Chapter 7: “The Best of Times”

Dusk swept the small pile of sawdust and dirt out the doorway and leaned the broom back against the wall, taking a moment to admire his work. With all new doors on the stalls, new patches over the holes in the roof, and new straw on the freshly cleaned floor, the stables had never looked better—at least according to the cows that slept there at night. Pushing a wheelbarrow and hammering boards wasn’t exactly easy, but he had gotten it done, by Celestia.

“Looks good, sugarcube,” said Applejack. Dusk turned to grin at his boss. “I gotta admit,” she said, “I didn’t think ya’d get through it so quickly.”

“Thanks. And you *did* challenge me to see if I could get it done in just one week.”

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t think ya could actually *do* it.” Applejack shook her head, chuckling. “That’s great, Dusk—ya done good. I gotta go get cleaned up a bit before the girls get home, and no offense,” she added, taking a quiet sniff, “but you could really use a washin’ up, too.” She laughed as she trotted off towards the house.

Dusk lifted a hoof and took a sniff. He blanched at the concentrated odor that overcame his desensitized nose and quickly decided that Applejack was right. As the pegasus headed for the water pump he couldn’t help but trot with a bit of a jaunty step now that his project was done. Applejack had asked him to work on the stables in his spare time, and having a job where everything was under his control made him feel special. Besides all that, the fact that he was doing all the small jobs meant that the farmers had gotten through half of the apple harvest in just a week, and he could take some small pride in that. He got some water running and scrubbed his hooves together, washing off his legs and forelocks. He dunked his head under the running stream and came back up to see a trio of fillies with their school bags racing up the path towards the farmhouse.

The trio stopped on the front porch and talked for a moment, then bumped hooves. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle went into the house while Scootaloo sighed unhappily and dropped her bookbag. Shaking out the water out of his mane caught her attention, and when he opened his eyes again she was waving at him. He returned the wave and she trotted over.

“Hey, Scootaloo!” he called out. “I haven’t seen you looking down before. What’s up?”

The orange filly sat grumpily on the grass next to him. “Oh, nothin’. We can’t go crusading today ‘cause Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle are busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Well, Apple Bloom has her chores to catch up on. Usually, Sweetie Belle and me go over to her place and hang out there, but Rarity’s been really busy lately on a special order. Granny Smith is giving Sweetie Belle some cooking lessons instead.”

Dusk raised an eyebrow. “She needs them?”

Scootaloo shuddered. “Let’s just say that Rarity actually begged her to.”

The image of the pristine fashionista actually going so far as to beg would stick in his mind for quite a while, he was sure. “Wow. So, you don’t feel like going home instead, then?”

The youngster shrugged noncommittally. “My dad works in Canterlot, so he usually doesn’t get back home until later. I’d just be as bored there as here. At least here there’s lots of trees to take a nap under.” The fact that she didn’t mention her mother did not pass Dusk unnoticed, but he let it slide for the moment. “You still working on those exercises?”

“Eeyup,” he said in an awful Big Mac imitation. “I can lift a hay bale onto my back now without too much struggling, but it’s still nowhere near AJ or Mac. I’ve seen that guy stack 3 bales on his back and walk off like nopony’s business.”

“Yeah, he’s huge,” Scootaloo laughed once and kicked her hoof on the ground awkwardly. “Soo…” she hedged, slowly. “Flying coming along yet?”

Dusk tried not to laugh at her nonchalance. “Not as such. How about you? Surely somepony’s been able to get you off the ground by now, huh?”

“Well, I haven’t really had anypony to teach me.”

“Seriously?”

She scratched her mane with a hoof idly. “Yeah. I was gonna have Rainbow Dash teach me, but we only got a couple of lessons in before she got promoted on the weather team. After that she couldn’t make time.”

Dusk frowned. “You parents haven’t taught you anything?”

Her expression clouded over. “Like I said, my dad’s busy. He doesn’t generally have energy for much besides making dinner and chatting once he gets home, and the weekends are always spent in the market and doing things around the house.”

“… And your mom?” he asked, knowing the answer wasn’t likely to be pleasant.

“I never really knew her,” the pegasus filly said, her eyes downcast.

Dusk sighed sadly. “Aw, Scootaloo, I’m sorry.” He put an awkward hoof around the filly’s shoulders, trying to be comforting. “I can’t promise anything since I can’t fly myself, but I remember a few tricks and tips from when I was a colt, if you wanna try ‘em.”

Scootaloo’s face went from moping to stunned excitement in a heartbeat. “What, seriously? You’d teach me to fly?” she exclaimed.

“Well, no promises. I only said I’d show you some—” He got no further because the filly latching herself around his chest cut off his breathing.

“Oh, thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, finally prying the younger pegasus off of himself. He thought to himself for a minute. “I’m pretty sure Twilight said the weather pegasi were gonna try to push a cold front through here, so there should be some decent winds soon. Do you know where there’s a good hill around here?”

The filly hopped excitedly in place. “Of course! There’s a great hill just on the backside of the corn fields. I race down it on my scooter all the time!”

Dusk nodded and the two pegasi started off across the fields, chatting as they went.

