Chapter 8: “Strange Déjà Vu”

 There were better things in life than just sitting on a cloud, and Dusk would be among the first to admit it. No matter how airy and light the cloud, you always ended up with slightly damp hooves. If you didn’t take great care in choosing the right cloud for a nap it would burn away in the warmth of the sun and you’d suddenly wake up to find that you were halfway to the ground and getting closer in a hurry. Clouds could be cold, thin, and unstable, and (if you were really unlucky) just testing the integrity of one with a hoof could be enough to discharge the static energy in it and give you a nasty jolt.

 None of that even entered Dusk’s mind. He let out a happy sigh as he closed his eyes and dug his hooves into the soft surface of a puffy, white altocumulus. The sun felt wonderful on his back against the cold prick of the winter air, and the currents in the wind stirred the surface of the cloud mass in hypnotic patterns, drifting through the sky in no particular hurry.

 He let his thoughts drift right along with them. It had been several years at least since he had felt like this. There were never that many places to fly around Canterlot, between the security patrols and no-fly zones the Guard enforced around the palace grounds. Not to mention, in the crowded city there just wasn’t much room left for recreational flying. Dusk realized he hadn’t been flying just to enjoy the sensation since he had enlisted, and he had hardly even thought about flying once he met his wife. Losing his flying ability had drilled into him just how much he had missed out on flight, and working so hard for the last four months had rekindled all the joy he felt as a colt. Just the other day he had even gotten a position on the Ponyville weather team so he could keep practicing.

 Dusk’s personal reverie was broken by the sound of another pony’s exertion. He smiled at the stream of grunts and mild oaths coming from over the edge of the cloud and waited for the pony responsible to show up.

 “Come on, just a *little bit more—GOTCHA*!” A pair of bright orange hooves appeared over the lip of the cloud and latched on, wriggling as the pony on the other end struggled to pull herself over the top. Dusk merely sat and watched, quite amused. Scootaloo finally made it and rolled onto the cloud, exhausted. “Thanks—for—all—the—help,” she wheezed sarcastically as Dusk broke out laughing.

 “What did you expect me to do, carry you?”

 “No, but not leaving me behind would have been a nice touch,” she griped between gasps of air.

 “Well, this was supposed to be a challenge, to see if you could make it. Not every pegasus *can* get this high up, you know.”

 “I wondered why we were climbing for so long…” Scootaloo mused as she looked over the edge and goggled at the drop below her. “Oh wow, I can hardly even see Cloudsdale!” She took a deep breath of the thin atmosphere and looked around in awe. “I never thought I’d be able to fly this high,” she said, her voice low and reverent.

 “In just a few months, you’ll be more than ready to help the weather team with Winter Wrap Up.” He smiled proudly at her. “You catch on fast.”

 “Well, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be up here at all,” she said gratefully.

 “You know something? I should be thanking you, too. If you hadn’t given me the chance to help you out, I wouldn’t be here either.”

 The two sat still and admired the view until Scootaloo had regained her breath, by which point they were both shivering from the high-altitude winter air.

 “So, now what?” she asked.

 “Now, the fun part. We see just how fast we can really go.”

 Scootaloo’s eyes became quite wide as a daredevil grin spread across her face.

 He put up a hoof to stop her. “Remember, slowing and turning are MUCH harder at terminal velocity, so give yourself PLENTY of room to slow down,” he cautioned.

 “Right. First one to pass the Cloudeseum wins!” she yelled, diving off the cloud. Dusk took a deep breath and leaped off right after her, his grin matching hers.

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 “That was so *awesome!*” Scootaloo shrieked, her windswept mane sticking out in every direction at once. “I can’t wait to tell Dash about that!”

 The two pegasi landed just outside of Scootaloo’s home. The filly gave Dusk a hoofbump and trotted up the stairs to the door, which opened just before her hoof reached for it. Inside was a dark blue pegasus stallion with a slight smile on his face and a serious look in his eyes.

