

Kindred Spirits

Chapter 5: Home is Where the Heart is

'I've hunted here before'

Lush, brown trees took on a spectacular violet garb as the dragon's scales reflected whatever stray rays of sunlight had managed to break through the forest canopy. Aside from such subtle shifts in color, it was nigh-impossible for any unsuspecting prey to predict his presence. Each step forward meant a carefully placed silent claw, a small flick of the tail to slide past a sea of trunks, a shift of the wings to avoid creating even the smallest disturbance in the afternoon breeze.

Suddenly, the wind shifted, acting as a harbinger for a scent that flared his nostrils and caused him to lick his chops hungrily.

Amidst the appalling stench of red-clad fruit, the musk of two equine mares could be made out, setting each of his senses off with pleasurable alarm.

'Books, apples and sweat,' he tasted as his forked tongue prodded the air.

'Busy in conversation,' predatory ears overheard.

The dragon moved with new-found purpose, slipping through the rowed-woods with a frightening mixture of swiftness and stealth. Not long after, the trees cut off abruptly in an unnatural line, giving way to fields of crops, rolling hills, and a home and barn off in the distance.

Such landforms and structures were only dully acknowledged. His attention was focused solely on the sight before him - two ponies, orange and purple, lingering just outside of the patterned forest, engaged in idle chat.

"...And was just wondering if you would need any help for this upcoming Applebuck Season?"

He ceased his advance, a small batch of trees the only thing separating him from his prey. While the dragon could simply leap from the orchard right now with an almost sure chance of a catch, months of previous hunting had taught him that the element of surprise was something to be treasured.

'Now just to wait for an opening.'

“Well shoot Twilight that’s awfully kind of ya, but Macintosh and Applebloom are already bitin’ at the bit to get started! We should be fine for this year.”

The orange mare stood perpendicular to his current position. She would see him lunging with at least a second or two to spare. On the other claw, the purple mare faced in such a way that he could descend upon her this instant, with not so much as a struggle...

'Stop! She isn't the target!'

“Oh good! I wanted to check just in case. Don’t want another repeat of the season you tried to do it all yourself!”

“Yeah you’ve been remindin’ me every year since. Thought you’d of forgotten by now.”

“Hard to forget half the town falling ill. How are the crops coming along?”

At last the orange mare turned away from him, towards the rows of fresh crops.

“Greener than ever! Ah’m expectin’-”

A ferocious roar ripped from his maw as he sprang from the apple trees, claws and wings outstretched in an intimidating manner. Both ponies reacted instantly, the orange with an expression of fright while the purple possessed a wry smile. High-pitched screams followed shortly.

Instead of aiming for his original target, the dragon found himself swerving to the left towards the other mare, her face quickly sharing the same fear of her companion.

'What am I doing!?!'

Before he could crash into the purple pony, his feet dug into the earth, halting him just before impact.

Then he fell to the ground laughing. The orange mare’s face quickly contorted in confusion while the purple mare’s snout was scrunched up in a sour pout.

“Spike!” Twilight shouted. “You said you were going to prank Applejack not both of us!”

His laughter died away as he picked himself back up. "I'm an equal opportunist! I provide scares no matter the pony!"

"Spike...?" Applejack asked, half in shock, half in joy..

The dragon nodded as he turned toward his friend with a wide grin, flaring out his purple wings and flexing his green spines. "I'm back, and boy is it good to be home!"

"Well I'll be! Mighty glad to see ya again! Things were gettin' eerily quiet around here with ya gone, even with Pinkie Pie on the loose."

"It's good to see you again too! And the farm as well! After stalking through the orchard for the past five minutes I can already tell you're in for a great season!"

"Heh, yeah it's in great condition this year."

Applejack's brow furrowed and her expression darkened.

"I don't mean to cause any trouble... but... Celestia...?"

"Already talked to her and sorted everything out," Twilight interjected quickly.

"Good," Applejack said sharply. "Was downright ridiculous what happened those months go."

