

Spyro's Old Flame

Chapter 11: Precious and Fragile Things

For the first time in the young hero's life, Spyro didn't know what to do. It was like his paws were glued to the grass, frozen in indecision as minute after minute passed.

He wanted to follow Flame. He wanted to take off towards the village and find him. He'd explain how sorry he was for saying all those things, for calling him a *liability*, for being just another dragon to tell him he's not good enough.

He'd plead with Flame to forgive him, to at least let Spyro hug him one last time, because the thought of leaving when Flame hated his guts made his stomach twist and chest hurt like he was being torn in two, never to be whole again.

Another part of him wanted to jump through the portal right now, right this second, before the elders found out about his plans. Before it was too late to save Cynder.

But what if Flame comes back tonight? What will he think if he comes back and you're already gone?

Spyro let out a hopeless whine, his claws digging into the earth. He had hoped that Flame would have turned back when he called his name. "Flame!" he had shouted, as loud as he could. "Flame, wait, please! Don't go!" But Flame hadn't heard him or hadn't cared. And Spyro had watched him wing away into the night, hoping that any second he'd turn around, but he didn't.

Then he had waited by the portal, hoping that Flame might change his mind and come back, that he'd look up and see the little red dragon flying towards him through the dark sky. But minutes had turned into hours and Flame still hadn't returned. And now, early morning rays were beginning to appear over the hills, telling him he was out of time. He couldn't wait any longer.

Behind him, the portal was still on, its pulsing, white glow reminding him that *soon* it might be too late. The elders could come by at any minute and discover him. They'd turn off all the portals and make sure he could never leave again.

If you stay any longer, she could get captured or even die. You will have ruined the lives of two dragons, not just one. Is that what you want?

Spyro didn't want that. He didn't want that at all. He turned back to the village. If he flew now, it might be too late, and worse yet, he could get spotted, and someone might tell the elders. He didn't know where exactly Flame lived, only that he lived in a cave with his mother, and his mother was on the council. She'd rat him out given half the chance, Spyro was sure.

And even if you risked that, Flame wouldn't want to talk to you. He wouldn't even let you in. If he had wanted to see you again, he'd be back by now... but he isn't.

With another helpless whine, the distraught dragonet sank into the grass. Up until now, he had been sure that he was a good dragon. All he did was go from realm to realm, helping people. That's what heroes did. That's what he thought he had been doing with Flame - helping him. Helping him become a better dragon so everyone wouldn't pick on him all the time, so he wouldn't have to watch bigger dragons push him into the dirt and the elders mock him. He wanted to give him a better life because he could see that Flame deserved it, even if nobody else did. That's why Spyro had taken him under his wing, trained him, helped him believe in himself.

But instead of helping Flame, Spyro had made it all worse.

And maybe Flame was right. Maybe Spyro had done all that not to help him, but for his own selfish reasons. That's the worst part, the thought that really made the purple dragon hate himself. It was never about helping Flame, Spyro had just kept him around because he liked having a dragon in his life who truly liked him. And *really* liked him, and not just because he was *Spyro the Dragon*. Liked him, not because he was the coolest dragon on the island, or because of his gem collection and records, but because of *him*. Flame had seen right past the big hero act he had so painstakingly kept up, right into something that was inside Spyro, something that wasn't fake or forced or just a trick the elders had taught him. Something deeper. What that thing was, Spyro wasn't even sure. He could be himself around Flame. It was like a breath of fresh air.

It made him feel good. Made him feel loved. Flame had always wanted to be Spyro's friend, always been there for him, always ready for a new adventure, with his maps and his help, even when he was scared. He had always listened to Spyro when few other dragons did. Spyro had liked it, he had been leading him on from the start, building him up only to

tear him down on this last night. Perhaps he had never really deserved Flame. And if Flame hated him now, maybe that's what Spyro deserved.

Could it be that he was really not a hero at all, but just a very selfish dragon? Had he been lying to himself all this time?

Why did you kiss him when you know you have to leave tonight?

Because it felt good! And because Spyro had thought Flame might like it too! Was that really so bad?

"Or did you just want to make sure he wouldn't forget about you?", his consciousness came back at him. *Just in case he might find some other friend while you're gone...*

And why had he waited until the very last moment to tell Flame that he was leaving? Because he had seemed so happy, soaring over the village, doing loops, and Spyro didn't want to ruin his day!

