

Irreplaceable
Chapter 18: Consequences

Although every pony in the cave during those early dawn hours reacted differently to the tale told, the one shared reaction was complete silence.

“And so, Luna and I returned to our castle, hopes for the future of Kalt’Vindur high. We were sure that, given the proper environment and time to reflect on his actions, he would most certainly change for the better. We convinced ourselves that by the time we returned to speak with him, he would be more than prepared to turn over a new leaf. However, we never got the chance.”

Celestia turned to Luna, her eyes speaking volumes as the Moon Princess hung her head. “We never got the chance, because 400 years later...” Celestia trailed off. In truth, nopony needed her to finish the sentence.

“After Luna’s... *absence*, I became... More than a little distracted, truth be told. Days faded to months, and to years, and events that had once been of the highest import were entirely forgotten. I never returned to find him, and I almost completely forgot he existed, I’m ashamed to say. He just... faded away. He never reemerged, he never caused any trouble whatsoever, he was invisible.” Celestia closed her eyes, turning away.

“Pardon me, princess, but... I get the feelin’ that yer date with that there dragon was a touch more important than just seein’ if his temper’s improved.” Celestia nodded.

“Yes, you’re correct. There was a purpose beyond simply discussing his current emotional state. When one places a seal on a being’s own magic, there are certain... limitations. You can smother it, seal it, wrap it and bury it deep within them, but... magic is life itself and, quite simply, you cannot contain life. No matter what obstructions it may face, life always finds a way around them. The main purpose of the meeting was to examine the seal that Luna placed on Kalt’Vindur and, if necessary, repair it. I just... I *forgot him*. It has been almost 1400 years since the seal was placed. It’s been degrading since then. This is... This is all my fault. If I hadn’t... He would have never had the power to do any of this... I... I am so *sorry*...” Twilight stood from where she sat and walked up to stand in front of her mentor, an angry look upon her face. Celestia opened her eyes and looked to her pupil. “I am... so, so sorry, Twilight, I-“

“Stop.” All eyes shot to Twilight, and all jaws dropped. Over the course of the past several months, the ponies had been exposed to and experienced some of the strangest things in their lives. Twilight Sparkle raising her voice to Princess Celestia, however, blew all the rest away. “Are you really expecting me to sit here and accept an apology from you?” Celestia’s eyes shot wide, and tears began to form.

“I... I-” The princess tried to speak, really she did, but the words just wouldn’t come.

“I told you to stop it.” Twilight stomped a hoof, fixing her with the angriest glare that any of her

friends had ever seen.

“...I...I am sorry...but...but I don’t get it.”

“It’s a rock face... There isn’t anything to get, lad.”

Spike sagged slightly, seeming disappointed. “But... you made it seem like we were headed somewhere special...”

“This is a special place, my boy!”

“I don’t see it.”

“That’s because we haven’t done anything to make it special yet.”

“Ah... well then. That would explain it.” Delicraw opened his mouth to say something, but closed it, raising a set of giant claws to cover his eyes. Being solely responsible for the young dragon’s mindset, he knew better than to try and continue with that train of thought.

“Now then, Spike. Before we continue with the night’s proceedings, I need to impart a truth unto you. I... Am not what I seem.” Before Spike could respond, or, for that matter, even fully register what he had said, Delicraw’s eyes began to glow a pure, blinding white, and with a dull roar and a crackle of magic, was lost to sight in a smoky cocoon. The smoke swirled, twisting and roiling, slowly becoming distended and bulbous. Agonized roars mixed with demented laughter, the eldritch storm shifting and boiling, the stench of ozone filling the air as the magic being released burned the surrounding air. The laughter was simultaneously chilling and familiar, both in its raw madness and its pure evil.

In a powerful explosion of light and mist, the cocoon evaporated and revealed a dragon that was decidedly *not* the master Spike had come to know. At first, Spike had thought himself face to face with a skeleton. The bleached, bone white scales of the great beast before him were not those of his master. Its claws and spines were misplaced, its neck shortened, its hips wider. The great white beast stretched its new body, streaks of silver and blue flashing in the moonlight as a series of pops and cracks echoed through the night, newly shifted joints snapping into place. Spike looked upon this monster in fear and confusion; though the bond he shared with his master affirmed its identity, every instinct, every draconic instinct screamed at him to flee, to fight, to loose flame until he could breathe no more. The dragon before him was something to be feared, he knew that much. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his brain, those dark crannies in which sanity still clung to life, realized this and, for the first time in a long time, knew fear.