Spike waved his claw in the air, as if shooin' an insect. "All in the past now. Anyways, me and Twilight want to meet up with the others before sundown, so we gotta get moving!"

"Alrighty then!" Applejack extended a hoof. "I won't keep ya waitin'!"

"See ya around!" he responded, accepting the hoofshake. Where he had once considered her one of the strongest ponies he had ever known, her limb felt like a twig in his grasp.

'So weak. Probably wouldn't even put up a fight.'

Spike chuckled at the absurd thought. *'What am I going to do? Wrestle her!?'*

"Ya'll come back around real soon!" Applejack called out as they departed from Sweet

Apple Acres. “With Applebuck Season comin’ round, we’ll have plenty of fresh apples!”

‘Blech.’

“Thanks Applejack!” Twilight called out. “See you soon!”

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“Yes! This is freaking awesome!” Rainbow Dash cheered. “I knew you were too cool for the princess to keep out!”

The three friends lingered on the outskirts of Ponyville, Twilight having just caught the cyan mare as she finished her daily weather patrol.

“You know it!” Spike crowed back, pounding her hoof with his claw. “You’ve probably got a million tricks to show me huh?”

“Actually, I’ve kinda been laying off the new tricks so I can perfect my current ones.”

“Not making up any new tricks?” Twilight asked, suspicious. “Since when has Rainbow Dash never been thinking up a new trick?”

Dash puffed her chest out in pride. “Since she was getting ready to try out for the Wonderbolts, that’s what!”

“No way!” Spike cried excitedly. “I’ll make sure to stay out of your way then, you must be training hard.”

“Now wait just a minute Spike. Just because I’m training doesn’t mean I don’t have time for some good old fashioned fun!”

“Rock on! I’ll make sure to hit you up for a race later!”

“A race?” Dash snickered. “Don’t kid yourself!”

“What?” Spike asked with a wry grin. “Don’t believe that I’ve improved while I was gone? Or do I need to chase you down to prove my point?”

The cyan mare broke into hysterics. “A dragon trying to catch a pegasus! I’d love to see

you try!”

‘Me too.’

“Pfft. Whatever. Twilight and I have to get going, see ya around Dash, and good luck!”

“Sure thing! I’ll see you two later!”

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The door to the Carousel Boutique swung open, revealing a pampered white mare.

“My apologies but the- oh! Twilight! And... Spike!?”

“Nah, just some random purple and green dragon that asked to stay at the library for a few days!” said Twilight.

Rarity scoffed at the crude joke while beckoning them inside. “Come in come in! Tell me everything!”

While Twilight and Rarity stood at the back of the main designing room, Spike leisurely sprawled out in front of the exit, casually watching the two ponies as they conversed.

“Do fill me in what happened Twilight. I’m elated to see Spike back, but Celestia seemed rather...”

‘I’ve never noticed just how ridiculous Rarity is. Her hair curls and loops all over the place like some exotic dish and she constantly reeks of unsavory perfume. Twilight manages to look exquisite without any of tha-’

‘Whoa, calm down Spike! I love her, but not like that!’

“... And that’s how I convinced her Spike had no intention of causing us any harm.”

“This is FANTASTIC news! Spike, I’m so happy that you’ve returned!”

“Me too! Lemme tell ya, it was getting pretty lonely out there.”

“Well now you don’t have to worry about being alone ever again. We’re all here for you.”

“Aw... thanks Rarity.”

“Spike and I have to get moving,” Twilight said quickly. “Still have to visit Pinkie and Fluttershy before the day’s over!”

“Oh! Hurry along then! And Twilight?” Rarity caught them as they exited the boutique.

“Yes?”

“Take it slow with dear Fluttershy... she’s still horribly conflicted...”

“We know,” Spike responded softly. “Don’t worry. I understand how she feels and haven’t harbored anything against her.”

“Hm. Good. I look forward to the inevitable party Pinkie will throw. ‘Till then!”

“Bye!” Twilight called as the door shut behind them. “Whew! Was seeing if I could get you out of there before you started hitting on her!”

