Chapter 9: “Under A Glass Moon”

 Dusk found it difficult to convince himself that he was truly okay over the next few weeks. He did try to make an effort to not avoid Fritter so much, but he was starting to pay the price. His dreams, even though they weren’t any more intense, were bothering him on a greater level, and seemingly worse each day. He went days without sleep sometimes, and started missing shifts on the weather team. He was amazed that nopony seemed too upset about it whenever he came back after missing a day, but he took it in stride.

 For her part, his encounters with Apple Fritter remained casual and friendly. She seemed to truly enjoy a chance to just sit and chat with him on the front porch of the house, or over a railing while he worked at some task or another. He found himself looking around while working, trying to see if she was trotting over to ask him a question, and he was quite surprised when he figured out that he was disappointed on the times he didn’t see her. He even realized that on the days he didn’t see Fritter around the farm, he worked slower, waiting as long as possible to see if she would come by.

 It was on just such a day that he got the flyer. He was leaning against a railing, idly picking dirt off the tines of his rake when he heard a voice.

 “Hey, you’re on the weather team, right?”

 He looked up at the face of the pegasus hovering over his head, and immediately had to force himself not to go sympathetically cross-eyed. “Uh, yeah,” he replied, pointedly not looking the messenger directly in her eyes.

 “Oh, cool. Here, this is for you!” replied the grey mailmare, pulling a scroll out of her saddlebag and dropping in into his waiting hoof. “See ya!” she chirped, and flew off whistling to herself.

 He chuckled at her spirit, and unrolled the scroll.

 “Mandatory meeting for all Ponyville Weather Team Pegasi—tonight,” he read aloud. Dusk sighed. “Awesome. I wonder what fresh hell Raindrops has dreamed up for our drills this time.”

 Dusk rolled the scroll back up, tucked it under his wing, and trotted off to find Applejack. He would probably have to miss work the day after whatever grueling challenge this was sure to reveal.

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 “All right, pegasi, let’s quiet down!”

 Dusk smirked in spite of himself from his place in the front row of the crowd as the assembled pegasi scrambled to follow Raindrop’s bellowed command. They settled onto the gound, chairs, and balcony of the City Hall’s main chamber, or just hovered in place, attentively. The room was packed with ponies of every color and—if you counted the muscle-bound Snowflake—size.

 Raindrops tapped a hoof on the makeshift lectern on stage, with a very familiar pegasus mare by her side. “Listen up, pegasi, this is not a drill.” A resounding sigh of relief filled the room from all the assembled fliers. “Har, har,” Raindrops deadpanned, continuing on. “This is a real situation. We’ve got a major storm front brewing over the Everfree. How many of you remember the storm at the end of last summer?” Every pony in the room put a hoof up. “Okay, good news: this isn’t that bad. Bad news: this could quickly *become* that bad if we don’t stay on top of it.”

 The captain looked out over her team, and nodded to the back of the room, where the young Featherweight was operating a projector. The room lights dimmed and slides of weather patterns snapped into life on the screen. “Reports from our spotters have shown a sizable mass of unstable air building. Right now, it’s trapped between the warm systems of Ponyville and Canterlot, so it’s had nothing to do but sit there and build in power. If we let it ride unchecked, it could break out and head either way with considerable damage being done. The big shots in Cloudsdale have decided that this system can’t be allowed to hit Canterlot, so that means we’ve got to suck it up and take one for the team.”

 She took a step back and indicated the mare at her side. “Because this is such a big deal, our Regional Supervisor and old weather captain is back to manage the situation. I’ll let Dash take it from here.”

 Rainbow Dash nodded her thanks to Raindrops, and stepped up. Dusk had never seen her looking so focused or professional before. “Hey, guys, good to see you all again,” she said in a strong but friendly voice. “Raindrops is right, this storm system has a lot of bad potential, so we’ve got to bleed it off and spread it around. I know things got pretty out of hoof last year, and you can blame me for that if you like. We got too spread out and started missing things, so we’re changing things up a bit this time around.”

 Her eyes swept the crowd, seeking out specific pegasi. “We’re dividing into squads to better manage the storm. Thunderlane?” The black pegasus snapped to attention at the sound of his name. “You’re going to be leading Alpha flight. You need to pick the 6 strongest fliers you can get, because you’re going right into the teeth of the storm. You’re the first line of control.” Thunderlane nodded, grinning from ear to ear at the assignment.