The colossal ivory beast looked upon the smaller dragon with a crazed smile of utter glee. He

had no need of a mental bond to tell him of the raw terror felt by his little madling; he could *smell* it... and it was *delicious*. He laughed again, a low rumbling chuckle starting deep in his belly and rising, louder and longer, ending in a maniacal cackle. This was it. No more hiding, no more cowering, no more running. No more pretending to be *ever so nice*. It had been well over a thousand years, skulking in the shadows of this accursed forest. It was time for him to continue his quest. He was free.

Laughter subsiding, he took a step forward, lowering his head so that he might look his slave in the eyes. ***“Hello, Spike.”*** The words rose from his throat in a sibilant hiss. ***“You know, I don’t believe that you and I have ever been properly introduced. While it’s true that I’ve been known by many names over the years, there’s one that I’ve grown rather fond of. My true name, if you’d believe it.”*** Spike tried to back away, but the beast easily outdistanced his strides, cornering him against the rock face. Opening his mouth, Spike prepared a burst of flame, only to find a massive claw encircling his jaws, squeezing them shut. ***“Naughty naughty, little madling... you wouldn’t be trying to scorch your master now, would you?”*** The ancient dragon lowered his head even more, bringing his right eye level with the smaller dragon’s face, merely inches apart as he spoke.

“Hello, Spike. I am Kalt’Vindur, The Frozen Claw Of The White Wastes. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. Now, I believe we have some business to attend to.” He grinned again, it spreading across his features, distorting them. ***“Me and you, you and I... We have some work to do. After all, you need to hold up your end of the bargain. I certainly did. I gave you your revenge, didn’t I? Now, I require a favour from you. It’s only fair, after all.”***

The cave was absolutely silent. Filled with stunned, slack jawed ponies, the only noise was the slow drip of water from the walls and ceilings of the cave. In truth, almost everypony wanted to speak, to say something, *anything*, but not one could bring themselves to utter a word. Of everypony present, Celestia, god-princess of Equestria, was probably the most stunned. Retreating slightly, she was taken aback for the first time in many hundreds of years.

Twilight shook her head once more, a mixture of rage and sorrow etched on her features. *“How. How can you sit there and apologize to us after telling us that story?”*

“I know... I don’t deserve your forgiveness... I just-” Celestia stopped midsentence as Twilight took a step forward. Luna tensed. Twilight Sparkle was the closest thing that Celestia had to family next to her, but... what would she do if Twilight acted?

Storming up to the Princess, she pressed herself against her mentor. Momentarily taken aback, the startled alicorn wrapped her student in a hug.

“Your story... Your story was of kindness, *your* kindness, bestowing a second chance upon a creature that didn’t deserve it. There is absolutely *NO WAY* that you are in any way responsible

for what's happened here. It's not your fault that... that... *that MONSTER* didn't change. He was given a chance, but he used it to take advantage of you. It's not your fault. I could never hate you, or even be the least bit angry with you for trying to save a life."

Twilight shook her head, looking up at her mentor. "Most ponies would do absolutely anything for a chance at redemption. You don't need to apologize to anyone, Princess, because there's nothing to apologize for. If... If you still insist on taking the blame for it, don't take it all. Leave some for me, too." Eventually, Twilight broke the hug, taking a few steps back in order to look the much taller pony in the eyes. "Now then. We don't have time to sit around feeling sorry for ourselves. We have a monster to defeat, and a dear friend to save!" Celestia stood tall once more, shaking off her sadness. Once again, she wrapped her normal mantle of regal confidence around herself.

"You are absolutely right, Twilight. Now, let's get to work. First and foremost, we need to figure out where Spike and Kalt'Vindur may have gone."

"Right!" Twilight nodded, reinvigorated by her mentor's determination. "Maybe they left some sort of clue here, there's certainly enough places to look!" Twilight ran to the nearest pile of treasure and immediately began sifting through it. Finally snapped from their daze, the rest of the ponies approached the treasure and began to help her look. All, that is, except for Rarity, who approached the Princesses carefully.

"Pardon me, your Majesties, but... something occurs to me."

"And what might that be, Rarity?"

"Well... In retrospect, having Spike attack Ponyville would serve little purpose in the grand scheme of helping that ruffian. In fact, it would hinder his efforts, simply serving to attract your attention. With that in mind, why would... Kalt'Vindur, was it? Why would he bother using his magic to do that unless he had some sort of purpose behind it?" The Princesses looked at one another, pausing as they considered this information. It didn't take long before their eyes shot wide, realization sinking in.

"My little ponies, come here." Stopping their search, everypony dropped whatever treasure they were sorting through and approached the Princesses again. "We now know what to look for. His plans are now clear to us. Kalt'Vindur plans to escape, and we know how."

"How?" Everypony present spoke in unison. Celestia turned to Twilight.

"Twilight, are you aware of Spike's magical talents?"

"Well, I know that he's capable of sending and receiving messages with his fire." Celestia nodded.