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Twilight smiled at Applejack as she answered the door.

“Hey, Twi, what’s up?”

The unicorn frowned slightly. “Have you seen Dusk? It’s starting to get dark, and he didn’t mention going anywhere.”

The farmer raised an eyebrow at her. “Really, Twi? Dusk’s a big pony, ain’t he?” she said, only to quickly back down at her friend’s annoyed expression. “Okay, okay, hang on, lemme check.” Applejack disappeared from the doorway as she called out into the house. “Hey, anypony seen Dusk around lately?”

“Forget him, has anypony seen Scootaloo?” Apple Boom challenged in annoyance.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Miss Twilight, but I think I saw Dusk and Scootaloo headed off towards the north fields ‘bout an hour ago.” Twilight turned to see Big Macintosh just coming in from working the orchards.

“Oh, thanks!” Twilight turned and headed off to find her housemate. After a few minutes of walking, she could see two pegasi on a hill silhouetted against the setting sun, both standing still with wings outstretched. Curious, she trotted closer until she could just hear their voices.

“Can you feel it? Just stay still and wait for the wind to blow.” She could just make out Dusk’s voice. “Let it flow across your wings.” He glanced over at the younger pegasus, her face fixed in concentration. “Spread your feathers out a bit more. Use every inch of wing you have,” he offered, pulling gently at her nearer wing with a hoof.

Scootaloo tried, splaying her feathers out as she stretched. “Like this?”

“Exactly. Now, roll the leading edge of your wing over, into the wind. Feel it pushing you down?” he said, suiting his actions to his words just as she did. The filly nodded. “Now roll it back, let the wind fill your wing instead of pushing against it.”

“Wooooaaah,” she exclaimed.

He chuckled. “See? It doesn’t take much effort. Certainly not as much as you’ve been putting into it. You got more lift just by using more of your wings.”

“I didn’t even do anything and I almost left the ground!”

“That’s the key. Don’t work against the wind, let it work for you.” Dusk folded up his wings and hoof-bumped the filly. “Not bad, kid. We’ll work on more another time.”

“Thanks!” she called over her shoulder as she jumped on her scooter and sped down the hill towards home.

Dusk stood and watched her go for a few moments, and then turned and saw Twilight, a huge smile on her face. “Ah. Hi. Been there long?”

“Not really, no. Just long enough to see what’s been going on with you two.”

“Twilight, it’s nothing, I swear. She just mentioned that she didn’t have a teacher and I offered a few tips, and—”

“Dusk, I’m so proud of you!” Twilight cut him off, practically beaming.

He stopped. “…You are?”

She waited while he trotted off the hill to her side. “Very.”

He was giving her a weird look. “Most parents in Canterlot would be calling the Royal Guard if a strange pony even talked to their foal.”

“But you aren’t a strange pony, Dusk. Well, not *that* strange,” she joked as they started walking back to the library. “Yes, we tend to be a little more open and trusting here in Ponyville, but never mind that. Dusk, you’re doing something wonderful for her.”

“I am?”

Twilight lowered her voice a bit as they began to walk through the town. “It’s no secret that Scootaloo hasn’t had it easy. Most ponies know her father keeps long hours. Not that it’s his fault, of course,” she amended, “but she’s alone most of the time. She’s had some ponies who have looked out for her over the years—especially her teacher, Cheerilee—but it’s pretty much been all mares. There hasn’t really been a stallion in her life at all.”

Dusk inhaled sharply. “Wait, you’re saying that I’m taking over for her dad?”

“Not taking over, more like filling in where he can’t.”

The pegasus winced slightly. “Twilight, I’m not sure if I can do that. I mean, what if her dad finds out and doesn’t like it? And I don’t know anything about foals! That’s a lot of pressure. I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.”

Twilight punched his shoulder lightly. “Dusk, relax. Nopony’s asking you to adopt her or anything. Just do what you were doing today: spend some time with her. Just let her know that you’re interested in her, that you care.”

His face contorted as he pondered the idea. “Well, I suppose when you put it that way…”

“And if her father has any problems with it, I’ll be happy to go talk to him and vouch for you.” The two were silent almost all the way back to the library.

“You know, I think I actually felt a little bit lighter when we were out on that hill…” he mused.

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“Okay, you were right. That was tough.”

Scootaloo flopped down on the grassy bank of Sweet Apple Acres’ lake. Dusk sat down with her, and they watched as the other two fillies continued to play in the water. The two had been working together for almost a week, and short, one-flap flights were becoming much easier for both. As a new challenge, Dusk had come up with the idea to use the lake, and the rope swing on the ancient oak on the bank. It turned out to be a great way to spend a Saturday at any rate, and the other Crusaders had eagerly joined them for some lake time.

The challenge had been that they had to swing off the rope as fast as they could, and see who could glide farther over the lake before splashing down. In the end, Scootaloo had come up the winner, but not by much.

Dusk shook the water out of his mane and tail. “Well, if it was easy, everypony would do it,” he chuckled. “You know you only beat me because you weigh so much less.”

“Pfff. Sore loser.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, unable to keep a grin off his face. “So, what did you learn from it?”