 Rainbow moved on. “Cloudchaser? You get together a few ponies, too. You’re leading Bravo flight, and bring some good cloud sculptors. You’ll be in charge of dispersing the rain clouds across the area so no one part experiences flooding.”

 As Rainbow’s eyes met Dusk’s, he shook his head emphatically. Without missing a beat, she passed right over him. “Mile High? You’ve got Delta flight. I need you to take some ponies up high, over the storm. Keep the warm air from coming in behind the front too quickly. If this system starts building too much pressure, it could start a cyclone, and then all bets are off.”

 In a matter of minutes, Rainbow Dash had assigned a dozen team leads and most ponies had an idea where they would be working. “I’ll be stationed here in Ponyville, getting the weather recon reports. Raindrops will be in charge in the air—all questions go through her first. We’re doing things like this in response to what you all put in your reports after last year’s storm, so if this works then *you’re* all geniuses. If we blow it, then *I’m* an idiot.” The assembled ponies chuckled at Rainbow’s good humor. “So do it for me or for yourselves, but let’s get it done. Go home, rest, and meet back at the fountain in the square at oh-seven-hundred. Know which team you’re on!”

 As the meeting dismissed, ponies began to mill out the doors. Rainbow tapped Dusk on the shoulder and indicated that he should follow her. The two pegasi trotted over to an office where Rainbow was setting up her base of operations, where they could get some privacy.

 “Dusk, how you been lately?” she asked.

 “Oh, okay, I guess.”

 She smacked him lightly in the head with a wing. “You’re an awful liar, you know? Raindrops has been talking with me about you—you’ve been tired, sloppy, and missing work lately. She knows we’re friends and asked me what she should do, and I told her to keep her hooves off and let me deal with you.” She sighed, unhappily. “I talked to Applejack and Twilight, too, and they backed up what Raindrops had said, among other things. You’ve had a pretty rough month here. I had hoped that I could still get you out there, because you’re a great high-altitude flier, but I’m guessing you’re not feeling up to it.”

 He hung his head like a naughty colt in the principal’s office. “I—I just don’t think I can do it, Rainbow. I don’t know what will happen to me if I’m out in the storm.”

 “I had hoped that keeping you above it would help, but I can’t put you out there if you’re not confident. That’s how fliers get hurt.” She took a step towards Dusk and gave his shoulder a friendly punch. “So, will you be back in the library during the storm?”

 Dusk rubbed his shoulder absent-mindedly and frowned. “I doubt it. Twilight’s getting the clean-up teams organized in there, and I don’t think I have to tell you how hard she can be to be around when she’s in ‘planning mode’.”

 Rainbow chuckled. “Okay, so, what’s plan B? I guess I could let you hang out here and help me out.”

 Dusk pondered. “Well, actually, I know Lucky and Caramel are going to be on the farm helping the Apple family get ready for the storm. Maybe I’ll go give them a hoof.”

 “Huh…” Rainbow Dash gave Dusk a cryptic smile. “Yeah, maybe you should do that.”

 Dusk was about to ask her what she meant by that, but she had already walked around the desk to glance over some paperwork, so he said his goodbye and made his exit instead.

 He trotted out the door into the night, towards home, feeling very conflicted. *Why did I decide to avoid my home during what is sure to be the most stressful day of the year? Why am I volunteering to go to the one place that’s made my life so tangled and miserable during the storm? Why am I not digging a hole to hide in or running for Trottingham before the storm hits?*

 He shook his head ruefully. *I guess I’ll find out soon enough.*

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 “Hurry it up, we’ve only got a few minutes a’fore this storm *really* hits!”

 Dusk gritted his teeth as he heard Applejack call out to him over the rumble of thunder. “Working on it!” he yelled back through the gusting winds and patter of fat raindrops as he and Big Macintosh struggled to secure a protective tarp over the Apple family’s wagon. The whipping winds kept tugging it loose and getting underneath it, and if it wasn’t staked down completely when the full storm hit, the rain could warp and ruin the wood or—worse yet—the cart could blow away and be damaged, preventing them from being able to get apples to market at all. The danger of the situation was clearly punctuated by the ever-closer bolts of lightning.

 Dusk threw his whole weight against the last remaining line. He drew the rope taut and held it still while Mac drove a stake through the loop and solidly into the ground with one swift kick, and the two headed for the house, heads down against the weather. Dusk looked around to see that nothing else had to be done, checking the boards over the windows and making sure the barn doors were still closed up. He made it in the door and the wind pulled it shut with a bang, making him jump. He closed his eyes and realized that his entire body was shaking.