Or did you just not want him to be angry with you?

He heard birds chirp in the oak trees above. He used to welcome the sound. It meant that a long, lonely night was over, and he could go out into the world and have fun. Lately, it had meant going to find Flame.

Now it meant that he had to leave and perhaps never see him again.

Go now, you idiot! Before it's too late. Before they find you!

He turned to the sky one last time, but he could see no little red dragon flying towards him. Then he looked down at his paws, at Flame's satchel with the painting half-way slipped out, and his heart sank again, remembering the look on Flame's face as he had tossed it on the ground. Spyro picked it up and admired it for a long time, then brought the little piece of paper to his chest.

"I promise, I'll be back," he whispered to the paper as if Flame could hear him. "Maybe a week, maybe a month, but as soon as Cynder is safe, I'll be back. I'll be back real *soon*."

Spyro had broken the promise he had made that night. He hadn't been back soon, or anything close to soon.

Twice now, he had promised to be back, once in Dark Hollow, once outside this terrible cave. He wouldn't break his promise again, that's the only thing he knew for certain as he waded through the cold water, shouting Flame's name until his throat was sore. He hurried along the rock wall, occasionally swimming when the water was too deep. He soon reached another crack, again too thin for him to crawl through, but he peered inside. "Flame!" he shouted again. "Flame can you hear me!" But there was no reply, and Spyro could not see the red dragon, just foaming water.

What if the chamber is already flooded? What if you're already too late?

Spyro didn't dare think about it. He couldn't handle it. Instead, he climbed a nearby boulder, from which he could reach another crack. But still, he couldn't see Flame. Still, there was no reply, but it didn't matter. He pushed on. He would find him. He wouldn't leave him again.

"Over here! Spyro, come quick, I see him!"

He looked up and there was Cynder. She was winging further up the rock wall, pointing at another crack. Beautiful, wonderful Cynder. She had refused to leave the cave, choosing to risk her life for Flame's as well. There were so many moments on their journey through the Well of Souls where he'd be lost without her.

He launched himself to the air, flying up to where Cynder was pointing. He grabbed the crevice with his claws, his strong back paws finding just enough purchase in the rock wall for him to hold himself up and peer through.

"Flame! Flame!" he shouted. "Answer me, buddy! Are you okay?"

There was a long silence. Nothing but rushing water. But then he heard Flame's voice. "Spyro!? Spyro, I'm here!"

Then he saw him, a little red dragon with wet red scales wading through the crack, his eyes widening when he saw Spyro.

"Oh, thank the Ancestors, you're okay! I was so worried!" Flame rushed up to the crack, and the two dragons reached for each other. Their paws touched, claws interlocking. When Spyro felt Flame's paw in his, small and smooth

and instantly familiar, it was like he could breathe for the first time since he had watched his mate disappear through that dark crevice. He squeezed it tightly, warming it in his bigger, purple paws.

He is alive... You have found him and he's alive...

"What are you doing here?" the red dragon asked him, sniveling. He sounded weak, and his scales were glossy with water. "You should have left by now..."

Leave? Without Flame!? Like Spyro would ever leave without him! "We're coming to get you," he said firmly, holding his mate's claw tightly. "But please, Flame, we gotta hurry!" The water was still rising quickly behind him, and oh there was so little time. They had to get him out.

"No, wait..." Flame trembling voice was barely audible over the rushing water as he spoke. "There's, there's no... I'm ehm..." he stammered then trailed off, and Spyro suddenly realized how exhausted the little dragon must be, that he could barely speak. Not only was he drenched from horn to tailtip, but he was also shaking visibly and his paw felt so cold, way too cold. Spyro should never have let him go, never have let him crawl through that crevice. He should have found a way to disable the force field himself instead of sending Flame like a coward.

Then Flame looked up and met his eyes, and suddenly there was like a calm washed over the other dragon. He stopped shaking, and a little brave smile grew on his red muzzle. "I'll... I'll catch up with you guys," he said. "I promise. Just go on without me and I'll meet you outside."

Spyro didn't like the sound of that. He didn't like it at all! And he especially didn't like how calm Flame suddenly seemed. Why wasn't he moving already? Why was he asking Spyro to leave without him?

