bad, and we’ve gotta go NOW!”

 “Where?” Twilight practically yelled anxiously.

 “Fritter’s headin’ back, she said just upstream of Ponyville Resevoir.”

 Without a second thought, Twilight fired her spell, and the two ponies found themselves slightly disoriented, but right on the shore of the reservoir.

 Applejack shook her head. “Geez, Twi, gimme some warnin’ or somethin’,” she muttered.

 “There she is!” Twilight yelled, spotting Apple Fritter at the outlet of the stream, prancing worriedly on her hooves. The three joined up and headed upstream, hooves pounding as they ran.

 *Oh, Dusk,* she thought. *Why is it always during a storm? I’m going to go grey worrying about you!*

 The unicorn’s lungs were starting to burn by the time they entered a ravine. Apple Fritter was getting even more worried the closer they got.

 “There! There’s the cave! No, Dusk!” she called out. The ursa was standing in the cave mouth, roaring to the sky as Dusk lay on the ground in front of the cave. Applejack and Twilight charged, the latter charging a spell as she ran.

 “Now, Twi, hit ‘im!”

 Twilight let a burst of magic fly, the amethyst beam striking the ursa dead in the shoulder. The bear was knocked onto its back paws just in time to catch a flying buck to the center of its chest from Applejack. The ursa went tumbling over backwards into the cave, growling in rage and surprise. Twilight set her feet and charged up a spell. She exhaled smoothly, steadying her mind as she formed a wall of force over the cave mouth, securing the ursa inside.

 After making sure the beast was truly trapped, she turned to see the Apple family ponies beside the broken form of Dusk Chaser. Twilight winced, and sent a flare up into the sky for Rainbow Dash to find. The cyan pegasus was just barely visible against the grey sky as she streaked in ahead of the medical team.

 Twilight walked over to her friends, a lump forming in her throat as she watched. Fritter was crying openly and begging Dusk to hang on as he weakly tried to hold on to her hoof. The yellow mare gathered up her straw hat and replaced it gently on Dusk’s head before collapsing against her cousin and breaking down.

 As the unicorn knelt by Dusk, she noticed his chest was rising and falling very slowly. There was blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth, which she gently brushed away. He looked at her with pain-glazed eyes.

 “Dusk, you’re crazy,” she said, her words choking off.

 He looked at her and glanced over at Fritter and Applejack as the pegasi team landed and rushed over. “Is—is she—okay?” he gasped, barely audible.

 Twilight nodded.

 “Wor—worth it.”

 The pegasi medics rushed in, allowing Twilight to gently levitate Dusk so they could slide the stretcher under him and strapped him in. In a matter of moments, they were headed back to Ponyville, leaving the three friends with the grieving Apple Fritter.

 Rainbow walked slowly over to the sobbing earth pony. “You’ve, uh, you’ve been through a lot, huh?” Fritter nodded. “Hey, the docs at Ponyville Medical are great. I’m sure they’ll have him back on his hooves in no time.”

 Apple Fritter took one last sniffle and sat back from her cousin’s embrace. She rubbed her eyes to clear them. “He’s—he’s pretty tough,” she admitted, quietly.

 Rainbow Dash perked up suddenly as Fritter turned to face the other two ponies. “Ohhh…” the pegasus said quietly. “I had no idea you two were *that* close. Wow, this *is* rough, I’m so sorry.”

 Twilight looked at her, confused. “What’s that mean?”

 Rainbow looked from Twilight to Applejack and back again, getting nothing but blank looks from both of her friends. “What, I mean— That’s his feather, right?”

 Applejack gave it a skeptical look. “So?”

 “That’s kind of a big deal to a pegasus,” she said. “It’s a very special symbol.”

 Apple Fritter blushed slightly in spite of her worry. “He did admit he loves me.”