 *I have to get past this,* he thought to himself. *I can’t lose it, not now.* He wanted to join the rest of the Apple family and farm staff in the main room but couldn’t bring himself to get past the kitchen. He stood alone, struggling to get control over his anxiety as his limbs threatened to give out underneath him. His jaw tensed as he fought. “It is NOT happening again,” he muttered to himself. “There’s nothing to go wrong today. No one is going to die and nothing bad is going to happen. You’re being a foal, stop it.”

 *What warning did you have last time?* His mind taunted him, replaying how serene and peaceful the night in Canterlot had been. *Then again, maybe it was just your hubris. “I’ll protect you!”* The irony was almost unbearable.

 Dusk felt a tear push its way past his eyelid as he tried to deny his own imagination a grip on his fears when he heard Apple Fritter’s voice.

 “Dusk, you comin’ in?”

 He felt his chest tighten up. Fritter was the last pony he wanted to see him when he was at his lowest. He tried to get anything out that might explain his behavior away, but words just wouldn’t come to him.

 “Hey, what’s wrong?” Apple Fritter examined his face and looked puzzled. “Is it the storm?” He nodded sadly. “I don’t understand…”

 “It—I,” he hesitated. “It’s nothing.”

 She looked askance at him. “I don’t think so, Dusk. You look terrible. What’s wrong? Can’t you trust me yet?”

 Dusk sighed unhappily, knowing he wasn’t likely to get away without offering at least some of the truth. “The last time there was a storm like this I—” he choked. “I lost somepony very important to me. I just keep thinking something awful is going to happen today.”

 She walked over until their faces were almost touching. “Hey, it’s going to be fine,” she reassured him. “Nothing’s gonna happen. This family has ridden out bigger storms before.”

 “I—I keep telling myself that,” he sighed, tapping a trembling hoof against his head.

 “Would you prefer to go in the other room and sit down?” He nodded, and she led him into the main room. Dusk sat heavily on the floor in the corner furthest from the boarded-over windows, and gave a hollow smile to Apple Fritter as she put a blanket over his shoulders and sat down beside him. He felt rather worn out from the frantic storm preparations, and the stress of the moment was weighing exhaustingly on his mind. He tried to fight the desire to doze off, but the blanket on his back was a reassuring weight and the body by his side was pleasantly warm despite his misgivings, and it wasn’t long before he succumbed, sliding into an uneasy sleep.

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 He awoke to a loud crash and the sound of ponies scrambling to get to the front door. He jumped up to meet the others in the yard just in time to see a few cows disappear into the hazy grey of the storm. The side of the barn had been completely caved in by a runaway wagon leaving a huge hole, through which the spooked animals had bolted.

 Applejack threw her hat onto the muddy ground in frustration. “Consarnit, Mac, I told you to get that wagon tied down *tight*!”

 Lucky bent over where the stakes were still firmly embedded in the ground. “Uh, AJ…?” he said, holding up the tattered end of a snapped rope that was still attached to the stake.

 AJ rubbed the bridge of her nose with a hoof and sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Mac. I shoulda known better.”

 Big Macintosh gave her a pat on the back, and looked over the scene. “Well, we gotta get ‘em back.”

 “Right. Those critters won’t last long without hurting themselves in this storm,” AJ said, taking charge. “Mac and me’ll head off after the ones headed into the orchards. Lucky, take a few ponies and look over near Ponyville—they seem to bolt that way most often.” Without waiting for confirmation, she grabbed her hat and took off running, Mac close behind. Lucky looked at his fellow farm workers, shrugged, and they headed off towards town, leaving Apple Fritter and Dusk.

 “Uh, should we look somewhere?” she asked, uncertain.

 Dusk pushed aside his private discomfort and thought. “Let’s take a look at the barn. Maybe we can tell if any went another way,” he said.

 *Toldja things were headed to Tartarus in a basket,* his subconscious taunted him.

 *Shut up,* he retorted.

 As Dusk stood in the driving rain the old familiar feelings came flooding back, trying to overwhelm him. He tried to focus on only one thing at a time, pushing everything else out of his mind as he struggled to figure out which way they should be going. Everypony else had taken the obvious directions, so Dusk tried to search for clues.

