Chapter 5: “A Nightmare To Remember”

The door to the library softly clicked shut as Dusk leaned against it and sighed contentedly. Yet another workday was finally done, and the sun was finally setting on his first full week of work at Sweet Apple Acres. He noticed Spike sitting at the desk by the door and intently reading a book. *Is—is he drooling?*

Spike looked up, absentmindedly wiping his mouth with one hand. “Hey, Dusk. How you feelin’ today?”

“Either I’m getting stronger or my muscles have died and can’t complain anymore. It’s an improvement either way.” He craned his head to read the lettering on the book’s spine. It proclaimed the book to be *Gemology: The Rare and the Valuable*. “Research?” he inquired.

“Cookbook.”

“Uh huh. You are a strange creature, Spike.”

Spike attempted to look hurt but couldn’t stop a chuckle from escaping. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said. “Oh, yeah—I almost forgot. Pinkie Pie came by looking for you again.”

Dusk winced. “Again?”

“She still wants to know when she’s allowed to throw your ‘Welcome to Ponyville’ party.”

“I don’t suppose if I just ignore her for, oh, a year or so that she’d forget about it?”

Spike stared at him incredulously. “You *have* met her, right?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Dusk sighed and started to walk into the library, stopping short to avoid tripping over a pile of books. “Looks like Twilight’s been busy today.”

“Oh yeah. She’s been reading some book that arrived from the Princess. I think she wanted to show it to you or something.”

The pegasus nodded and let Spike return to his reading. He trotted over to the kitchen where he found Twilight seated at the table with a book and a small stack of hay fries. He chuckled to himself as she levitated a small bunch of the fries to her mouth and started munching without ever taking her eyes off the page.

He dropped heavily into a seat across from her. “Hey.”

Twilight yelped as hay fries scattered haphazardly across the table. “Sheesh, Dusk. Don’t do that.”

“Got something interesting there?”

She nodded and swept her snack back up with a glow of her horn. “The Princess sent me a book, and I’ve been reading it all day. It’s a fascinating treatise on pony mentality and psychology. There’s a few things in here I wanted to talk to you about, too.” Dusk nodded encouragingly. “This book is more of a philosophical text than an academic one, but Neighlor has some interesting ideas that I think apply to you.

“He speculates on the idea that every pony has a sort of dual mind, a waking and a sleeping mind, if you will.”

Dusk tried to roll the idea around in his head. “So, when I’m asleep I’m using a different mind?”

“Not really that kind of sleep,” she said, frowning. “Maybe I should call them conscious and unconscious instead. That does apply, though, because your waking mind is what you think and feel and do, you can control it. Your sleeping mind is where your fears and instincts reside. Think of it more like reason and emotion—your sleeping mind is pure emotion and memory. When you’re actually asleep, your waking mind isn’t being used because it’s resting. Your unconscious can then bring things up that you can’t do anything about. In extreme cases, your unconscious can overpower your waking mind, usually to protect you from something, but sometimes something can happen that…” She trailed off, searching for words. “That ‘scars it’, shall we say.”

He was interested and didn’t want to be rude, but Dusk was growing more uneasy as he plotted where this conversation was going. “So you’re saying that I’ve got mental scarring, and that’s why I can’t sleep?”

Twilight nodded. “Basically. In fact, Neighlor predicted many of the symptoms you’ve had or still have: difficulty sleeping, nightmares, frightening visions or flashbacks, difficulty being around other ponies—even that you might repress memories, willfully and unconsciously.”

Dusk blinked in amazement. “When was that book written?”

“Almost 600 years ago. Something he didn’t predict, though, is how well you would respond to work and physical effort.” The unicorn looked rather proud of herself for a moment before continuing. “He did speculate that you wouldn’t be able to overcome it until you’ve come to terms with it, though, and in his opinion, that means embracing the whole experience, including what you may have repressed.”

Dusk shuddered, beginning to feel edgy. “If I can’t remember it now, how am I supposed to do that? It’s not like it’s easier now than it was a few weeks ago. I mean, if I don’t want to remember it, how am I supposed to just will it into my head again?”

Twilight closed the book and put her hooves together. “I have an idea,” she said.  “It involves a hypnosis spell—well, really a modification of a standard memory spell.  I thought of it myself,” she said proudly.

