Chapter 6: “Breaking All Illusions”

 It was hard to tell exactly how long it had been since Twilight and Applejack had gone off into the night to gather their friends—every moment dragged on for an eternity in Dusk’s mind. He sat morosely on the floor of the library in front of the alicorn princess, unable to bear looking into her face. The few times he had attempted to speak to her, she had urged him to remain silent and to wait for the others to arrive. Celestia’s voice, face, and countenance held none of the humor and gentleness that she was so famous for. The mixture of shame, fear, and despair fed into Dusk until he was only able to lift his gaze from his own hooves to hers, and even then the gleaming surface of her ceremonial hoofwear mocked how dirty he felt.

 Dusk turned to look out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the others arriving. What he saw instead was his reflection on the darkened panes. He stared in shock at his disheveled state. His thrashing around during the session with Twilight and Applejack had left his mane and tail horribly messy. His coat was rumpled and uneven from Applejack’s awkward attempts to console him. His eyes were bloodshot and weary, and he could see the darkened streaks left on his face from tears.

 Dusk slowly turned back to the princess, trying to find his voice. “P—Princess,” he stammered, “could I—“

 She held up a hoof. “Patience, Dusk. You will have the chance to say what needs to be said soon enough.”

 He swallowed hard. “No, I—I was just wondering if I could use the bathroom.” He struggled to meet her eyes. “I’d like to clean up a bit before the others get back—if that’s okay. I look terrible.”

 For the first time since she had arrived, Celestia’s stern countenance cracked. She looked at Dusk with what seemed to be pity. “Allow me, my little pony,” she said, her voice much more gentle, her horn beginning to glow with a soft light. Dusk braced himself and felt a small tingle over his fur as each strand of his coat was smoothed back into place. He looked back at the window to see that his mane and tail were once again straight, his coat clean and neat, and his eyes were clearer. He mouthed a silent thanks to the princess just before the door burst open and the first of the Elements of Harmony bounded in through the door.

 “HEY EVERYP—aw, Applejack, this isn’t a party at all,” Pinkie moaned.

 The farmer trotted in behind her, followed by Rarity. “I never said it was. I toldja that the princess needed you, and ya just assumed.” All three ponies sketched quick but respectful bows to the princess and went to sit next to her. Even Pinkie seemed to pick up on the subdued feeling in the room. It wasn’t long before Twilight arrived with Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy.

 The six mares took their seats around Celestia. The princess stood to address the group. “I’m sorry for calling you all here on such short notice—and even sorrier for why you are here—but for such a duty the Elements of Harmony are quite necessary.” She turned back to Dusk, her face returning to the blank impassivity of a ruler. “Dusk Chaser, this is an inquest into your role in the death of another pony,” she declared, ignoring the gasps from several of the assembled ponies.

 “Princess, there must be some mistake,” Rarity interjected. “Surely if a pony was capable of such a thing, it was never one like Dusk.”

 Celestia turned to Rarity, who quickly fell silent. “Your faith in your friends is admirable, Rarity, but this is not the time. The fact is that Dusk may very well be responsible for taking a life, and you are here to observe, not support.” She looked back to him. “Dusk, do you understand what I am saying, why we are here?”

 He took a deep breath. “I do.”

 The alicorn’s jaw tightened. “And how do you respond to this accusation?”

 “It—it’s true,” he choked out, no more able to look at any of his friends than his ruler. The expressions of shock they doubtlessly wore were bad enough in his mind without having to see it on their faces.

 Celestia held up a hoof for silence. “Dusk, you may tell your story. Be honest and forthright.”

 “Where do I begin?”

 “Wherever you feel it necessary.”

 Dusk nodded and took a few deep breaths to settle himself before lifting his head and beginning. “Well, first off, I feel like I should say ‘I’m sorry’ to each of you. You’ve all been so very open and friendly with me, and I’ve never once let you know anything about who I am. Despite that, you are all still so willing to believe the best in me, and I appreciate that.

 “I was on my way back home with Elegy—my wife—from a gallery opening for one of her friends, and I decided we should take a shortcut because it was starting to rain. We got soaked fairly quickly, of course, so it hardly mattered, but we were just enjoying acting like foals playing in the rain.