 *Focus, Dusk,* he thought, trying to hold himself together. *Dirt. Mud. Tracks?* As he thought, he noticed there were deep hoofprints in the soft ground, left by panicked cattle. At least two sets of the tracks were headed off into the Everfree Forest. He tried to swallow the unease as he thought about going in after those cows.

 He turned to his partner, and Apple Fritter looked at the muddy hoofmarks. “They’re headed off into the forest, right?”

 “Yeah.”

 “Well, let’s go get ‘em!”

 Dusk could feel his mouth going dry. “Yeah. Let’s do that.” His steps were just as unsteady as his voice, but he began the trek into the dark woods.

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 The path was obvious, even to an unskilled tracker. A panicked cow tended to leave a wide swath through the brush, and the two were able to make good time as they followed. As he ran, Dusk tried to concentrate on each hoofstep to block out as much as he possibly could. Each roll of thunder felt like it was going directly down his spine and every strike of lightning showed a myriad of shadows that he instinctively shied away from. He ran on, berating himself for every flinch, and quite conscious of the mare with him who kept throwing odd looks in his direction when he did.

 The two rounded a bend in the path and ran headlong into a massive wind gust, almost stopping them entirely. The interruption gave Dusk just enough time to look up and react to the movement heading for him. Just as the sounds of popping and snapping wood became loud enough to overwhelm the rain and wind, an ancient oak broke through the trees bordering the path, tumbling gently as it plummeted to the ground, broken by the relentless winds.

 “Elegy, No!” Dusk cried as he flung himself backwards, catching Apple Fritter and throwing her away from the danger. The tree slammed to the turf with a roar of rending timber.

 Fritter leapt to her hooves. “Dusk! Are you alright?” She ran to his side.

 He sat, shaking violently, covering his head with his hooves. “No, no, no,” he muttered to himself, keeping his eyes shut, knowing what he would see if they opened. Thunder crashed overhead, and Dusk’s eyes opened instinctively. He could see trees—or were they buildings? It was supernaturally dark, making the white pony in front of him stand out like a beacon.

 “Dusk, are you hurt?” He could hear the voice, but it sounded slightly off, like it didn’t belong to the almost ghostly pony he saw. Why was she asking about him? W—were his hooves covered in blood? He shook his head. She grabbed his face in her hooves and tried to get him to focus. “Dusk, are you okay in there? Do we need to go back?”

 He tried to focus on her. He knew her, didn’t he? Why did her face seem to change as he looked at her? He started as the answer came to him.

 “Elegy?” he asked, “y—you’re alive?”

 The pony in front of him looked distinctly confused. “Dusk, I—who’s—?”

 He grabbed her hoof and pulled her firmly after him. “Come on, we gotta go!” he yelled, dodging around the fallen tree and darting down the path. Fritter was plainly worried about him, but said nothing as she found a way around the massive downed trunk, merely sighing in frustration as she tore off after him.

 Inside Dusk’s head, panic reigned. All he could see was a street where the path was, leading off into the dark. He didn’t know where it would end, but he had to lead his wife to safety or else... She would die… Again?

 He firmly pushed aside his thoughts and raced, trying to find a way to escape the confines of his mental landscape. He rounded a corner, snapping through a few branches which felt like grasping hooves in his head, and gasped as he came face to face with a dead end.

 Fritter raced into the small clearing behind him, seeing him standing at the edge of a large, washed-out ravine, staring panicked into the sky with a distant look in his eyes. She ran over to him, trying to get him to snap out of his delusion.

 The world seemed to explode. A bare bolt of lightning stretched instantly from sky to ground, impacting a large tree not more than a few pony-lengths away. The pure concussion of the blast threw Dusk backwards, dazed from the blinding light in the otherwise dim storm. He tried to blink out the spots on his vision, shaking his head to clear it as the world came back into focus as what it really was. His wife had been dead for 10 months, and he was out in a dangerous storm with a pony who needed his help. He looked around for Apple Fritter, not knowing what might have happened to her, and saw her trying to regain her own senses on the edge of the ravine.

 She clambered to her hooves and looked over the edge. “Oh Luna, that was close.”

 Dusk could almost feel it coming. He was halfway to upright when the face of the ravine, washed by torrential rains and stressed by the weight of the pony, gave way. Apple Fritter didn’t even have time to cry out as she disappeared from Dusk’s view.