“Twilight!” Spike growled, smoke rising from his nostrils. “I already told you I was over her YEARS ago!”

The purple mare laughed. “Sure Spike. I’d believe you if you didn’t have that same lovey-dovey look in your eyes you always have when you see Rarity.”

‘It’s not because of Rarity...’

“Aren’t we in a hurry?”

“Yeah yeah. Next stop: Sugarcube Corner.”

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“And I’ll host it right in the middle of the town square, so everypony will HAVE to attend!”

Pinkie jumped up and down excitedly in front of them, having immediately left the counter the moment they had entered the store.

“That’s nice Pinkie.” Twilight smiled. “Any idea when?”

“Right now!”

“Whoa Pinkie! We still have to go see Fluttershy and I would like to make my first day back a little relaxing!” Spike said desperately, raising his claws in defense.

“Silly me! Of course you do! We can have our own quick party right here then!”

Before either of them could protest, the pink pony disappeared into the backroom only to return with three large cupcakes.

“One for you! And one for you! And one for me!”

Spike grimaced at the confection, then began to raise it to his maw.

“WAIT!” Pinkie cried out.

“Huh? What’s the matter?” the dragon asked in shock.

Pinkie took a deep breath, then burst into song.

“♪Spike is back!
Spike is back!
He’s right here beside me with a big-nice-snack!
Spike is here!
No more Fear!
Now we’ll celebrate with a big-nice-cheer!♪”

“Hooray!” she cheered happily. “You can’t just have a welcome-back party without a song to start it off!”

“Thanks Pinkie,” Spike said as he tried to wipe the stupid grin off of his face. “It already feels like home again!”

“See!? It works! Now let’s dig in!”

The two mares began to eat away at their cupcakes while Spike eyed his desert with

uncertainty.

'Come on! Just eat it!'

He glanced at Pinkie, who smiled at him in return, followed by Twilight, who cocked an eyebrow at the dragon. Suddenly, his cupcake seemed highly unappealing.

“Something wrong, Spike?” Twilight asked.

'Now I can't eat around her anymore? I've known her for my whole life! Why is this happening now??'

“Huh? Oh! No, nothing! I'm fine.”

Spike tossed the morsel into his mouth, cringing as he felt it slide down his throat.

'Tastes like nothing. Like a scrap of cardboard.'

“That was delicious Pinkie,” Twilight thanked her. “Spike and I have to get moving now.”

“Aw! Leaving already??”

“Yep, sorry,” Spike apologized. “We still have to see Fluttershy before sundown.”

“Just remember, HUGE party tomorrow!”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world Pinkie! See ya then,” Twilight called as they left Sugarcube corner.

As Spike and Twilight stepped outside, crimson rays shot across the tops of Ponyville's rooftops, soaking the tops of the buildings in a blood-red hue. Mares hastily gathered their children while stallions chatted amongst each other, exchanging their final farewells before their wives called them back home.

“Last stop,” Twilight said apprehensively.

“Last stop,” Spike repeated.

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'She looks almost like a deer.'

Spike observed the yellow pegasus from afar, hidden by a patch of brush. Indeed, while he had always known FlutterSHY wasn't a brash pony, her timid and frail movements were as clear as daylight to him now, bringing up images of the wildlife he had once lived amongst during his exile.

Twilight entered from the left side of his vision, trotting up to the fence which surrounded Fluttershy's home. The mere sight of her sent his heart racing and made him shift uncomfortably.

'Come on, focus. This is about Fluttershy, not Twilight.'

"Fluttershy!" the purple mare called out, eliciting a squeak from the startled pegasus.

"Oh Twilight. It's just you," she responded as she turned and trotted towards her friend.

"Fluttershy, we need to talk."

She instantly halted her progress, taking a few steps back in apprehension. "But... I already said I was sorry and..."

"No. Not about that. Come here."

The pegasus fidgeted in place.

"Please?"