"Spyro!" Cynder's voice came from somewhere behind him, warning him as another crevice in the wall exploded with a torrent of water, splashing into their own fastly filling chamber. Soon, the exit would be completely flooded.

Spyro didn't care. Instead, he fixed his eyes on his mate. "I'm coming for you and that's that!" he shouted back at Flame. "Go through the main tunnel, Red's gate. I'll meet you half-way. But you gotta HURRY!"

Please, Flame. Please Don't give up. Not yet, even though I'd deserve it. Just give me a chance...

The tunnel was a long dive, way too long. And it would be dark too. But it was the only way through.

"But it's flooded!" Flame exclaimed, his eyes filling with fear again at the thought of swimming through that black, flooded tunnel. Spyro knew how much Flame hated tight, dark places. He knew how afraid he had looked, at the bottom of that well in Crocodile Swamp.

Spyro wished he didn't have to ask that of Flame. He wished he could tear open the crevice and free him, that he could tear down the entire rock wall, gather Flame up in his arms and fly him far away from this cave. He would take him to some safe, warm place where no elders or force fields could hurt him, and hold him and never let him go again for as long as he lived.

If he was any kind of dragon, that's what he would do, but he was too weak, so weak. All he could do was send Flame into another dark tunnel, even though he knew Flame was claustrophobic, even though it was cold and deep and he might not make it...

I should have never let you go... Never never never

"You're gonna have to dive!" He squeezed Flame's paw a little harder. "I know you can do it Flame. I'll see you on the other side. And I love you."

Please don't give up, please do it for me...

Water was still flowing in around them. Reminding Spyro that they were out of time. Their gaze met again. The fear was still there, in Flame's crimson eyes, but he nodded softly, knowing what he had to do.

I'm so sorry Flame... I'm so sorry...

Spyro didn't know what to say. So instead he softly kissed Flame's paw before letting it go. He looked at his beautiful mate, his dearest friend, praying to the Ancestors that this wouldn't be the last time they saw each other, then he let go of the crevice and dove.

I'm so sorry...

The water hit him hard and cold. Spyro used to love to swim. Right now he felt like he never wanted to see water again as long as he lived.

The gate appeared ahead of him, a black square which he swam towards until it engulfed him in darkness. Not much light made it into the tunnel, and with every stroke forward, it got blacker still until he couldn't see his claws ahead of him. His lungs were already burning for oxygen, but he kept up the pace, knowing that Flame was somewhere up ahead.

He swam and swam, expecting to see Flame any second. He swam, even though he was sure he had passed the middle-point, and should have seen him already. He swam as the building fear in his chest grew worse until it was all he could feel, overshadowing even the water and his burning lungs.

Spyro couldn't remember how exactly he found Flame in that pitch-black darkness, just that he did. He couldn't remember the fear he must have felt when he saw that Flame wasn't swimming but sinking, that his body was limp, cold and didn't react to Spyro when he took him in his arms. His eyes were closed, bubbles escaping from his open muzzle.

He had turned around in the pitch-dark tunnel and started swimming in the opposite direction, as fast as he could, with Flame in his arms. In that darkness, every second had felt like a minute, every minute like an hour.

Suddenly, a light in the watery darkness, glimmering like a lonely star above him. At first, his confused, oxygen-deprived mind couldn't make sense of it. Then he remembered there was a hole in the ceiling in the chamber from which he came. He remembered the sun shining in.

The shape of a dragon came towards him. It, or rather, *she*, for it was Cynder, was pointing towards the light, wanting him to go there. But it was so hard to think, and even harder to swim, and his vision was turning into a blurry tunnel with only that faint light at the end. But she dove down towards him, grabbing him, pulling him up, and he realized he still had Flame in his arms, and he must swim with whatever powers he had left, because nothing else mattered then saving Flame.

Never let go. Never let him go. Never again.

It was hard to move his forearms and legs, so cold were they, and his head was pounding. But he swam and swam until eventually, his claws grasped the rim of that hole, and with Cynder's help, he pulled himself and Flame out.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with sweet, sweet air. The outside was so bright he could barely see, but Flame was still in his arms, precious little Flame. He was all that mattered. He carefully laid him down against the rock, then staggered back as exhaustion overtook his body. The world started spinning, he was panting uncontrollably and it was hard to focus, but he shook his head and forced his senses back to reality. He saw Cynder leaning over Flame, pressing her muzzle to his to blow air into his lungs.