“I have no idea what that is, but it doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“Actually, it won’t really affect you at all. Neighlor suggests that we need to bring your sleeping mind to the front without completely shutting off your waking mind. That way, we can see the repressed memories without looking through the emotional lens of fear and pain that you’ve been seeing it through.” Twilight looked intently at Dusk. “What I would do is put you into a kind of sleep, where you could still respond to my words. We could help you relive the experience and see what truly happened, and then you can start to deal with it.”

Dusk couldn’t respond. He couldn’t even meet Twilight’s eyes as he shivered in spite of the kitchen’s warmth. He was feeling pushed in a direction he really didn’t want to be going, but it was Twilight; surely she meant the best for him, right? Could he really stand to go through it all again? Could he take knowing what really happened? He opened his mouth but found that words were failing him.

He felt a hoof on his shoulder and looked up to see Twilight standing next to him. “You won’t be alone,” she said. “I’ll be there the whole time, and I’ll have help, too.” He stared at her, wondering if she would really betray his privacy to somepony else. “Well,” she began, “that one time you had a flashback and you ended up hurting yourself—I’d like to have somepony here to help prevent that.”

*Not to mention how I’ve almost hurt you and others? How tactful,* he thought sardonically. Dusk sighed heavily, closing his eyes in thought. *What she’s said makes sense. I can’t dispute the logic, but I don’t know if I can take the memories directly. Even the fragments are torture…* He opened his eyes. *But I have to do what I can to beat this.*

“Let’s do it,” he said quietly.

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Twilight took a deep breath and reviewed her preparations. *Spellbook, one: check. Parchments for notes, several: check. Quill for notes (with ink), one: check. Assistant (Applejack), one: check.* She looked over to the couch where Dusk was lying on his back, fidgeting anxiously. *Terrified subject, one: extra check.*

Applejack was talking to him, trying to keep him calm. Twilight wasn’t sure how well it was taking, but he looked very tense. “Dusk? I think I’m ready, if you are.” The pegasus started as she spoke. His wide eyes bespoke the emotions fighting inside him, but he nodded at her to proceed.

“Okay. Here’s how this is going to work. Applejack, stand by in case Dusk needs help staying calm during the memory. Dusk, I need you to relax as much as possible, and just do what I tell you. Focus on my voice and you shouldn’t need to do anything else.” The two friends acknowledged her instructions, and Twilight closed her eyes for a few seconds to focus. She let the magic flow through her, shaping the spell to her thoughts and forming it for Dusk’s particular mind. She could feel the turmoil inside Dusk’s head as the spell found its way to him, trying to gently press his troubled thoughts aside. A small glowing sigil appeared on Dusk’s forehead as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Twilight found her notes and read off her instructions.

“Just focus on my voice, Dusk,” she said softly. “Let yourself relax. Let your mind be at rest and hold on to the sound of my voice. Focus on your body; feel it relax and become loose and free. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Concentrate on your breathing, and with every breath you will become more and more relaxed.” Dusk appeared to become stiller as she spoke, his breathing deeper and less rapid. Applejack watched the scene unfold with awe on her face. “I’m going to count back from ten,” Twilight intoned, “and with each count, you will become more and more relaxed, falling into a deeper sleep.

“Ten.

“Nine.

“Eight. You are going to a safe place where you can watch your memories unfold without danger.

“Seven.

“Six.

“Five.

“Four. If you feel you need to come back, all you need to do is open your eyes.

“Three.

“Two.

“One.”

Both Twilight and Applejack held their breath expectantly as the unicorn relaxed her spell and waited to see if it had worked. Dusk didn’t move at all. Only his breathing indicated his sleeping state. Even his mind had felt calmer as he had gone under. “Dusk, can you hear me?” she asked hesitantly.

“*Yes,*” he said, his voice somehow sounding unnaturally distant. Twilight repressed a shiver. This was a terrifying sort of power. She could easily understand why unicorns were rarely trusted to do this sort of thing.

“Dusk,” she began, “I’d like you to go back to a time three weeks ago, when something very unexpected happened to you. Do you know the time I’m referring to?”

“*Yes.*”

“Go there, and put yourself in your hooves at that time. Where are you?”

“*Canterlot.*”

“Can you describe what’s happening around you?”