 “Hey dad!” Scootaloo called, giving him a quick hug and trotting off into the house.

 The father greeted his daughter and turned to Dusk, who was starting to feel a bit anxious. “Why don’t you come inside for a moment?” he said, bidding Dusk to enter with a sweep of a hoof.

 Dusk nodded and walked in. The house itself was simple and fairly well-maintained, but with the scattered detritus and toys that indicated a younger pony lived there.

 “Would you like some tea?” the stallion asked.

 “Uh, yes, please,” he replied, still feeling a bit uneasy as he continued to look around. Through the open door of the bathroom he could see Scootaloo standing up and trying to pull a brush through her unruly mane with both hooves. He had a quiet chuckle at the sight.

 Her father offered him a chair at the dinner table, where two mugs of tea were waiting. Dusk sat and waited for the older pegasus to initiate the conversation.

 “I’ve been meaning to speak to you for quite a while now, Dusk Chaser, but it’s not easy for me to find time away from home.” Dusk started at the sound of his name, which Scootaloo’s father noticed. “Yes, I know who you are. You can call me Cloudburst.”

 “Oh. Pleased to meet you, then,” Dusk replied, still slightly stunned.

 “I knew something different was going on around here while I was gone every day. For months now, my daughter has been happier and more talkative than, well, ever since we moved to Ponyville. I wasn’t sure what would have caused this, but then she showed me that she was learning to fly. I was, of course, overjoyed,” Cloudburst said with a grin. “I always felt so bad that I didn’t have time to teach Scootaloo myself, and she had always talked about getting lessons from her hero, Rainbow Dash. I assumed that was what had happened.”

 Cloudburst’s face darkened slightly with a frown. “I was *not* pleased when I found out it was, in fact, a strange stallion who had been spending so much time with my daughter. Maybe it’s just because I spend so much time working in the big city, but I felt like I had to put a stop to it immediately. I probably should have—that would have been the thing a responsible parent would do—but I just couldn’t bring myself to say it. Scootaloo was so happy, I just couldn’t take that away from her.

 “So, instead, I took my Regent’s Day off work and asked around to see who you were.” Cloudburst chuckled. “I heard quite a few different opinions on the subject. There were a few ponies who described you as a disturbed, crazed madpony—but equally as many who said you were a perfect gentlecolt. That by itself made me very nervous, but all the ponies who knew who you were said you were living in the library with Twilight, so I went and talked to her.”

 Dusk let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. *If he talked to Twilight, this can’t be all bad,* he thought.

 “Twilight was very complimentary of you, but she told me something very interesting. She described your relationship with my daughter as ‘therapeutic’.” Cloudburst took a long drink from his mug. “So, I think I’d like to hear it from you, Dusk. Why are you interested in my daughter?”

 Dusk took a deep breath and marshaled his thoughts. “Well, to be honest, I wasn’t initially. Scootaloo seemed interested when I told her that I couldn’t fly. I think she saw it as a bond we shared. I offered to show her a few things I learned back when I was a colt, and I had assumed that would be the end of it.” Dusk took a moment to sip his tea. “The thing is though; I’ve had a past that has left me, well, scarred. I quickly found out that working with Scootaloo was a healing process for me as well. I still wasn’t totally comfortable with the idea until Twilight encouraged me to keep at it. She suggested that Scootaloo could use another stallion in her life.”

 Cloudburst nodded emphatically. “That she can,” he said, looking over towards the door to her bedroom. “It’s not easy having to be away from her so often.” He sighed and looked back at Dusk. “For what it’s worth, what you’ve said matches up with what Twilight told me. And, honestly, having you being Scootaloo’s friend and mentor has been good for both of us as well. She forced me to talk about her mother, which was extremely difficult, but it definitely brought us closer together. Since she learned to fly a few weeks ago, we even got to take a father-daughter trip to Cloudsdale for the first time.” Cloudburst’s eyes misted slightly. “I can’t tell you what that meant to me, Dusk. So, for everything you’ve done, for both of us,” he raised his mug up towards Dusk. “Thanks.”