 “A unicorn came out of an alleyway and cornered us. He had a spell prepared to cast and demanded that we give up our bits. We weren’t carrying any money at the time, but I offered him my wedding band if he would let Elegy go unharmed. He seemed so scared. He couldn’t even hold the ring when I gave it to him. It dropped and we both went to catch it—” Dusk stopped, choked. “He panicked and the spell fired. I tried to knock his horn aside, but the spell hit my wife right in the chest, and she fell. I felt like I was watching myself from the outside. I tried to attack the unicorn. He backed away from me, terrified. He kept aiming his horn at me, but nothing happened. I pinned him against the wall, and—and I…”

 Dusk screwed his eyes shut, trying desperately to not start crying. “I bucked his head right against the wall. He was dead before he hit the ground.” Dusk could hear the gasps of disbelief from his friends, but he forced himself to ignore it and just finish the story. “Immediately, I felt terrified and confused, like something inside my head had snapped or broken. I couldn’t remember how I got where I was, I couldn’t remember who these ponies were, and I couldn’t remember why they were dead—so I panicked. I knew I would be next, and I had to get away or die. I jumped off the wall of Canterlot and found out my wings didn’t work. After I finally found myself on the ground, I just started walking, even though I had no idea where I was going. I suppose the rest is history.” He sighed, his story complete, and allowed himself to sag in relief.

 He looked up at the assembled ponies. Dash and Pinkie looked horrified, Rarity looked mildly disgusted, and the rest were teary-eyed. Celestia’s demeanor, however, remained impassive, but her eyes no longer held the sharp edge from before. She took a step forward as everypony gave their attention to her.

 “Dusk Chaser,” she began, her voice softer than before, “thank you for being honest. You did kill another pony, and while this normally carries the most severe penalties in Equestrian law, on this occasion, you acted in self-defense. Perhaps not entirely, but enough that I cannot punish you further, and for that, I am truly sorry.”

 Dusk looked at her through damp eyes, bewildered. “Wha—?”

 The princess walked over to his side and sat next to him. “What you are living with now is, and will be, much harder. If I could punish you, then your debt would be paid and you could move on, but it is not so simple as that.” Celestia looked up at each Bearer in turn. “All of you, there is something very important that you need to know. You need to know why you had to be here, and you won’t like it, but it is part of the responsibility of the Elements of Harmony.”

 Celestia cleared her throat softly. “I’m sure my student has suspected as much, but Equestria is much more than merely the land we inhabit. It is formed out of the magic of Harmony. Equestria is alive, and it has a relationship with every pony in it. As ponies care for the land and foster Harmony with each other, they build their connection to the land, and receive their magic as they do. If a pony kills another before their time, that act is a breaking of Harmony that harms Equestria itself. When a pony takes a life, they sever their connection to Harmony, and their ability to feel Equestria’s magic is broken. This is why the unicorn could not cast magic after he killed Dusk’s wife and why Dusk couldn’t fly when he fled.”

 The ruler of Equestria looked down at the dumbfounded pegasus. “It has gotten a bit better, hasn’t it? But you still can’t fly,” she said matter-of-factly. Dusk nodded, and Celestia turned back to address the Bearers. “Dusk has been hurt in two ways. His mind has been fractured by the trauma of losing his wife and facing death, and taking a life has cut off his ability to use magic. These *can* be cured, or at least eased, but it won’t be easy.” She turned back to speak directly to Dusk. “By working to foster Harmony with those around you, you can atone for taking a life, and in time, your magic will come back to you. The other is much more costly. You will never outlive your memories, though I have a sense that you will find a certain amount of peace if you can sacrifice yourself for somepony who means as much to you as your wife did.”

 Dusk sniffed back a sob and stared at his princess. “Sacrifice?”

 Celestia nodded slowly. “The greatest of sacrifices are required to cover the greatest hurts. Unfortunately, once in a great while, this is where you are required to come in, my friends,” she said, addressing the assembled mares. “You are the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony. Your job is to protect the balance of Harmony and restore it when it is broken. This task takes many shapes. Sometimes you can remove the corrupting influence, as you did when you purged the Nightmare from Luna. Sometimes the evil can be sealed away, as you did when you defeated Discord. But sometimes, in a very rare occurrence, the Elements may be called upon to take amends from somepony.”

 There was a very palpable silence in the room. “Princess,” Twilight spoke up hesitantly after several moments. “Does that mean…”

 “The balance of Harmony *must* be restored, whatever it takes.” The sentence hit like a bomb as everypony was struck by the implications. “It hasn’t happened in over 2500 years, and I pray that it never happens in your lifetimes,” the princess said quietly.

 Twilight walked slowly over to stand before Celestia. “Princess, have you ever—?”

 The alicorn looked at her student. “I have, Twilight. Even with the protection of Harmony, it hurts. It hurts a great deal. My sister and I were chosen to protect the inhabitants of Equestria, and to see one go, for any reason, is a painful experience for me.” She looked back at the Elements carefully and intently. “I know you may be tempted to abandon this duty should you ever be called to it, but you should know that Harmony will choose another group to be its guardians if you do. Luna lost her ability to wield the Elements when the Nightmare convinced her to turn her back on her responsibilities, and when I used the Elements against her to banish her, even though my intentions were good, I lost my connection to them as well. That was when you six were chosen to be its champions.”