The filly concentrated hard for a few moments. “Well, it’s really hard to glide over water.”

The elder pegasus nodded. “Yup. Water cools and heats very slowly, so most often, the water is quite a bit cooler than the air. The air above the water cools down, and creates a downdraft. That’s why near the coast it never gets so hot, because the ocean helps cool the air down.”

“And cold air is hard to fly through?”

“It’s not so much that it’s harder, it just doesn’t help you. If you try the same thing over Ponyville, or a place like Manehatten, you’ll go *much* farther. All the concentrated buildings and such give off a lot of heat—”

“Ooh, ooh, I know this one,” Scootaloo piped up. “Hot air rises, and creates thermals, right?”

“Bingo.” Dusk laid on his back. “So, how did you get more distance?”

“Well, I dunno. I guess I had to spread my wings more.”

“Did you notice that you were curling your trailing feathers down? Because you were.”

“Is that good?”

“Yup. You can generate more lift at the slower speeds we were at, and it lets you roll your wings back more, to catch more air. You do that most often when you land, unless you prefer to land at a full gallop.”

The two drifted into silence, just enjoying the warmth of the sun as they dried off.

“You know,” she mused, “Rainbow Dash said she was just gonna throw me off a cliff to get the feeling.”

He laughed and sat up. “Well yeah, she would be able to catch you. This wasn’t quite how it went my first time, either. We’re kinda doing it the hard way.”

“But if it was easy, everypony would do it?”

“Yup,” he chuckled. “That’s what my mom always told me when I would whine about something.”

The filly went very quiet, and it was plainly obvious to Dusk why. “My mom died when I was fifteen,” he said quietly, reaching out to the place where the filly’s thoughts were. “It crushed my dad. He hardly smiled after that, and when he did it was usually sadly.”

“My dad’s kinda like that, too,” Scootaloo said, equally quiet. “When he gets home, we chat about stuff, but when I get ready for bed he’s always got this look in his eyes, like I make him sad or something.” She sniffed and pawed at a teary eye with a hoof. “Sometimes I think that’s why he doesn’t find time to do much with me. That it’ll just make him sadder than he is already.”

Dusk scooted a little closer to the filly. “Everypony handles grief differently. My dad couldn’t take being in the same city after mom died. He moved away, and we haven’t spoken much since then. I wanted to be as busy as possible, to try to drown it out, so I enlisted.” He put a careful hoof around Scootaloo’s shoulders and pulled her in just a bit. “Don’t be too hard on your dad. I’m sure he’s just trying to deal with it as best as he can. Maybe you should bring it up? Ask him what your mom was like.”

The filly grabbed him in a fierce hug around his middle, taking him completely by surprise. It took him a few moments before he returned it, but he was amazed at how good it felt. They separated as the other Crusaders came running up the bank.

“Hey, Scoots, we’re headed to the clubhouse. You comin’?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m comin’.” She clambered to her hooves, and started off towards where he scooter was parked before turning back. “Thanks.”

Dusk watched the three race off into the back orchards to plan their next escapade, feeling like the sun had settled inside his chest. He got up and leaped into the air, flapping about head-high back towards the farmhouse and Ponyville, far too ecstatic to walk.

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Just as he reached the farmhouse, Applejack came walking out the door, chatting with a light yellow mare he hadn’t met before. His boss stopped and waved her hat to beckon him over as soon as she saw him.

“Dusk! Great timing, I want you to meet my cousin, Apple Fritter.”

Dusk landed in front of the two relatives, nodding respectfully to the unfamiliar mare. “Dusk Chaser. Pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Apple Fritter tipped her smaller hat back a bit, better showing her dark green mane and light green eyes. She gave him an amused look. “A pleasure, I’m sure,” she said, her northern accent a distinct contrast to Applejack’s drawl. She turned to her cousin. “Do you always hire such polite ponies?”

Applejack chuckled. “Nah, Dusk’s just trying to show off his big-city manners. Anyway, Apple Fritter’s gonna be stayin’ with us for a while. She’s lookin’ to start her own shop sellin’ Apple Family delicacies, so she’s here to learn a few tricks from Granny Smith.”

“Well, there’s hardly a better pony to learn from,” Dusk agreed, hiding behind politeness as his feathers pricked with a growing sense of unease. “Hope we’ll be able to make your stay enjoyable.”

Apple Fritter smiled at him. “Thank you, Dusk. If you don’t mind my askin’, what’s a pegasus doing on a farm?”

“Oh, just earning a few bits here and there,” he said, chuckling quietly as his hooves itched to leave.

“Dusk’s had some trouble with flyin’ lately,” Applejack supplied, “but come to think about it, you were doin’ just fine a moment ago.”

Dusk grinned until his cheeks hurt. “Oh, I can’t get much higher than that yet, but it’s getting better!”

“Well shoot, you’ll be ready for the weather team before ya know it!”

“Maybe! Well, I’m gonna go fly circles around Twilight until my wings fall off! See ya!”

As he jumped into the air and flapped clumsily towards the library, he heard Applejack say “Ya know, he’s not always that crazy”, but it was Apple Fritter’s pleasant giggle that sped his wings as he fled the farm.