 Dusk smiled and raised his own mug, tapping it against the offered glass, and the two stallions sat back to talk about life until the tea ran out.

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 Dusk collapsed on a hay bale with an exhausted groan. The last few weeks had been absolutely brutal on him. All the muscles he had been building by working on the farm were being tested in completely new ways now that he had started working on the weather team. He had known that Rainbow Dash could be a bit of a hard-flank on her workers, but he had no idea that the soft-spoken Raindrops was just as bad. Since Dash had gotten promoted to a regional position and Raindrops took over Ponyville, she had driven everypony to be the absolute best and she accepted nothing less.

 His back ached in places he didn’t even know he had muscles. Being talented at high-altitude flight meant he was constantly chasing down wisps of cirrus clouds, which were no fun to clear at the best of times, and his wings were downright sore. His jaw even hurt from gritting his teeth as he strained to go just a little bit faster, a little bit higher. It didn’t help that since planting season was right around the corner, the entire weather team had been drilling on rain formations and storm weather control in addition to their usual work loadouts.

 As if all that wouldn’t be enough to keep him in bed for a while, he hadn’t given up his responsibilities on the farm. Sure, now that Caramel was back he could let some of his old tasks go to other ponies, but he just couldn’t bring himself to quit altogether. He told himself that he was there because he felt loyal to Applejack for giving him a chance, or that he took a lot of pride in his work, but there was something else underneath his reasons, and it disconcerted him greatly. He was finding it hard just to stay away from the farm at all. Anytime he went more than a day or two without being around Sweet Apple Acres he would start to get anxious. He didn’t even realize it until Twilight pointed it out to him, though the reason still eluded him. There could be any number of reasons why, including just because the farm ponies were some of his only friends, and he didn’t want to leave them.

 He sighed and let his eyes drift closed, not really trying to fight the pull of his tired mind and body. Maybe if he just imagined that this hay bale was a comfortable couch instead…

 “Hey Dusk!” He shook himself back awake as he heard his name called. The voice sounded familiar. Slightly groggy, he raised his head and looked back to see an earth—

 *Elegy?*

 The white mare trotted happily over to him, balancing a fresh pastry on her nose. “Hey, I just made these, try one!” she said in a voice that was familiar, but slightly off.

 Dusk shook rubbed his eyes forcefully, trying to wake up fully, and opened them to see Apple Fritter standing before him. His jaw dropped, and she took the opportunity to put the bite-sized treat directly into his mouth before turning to go.

 “Let me know what you think!” the yellow-coated earth pony called over her shoulder.

 Dusk closed his mouth and shook his head to clear away the cobwebs. *What the hay was that? Am I really that tired?* He chewed thoughtfully. *Hmm, these are pretty tasty, though.*

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 *Dusk stood in the middle of a darkened street, heart pounding. On all sides the ground seemed swallowed up beyond sight in the black, even when vague flashes of lightning tried to illuminate the scene.*

 *He swallowed nervously. Hadn’t this part of his past been exorcized already? Why was he back in this place?*

 *“You don’t know why you’re here?” came a sinister voice from behind him. Dusk spun around to see… nothing. “You’re here to make a choice.”*

 *Dusk turned to look back down the road and saw a white pony he knew only too well on the side, just out of his reach. “Elegy?” he called out to her. “Elegy, this—none of this is right!” He tried to go to her, but his hooves wouldn’t obey his commands.*

 *“Dusk? What’s going on?”*

 *He looked again, and on the other side of the road stood— “Fritter? What are you doing here?”*

 *“I don’t know!” she exclaimed, looking panicked.*

 *“Do you understand yet, pegasus?” the dark voice taunted. “Do you see the dilemma? Only one may be saved.”*