“*I’m walking down the street. It is night, and just starting to rain. I’m leaving an event, and walking back home.*”

“Is there anypony with you or around you?”

“*Yes. There is a pony with me.*”

“Who is it, Dusk?”

“*It is my wife.*”

Twilight started as if struck. She looked over at Applejack, who seemed just as surprised as she was. *He’s married? How does a pony forget something like that?* “Let the scene play forward. What’s happening now, Dusk?”

“*We’re walking home,*” he said slowly, face twitching ever so slightly. “*I know of a shortcut that will get us home faster since it’s starting to rain. We’re walking down a side street past some shops. She mentions how dark it is, and I tell her not to worry. I tell her that I’ll protect her. She—she laughs.*” Dusk’s face contorted more noticeably as he finished.

“Applejack, keep an eye on him,” she quietly instructed as he continued. The farm pony moved closer to where his head was lying, watching closely.

“*There is another pony now. I think he came out of an alley. It’s a unicorn, and he stops us. He’s telling us to give him whatever bits we have.*”

Twilight and Applejack looked horrified. *A pony robbing another pony,* Twilight thought sadly. *I never thought that would happen there, of all places.*

“*I’m telling him that we don’t have any bits on us,*” he went on, head starting to twitch from side to side as he spoke. “*He says he doesn’t believe us, that he isn’t going back home empty hooved. We’re backed up against a wall, and his horn is glowing. He demands that we give him our jewelry or he’ll hurt us. I tell him that I’ll give him anything as long as he’ll let my wife go. He doesn’t look very convinced. He says no, and I unclip my wedding ring from my wing and try to pass it to him, but he drops it.*”

Dusk’s whole body began to spasm. “Applejack! Hold him down. Don’t let him hurt himself!” Twilight called out.

The pegasus grimaced in pain as his story continued. “*We both go to catch it, and he panics. His spell fires, and I try to knock his horn away from my wife. The magic cuts across my leg, and it hits my wife in the chest. I yell as she falls.*” he said, his spasms becoming violent as his mind fought with what it was reliving. Twilight jumped up and ran to help restrain Dusk as he curled up, almost jerking right out of Applejack’s hooves.

“For Celestia’s sake, Twi, wake him up!” she yelled.

Twilight nodded. “Dusk! As I count down from three, you will wake up! Three!”

“*He looks scared.*”

“Two!”

“*I yell and—*“

“ONE!”

Dusk jerked harshly one last time and cried out, eyes bursting open as he came fully back to consciousness. He stared at the ceiling, eyes vacant. Twilight and Applejack watched him closely, eyes just as wide as his own. He slowly looked down to meet Twilight gaze. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. “Oh Celestia,” he whispered. “I killed him…”

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Twilight sighed wearily as the letter evaporated in a breath of green flame and turned back to her friends. Dusk had stopped crying, though he was still sitting on the couch in Applejack’s hooves, shaking slightly as he leaned on her for support. AJ didn’t look all that comfortable with the situation.

The unicorn trotted over to Dusk’s side. “Are you doing okay?”

“No,” he said, not bothering to lift his head.  “It’s so much—my head feels like it’s going to explode.”

Applejack pulled back slightly from him, looking worried.  “AJ,” Twilight gently admonished, “not literally.”  She placed a hoof to his forehead.  “At least, I don’t think so, right?”

Dusk shook his head.  “No, not literally.  I almost wish it would, though.  I don’t think I’ve ever felt this bad.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose with a hoof. “It is a lot to take in, though, even for me. I hope you don’t mind that I sent a brief recap of this to Princess Celestia. She asked that I keep her informed about you, and this is a pretty unusual event.”

“More than you know, my student.”

Twilight spun around to find Princess Celestia walking silently in through the door of the library, shining radiantly. The regent’s expression matched her voice: terse, and without a trace of the warmth and good humor it normally contained. “Princess—!” Twilight was halted by a raised hoof from Celestia.

“Twilight, Applejack—I need you both to go and bring the other Elements. Now.” She walked over to Dusk, towering over the pegasus as he sat on the bench. He felt his heart sink into his stomach at seeing the ruler of Equestria so upset at him. “I’m afraid we all need to have a chat with your friend Dusk.”