 “NO!” he screamed. He took one stride and leaped headfirst over the edge, wings giving one massive push and tucking in close as he cleared the cliff, desperate to fall faster than her. His whole world faded to just him, her, and the ground as time itself seemed to slow. He caught up and put his forehooves around her body, pulling her in close and looking over her shoulder to find the ground.

 It was too close. Much too close. Eons of running water had smoothed the rocky riverbed before receding, leaving only bleached stone under him as the water flowed on the other side of the gully. In the space between heartbeats he could tell that he wouldn’t have time to land—wouldn’t even have time to pull up enough to avoid crashing. His wings flared to catch the air and pain exploded down his back as the muscles were forced to pull twice as much weight as usual at extreme speeds, only brute strength keeping them from buckling altogether under the strain. He was all out of options. There was no avoiding it now.

 Dusk looked at the ground and then at his precious cargo. He wrapped all four hooves tightly around her, tucked his left wing in to force his body to roll over, and braced for the inevitable impact, hoping only to protect her. He could feel every breath of air as it tugged on his feathers, the panicked heartbeat of the mare against his chest, the brush of raindrops against his pelt.

 *Celestia watch over me,* he prayed, closing his eyes and tensing for the crash.

 When he had plummeted from the side of Canterlot and slid down the mountainside—that had been brutal, but it seemed like nothing compared to the blow he took. The ground met his body like a hammer meeting an anvil. He felt his left wing shatter under the combined weight of both ponies as the breath was driven from his body. Pain erupted from his chest as he skipped off the water-smoothed river bed. He bounced, only to have Apple Fritter torn from his hooves as his left side slammed into another rock, spinning him around like a rag doll.

 He finally slid to a stop, his vision blurred from the incredible pain he felt. His head felt like it had been flattened, his breathing was quite difficult, and without even checking he knew his wing was broken beyond use. He lifted his right hoof, noticing it was oddly numb. Even in his state he knew the angle it was at was neither normal nor healthy.

 Just as he was considering giving in to the pain and just blacking out Apple Fritter appeared in his vision, racing to his side. She was running unsteadily, with a gash over her eye bleeding down the side of her face. She dropped to her knees next to him, calling his name.

 “Dusk! Dusk, speak to me. Say something!”

 “You— You look—terrible,” he croaked.

 She gasped out a laugh, tears starting to flow from her green eyes. “You should see yourself. I bet AJ’d say you look like you lost a few rounds at the rodeo,” she said, her voice choked with relief. “Your wing is—oh…” she stopped, putting a hoof to her mouth.

 “… Is what?”

 “Um, just—just don’t move it, Dusk.”  She shuddered, and pointedly did not look at his wing again.  He craned his head around and saw the sickening white glint of bone poking through the surface of his wing, though the sensations were confused and muted under his shock.  “Can you move?” she asked.  “We’ve gotta find some shelter.”

 “Not yet,” he replied.

 “I think I can see a cave down here—we can hunker down inside and wait this storm out.”

 He nodded slowly, blinking against the rain running down his face. “Give me—just a minute.” He struggled to a vaguely sitting position. He tried to shake the water out of his eyes only to groan as he made himself dizzy.

 He felt the rain stop as her hat settled onto his head. “Here, you look like you need it more than I do right about now.”

 Leaning heavily on her for support, Dusk fought his way upright and the two began to make their way towards the available shelter.  The rain made the rocks extremely slick, and the wind threatened to drive them backwards as it whistled down the chasm.  Each step jolted his body, especially when he had to hop to avoid putting weight on his broken front leg.  Dusk had to focus just to remain conscious, relying on his friend to guide his steps.  The pair almost lost their balance as they finally made it into the cave and out of the intense weather.  Apple Fritter helped Dusk gently to the ground once they were well inside the cave, away from the storm and unseasonably cold rain.

 “Is there anything I can do?” she asked, shifting her weight anxiously from hoof to hoof.

 “I would say start a fire, but that doesn’t seem too likely in this rain.” He beckoned her to lay down as well with his good hoof. “We’re just going to have to wait the storm out for now.”

 She sighed unhappily, but did as he suggested. She lay down next to his right side, turning to him. “You saved my life, Dusk. Thank you,” she whispered, giving his cheek a quick, heartfelt kiss before she settled in against him. Even though his likely-broken ribs protested he wouldn’t have asked her to move away in a lifetime. He stretched out his good wing protectively over her withers and laid his head next to hers, shuddering slightly as his emotions caught up and overwhelmed him.