 *Dusk began to hyperventilate, fear suffusing through him. He looked back at Elegy, only it wasn’t her, it was Fritter now. Elegy was back where—no wait, they changed again! The two mares switched places in his mindscape, both pleading for his help. Their voices seemed to be coming from everywhere, and he put a hoof to his head trying to block it out, but nothing could stop the confusion in his mind.*

 *“CHOOSE!” the disembodied voice bellowed.*

 *Dusk screamed and jumped out towards his wife, only to pass right through her. He spun around, only to notice that she was faded and insubstantial.*

 *“You forget yourself, pegasus,” he heard the bitter voice say. “She has already been claimed.”*

 *Dusk spun back to Apple Fritter, who screamed in fright as the entire landscape shattered. Fritter was consumed in a flash as the ground erupted, sheets of blinding light shining up between hunks of the rent street. Dusk never even had time to blink as a large piece of the pavement flew up to connect directly with his face.*

 He cried out in pain as he slammed face first onto the floor off the side of his bed, legs tangled hopelessly in the sheet. He lay on the ground in the dim pre-dawn light trying to regain his bearings as the door opened a crack and Twilight poked her head in.

 “Dusk, are you all right?” she asked, her mane still rumpled from her sleep. She saw him trying to extract himself from his bedsheet and noticed the look on his face. “Oh no, was it another nightmare?”

 He finally tugged his last limb free and just sat on the ground, trying desperately to hold himself together.

 He felt Twilight sit down next to him and put a hoof around his shoulders. “Was it the same one as before?”

 He shook his head. “Something new.” He shivered in her grasp. “I have no idea what it means, but I’m scared to find out.”

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 For the next few weeks, Dusk was plagued by nightmares, sometimes recurring, sometimes new. It got to the point where he no longer woke up screaming because he was expecting it when he finally dropped from exhaustion each night.

 When he worked on the farm, he found reasons to stay as far away from the farmhouse as possible. He volunteered to carry seed, water and tools out to the farmers as they planted—anything to avoid a situation where he might see Apple Fritter. He threw himself into his work, hoping to find the same sort of release in it that he had found before, but he grew less and less satisfied with his work. He began to make mistakes in his weather work, which of course brought Raindrops’ ire down on him. He could unequivocally say that she was the only pegasus he truly feared.

 He walked through Sweet Apple Acres, too tired to fly and too distracted to care, completely lost in thought. *How did my life start falling apart so fast?* He groaned and kicked angrily at dirt clods in the path. *It’s somehow Fritter’s fault! I need to just leave, and—* he stopped, mentally kicking himself instead. *It’s not her fault, it can’t be her fault. But if it isn’t her fault, then that means there’s still something wrong with me.*

 What was bringing everything back now, and how did Apple Fritter fit into the puzzle?

 “Hey, you!”

 Dusk froze on the spot, his mind going blank at the sound of an angry voice being raised in his direction. *Oh, Harmony, Raindrops is back! What did I do?*

 He turned, expecting to see his weather team supervisor diving at him to punish him for another mistake, but instead he saw Apple Fritter running towards him with a heavy scowl on her face. He winced as she stopped right in front of him.

 “Where the hay have you been?” she scolded.

 Dusk’s jaw worked up and down a few times, unable to come up with any sort of response to the unexpected question.

 “I haven’t seen you in almost three weeks! Are you avoiding me or somethin’?”

 “I, no, I, um… uh,” Dusk stammered.

 “You ARE!” she said, voice raised in surprise as she advanced on the pegasus. “What the hay did I ever do to you?”

 Dusk backpedaled a few steps, trying to get room to think. He tried to shake his head the clear it, but when he looked up again, all he could see was Elegy yelling at him in Apple Fritter’s voice. He shut his eyes and dropped to the ground, putting his hooves over his head. “Stop, please stop!” he whimpered.