Finally, Fluttershy continued forward until she stood before Twilight, pink strands of hair still shrouding a sad, guilty expression.

"Thank you. Anyways, Celestia allowed Spike to return"

"Oh my goodness," she squealed, raising a hoof to her mouth.

"No! Look you have to understand, Spike doesn't hate you. He's your friend!"

"He's not mad?"

“Nope. Happy to see you actually.”

“Is he... *here* here?”

“Whenever you’re ready, I’ll call him over.”

Fluttershy took a deep breath, her eyes darting around the grove as if to oust the hiding dragon.

“I’m ready.”

“SPIKE!”

The dragon stepped forth from the brush, making sure to keep his wings folded and teeth hidden. At the sight of him, the yellow pegasus shied away, shrinking closer to the ground.

“S-Spike?”

“Fluttershy,” he responded simply, at a loss for words.

To both their surprise, Fluttershy flew herself to be eye level with the dragon and embraced his snout. “I’m so sorry Spike,” she said softly. “I never knew...”

“It’s ok. You were just following your instincts. It’s over now.”

Twilight trotted up to Spike with a large smile. “You should see yourself right now Spike, youAAAH!”

With a sudden tug she was pulled in, a large purple-scaled arm wrapping around her. “Don’t think you can get out of this either,” Spike growled playfully.

The initial shock wore off and Twilight fully embraced the dragon with a happy sigh. Once more, the strange feeling of heat and anxiousness overtook his body.

‘There it is again. I’ll never be able to act the same around Twilight now because of something I can’t even control!’

Before dismay could overtake him, a soft prodding ran up his left belly as Twilight wriggled free of his grasp and lifted her muzzle to his ear.

“Spike, I love you.”

The dragon had heard this many, MANY times before, spoken in much the same way. For some reason, however, the three words meant more than anything he had ever heard or felt before.

‘That’s it,’ he settled, finally relaxing after the chaotic inner struggle he had been fighting ever since he had first seen Twilight from his exile. *‘I love her. It took months of being away to finally realize it, but I love her.’*

“I love you too,” Spike responded, but with a whole different world of intentions.

The three friends held their embrace for what seemed like hours until nightfall forced them to part ways.

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‘Now how do I tell her?’

Spike lay on the library’s wooden floor, taking in the scent of old oak and ancient textbooks. It was a smell he had known since his childhood, but had nearly forgotten during his absence.

“By the way,” Twilight spoke as she finished putting up her textbooks “If there’s anything you need for sleep tonight, like pillows or blankets, just let me know.”

His only response was to shuffle his claws and cast his gaze downward.

‘Should I do it now...?’

“Spike? Is something wrong?”

“Uh no. I’m fine. Just uh... hungry!” he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Oh duh!” she chuckled as she brought a hoof to her face. “How could I forget dinner? I’ll go get you a bowl of gems and chop myself up a salad!”

The dragon breathed a sigh of relief as Twilight left for the kitchen, only to remind

himself that she was just one room over.

'Maybe I should wait for tomorrow night? Can't be during the day with Pinkie's party and all. Ugh. Just thinking about having to go another day having to fight this feeling-'

A sharp cry rang out, startling Spike back to his senses.

"Twilight!?"

Leaping up from his rest, Spike dashed towards the kitchen in a frenzy.

"Twilight! Is everything ok??"

'She's fine.' His thoughts were alleviated as he caught sight of Twilight through the kitchen opening. The purple mare was holding one of her forelegs aloft, a pained grimace across her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she breathed. "Just made a stupid mistake and cut myself with the knife on accident. It's nothing bad. See?"

Twilight turned towards him with a pained smile, holding her wounded leg towards him.

"Heh, you had me scared for a second-"

A drop of crimson seeped from the exposed gash, cutting off the dragon's words and thoughts.

Insinctively, his tongue flicked from his mouth for a split-second, the sanguine scent and taste of blood having already worked its way into the air around them.

His heart rate increased, heat flushed through his body, and the same, strange anxiousness he had been plagued with the moment he had reunited with Twilight returned.