"Yes, that's true. However, I don't believe that you're aware of how special that is. As you're

aware, there are many different types of dragons. Many different species possess different types of magic. Most times, their type of magic is released through the magical glands in their throats. Many dragons breathe fire, although others can breathe things such as ice, water, steam, the list goes on. Now, Spike's breath is a rather unique type. In order to possess the power Spike does, a dragon must be hatched through the use of magic. At a young age, this fire can be used to send small things from one point to another. Scrolls, small objects, etcetera. At Spike's age, he had to create an anchor with me, so I am the only one he is able to send things to. However, once he grows up, he will be able to send much larger objects to just about anyone, just so long as he could picture them clearly in his mind's eye. Judging by what you have told me, Spike is very large now... That means his abilities have increased, and he will have gained a new ability. It makes perfect sense, now... when Kalt'Vindur and Spike first met in this cave, he must have practically leapt with joy when he realized Spike's talents."

Twilight spoke up, concern weighing heavily on her voice "Princess... what, exactly is Spike capable of?"

"If Kalt'vindur manages to find a large enough smooth surface, Spike could use his breath to -"

"I don't think I understand."

"You don't need to understand. For the moment, just sit there." Spike obeyed, plopping himself on the ground before the dragon. Kalt'Vindur lowered himself to his level and spoke slowly, almost patronizingly. **"Now then. I am going to use my magic to show you a image of a location. When you see it, I need you to concentrate hard. You have to focus, and remember every single little detail you see. Alright?"** Spike nodded his head. **"Good."**

Reaching down with his massive claws, the great dragon grasped the younger's head between them, linking their minds with a thought. It was then that he himself concentrated, thinking hard on the image he wished to share, forcing it into Spike's mind as he quashed his own worries. It was dangerous, no doubt about it, but Kalt'Vindur couldn't care less about the mental health of the younger dragon. No, his worries stemmed from time, or lack thereof. It was very easy to lose track of time when not in one's own head, and they didn't have much to waste. Closing his eyes, he concentrated even harder on the mental image.

To his credit, Spike did his absolute best to memorize every inch of the scene before him. It was a rather difficult task, however, seeing as the image contained almost nothing but pure, drifting whiteness as far as he could see. Eventually, he picked out a small detail, a rock poking out of the ground. He focused on that small rock, on its position, how it fit into the scene.

He focused to the best of his abilities, but after what seemed like minutes, he shot back to reality as Kalt'Vindur severed their minds, breaking the spell.

“Majkata! I can’t believe we wasted an entire hour in there. Come, Spike, stand up. It’s time. Do as I instructed earlier, we haven’t a moment to lose.” Spike obediently turned, facing the great stone wall. Taking a deep breath, the young dragon summoned the image of that snowy wasteland in his mind. His eyes blazing with green fire, he let loose with every ounce of flame he could muster. As flame met stone, the emerald fire took root, as if the rock wall were centuries-dried wood. Growing, crawling, spreading outwards, the flame clawed its way across the surface. Spike felt a claw on his shoulder, and he knew it was time to stop. Cutting off the inferno, he stepped aside to make way for his master, who inspected the wall with a devilish grin. What had once been a solid stone wall was now a dancing, crackling sheet of flame. Then, it began to shift and twist, swirling and spiralling, a vortex in jade. As the vortex widened, the center of the whirling mass of flame expanded into an endlessly bubbling blur of colour and light, solidifying into a solid, shimmering image; a endless snowy landscape with a single rock.

Kalt’Vindur threw back his head, letting out a burst of mad laughter. ***“YES! YES, YOU’VE DONE IT! Excellent work, boy, excellent! You have helped me greatly. I will always remember you for this, my... friend...”*** The great dragon paused, looking pensive for a moment, before grinning widely. ***“Yes, my friend. I’ve never had a real one before. I would ask you to accompany me home, but you would not be able to survive the climate. Only a true ice dragon can survive the temperatures of the White Wastes. In any event, I do believe that this is goodb-”***

Instantly, his head snapped around, eyes narrowing as he looked to the south, his smile turning to a scowl. ***“Majkata! I knew we’d taken too long. Spike... my friend, my boy, my madling, I require one last favour from you. There is a group of ponies approaching from the south. Find them and stop them... in whatever way you see fit.”***

As Spike turned to leave, he felt a colossal claw close on his shoulder one last time. ***“And Spike? One last thing.”*** His scowl was gone, the demented light in his eyes returning as that impossible grin spread back across his face. ***“Get mad. Get very, VERY mad.”*** The moment he released him, Spike shot away, blind fury crawling through his mind once more.

“...I....I had no idea he was capable of that.” Twilight stood wide eyed, stunned as Celestia finished her explanation.