"SPYRO!" she shouted at him, grabbing his wrists. "Quick, his chest, push down on his chest! Do it until I tell you to stop!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Spyro brought his big paws to Flame's chest, then started pressing in time with Cynder's counting. He didn't understand why, but there was no time for questions and Cynder knew these things. He pressed as hard as he dared without hurting the little dragon, pausing only when Cynder leaned in to breathe air into his muzzle.

But Flame didn't move. He didn't open his eyes or start breathing. They kept going. Going and going until Spyro could barely see for the tears in his eyes, and in the back of his mind, that forbidden thought, the fear that Flame might never come back to him, got harder and harder to ignore. *One, two, three, four*, he kept pushing; *five, six, seven, eight, nine, breathe...* Nothing. Then start over: *One, two, three, four...*

Then finally something happened. Flame's body jerked to life under his claws. He sat up, water shooting out of his muzzle like a torrent. He didn't spit or cough it out, it *flowed* out of him. A weak wheezing sound could be heard as his chest filled with air at last, and a relief so strong he felt dizzy washed over Spyro.

Oh, thank the Ancestors...

All power left him. He collapsed to the rock next to Flame, then pulled him a little closer; it was all he could do, he was so exhausted. So relieved.

He nuzzled his cheek softly. "Are... are you okay?" Flame looked up at Spyro with beautiful eyes, crimson red like his scales, a faint smile grew on his muzzle when he saw the purple dragon, then the eyes dimmed out as he drifted back

into unconsciousness.

"No please," Spyro squeezed him a little tighter. Then he felt a paw on his shoulder.

"He's breathing now, but we should get him to a doctor... someone who can help," Cynder said.

"Magnus..." Spyro replied, holding Flame in his arms. "He's the elder I trust. He can help."

He lifted Flame's body off the rock and held him against his chest, very carefully, for he was the most precious thing in the world, and then he spread his wings and took off towards the village, praying that Magnus was home.

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Flame must have had some weird dream, because he woke up with this warm fuzzy feeling in his chest. He felt happy without even knowing why, happy and excited even though he couldn't think of anything in his life to be particularly happy or excited about.

He vaguely recalled running around Dragon Village, and then something about sheep, which was also weird. And the more he tried to remember the dream, the more it seemed to unravel, like sand slipping between his claws. All he had left was that warm, fuzzy feeling, but even that was beginning to fade away.

Light assaulted his eyelids and he blinked, groaning. He didn't want to wake up. He wanted to remember the dream, wanted to hold on to that feeling wherever it came from. He hugged his pillow trying to squeeze some of that warmth back, and as he wrapped his arms around the cool fabric, another image flashed back in his mind. The image of lying in green grass with Spyro by his side, their arms wrapped around each other. *What?* That was even weirder than sheep! Why would he be dreaming about Spyro, and more importantly, why would *that* make him happy! He had barely seen the dragon in ages.

"Flame...? Flame are you waking up? Can you hear me?"

It was his sister's voice, invading his sleep-drunken mind and forcing him back to a reality he wanted nothing to do with. Why did Ember always have to bother him in the mornings? Why couldn't she just let him sleep!? He groaned something inaudible into his pillow and gestured for her to leave so he could remember his dream.

Spyro was definitely in it, he could see the purple dragon lying next to him in the grass as clear as day, looking at him with a curious, odd smile on his muzzle. They had been running around the village doing something... chasing sheep? Yeah, that's it! And then he remembered: the *sheep infestation!* Definitely a dream. Not even Spyro could come up with something that stupid. But his mind took him back to lying side by side with him, and how he had wrapped his arms around Flame and the world had felt strangely okay all of a sudden. In an instant, that weird warmth was back.

Then it all disappeared again when he felt his sister's claws on his shoulder, shaking him. "Flame, can you hear me, bro?" He opened his eyes and a blurry pink blob which he assumed was Ember came into view. "Say something? *Please?*"

Her voice sounded strangely distant and Flame couldn't understand why she seemed so worried. And that's when he realized that his head hurt something awful. In fact, every inch of him ached, his wings, his arms and legs, but especially his head. He rubbed his eyes, and now he could see Ember clearly. She looked... older somehow, and her green-blue eyes were full of worry.