'This isn't love.'

It was a morbid thought which spawned hundreds of thousands of other realizations that he had believed to have left behind long ago.

'The princess was right.'

“Spike?”

‘I’ve never noticed just how... beautiful? No. Delicious, Twilight looked.’

“I told you it’s not a bad cut! I’ll be fine!”

‘I should have never come back.’

“Is this a joke?”

‘You know what? I do love her. The way she’s not too skinny, has a bit of meat on her. And that flank. Mmmm...’

“Well I’m not going to fall for it!”

‘I’m a monster, just like Fluttershy first assumed!’

“...Spike?”

‘Thinking of Fluttershy, I wonder if all of them taste differently? Would Rarity taste like marshmallows?’

“You’re starting to scare me! Are you ill?”

‘I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!!’

Spike wheeled away from the mare, slamming into the kitchen wall in a mad scramble to be anywhere but where he was now. Despite a cry from Twilight, he recovered and ran into the library’s main room, his now dilated eyes frantically searching for the door. All the while, a haze began to cover his thoughts, replacing them with that of a hunter who had cornered his prey.

‘Turn around. You’re starving.’

‘THE DOOR! WHERE’S THE DOOR!?’

It didn’t exist. Everywhere he looked, either a bookshelf or a wall of wood stood out, mocking his desperation.

Any sentient thoughts he had once possessed vanished as he threw himself against the wood and began ripping it apart with his claws. Behind him, a small clapping of hooves against the oak floor could be made out amongst the thoughts screaming in his head.

“Spike it’s ok! I’m here! Please listen to me!”

Spike turned around. Whether to tell her to run, push her away, or simply roar at her in vain hope of scaring her off, he never even got the chance.

The moment his snout rotated towards the purple pony, it brushed against against her leg which had been raised towards him in reassurance.

The same leg which was soaked in blood from her wound.

A warm, decadent liquid splashed into his maw, followed by a flash of red against his eyes, then finally a sharp scream of horror flew through the library.

Something hard rolled about in his mouth. Bringing up a claw, he pulled the object out, curious as to what it could be.

A purple-red lower-foreleg was pinched between his claws, a large majority of the hair and flesh having been stripped away leaving only bone and a small hoof. Past the leg, the pony it had once belonged to was collapsed and writhing upon the ground, tears and blood mixing in a pool beneath her.

‘You know what? I AM hungry.’

“Spike... please... remember...” Twilight gasped through her sobs.

The dragon advanced upon her in a slow, sadistic manner, as if he fancied the idea of playing with his food.

Trying to pick herself up, his prey crashed back to the ground with a cry the moment she put weight on the legless stump. He watched with glee as she began to drag herself away, splotches of blood dotting the library’s oak floor and staining the once pristine books a delightful scarlet.

“Spike... you’re not... a monster.”

The purple deer slowly crawled herself towards the kitchen, her incoherent babbling completely lost upon him.

'She looks like a fish out of water.'

Unable to hold back any longer, he lunged, catching a large portion of Twilight's exposed belly between his razor sharp teeth. A strange stretching feeling resisted him, only for it to snap and give way to another wave of fresh hot liquid. A second scream rang out, small bits of blood trapped in her throat giving it an exotic, vibrating sound.

Realizing that his prey had no way of outrunning him with a missing leg and half her stomach ripped away, Spike focused on savoring the scrap of flesh that rolled about his mouth.

'Like a deer, except with added flavoring. I could get used to this.'

Returning towards the hunt, he found the pony lying in a pool of her own fluids at the center of the kitchen. Succulent blood poured from the wide tear in her belly, inviting him to feast. Rushing forward, he towered above her, menacing wings closing off all escape as he gazed down at her hungrily.

Before he could begin, Twilight lifted her head, giving the dragon a strange stare as if she were looking for something.

"Spike..." He could barely understand her through the gurgling and spittles of blood. "I love you..."

'Love you too.'