“We haven’t a moment to lose. We must find him and stop him.”

A quick glance at her friends told Twilight all she needed to know.

“We’re with you, Princess.”

Celestia nodded her head, smiling. Returning to the entrance of the cave, Celestia rapped out several quick orders to her guards, who immediately took to the skies.

"I've ordered them to retrieve the nearest reserve squadron as fast as possible and return to us. We need all the help we can get." Turning to Luna, the Sun Princess inclined her head. "We have but a few hours until sunrise, sister. If you would, can you please locate our friend? And our monster?"

Nodding, Luna closed her eyes, and her horn began to glow with an ethereal light. As she concentrated, gravity seemed to lose its hold on her, and her mane began to drift about her head, wafting on an invisible breeze. Stretching herself to the sky, the glow spread to the rest of her, eventually disappearing to be replaced by shadow. As the ponies watched, she began to turn slightly transparent, and she sparkled as though filled with millions upon millions of stars. She stayed like that for several minutes before resuming a corporeal form, landing gently upon four hooves. She wavered slightly, off balance, before regaining her composure.

"They are at a large rock face, due north of our position. If we head this way, we can't possibly miss it." Without a word, the ponies took off at a gallop towards the rock.

As they made their way through the early morning light, the two Princesses hung back slightly.

"Do you think we can do it, sister?"

"Indeed I do... That student of yours is quite the pony."

"No... not student. Friend... and yes. Yes, she is." A small smile spread across Luna's face. "As sad as this whole sorry situation may be, I have to say. It feels good to help in a way that doesn't involve endless meetings with stuffy bureaucrats." Her sister giggled.

"Indeed." Luna moved herself closer to her sister, stretching her neck to speak directly into her ear.

"Twilight is right. You need not apologize for kindness. And please, do not let this experience sour your soul. You have always been willing to give any creature a second chance. One poor experience shouldn't affect that."

"As always, you show yourself far wiser than I pretend to be. Far more than you let on." Luna smiled, returning her gaze to the path ahead.

"We *will* stop him."

"What of Spike?"

"I am one hundred percent confident that his friends can bring him back." At this pronouncement, Celestia cocked an eyebrow in curious surprise.

"You have always been optimistic, but this seems to be a bit more than simple optimism. How

can you be so sure?" The midnight blue mare's smile grew, winking mischievously at her sister..

"I am the night sky, I am the moon that floats in it and the stars that light its waters. Truth may try to hide in the darkness my beauty creates, but all things are revealed when I sing. For when I sing, I am not just using my voice, but the voices of all things in life that are afraid to bear their souls during the day. And truth can never hope to hide from life itself. "

Celestia nodded, choosing to press the issue no further. She knew that little excerpt rather well; it was taken from an excessively long, rather verbose love letter written to Luna over three thousands years ago. It was one of her favourite things to quote, referring to it when she didn't feel like answering a question in a straightforward manner. Celestia chuckled. She was always so dramatic.

"You still haven't answered my question. What of Spike?"

The smile faded from Luna's face, the full meaning of her sister's question sinking in. "...At the very least, we can return to him both his sanity and the love of his family. There's not much beyond that we can do, and you know it. I'm sorry, sister." Celestia nodded sadly.

"That... is what I thought. Do you think Twilight knows?"

"I would stake my my horn on it. We will deal with that situation when the time comes." Celestia sighed. Luna was right, there was nothing that any creature could do for poor Spike. That... that *monster* had taken advantage of her kindness and hurt her friends. Before the sun set on this day, he would rue the day he was hatched.

"And there, in the blackest pits of its own vile creation, the monster learned its final lesson: That she, The Eternal Radiance, has no pity for those who would toy with the love of her subjects." Luna glanced at her sister.

"I thought you hated that story?"

"And I still do... but I do believe that line is fitting." The sisters paused for a long moment, silence heavy in the air as they ran.

"Indeed."

And with that, the two sisters quickened their pace, joining the rest of the group.

~TO BE CONTINUED~

A/N: Hey all. To begin, sorry it took so long to get you this chapter. I've been a bit distracted as of late. To begin with, I got knifed at work a few weeks back (Don't worry, I'm just fine, and the guy with the knife is *far* worse off than I am. Sent the bastard my drycleaning bill to get his bloodstains out of my uniform. He can get right on that after they put his face back together.) That was a mite distracting, to be honest, and it was a little hard to concentrate on the story. Couple that with the fact that I spent approximately 5-6 hours a day caught up in an epic pony RPG campaign, and that's a recipe for no story.

Again, I'm sorry, and I'll try to get the next chapter to you sooner. Thanks to all my readers for being fucking AWESOME, and still reading even after that bloody great delay.

~La Barata