"Geez... Calm down. I can hear you!"

"OH MY GOSH, YOU'RE AWAKE!!!" His sister threw herself over him, squeezing him hard. "Don't scare me like that, you jerk!" she said, punching his shoulder and making the red dragon groan again. "Magnus, look, he's answering! Everyone, get in here, Flame's awake!"

Magnus' big, pink face appeared behind Ember. "Oh, that's more like it! Didn't I say he'd be fine, dearest? Some rest was all he needed." His soft cheeks broaden into a smile and he handed Flame a glass of water which the latter quickly emptied.

Flame rubbed his temples, some energy returning. "Where am I? What happened? And why are y'all hovering over me like I'm back from the dead or something?"

"What?" Ember tilted her nose. "Don't you remember what happened?"

"Remember wha..." But Flame stopped himself, realizing that he *did* remember. Those nasty dragons had thrown

him down that gross, disgusting well. Flame must have passed out or something and they probably found him down there. *Oh ancestors, how embarrassing...* And the whole part about Spyro saving him? Just a stupid dream. Suddenly, he just wanted to be alone.

"It's a good thing you're awake," Magnus continued. Spyro's been insisting on sleeping right here, in my study, being a big nuisance. He's barely left your side, you know. Oh, there he is now!" He turned to the doorway where a purple dragon had appeared.

Whoever it was, it couldn't be Spyro.

This dragon was an adult, and so tall he could barely fit in the room, his long horns scraping against the roof. His scales were a deep purple, amethyst maybe, and golden plates covered his chest and belly. He was at once strange and familiar, like something between a dream and a reality. "F..Flame?" he asked, looking at him with big, bright violet eyes, blinking as if he couldn't believe the red dragon was truly there.

Then, before Flame could say anything, he had sprung up to his bedside. And he carefully, ever so carefully, gathered Flame up in his strong arms, holding him against his chest. "I was so worried," he whispered, his cheek brushing wet against Flame's, and his scent... his scent was so familiar. "Please tell me you're okay..." he whimpered, squeezing him like any second he might disappear.

"I ehm err... okay?" Flame was so confused, his aching head struggling to make sense of what was happening. His scent and warmth brought fragmented memories back, like glimpses from a past life dancing by. He saw night skies, purple scales lit up by the warm glow from lanterns.

"Oh, praise the Ancestors!" The other dragon was so relieved he started kissing Flame, kissing his cheeks, his nose, kissing and licking all over Flame's face while his tail swinging back and forth so hard the bed rocked. "I knew you'd be alright! I knew we'd make it out of that cave!"

The cave...

Visions flashed before Flame's eyes; of rushing water and stalagmites, of dark gems and this stranger dragon reaching towards him through a crack in a rock wall. He remembered the last time he had felt those warm purple scales against his body, he remembered how Spyro left and how he came back.

He looked up at the purple dragon. "Spyro...?" he stammered, realizing that it was him after all. It couldn't be anyone else...

"Yes?" Spyro looked down at him, head tilted. "You sure you're okay, Flamey?"

Flame's head still hurt like a thousand needles had burrowed into his brain. His entire body was tired and weak. But the dream of Spyro pulling him out that well was real, as real as the dragon before him. He had saved Spyro's life, and Spyro his. Yes, he was okay. He was more than okay.

He laid a claw on Spyro's chin, bringing him in for a kiss. Their lips met, Flame's heart jumped and his mate pulled him near. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the taste and warmth of the other dragon's mouth. Everything from how the scales on Spyro's muzzle felt against his own, to the touch of his sharp canines against his tongue was instantly familiar.

When they were quite done, their lips parted with a most embarrassing *smack*. Flame, still a bit dizzy, suddenly became aware of their audience. His eyes flicked to his sister, whose pink cheeks seemed a tad pinker than usual. And Ashes and Cynder were there as well. Flame's own scales warmed up a bit, and he chuckled. "I ehm... it's nice to see you all..."

Then another memory came back to him. Something that sucked every bit of tiredness out of his body and made him sit up so suddenly Spyro jerked back. "Where are Astor and Tomas!?"

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Rain pelted against Magnus' window and outside, the February sun had already begun to sink in the sky. Flame took a deep sip of his chamomile tea, letting the hot liquid warm his body. "Much better," he purred, his energy returning.