His head shot forward, warm crimson splashing across the kitchen and his face as he-

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"NO! STOP!"

Spike convulsed violently, his consciousness struggling to save itself from the fevered nightmare that had overtaken his mind. Long scratch marks were etched into the rock beneath him and gems lay strewn across the cave floor, as if a fight between two great monsters had just occurred.

At last, his eyes snapped open and a wave of exhaustion overcame him, leaving him panting and slumped against the ground. Once proud and powerful wings now lay strewn out around him, too weak to straighten themselves and too frightened to fold back in.

Then he, a prideful and fearsome dragon, broke down into tears. Thousands of infected emotions could be heard in his sobs, but three rose out above all others: horror, disgust, and defeat.

Horror from the images that had been seared into his mind. Disgust with himself for even having the capacity to dream them in the first place. Defeat due to his inability to stop such recurring nightmares.

After a full month of questioning both himself and the princess' reasons for his banishment, doubt wormed it's way into his thoughts, birthing the evils that lurked in his sleep. They had been small, innocent dreams at first, beginning with comparing his friends to certain foods only to end with the unspeakable thoughts that plagued him now.

'I thought they were gone. Why did this happen again?'

His vision scanned the cave, as if the rocks themselves may have held the answer to his life's problems. Emerald eyes froze upon a brown bag, a fine layer of dust having accumulated upon it's outer shell.

'They stopped because of her. Gilda...'

Spike sneered at the name. A week ago it had carried hope, with a near assurance that he would meet with the griffon again and be able to repair their friendship. Now, combined with his ever-growing doubt in himself, it was a main component of the invisible ball-and-chain that kept him confined within his cave despite the promise of home and family just a few days' flight away.

'She didn't return. She never even cared in the first place. I was just some little week-long vacation for her. A simple stress-reliever.'

His attention returned to the untouched bag. The past week, it had served almost as a holy relic, awaiting the moment when the goddess would return to reclaim what was rightfully hers.

'I should burn it. One burst of flame. Bam. Done. One more obstacle out of the way.'

Staggering to his feet, Spike narrowed his eyes menacingly towards the sack, activating the fire glands which smoldered at his core. Just before a gout of green flame would cleanse the bag and all of its contents from his life, a single line of thought crossed him.

'I don't even know what's inside.'

He sighed, letting the fire die out.

'Might as well check before I incinerate the thing.'

Spike cautiously edged towards the bag, snapping it up in one swift movement when he was close enough. Dust fell from its sides, but nothing extraordinary happened.

'Just a bag after all. Now let's see...'

Reaching into the sack, he retrieved the first item he could grasp: A small, fluffy pillow.

He let it fall to the ground, searching the bag for another item. A satchel of coins.

'Ugh! No wonder she didn't come back for this thing! There's nothing but junk in here! I've been wasting my time.'

When he reached in again, his claws wrapped around a thin, hard object.

'Probably some ceremonial weapon or-'

It was a framed photo of Gilda and Rainbow Dash, each with a hoof and claw wrapped around each other's shoulders in a friendly embrace. The picture surprised Spike. While he had known the two used to be good friends, the way in which Gilda talked about Dash had always made him assume she saw the friendship as a thing of the past.

The dragon laid the photo down gently and began rummaging through the pack once more. This item could have been mistaken for a slip of paper if not for its unique texture. What he pulled out was instead a brown parchment leaf, inscribed with the map he had drawn for Gilda over two weeks ago.

'I thought she had thrown this away,' he reminisced, only to quickly toss it aside. *'Eh. Just a map.'*

The bag was nearly empty now, only a small lump forming an outline along its bottom. With trembling claws, he grasped whatever was left inside, the shape and texture immediately recognizable.

'Of course. How could I forget?'

Letting the bag drop to the floor, Spike held a large blue gem in his grip. Despite the sapphire having no unique features to distinguish it from the other jewels, it possessed a soft inner glow its brethren lacked.

Gilda's face the night she had received the gift was still seared into his memory. It was an expression that had surprised him, that had convinced him that he had only seen a small part of her, that told him he had only scratched the surface.