 Fritter stopped short. “Dusk, I—what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

 Dusk tried to compose himself as quickly as he could. “I’m fine. I think. Look, I guess I have been avoiding you. It’s not anything you did or didn’t do, okay? I’m sorry. It was silly.”

 “Well, stars above, Dusk, why?”

 “Please, *please* just let it go at ‘I’m sorry’,” he begged her. “I—I can’t really get into it right now.”

 She took an unsure step back. “Okay, I guess. Hey, I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at you.”

 He nodded his acceptance of her apology.

 She turned to go back, stopping to glance his way one last time. “I just get worried about you sometimes, is all,” she said, trotting back towards the farmhouse, leaving the pegasus sitting on the ground with his head spinning.

 *She worries about me. That can’t be good.*

 “Why not?” he muttered to himself.

 *If she worries, then she must care. She’s trouble!*

 “What, you’re nuts. I mean, I’m nuts. Clearly. I am talking to myself, after all,” he sighed, putting a hoof to his face in exasperation.

 *Look, you know that mare has been giving you a bad feeling, right? Don’t you know enough to trust that?*

 “Okay, fine, I’ll play along,” he said, making sure nopony else was around first. “What do my feelings know that I don’t? Apple Fritter has been nothing but kind and friendly to me.”

 *That’s. The. Point.*

 “Can you—er, I—stop being cryptic for one damn minute? You’re my brain!”

 *She cares. Caring means she might like you. If she likes you, there’s a chance you may end up liking her back. If you get attached, how long do you think it will be before everything ends up in the dung pile again?*

 “Okay, that’s just crazy talk,” he said, though he was beginning to feel very nervous about these thoughts. “There’s not been anything to indicate that she’s interested in me particularly.”

 *So, the treats she’s asked you to try, the way she says hello to you first, the way her eyes always seem to find you in a room before anypony else… That’s all a coincidence then, is it?*

 Dusk gritted his teeth. “Look, if you’re just going to mess with me, then shut up. I—I can deal with this. I can handle it.” His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I’ve handled it so far,” he said, not even convincing himself.

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 “I can’t figure it out, Twi.”

 The pegasus sighed irritably. Across the table from him Twilight swallowed her mouthful of vegetables and let her fork float back to the surface of the table. “Well, I can’t either,” she said, wiping a napkin over the corner of her mouth. “You used to be excited to go to work and happy when you came home; now I can’t tell if you are or not. Lately you’ve been up even earlier than me, which would normally indicate that you’re eager to get there, but when I do get up I find you pacing nervously in the library trying to decide if you’re even going to go in that day.”

 He nodded glumly, unable to account for his erratic behavior of late. “Well, as far as getting up early, I guess my sleep hasn’t been quite as sound this week.”

 “Have the nightmares been coming back?” she asked, concern coloring her voice.

 “Oh, they’re pretty much always around. I just haven’t been making as much noise lately.”

 “So what’s happened that might have started this off? What’s been different in the last month that wasn’t there before?”

 Dusk thought for few seconds. “AJ’s cousin came to stay at the farm. Caramel came back from his leave of absence. Everything else has just been normal work.”

 “AJ’s cousin? Apple Fritter, right?”

 “Yeah, Apple Fritter.”

 Twilight tapped her chin with a hoof as she pondered. “What’s she like?”

 “Honestly, it’s hard for me to put my hoof on. She *seems* really nice. She’s a couple years older than AJ, but more soft-spoken.” Dusk recognized the tightness spreading in his chest as he spoke and gasped as it dawned on him. “Wait. It’s her. It’s gotta be.”

 “Why do you say that? Did she do something?”

 “No, but I still can’t shake the feeling that I shouldn’t be around her. Every time she says ‘Hi’ I can barely keep my hooves from running away. Just seeing her makes things appear in my head, like I can see my wife. Hay, just thinking about her now makes me want to panic.”

 Twilight thought very hard for a few moments. “Dusk, AJ’s cousin is about the same age as your wife would be, am I right?”