On his right, Spyro inched closer so he could wrap his wing-membrane around the other dragon. "Are you sure he should be out of bed?" he asked Magnus for the twentieth time that evening, regarding Flame with worried eyes. He hadn't stopped brooding over Flame since he got up, keeping him under his wing like Flame was a chick and he an

overprotective mother-hen.

"Oh, don't be silly! Some tea and a good night's sleep and your boyfriend will be good as new," the elder replied cheerfully, laying out some biscuits for his guests to enjoy before squeezing in between Spyro and Ashes to take his seat. Ember, who had hurried back from the Artisan Homeworld upon hearing about Flame's misadventure, had also been a little extra apprehensive about her brother's health, and it hadn't been easy to convince her not to tell Mother yet. Flame had enough to worry about as it was. Even Cynder and Ashes had stayed with them during Flame's recovery. He had been out about a day and a night.

Magnus' modest kitchen clearly wasn't built to entertain six adult dragons, but the group did what they could as they huddled around the table. And at least, the elder had made plenty of his chamomile tea. Flame took another sip, shuddering in delight, then turned to the dragons. "So. what do we do about the elders?"

"Kill them." Cynder was the first one to speak up. She had barely touched her teacup or said much the entire evening. "We'll simply kill them. Slowly."

"I have to admit, that's tempting..." Spyro said, his wing tightening around Flame. Whatever moral qualms the hero had expressed before about harming the older dragons seemed to have flown out the window following Flame's near-death experience. Ember who sat next to Spyro nodded eagerly, and even Ashes seemed to like the idea.

"Surely, *killing* them is a bit extre..." Magnus tried but Cynder shot him a deadly glare. The elder went quiet, going back to munching on a chocolate chip.

"Before we can decide what to do about them, we have to find them," Flame said, steering the conversation in a more productive direction. "Do we have any idea where they might be?"

The dragons went quiet, which told Flame all he needed to know "I tried looking at the temple, but they weren't there..." Ashes reported, shuffling her talons. "And nobody in the village had seen them either..."

"And the cave is still mostly flooded, so they can't be hiding there," Ember added. "I checked this morning."

Cynder perked, confused. "Flooded? Still? I thought the tide was like... daily?"

"Diurnal tide, yes." Flame replied. "But it's monsoon season, and with this much rain, it can take days before it clears out. It's been around twenty-four hours since we were down there, and the entire chamber was flooded. I'd give it another twelve hours at least until anyone can go in there."

"Huh..." Cynder nodded, and Spyro had a proud grin on him that seemed to mean something along the lines of *look what a smart dragon I'm dating*.

"So whatever we do with those murderous psychopaths, we better find them fast," Ember said. "Because when they sneak back into that cave tomorrow and find out that you guys ain't dead, they're gonna be gone faster than an egg thief with his butt on fire..."

"Doesn't matter because we'll get them before that," Cynder growled. "We'll burn down this miserable patch of land if we have to... We'll interrogate every dragon here. I'll find that Astor and pick the scales from his body if it takes me my immortal life!" Smoke coiled from her nostrils and her claws dug deep into Magnus' kitchen table.

Then Spyro threw her a disapproving look and she pulled her paws out of the wood. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Well, I'm with Cynder on this!" Ember chimed in. "We're not gonna let them get away, right? They tried to kill my bro!"

"Well technically, they just tried to kill Cynder and Spyro, I just happened to be in the way" Flame offered, jokingly. But Ember didn't smile. She was clearly dead set on getting back at the elders. They all seemed to be.

But the truth was that Flame couldn't share their confidence. Sure, just thinking about Tomas and Astor made his blood boil, but he knew that finding the elders would be next to impossible. The island was some seventeen miles long and half as wide, at least according to his own calculations. He and Spyro had spent the better time of a summer charting it, and they still hadn't mapped more than half. Besides, there were portals all over it, many of which only the elders knew about. Tomas and Astor were many things, but they weren't stupid. They'd lay low until they know for sure that they're plan worked and that Cynder and Spyro are gone.

"This *miserable patch of land* is too vast to search by ourselves, and if we start asking around, rumors will spread

and the elders will know you're alive, at which point they'll take the nearest portal to the Forgotten Realms and we'll never find them again." Flame explained to the still sizzling Cynder. "And if they see you or Spyro flapping about, looking for them, they'll *definitely* ..."