Spike sighed in defeat as he retrieved the bag and began replacing the objects.

'I can't do it,' he thought hollowly. *'Destroying Gilda's stuff will only make things worse. I have to do this myself.'*

The dragon sauntered to the back of his cave, his regal spines, wings, and tail now drooping in defeat. After grabbing a clawful of gems, he plopped down where he had once lain, his eyelids already becoming heavy and a soft blanket beginning to smother his consciousness.

Only a day after Gilda had left, he had fallen back into his old routine: Eat gems and sleep. Hunting only came once a week, enough meat to keep his muscles and organs functioning while controlling the guilt and shame he felt during his feasting to only a few minutes every seventh day.

Sleep was a heavy burden now, but unavoidable. Despite the nightmares, most of his time was spent in his cave, daydreaming of better days while dreaming of horror. In only a week's time he had already gained a bit of weight and began to return to his usual sluggish self.

He took one last look around the cave as his vision began to blur. Atop the pile of gems behind him, a golden brooch lay, pristine in reality but tarnished within his mind.

'You're not a monster. You're not a monster. When you wake up, be it night or day or whatever, leave here. Go home. There's nothing for you here anymore. You can leave. Go home. You won't hurt them.'

Spike repeated the thought to himself endlessly every time he began to drift off to sleep hoping, praying, that he may wake up one day and leave the now self-made prison he found himself trapped in.

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A dull thud sounded from the mouth of Spike's cave, rousing the dragon from his sleep.

"Quiet idiot!" a sharp whisper cut through the air, easily being picked up by his sensitive ears. "You'll wake him up!"

He hesitated. The voice was clearly female, but not one he had ever heard before. This one was raspy and young, as if coming from a adolescent who was still struggling into adulthood.

"Whatd'ya mean?" a male responded, sounding about the same age as his companion. "He's just a dragon right? I thought they all could sleep through hurricanes?"

"Weren't you listening during training? Dragons have enhanced hearing! I'm surprised he isn't already trying to bite our heads off!"

'Oh no. It couldn't be...?'

Spike opened an eye, spotting two armor-clad griffons in the midst of a heated argument lingering on the ledge that jutted out from his cave. Both of the intruders turned towards him and he instantly closed his eyes, wanting to maintain the element of surprise.

"So... what do we do now?"

"Hmmm... you could sneak up on him and use your claw to slit his throat."

Spike struggled not to cringe.

"WHAT!?"

"Shhh! Shut up!"

"But can't dragons like.. talk and stuff? I don't want to *murder* anyone!"

“Once again, you must have been asleep during training. They specifically told us dragons only think about eating, sleeping, and killing. They’re basically monsters!”

“Alright then. *You* go kill it.”

“Huh!? No, you!”

“How about no one kills anyone?”

The two intruders wheeled towards him, frightened by the sudden addition to their private conversation.

Spike was now fully awake, still lying down but with his neck and head at full alert. He stared at the two griffons with curiosity and suspicion.

“DAMNIT! See!? You DID wake it up!”

‘Just stay calm. I can make it out of this without a fight.’

“Is there anything I can help you two with? You know, besides the whole slitting my throat part.”

“Alright, listen up!” the female griffon sneered as she stepped forward. “We want your whole hoard! All of it! Nothing more nothing less! You can stay and fight against two of the Griffon Empire’s most elite soldiers, or you can scam!”

‘Maybe I can just slip the brooch out from it’s hiding place and tuck it beneath my wing.’

Spike looked behind him, noticing the brooch still resting proudly atop his hoard for all to see.

‘Shoot.’

“How about a deal?” he asked, trying to remain peaceful while still maintaining an air of danger. “I take my small, worthless little brooch *‘Sorry guys...’* along with me and you can have ALL of my gems. No fight necessary.”

“But isn’t the brooch basically the whole reason we came?” the male griffon asked, seemingly lost.