 Rainbow shook her head. “Nuh uh, it’s more than just that.” She frowned slightly, as though trying to put her words in the proper order. “Look, flying is everything to a pegasus. It’s what we do.” She spread her wing as an illustration. “Our wings aren’t that large compared to our bodies. If we lose even one feather it affects our ability to fly a lot more than it would a bird, so by giving up a feather you’ve basically crippled yourself until it grows back. He’s saying that you’re more important even than flying.” She looked directly at Fritter. “Among most pegasi, that’s basically a marriage proposal.”

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 It was the sounds that came back to Dusk first—the steady beep of a heart monitor, the rasp of sanitized sheets against fur, the purposeful hoofsteps outside. Before his eyes even opened, he knew where he was. He waited for enough strength to come back to him to open his eyes, needing to see his surroundings to confirm that he wasn’t dead.

 When his eyes finally cracked open, the first shape to resolve itself against the soft overhead lighting was the purple form of Twilight. *Oh, thank you, Celestia.* He fought the urge to cry as she leaned over and noticed his awakening.

 “Hey there,” she said quietly, brushing her mane out of her face.

 “Hey,” he croaked in a raspy voice.

 Twilight floated over a glass of water and straw, holding it where he could reach it. “How are you feeling?”

 He took a few sips of the water. “I feel like I got beat up by an ursa, thanks for asking.” He sighed. “What was the damage?”

 She frowned. “Pretty extensive. You’ve been here for a full day already. Compound wing fracture, broken right leg and two ribs, internal bleeding and a concussion.” She put the glass back on the table. “Please, *please* stop doing things like this every time it rains. You’re going to give me an ulcer.”

 “Sorry. I didn’t really have time to think it over.”

 “That ain’t the only thing you didn’t think over,” Applejack said from behind Twilight, walking up to the bedside. “Rainbow Dash explained that feather ya’ll gave Fritter. She’s a mite flustered over the whole thing.”

 Dusk winced. “I know, I know. It wasn’t fair to her to force the issue like that. I just—I knew that I was going to die in that cave. That was the idea, or I thought it was supposed to be. It was the sacrifice Celestia told me about, and I didn’t want to leave anything unsaid.” He looked over to the bedside table where Apple Fritter’s hat sat among a few scattered cards and a large bunch of balloons from Pinkie Pie and nodded to Applejack. “Take it. Take her hat and return it to her.” He turned his face away. “Tell her she can make her decision with no pressure from me. She can do whatever she wants with the feather, no hurt feelings.”

 Applejack picked up the hat regretfully. “No offense, sugarcube, but I’m not sure this is the best way to handle things.”

 “Well, I’ll be here for at least a week, so she’s got time.” He shifted his weight off of his wings and winced. “Just—just let her know that I was—that I *am*—sincere,” he said quietly. “If she’d take a broken wreck of a pony, that is.”

 Applejack leaned over and gently tussled his mane. “Sugarcube, no matter what, you’re a fine pony. Git well soon, ya hear?” she said and trotted out the door, leaving the housemates alone.

 “Dusk, you know the princess never really said you had to die, right?” Twilight offered.

 He looked at her, uncomprehending. “But, she said it: ‘*the greatest sacrifice’*. What else could it have meant?”

 “Quite a few of the old Equestrian philosophers have debated whether dying in somepony’s place is the greatest sacrifice there is. Many think it is, but a few would say that dying is easy, that it’s much harder—and therefore much more of a sacrifice—to live completely for somepony else instead.” She leaned in and gave him a gentle but warm hug. “I think that’s what Celestia was implying. You’ll always have your memories, but as long as you isolate yourself, they’ll have power over you. Having the mission of caring for another pony and putting them first will give you a purpose. It will allow you to keep your memories without falling into them.”

 Twilight stood back from the bed and looked at the assorted get-well cards on the table, and picked up one in particular. “Think about it, Dusk, when have you been happiest lately? What’s given you the most hope?” She put the card down on his lap, and he opened it with his good hoof. The card was as vibrantly orange as the filly who had signed it. “I think I know one young pony in particular who can tell you when that was,” Twilight said, a pleased smile on her face.