"... take the nearest portal, I got it..." Cynder growled. "But we can lay low, make sure not to be seen. We'll scout them out and strike before they have time to react, we'll..."

"He's right, Cynder," Spyro interjected. "We'd never find them without help. And I'd rather chase them off the island for good than sneaking around, giving them more opportunities to try to get to you or Flame, or any other dragon they want to silence."

"Let them escape!? Without revenge!?" Cynder gasped. "That's exactly what they'd want for us to do! We might as well drop dead too, while we're at it!"

Flame, lost in thought, hadn't paid much attention to Flame and Cynder's argument. But now he perked. "Wait a minute! That's what we'll do... we'll play dead!"

"What?" the other dragons gasped in unison, turning to Flame. Even Magnus looked up from the biscuits he'd been eating while the others bickered. Spyro leaned over to Flame, a curious glint on his eyes. "You got an idea there, Flamey?"

"Yes! And it's so simple," Flame beamed. "We don't know where they are, but we know where they'll be. The elders will return to the cave expecting to find Spyro and Cynder dead. So let's make sure they do!"

Now he definitely had their attention, and he couldn't help but smile when he laid out his plan. Finally, he was going to get back on the two old dragons that had made his life such a pain since he was hatched. They weren't going to get away this time.

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The sun had dipped below the horizon by the time they were done discussing their plans for the next day. Now it was time to sleep, and as such, all the dragons had crammed themselves into Magnus' little bedroom. Spyro had decided Flame should get the bed, and the elder had been nice enough to provide a few extra mattresses for the rest of them to sleep on, and even offered to take the couch himself. He really didn't seem to mind his house being invaded by half a dozen dragons, most of which he had never met before.

Even so, the room was just way too small for all of them, not that it could be helped. Neither Cynder nor Spyro could risk being seen, and Ashes had nowhere else to spend the night. Flame had offered to walk back to his cave to spend the night there, but Spyro had staunchly refused to part. Ultimately, Ember had decided to stay as well, since Artisan was a long flight back and she "didn't want to miss any action". And so it was that they all laid there, packed like sardines on the floor in Magnus' bedroom.

There was some bickering between Ember and Cynder about who got the most space, and Cynder had complained quite a bit about having to share a room with so many dragons. Ashes had fallen asleep the second she curled up and was snoring something awful, bothering everyone. Spyro had wanted to sleep in Flame's bed with him, but the old, squeaky thing would never support both of them. This had made him immensely unhappy until Magnus had solved the situation by moving some furniture and made room for Spyro's mattress to lay right next to the bed. Spyro had begrudgingly accepted that this as being was close enough, but wrapped his wing over Flame just in case some murderous elder might climb through the window and steal him away. But after a while, things had calmed down enough for Flame to close his eyes and relax. Even with all the sleeping he'd done lately, he still felt utterly exhausted.

Right before drifting off into dreamworld, he felt Spyro's soft muzzle nudge him carefully. "You awake, hun'?"

Hun... that's a new one. Flame liked it. "Yes," he replied quietly, not wanting to wake anyone, especially not Cynder.

"Look, I want to get those bastards as much as everyone else, after what they did to you. But are you sure you're up for this?"

"What do you mean?" Flame asked, confused. His head wasn't even hurting anymore, and Magnus had even said he'll be fine.

Spyro shifted closer, lifting himself off his own mattress so he could lean on Flame. "You know, we could let them run off to the Forgotten Realms. At least we'd be rid of them. I mean just going back into that place..." he paused. "...If

you want to do it, we'll do it, but if you don't, I have no problem with just letting this whole thing go." His nose brushed along his arm to find Flame's cheek, a little lick followed. "All I care about is you, you know. And you're safe now."

Flame took Spyro's paw, giving it a soft kiss. "Your consideration is quite adorable, but it's just a cave, and it's going to be dry this time. And I'd be seriously concerned about Cynder's mental health if we just let them go."

"I'll handle Cynder. This is about you. About us." Spyro looked at Flame, and Flame could see his eyes glimmering in the starlight from the window. "All that matter is what *you* want."