“Huh. Seems you were listening for once,” the female griffon grunted before fixing Spike with a hard glare. “My brother’s right. The sarge asked us to kick your sorry butt out AND get the brooch. So here’s a deal: you leave with your life and scales. That’s it.”

‘Here just for my brooch? Rarity DID tell me the gem inside it was rare... Whatever. Time for a little intimidation.’

Spike pushed himself up, flaring out his entire wingspan, thrashing his purple tail violently, and flashing out his claws in a hope to scare them off. A small trail of green flame leaked from his maw.

“Leave. Now. Before I make you regret ever coming here.”

Instead of the fear he had hoped for, the female griffon seemed to take the words as a challenge. “Anything you do to me, the sergeant would match ten-fold!”

He was at a loss for words.

‘Well. At least griffons have good loyalty I guess?’

“Your move then,” Spike said finally.

“Just how I like it. Bro, stay out of this fight!” she called back towards her partner. “Just grab the brooch. I’ll take care of this monster.”

Her brother began to walk towards his hoard. Spike moved to block him, only for a patch of blood-red to appear out of the corner of his vision. He quickly turned towards his assailant, bracing himself.

While Gilda had sent him flying in their fight before, the younger griffon only pushed him a few yards back as they locked claws in a quick struggle. Realizing she was outmatched strength-wise, she broke away, lunging to his exposed right belly.

‘I’ve seen this technique before!’ he recognized as he leaned to his left, narrowly avoiding the soldier’s razor sharp beak. *‘Albeit more refined.’*

With the griffon now exposed from her failed attack, Spike balled his claw, settling for a quick punch to her armored skull as opposed to running the risk of ripping her throat out. She

dropped like a dead weight and cried out, clutching her head as she was sent rolling along the cave floor.

'Just have to injure them enough to scare-'

A fierce tickling erupted in the back of his mind.

'Now remember Spike,' Twilight said softly, her eyes red from endless tears. *'I've enchanted it so that you'll always subconsciously know where it is. If someone else you don't know tries to steal it...'*

Spike turned to where his brooch lay only to find it firmly locked in the grasp of the male griffon.

Defensive instinct cast aside his passive combat as he lept forward and slashed at the thief, tearing three large lines into his side.

After staggering away, the griffon looked towards his side with wide eyes, immediately dropping the brooch and letting out a screech that unnerved Spike.

Blood was leaking profusely from the wound and bits of pulsing muscle and tissue could be made out threw the claws that were trying hopelessly to seal it up.

'Look at that. He's probably not even reached adulthood and I've almost murdered him.'

He tried to fight against his own mind as a groan sounded from behind him.

'Well? Aren't I going to eat him just like in my dreams? Monster.'

“DROLUND!” a female voice screeched out followed by a ferocious battle roar. Spike's thoughts were still conflicted as he spun around, an unprepared impact to his chest throwing him to the ground.

The sister had pinned him down, her eyes lit up in a fiery rage as she used both claws and beak to tear away at his defenses.

'Fight back! Tear off her legs! Incinerate her with fire!'

No fire came, and while he could certainly struggle with the young griffon and fatally

injure her, every inch of his being was screaming at him for simply thinking the idea.

'What am I going to do!? Let her kill me!?'

His mind drifted as small cuts began to emerge along his arms, the sister thrashing at him like an enraged cat.

'No one would miss me. Twilight's already been without me for all these months, she'll probably just think I enjoyed being away from Ponyville and simply never came back...'

A razored claw slipped past his arms, leaving a deep gash across his sternum.

'The others have probably all but forgotten me. Who's left? No one. Better to just die here and never have the chance of fulfilling my sick dreams!'

As blood dripped down his forearm, he began to slowly give way, emotional and physical weakness overtaking his body.

'Just... end it!'

Spike's arms finally gave way, allowing the soldier a clear shot at his exposed throat. As she reared back for the final blow, darkness draped his eyesight, bestowing him with a strange peace that washed away the strife and pain he had experienced ever since his exile.

'I'm sorry Twilight.'