 Dusk could feel a tear sliding down his cheek as he read the card again and again. *Her father even signed it…*

 Twilight wished him good night and walked away, leaving Dusk alone with his thoughts for another night.

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 It turned out to be more than a week before Dusk was allowed to be released. While the doctors waited for his bloodwork to level out, they had him doing all sorts of physical therapy on his injured limbs. He made a specific point to be as polite as possible to the hospital staff this time. The casts were removed before he left, though his wing still had to be taped up, but he could move everything without too much pain.

 He stalled on the grass outside the hospital, trying to enjoy the sun and fresh air. He knew exactly where his first stop had to be, but he was a bit hesitant to get there. *What if she said no? What if I scared her away?* The exact same thoughts he had been hashing over in his mind for the last week came back again and again. He wondered if he might have already used up all the bravery he had—maybe that was why his hooves didn’t seem to want to work anymore.

 Dusk took a deep breath, steeled himself, and started walking towards the other end of town and Sweet Apple Acres.

 Word of his fight with the ursa had clearly gotten around town, because he kept getting greetings and congratulations on his recovery from ponies he had never actually met before. He thanked each pony, even if in a slightly distracted manner. He seemed to be moving automatically now, his hooves remembering the route even though his mind was paying no attention. It was only a few minutes before he crossed the small stream and the borders of Ponyville’s downtown district.

 Just before he crested the last hill before the gate, he froze. He knew that once he went in that gate, that was it, there was no turning back. He tried to take a deep breath to steel himself, but it caught in his throat. His hooves were shifting backwards just slightly.

 “Having second thoughts, my little pony?”

 Dusk jumped as the smooth voice startled him. He spun around and went to his good knee in front of the Sun Goddess. “Princess, you scared me!”

 She laughed quietly at his response, beckoning him to get back up. “Now, now, enough of that.” Dusk stood and looked into Celestia’s face, taking comfort in the joyful emotion she showed.

 “How—why are you here?” he asked, bewildered by her presence.

 “Did you really think my faithful student *wouldn’t* write me a letter about one of the bravest deeds Ponyville has ever witnessed?”

 He stood, dumbfounded. “Oh.”

 “I have been keeping track of you as best I could. You have come such a very long way, Dusk Chaser. So why are you hesitating now? Getting cold hooves?”

 “More like old fears resurfacing.” He frowned, looking away. “I just—it’s always the ‘what ifs’ that keep haunting me. What if Fritter rejects me? What if I lose her, too? What if my—what if Elegy wouldn’t have approved…”

 Celestia put a gentle hoof under Dusk’s chin, raising his head back up. “I would find it very hard that a pony as wonderful as you describe wouldn’t be proud of you, and I can’t think of any pony who would begrudge you a chance to live again.”

 He stopped, pondering over her words from the last time they had met. “Princess, you told me that the ‘greatest sacrifice’ would be the only thing that would let me move on from my wife’s death. What did you really mean?”

 She smiled warmly at him. “The greatest sacrifice is an endless sacrifice, Dusk. It is the daily choice to put yourself at the service of another. It is the heaviest burden and the hardest task, but also the greatest reward.”

 Dusk smiled as he thought over her words. “Princess, thank you. Thank you for everything.” He took a step forward and gave the Princess of the Sun a heartfelt embrace. “I think I have somepony I need to talk to,” he said as he stepped back. Without waiting to see if she was leaving, Dusk turned and trotted down the path towards the farm.

 He caught sight of the gate just over the hill rise, and his heart jumped into his throat. Would she be waiting there? Would there just be a note and his feather returned to him? Would she—

 He crested the hill, and his mind went silent. His heart left his throat and leaped clean out of his body.

 Sitting on the fencepost right next to the gate was Apple Fritter’s hat, his feather tucked into the hatband.

 He broke into a sprint, ignoring his hurting limbs, headed towards the group of ponies waiting for him on the front porch of the farmhouse.