 He frowned. “I suppose so, but they’re not a lot alike. Why would that matter?”

 Twilight sighed lightly and nodded. “Dusk, have you ever actually said goodbye to Elegy?”

 He jerked in surprise.  “What’s that mean?” he said, taking a step back from Twilight’s accusation.

 “I mean, *have you ever said goodbye*?” Twilight stood and looked him in the eyes. “Dusk, I know you weren’t ready before, but I know you haven’t let your wife go. I think it’s going to keep haunting you unless you do.”

 His nightmare of his inability to hold on to his wife’s ghost flashed through his mind. “You mean forget her. I can’t do that, Twi, you know that!”

 Twilight shook her head emphatically. “No, Dusk, not forget.” Her voice grew softer. “Dusk, you haven’t even visited your wife’s grave. One would think that’s a fairly important thing to do.”

 He shifted his weight anxiously as guilt lashed him. The back corner of his mind recognized the same panic response as when Apple Fritter spoke to him, but he couldn’t spare the time to ponder it. “I don’t even know where it is,” he said weakly. “I can’t go ask her family. I never knew them that well, and since I sort of disappeared when—when their daughter died, they probably don’t like me much.”

 “I know you weren’t in much of a condition to go at the time, but that might have been avoided if you had gone to the funeral.”

 He started, confused. “The what now? Funeral? When was that?”

 “About a week after you showed up here. There was an article about the attack in the Equestria Daily. There wasn’t anything in it about you, but it mentioned when her funeral was going to be. I left the paper on your bed so you’d see it.”

 He shook his head in disbelief.  “I—I remember the paper, but I don’t remember anything in it.  Did I read it?”  His head dropped, bowed under the weight of his guilt.  “Did I block out my own wife’s funeral…?”

 Twilight walked to his side and gave his mane a friendly rub. “Dusk, it’s not your fault. You were suffering. Nopony expected anything more of you then, but now I think it’s time for you to go.”

 “What do I say?”

 “I have no idea,” she admitted. “I’ve never gone through anything like this myself. Just say whatever is on your heart, I guess.”

 “I’ll—I’ll think about it.”

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 He had thought about it, long and hard. He had thought about it all the way to Canterlot on the train, and now that Dusk stood at the entrance to a cemetery, he was still thinking about it.

 Twilight had come along on the train, saying how she had been meaning to stop by and visit the princess and her family. He knew she had mostly come to make sure he would be okay, but he appreciated her thoughtfulness. She had been with him long enough to find out where Elegy’s grave lay and then left him to do what he had to do, and now without her reassuring presence he found the entryway to the cemetery to be almost as impenetrable as a solid wall to him.

 Dusk waited, trying to dredge up the courage to go in. His heart was pounding and his head was crying out for him to leave, but his guilt was even stronger. He felt so awful for not coming sooner that there was no way he could leave, but it was almost equally hard to go in, so he stood at a stalemate trying to find the strength to go through with it.

 He took a deep breath and looked over the graveyard itself. It was small, and the overhanging trees gave him a deep sense of claustrophobia. He could feel the walls around the grounds as though they surrounded him directly, and the more he thought about entering, the more they felt like they were closing in. *Maybe I could just go over to that tree,* he reasoned with himself. *That’s not a gravestone, there’s no reason to be afraid of it.*

 He let his breath out and coaxed his trembling limbs to movement. He put his first hoof down over the threshold and gasped slightly. *I can do this,* he thought, forcing his other legs to follow suit. *I have to do this.*

 When Dusk looked back up he found that he was standing under the tree. He reached out a hoof and touched the rough bark as though trying to assure himself that it was solid and this wasn’t a dream. He glanced around and tried to calm his breathing a bit, only to have it catch in his throat altogether as he caught sight of the nearest headstone.

*Elegy Chaser*

*Beloved daughter, taken too soon.*

*Her voice still rings in our hearts.*

 Dusk sank to his knees, unable to find breath as his world crashed in on itself. His hoof reached out without his input to touch the carved granite surface of the stone.