The red dragon suddenly wasn't so sure just *what* he wanted. A few hours ago, he had been brimming with excitement, detailing his plan. Now he was starting to wonder if he had been deluding himself. What if he really wasn't ready? What if he just *thought* he was brave enough to take them on, but would chicken out at the last minute? And if his plan didn't work, he'd be putting everyone at risk.

"Ehm... let's talk about this tomorrow," he said. "For now, let's just get some sleep... *hun*,"

Spyro laid his head to rest on Flame's belly, and he was sure he could see the purple dragon smiling even though the room was pitch-dark. "Goodnight... *hun*," he replied.

Flame closed his eyes, and a minute later, both dragons were fast asleep.

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A few hours later, the red dragon suddenly jolted awake with sweat dripping from his scales. Like before, he couldn't remember his dream, but this time it was nothing the least bit pleasant. Also, like before, he could remember some faint images. Dark gems. Rushing water. Elder Tomas and Astor walking through the temple courtyard in the veil of the night, whispering amongst themselves, and his blood boiled with anger. He hadn't been afraid, it wasn't that type of nightmare. He had been furious.

With a deep sigh, he fell back on his sweaty pillow. Outside the window, familiar constellations lit up the dark night sky. He lay there for a bit, looking at the stars and letting Spyro's gentle breathing calm him down.

Somehow, his mate had managed to fall asleep with his head still on Flame's chest. In fact, the purple dragon was sleeping with half of him on Flame's bed, the other half on his own mattress. At some point in the night, he seemed to have decided that one wingspan was too far apart after all, and had crawled closer, with his heavy forearms laid over Flame's legs. Somehow, he had managed to fall asleep in this awkward position, but aside from his nose twitching now and then, he was looking as peaceful as ever.

To be honest, he was getting a little warm and heavy, but Flame wouldn't have it any other way.

Silly dragon...

Flame loved him more than anything.

He gently brushed his talons through Spyro's yellow frills and watched his chest rise and fall with the tides of sleep. He thought about how his little high-pitched snores were much too cute for a dragon of his size. He wondered what life would be like together after this whole mess was over with.

But even with Spyro so close, Flame didn't seem to be able to go back to sleep. He needed some fresh air to clear his head. So without waking Spyro up, he carefully slipped out of his sheets and padded outside.

The night was cold and fresh, the grass still wet from the earlier rain. It cooled his warm scales. It was exactly what Flame needed. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the chilly night air, then sat down in the grass and watched the starry sky.

It didn't take long before he heard a rustling behind him. For being so big, Spyro could move remarkably quietly.

"Hi, buddy. Can't sleep?"

Flame looked up at the dragon. "Nah, I just needed some fresh air."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not!" Flame patted the patch of grass next to him.

Spyro padded up to Flame, then flopped down on his haunches, inching close. "You're not feeling ill, right?"

Flame quickly shook his head. "I promise you, I'm fine. I just... I had a nightmare I guess."

The purple dragon heaved a deep sigh. "Was it about the elders?" he asked. "And the cave?"

"Sort of..." Flame admitted.

"So you had a nightmare about going back there... So maybe we should... call it off?"

"No..." Flame replied, his voice low but determined. "The nightmare I had wasn't about being trapped in that cave, it was about those elders slipping away." He turned to Spyro, who looked at Flame with his big head tilted.

"For as long as I've lived on this damn island, I've been letting those elders walk all over me. The elders and everyone else. And I wouldn't care, but this time they tried to take away something that truly matters to me."

He moved closer to Spyro, taking his talons in his. "If we let them through that portal, they'll just become someone else's problem. And maybe they'll try to come back and hurt us again. And most importantly... I don't know how I'd be able to live with myself if I didn't do something this time."

"So... does that mean?"

"Yes," Flame said. "Let's get those spineless lizards."

Spyro was quiet for a long time. A very long time. Then he wrapped his arms around Flame and pulled him into his lap. "I don't think many dragons are as brave as you," he whispered, nuzzling Flame from above. "Astor and Tomas will regret the day they messed with my lil' chili."

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So there you have it, chapter 11! As always, I hope the long wait was worth it. And as always, thanks to everyone who's been commenting, given my feedback and followed the series so far. You guys are the best!

Thanks for reading my story! You can read the rest of the series on my [FurAffinity](#) or [SoFurry](#) account. If you liked it, head over there and give me a fave or let me know what you think!