 Everything felt so different now, like he had left his discomfort back on the clifftop as he dove into the gorge after her. He felt like everything inside of him had been stripped away, leaving only the bare truth behind—the same truth he had been fighting against.

 “I don’t think I could live if I let somepony I loved die again,” he said quietly.

 He felt her tense slightly at his words. She turned to look at him. “Y—you—love? As in…”

 “Um, it’s all a bit confused in my head right now,” he admitted. “For months now, I’ve thought of you as a good friend—somepony I could talk to, but even if you were like family I don’t know if I would have jumped off a cliff after you,” he said, trying to keep his voice light even as emotion tightened his throat. “I was trying to not be around you very often. I’ve been fighting the idea of you as being important to me, or that I might like you, or more. I couldn’t admit it—I got scared…”

 She looked into his eyes. “You sad you lost somepony.”

 He nodded. “I had a wife before I came to Ponyville. The storm on the night she was killed was a lot like this storm today. It…” he stopped, searching for words. “It broke me—took me months to start recovering. I was jumping at shadows for a long time. I still was—still am sometimes. Maybe I think that it was my fault.”

 “Is that who Elegy was, your wife?” she asked. He sadly confirmed it was. “Is that why you dove after me?”

 “Yes,” he admitted. “If I hadn’t done everything possible, I know the guilt would have destroyed me this time.” He sighed, baring his heart to her. “Fritter, I really do love you. You’re a great mare, and one of the few ponies I feel like I can talk to and connect with.” He tried to grin around his battered face, only partially successful. “Plus, you gave me your hat. That’s gotta count for something.” He let the smile drop, his voice earnest. “Seriously though, having you as a friend has been, well, it’s been good for me. I’m not sure if I could leave you, even if I wanted to.”

 She was quiet for a long time—long enough that Dusk was getting worried he had offended her somehow. “Dusk, can I admit something to you?” she asked softly. “I’d hoped you felt that way. After I jumped at you for avoiding me, I talked to AJ, asked her if she thought I should ask you out or somethin’. She told me—plainly—that I shouldn’t press you. She told me that you had been hurt pretty bad, that I should give you the space you needed. It wasn’t easy, because you seemed to be fine when I met you, but I can see what she had meant. The way you kept to yourself for the most part, the way you almost never started a conversation—it all kinda makes sense now.”

 Dusk closed his eyes. “She was right. I would have pushed you away. I was so scared of forgetting my wife that I shut almost everypony else out. It made things even more frustrating for me that I just couldn’t stay away. I kept working around the farm even after I joined the weather team just so I could see you, even though it was killing me.” His wing wrapped around her just a bit tighter. “I know—I *know*—I could never forget about her, but I couldn’t make myself not be afraid. I can’t come that close to dying and kid myself, though. I know what my dreams mean now: I can’t keep trying to hold on too closely to my wife’s ghost, or I’ll lose everypony else I care about. I’m trying to learn how. I really am.”

 When he reopened his eyes, Apple Fritter was smiling warmly at him. “I couldn’t ask for anything more than that, Dusk,” she said, turning back away and settling in against his side once again.

 He chuckled nervously. “Well, I don’t have a fancy hat to give you, but I can improvise.” He reached his head over to his intact wing, pulled a primary feather free with a grunt, and tucked the long grey feather securely in Fritter’s hair behind her ear to lie back along her mane. She sighed happily, and the two fell silent, watching the rain falling outside the mouth of the cave.

 Dusk took the time to finally go through his thoughts. By this point, there was no point in trying to lie, not even to himself. He had fallen for Fritter, even going so far as to express his commitment to her in token form. He knew the depth of what that meant, but did she? What if she didn’t—would she be scared when she found out?

 Even more than that, since the moment Dusk admitted his feelings Celestia’s prophecy had been playing through his mind on an endless loop. *The greatest of sacrifices are required to cover the greatest hurts.* Did that mean that his days were numbered? Now that he found a pony he cared for more than his own life, would he be required to lay that life down? How was that fair?

 *It doesn’t much matter how whole I am if I’m dead,* he thought. *Would it be better to live a life with a painful memory or die letting it go?* He couldn’t shake the feeling that his reckoning hadn’t come yet—that the worst was yet to come. That thought terrified him. *What if I can’t save Fritter no matter what I do? What if my sacrifice doesn’t matter?* As his eyes closed, he was consumed by the thought of how he would try to explain how he had failed again when he saw his wife on the other side.

 The same thought was on his mind right up until he heard the growling.