 “Elegy…” he breathed, barely able to speak around the lump in his throat. “Elegy, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” He sat on his haunches and put his front hooves on the gravestone. “I forgot you. I don’t know how, but I forgot. I—I can’t live tha—” he gasped, eyes closing tight. “I can’t live that down,” he whispered, tears finally starting to roll uninhibited down his face. He let go of the memorial and wrapped his hooves around his middle as the tears become intense sobs, the grief and pain spilling out as he wept.

 He had no idea how long it took, but in time he finally reached the point where he felt like he didn’t have any more tears left. He dried his face as well as he could and sat back up next to the grave. When he opened his eyes, he found that everything around him had changed. The overhanging trees and lovingly maintained landscaping still made the graveyard stand out from the urban sprawl of the capital that surrounded it, but now as an oasis of green in a sea of grey. Instead of a sense of entrapment and finality, the scene now gave off an air of peacefulness and calm, and Dusk could almost breathe it in. It was no longer a place of pain—it was a place of longing, perhaps—but more than anything it was a place of memory.

 He looked back to the gravestone beside him, and the words sprang unbidden from his mouth, free and easily. “So, it’s been a long time, Elegy. I’m sorry about that. It’s about a month to midwinter, I guess, so that means our anniversary is coming up. I promise I’ll come back for that.

 “I’m not sure what’s real and what isn’t sometimes.” He took a deep breath. “I miss you. By Harmony, I miss you so much, and I feel like it’s my fault. I didn’t protect you. I don’t even know if I could have done anything, but it doesn’t matter because I *know* deep inside I should have protected you.” He stopped to wipe a rogue tear away from his eye. “So much has happened to me lately. I feel like the pony I was before is just a shadow now—like a picture somepony showed me. I don’t know if you’re still watching me, but I hope you still approve of who I am, because I’m not always sure.”

 A soft smile appeared on his face as he thought of all the good times lately. “I got a job on a farm. I know, sounds crazy, right? It’s been good, though. It’s kept me busy at least. I also met a young filly. I’ve been giving her flight lessons, which is weird because I’ve needed them almost as much as she has. We’ve helped each other out a lot.” He touched a hoof to the words engraved on the memorial. “I don’t know what kind of foals we might have had, but I can only dream that they would have been as enthusiastic as she is.

 “I’m not sure if you can really hear me on the other side, but I hope so. I hope you can forgive me for everything. Someday maybe I can forgive myself, too, but I’m trying. I just hope that wherever you are now, you’re at peace.”

 He stood shakily to his hooves and looked down at the headstone. “I love you, Elegy. I always will.” He took a step back and stood in silence, embracing the stillness around—and inside—him.

 “That was beautiful, Dusk.”

 He was so emotionally drained he hardly even reacted to the sudden voice behind him, but it was easily recognizable. He turned his head and bowed to Celestia. “Princess.”

 The alicorn walked forward to his side, and the two of them looked at the carefully kept plot of grass where Elegy lay. “I know she would be proud of you.”

 “I hope so,” he admitted. “I feel so… empty.”

 “Pain can take up such a large part of us if we let it,” she said. “By letting it go, all that space inside you is freed up for something greater.”

 “So, what does this make me now? My wife is—gone?”

 Celestia smiled down at him and pressed a hoof to his chest. “Feel in here, does it feel like she’s gone?”

 “No, I’m pretty sure I can still feel her,” he said, smiling as Celestia’s warmth lifted his spirit.

 “She will always be a part of you, no matter what. Love may not exactly conquer all, but it does create a bond between ponies that never breaks.” Dusk sniffed slightly and pawed at his eye, and the princess drew him into a hug. “This was a very brave step, Dusk.”

 The two ponies broke the embrace in silence. Dusk nodded his thanks to Celestia, and walked back out the cemetery gate, alone with his thoughts, to find Twilight.