 The princess stood. “I know this is a lot to take in for all of you. I am sorry, and I had hoped that you would never need to know, much less act, in such a capacity. I need to return home and rest before I raise the sun again, but I have one request in the meantime.” She gently placed one hoof on Dusk’s back. “Take care of Dusk. Show him what it means to foster Harmony—and how to be a good friend. If he is to heal, this experience will most likely be the most important for him.”

 Dusk screwed his eyes shut and hung his head, tears beginning to roll silently down his cheeks. The ruler of Equestria gave a gentle word in farewell to each pony in turn, gave Twilight a warm hug, and waved her hoof one last time as she disappeared with a flash like the sun. Fluttershy and Pinkie rushed over to embrace Dusk as he wept while the rest stood with stunned looks on their faces.

 “Um, girls, I know it’s not really a party type of time, but maybe you’d all like to stay for tea or something?” Twilight asked.

 Everypony let out a relaxed sigh and quickly consented, and the mood lightened considerably. Dusk walked over to Twilight. “Thanks,” he whispered.

 “You’re welcome. I don’t really feel like being alone either right now.”

 While Pinkie flatly refused to accept that this would suffice for Dusk’s “Welcome to Ponyville” party, she gladly agreed to quickly whip up some cupcakes as snacks in Twilight’s kitchen. The friends sat around, chatting and catching up with each other, and it wasn’t long before Pinkie pulled out a few board games. Dusk stood to the side for a few moments, watching Pinkie and Applejack argue over who owned the property that Rarity had just landed on, and then he quietly went upstairs to the balcony outside Twilight’s room.

 Dusk stood in the rapidly cooling night air, trying to process everything he was feeling. He crossed his front hooves on the railing and laid his head on them, staring into Luna’s sky. He felt a sickening sort of void inside. It wasn’t so much the trial he had just endured, and it wasn’t even the fact that he had killed another pony. Every time he tried to pin down his feelings, he came to the same point: *I forgot her*. Even though he knew why he had, even with the excuses and explanations, he still felt deeply guilty. He closed his eyes, his ears lying back against his head in shame. “I’m so sorry…” he whispered into the night.

 “Hey, you okay out there?”

 Dusk opened his eyes to find Rainbow Dash silently gliding through the door to his side. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

 The blue pegasus stood next to him looking out into the night sky just like he did. “You know, we haven’t really had a chance to catch up since you arrived. That’s probably my fault. I never got off work long enough to see how you were doing.” He didn’t look over at her, still staring at nothing, only half paying attention. Both ponies were silent for a long time.

 “So,” she said, “what was she like?”

 He looked over at her. “Say what?”

 Rainbow turned and leaned against the railing casually. “You know, your wife. You look like you need to talk, and I’m sorta curious what kind of pony you fell for. So, what was she like?”

 “Elegy was…” Dusk opened his mouth and closed it again, trying to figure out how to describe her. He closed his eyes. “She was an earth pony, and a singer. She had a voice that could make Celestia herself cry. That was what drew me to her at first, but she was gentle and easy to talk to. She was becoming more famous every day, and she still took time to speak to me, even though I was nopony at all. She practically put her career on hold when I proposed to her.” He sighed happily, his entire countenance lifting just a bit. The hole in him seemed to fill in a bit as he reminisced about her to somepony else. “She loved to dance, even though she constantly said she was terrible at it. She tended to be critical of herself, but none of those things ever mattered. The flaws only made her more perfect to me.”

 He could feel a tear working its way down his cheek, but he kept smiling. “I think the strangest thing about that night is what I remember strongest. I can’t even remember the name of her friend, the pony we went to see, but I can remember the pattern of Elegy’s necklace as clear as I can see you. I don’t remember what color the unicorn’s mane was, but I know he was wearing a brown vest. I don’t know exactly where in Canterlot we were at the time, but I can remember the feel of each cobblestone under my hooves.” He sighed sadly, ears drooping again. “But despite everything, despite all she meant, I still forgot her. How could I *ever* forget her—forget the pony who was my other half? I don’t think I’ll ever get over that.”

 He looked over to where Rainbow Dash stood hiding her face from him. She seemed to be wiping her eyes, but she quickly stopped as he looked at her. Rainbow gave him a little knock on the shoulder with a hoof. “Well, I would say ‘don’t worry about it, things will get better,’ but somehow I don’t think that’s quite right,” she said, pausing as the silence returned. “It sounds like she really meant a lot to you.”

 Dusk stood back up, noticing that the ache in his heart wasn’t quite as sharp as it had been half an hour ago. “She did. And does. Thanks, Rainbow, I really did need to talk.”

 “Hey, no problem. We pegasi have to watch out for each other, right?”

 He grinned at her. “I suppose we do.”

 “Think you can take more party? If not, then Pinkie’s bound to come looking for you soon, and that would definitely ruin your quiet time.”

 “That it would. Well, I guess I can stand being around my friends for a while longer,” he said, his grin replaced by a contented smile as the two trotted back into the library.